

Towards a Critical Phenomenology of Sensibility:
Transforming Transcendence with Husserl,
Levinas, and Merleau-Ponty

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Abstract

Contra the privileging of perception in phenomenological accounts of bodily existence, this thesis develops a notion of sensibility which, it argues, is needed in order to account for the contextual structuring of the ways in which our bodies come to move, feel, and touch. From a feminist perspective, it begins to develop a critical phenomenology of sensibility through a tracing of the notion of transcendence such as this operates in the works of Edmund Husserl, Emmanuel Levinas, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Transcendence is argued to work most basically at the level of bodily sensibility rather than consciousness or perception. Sensibility is defined as a pre-reflective and pre-perceptual dimension through which the body is open to material and historical change and transformation. It is argued that whilst sensibility does not 'appear' in any traditional phenomenological sense, it is precisely this notion of sensibility that unlocks the critical and political potential of a phenomenology of bodily life.

This argument is demonstrated in three parts. Part one on Husserl uncovers a notion of sensibility that is operative in *Ideas II* and investigates the temporality of sensibility through a critical transposition of his theory of time to the level of bodily movement. Part two develops the notions of assimilative and non-assimilative sensibility through an ontological, rather than ethical, reading of Levinas. Taking a feminist critical approach, it engages his late thinking on diachrony in order to formulate a notion of the body as an original intercorporeality through the fact of having been born. Part three argues, contra Merleau-Ponty's claim that perception is primary, that a notion of sensibility is operative in the *Phenomenology* which pushes this work towards the ontology of the flesh. In dialogue with the feminist literature on sex and gender, it analyses the contextually specific structuring of the erotic as a modality of sensibility. This excavation of transcendence as sensibility is in each part shown to push classical phenomenology towards its own transformation from within. Thus, the thesis lays the groundworks, from within 'classical' phenomenology, for a critical phenomenology of sensibility which, it argues, can account for the ways in which bodily existence and experience is structured in interaction with material, social, and historical factors that are not themselves 'given' in experience.

The living body is, as living body, filled with soul through and through. Each movement of the body is full of soul, the coming and going, the standing and sitting, the walking and dancing.

Edmund Husserl

We live from "good soup," air, light, spectacles, work, ideas, sleep, etc. ... These are not objects of representations. We live from them.

Emmanuel Levinas

We must discover, beneath the idea of the subject and the idea of the object, the fact of my subjectivity and the object in the nascent state, the primordial layer where ideas and things are born.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty

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Abbreviations

Full bibliographic details can be found in the bibliography appended to this thesis.

Note: Citations of Husserl, Levinas, and Merleau-Ponty are taken from the English translations as indicated in the bibliography. Where, for the sake of clarity or argument, it has been necessary to include the German or French term or phrasing, the German or French pagination will be indicated by a forward-dash following the English pagination.

Note: Where the German or French term or phrasing is inserted directly into the English citation, this is indicated by curly brackets {}.

Works by Edmund Husserl

Note: Where available, citations of Husserl's work are taken from the appropriate *Husserliana* volumes. For ease of navigation in the text, I have used the following abbreviations.

ACP	<i>Analyses Concerning Passive and Active Synthesis: Lectures on Transcendental Logic</i>
CM	<i>Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology</i>
Crisis	<i>The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology</i>
EJ	<i>Experience and Judgement: Investigations in a Genealogy of Logic</i>
Hua X	<i>On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time (1893-1917)</i>
Ideas I	<i>Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy: General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology</i>
Ideas II	<i>Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy: Studies in the Phenomenology of Constitution</i>

Works by Emmanuel Levinas

EE	<i>Existence and Existents</i>
OE	<i>On Escape</i>
OTB	<i>Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence</i>
TI	<i>Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority</i>
TO	<i>Time and the Other</i>

Works by Maurice Merleau-Ponty

Note: Citations in English of *Phenomenology of Perception* are taken from Donald A. Landes' translation.

CRO	'The Child's Relations with Others'
PhP	<i>Phenomenology of Perception</i>
PriP	'The Primacy of Perception and its Philosophical Consequences'
SW	<i>The Sensible World and the World of Expression: Course Notes from the Collège de France, 1953</i>
VI	<i>The Visible and the Invisible</i>

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Introduction

Transcendence Transformed: Sensibility and the Movement of Life

What is the relation of phenomenology to its outside? Throughout its history, this question has been central to critiques of phenomenology. These critiques argue, in various ways, that phenomenology, as a purported self-constitutive science, cannot properly account for the alterity which makes it possible in the first place.¹ Classical phenomenology considers the world such as it appears to a subject in order to uncover the origins of meaning in the concrete operations of experiencing life, the abstract results of which science and objective thought take for granted at face value. Yet if we remain within a consideration of the world such as it appears to a subject, the critique goes, we fail to account for those extraphenomenological factors – materiality, culture, language – which do not, strictly speaking, ‘appear,’ but which nonetheless shape the ways in which we come to experience the world. Consequently, if phenomenology is to avoid reverting into idealism, it must find a way to consider those elements which operate on its ‘outside’² without yet swallowing

¹ Perhaps the most famous of these is Jacques Derrida’s critique of phenomenology as a ‘metaphysics of presence.’ See Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl’s Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 10. Emmanuel Levinas argues that the phenomenological conception of intentionality as the mode through which a subject knows a world results in the reduction of the alterity of the world and the other to the immanence of the same. In the intentional relation, he writes, ‘the other does not determine the same; it is always the same that determines the other.’ *TI*, 124. In line with the Levinasian critique, and in a project for a speculative realism, Tom Sparrow has recently announced, as the title of his book boldly proclaims, *The End of Phenomenology* insofar as its method prescribes it as a correlationism, that is, insofar as it has no concept of alterity proper. Sparrow writes that phenomenology ‘render[s] present to thought that which is as it is,’ only ‘at the cost of reducing the reality of being, by rendering being dependent on human consciousness. It empties being of real transcendence.’ Tom Sparrow, *The End of Phenomenology: Metaphysics and the New Realism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 17.

² In *On Touching – Jean-Luc Nancy*, to which we shall return in more detail in chapter one, Derrida calls for a consideration of the ‘outside’ to the phenomenological conceptualisation of the living body if the latter is to avoid reverting into a pure auto-affection: ‘We should then reintroduce the outside itself, the other, the inanimate, “material nature,” as well as death, the non-living, the nonpsychical in general, language, rhetoric, technics, and so forth – all that this phenomenological reduction to the sphere of pure appurtenance of the

these elements up: phenomenology must consider the nonphenomenological. How is this possible from within phenomenology? Would a 'phenomenological' consideration of the nonphenomenological result in the going beyond, the end, of phenomenology itself? Or would it, on the contrary, contribute towards its own transformation from within? These are the questions which guide this thesis and to which it attempts to provide an answer through a tracing and a reformulation of the notion of transcendence as sensibility.

Transcendence transformed

Etymologically, the word transcendence derives from the Latin *transcendere* which consists of the prefix *trans*, beyond or across, and the verb *scandere*, to climb. Its antonym, immanence, derives from the Latin *immanens*, the present participle of *immanere* which in turn consists of the prefix *im*, in, and the verb *manere*, to dwell or remain. Etymologically, then, transcendence means going beyond or being on the outside, whilst immanence means remaining or dwelling within. Whilst phenomenology retains this distinction between immanence and transcendence, it at the same time destabilises any strict dichotomy between the two. The concept of intentionality precisely describes the movement through which a subject transcends herself and perceives the world which, far from being a mere representation, is really present to her 'in the flesh.' With the notion of intentionality, Husserl thus breaks with any strict dichotomy between immanence and transcendence: the subject is not locked in immanence but is always already in and towards the world whose meaning in turn is constituted through her conscious and perceptual activity. Thus, the core of phenomenology, as Levinas writes in his essay 'Intentionality and Sensation,' 'consisted in perceiving a rigorous correlation between the object's structures and the processes of the thought that intends it or has self-evidence of it: *the approaches to Being are prescribed by the Being identified from these approaches.*'³ The concept of intentionality, whilst emphasising the presence of the subject to the world, thus famously risks reverting into

"solipsistic" body proper tries to keep out.' Jacques Derrida, *On Touching – Jean-Luc Nancy*, trans. Christine Irizarry (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 180.

³ Emmanuel Levinas, 'Intentionality and Sensation,' trans. Richard A. Cohen and Michael B. Smith, in *Discovering Existence with Husserl* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2000), 135.

another idealism insofar as the world ultimately appears according to the intentional activity of the conscious or perceiving subject.

As long as transcendence is thought at the level of the objectifying intentionality of consciousness and perception, then, the spectre of idealism continues to haunt phenomenology. Yet does not the phenomenological conceptualisation of transcendence as the movement through which a subject comes to know or perceive a world itself refer back to another kind of transcendence operating beneath the epistemological operations of perception and consciousness? Through a critical reading of Husserl, Levinas, and Merleau-Ponty, this thesis transposes the concept of transcendence to the level of bodily life which operates prior to the differentiation into subject and object.⁴ With this follows a different notion of transcendence: no longer describing a projective movement through which a subject grasps her world, transcendence is understood to designate the material-ontological openness and the fluid interaction of bodies and worlds prior to any consciousness or perception. Whilst Husserl's notion of the touching-touched shows that the body is at once a perceptible object and a perceiving subject, this thesis will argue that the sensory life of the body operates prior to binaries of subject and object, activity and passivity. In order to conceptualise this dimension through which the body is fundamentally open to the world, then, a distinction is needed between perception, which presupposes a distance between perceiving subject and perceived object, and sensibility, which operates imperceptibly prior to this distinction.⁵

The thesis thus develops an other sense of transcendence concretely rooted in a sensible materiality, where materiality should not be understood as a dead mechanism, but rather as

⁴ Indeed, Husserl himself uncovered the notion of a non-objectifying operative intentionality which was later taken up and reappropriated by Merleau-Ponty: 'We uncovered, beneath act or thetic intentionality – and in fact as its very condition of possibility – an operative intentionality already at work prior to every thesis and every judgement.' *PhP*, 453. And, he writes: 'Operative intentionality is the one that provides the text that our various forms of knowledge attempt to translate into precise language.' *Ibid.*, lxxxii. See also *EJ*, 48. The notion of transcendence as sensibility developed here includes but is not reducible to the notion of an operative intentionality. This is because the notion of sensibility describes not only the movement of (human) bodies but also the sensible materiality out of which bodies are formed. Whilst living bodies move according to a non-thetic, operative intentionality, it cannot reasonably be said that the sensible materiality of the world has 'intentionality,' whether operative or thetic.

⁵ The notion of sensibility developed here thus to a large extent agrees with and draws from Tom Sparrow's work on sensation, yet rather than moving us into a post-phenomenological framework, as Sparrow argues, I will argue that the notion of sensibility moves us into a critical phenomenological framework. See Tom Sparrow, *Plastic Bodies: Rebuilding Sensation after Phenomenology* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2015), 24.

the living material out of which (human) bodies are made.⁶ This rethinking of transcendence in terms of bodily life thus also serves as a rejection of the conceptualisation – found in Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* but equally detectable in the general devaluation of the body in the history of philosophy – of the (feminine) body as an object that is locked in repetition and immanence, and the (masculine) mind as the projective movement of transcendence through which the subject frees himself from his biological destiny.⁷ Through its sensory life, the body is always already *in* the world, and thus the body cannot be thought in terms of immanence.⁸

Whilst transcendence is conceived explicitly in terms of consciousness in Husserl, the ethical in Levinas, and perception in Merleau-Ponty, in what follows, I excavate and reappropriate a notion of transcendence as sensibility that is operative in each of their works, even if it is never their primary or explicit object of investigation. In Husserl, we find a notion of sensibility in his description, in *Ideas II*, of the body as a ‘turning-point’ between physical processes and lived bodily experiences as well as his analyses of sensings and kinaestheses. Through a critical transposition of his theory of time to the level of the living body, we shall uncover the temporality of sensibility as the temporality of movement. Whilst Levinas, more explicitly than Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, develops a notion of sensibility, this ontological conceptualisation of sensibility is often overshadowed and even, as I will argue in relation to *Otherwise than Being* in chapter four, compromised by his ethical project. As such, it will be

⁶ Whilst the notion of sensibility does not exclusively pertain to human bodies but encompasses the material from which all life is made, in this thesis, I am interested in the specific ways in which this sensible materiality expresses or instantiates itself at the level of human bodies.

⁷ Beauvoir writes: ‘The female, more than the male, is prey to the species; humanity has always tried to escape from its species’ destiny; with the invention of the tool, maintenance of life became activity and project for man, while motherhood left woman riveted to her body like the animal.’ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (London: Vintage Books, 2011), 77. See also 17; 381. Beauvoir’s thinking of transcendence and immanence is reappropriated by Iris Marion Young in her seminal essay ‘Throwing Like a Girl.’ Here, Young identifies a feminine bodily motility that is more self-referred and restrictive than the typical male who unambiguously throws his body into tasks. Whilst Young argues that this self-referred motility is due to the fact that women experience their bodies as immanent objects rather than as movements of free transcendence, Gail Weiss questions the association of feminine bodily motility with immanence versus masculine free movement with transcendence: ‘I argue that the understandable desire not to be viewed merely as a body or as a sexed object, a desire that is discussed so powerfully by so many feminist authors, has often led to a further denigration of the body, rather than a recognition of the limitations of the transcendence/immanence distinction.’ Gail Weiss, *Body Images: Embodiment as Intercorporeality* (London: Routledge, 1999), 4. See Iris Marion Young, ‘Throwing Like a Girl,’ in *On Female Bodily Experience: ‘Throwing Like a Girl’ and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁸ Whilst the body cannot be thought in terms of immanence to itself, it is of course immanent to the world in the sense that it does not transcend the world. The point is that the body does not fit into the immanence/transcendence dichotomy such as this has traditionally been conceived.

necessary, following what Tom Sparrow calls a ‘heretical’⁹ reading, to divorce the ethical from the ontological dimension of Levinas’s work. This ontological reading will ultimately allow us to interpret his notion of the oneself as an original intercorporeality through the fact of having been born from the body of another. Contra Merleau-Ponty’s claim that perception is primary, a notion of sensibility is, as we shall see, operative in the chapter on ‘Sensing’ in the *Phenomenology of Perception* which pushes this work towards the ontology of the flesh. Whilst this connection between the two works is increasingly recognised in the literature, a reading of Merleau-Ponty’s analyses of sexuality in the *Phenomenology* will bring to light a certain eroticism of sensibility itself which is, as I will argue, operative in his work but which has been largely overlooked in the literature. From a feminist perspective, I employ this notion of a sensible eroticism in order to form a critical understanding of the contextual structuring of the ways in which bodies *live* desire prior to reflection and perception.

What follows, then, is not a reconstruction of the philosophies of Husserl, Levinas, and Merleau-Ponty, but rather a bringing to light and a further development of elements of their work which, as I will argue, provide conceptual tools for a critical understanding of the intercorporeal, existential, and historical dimensions of bodily life. The notion of sensibility is developed from a double perspective throughout: from a phenomenological perspective, it is argued that a sensible experience is the experience of *being* a body that moves in the world; from an ontological perspective, it will be possible to account for the material and historical structuring of the sensory life of the body itself. The thesis thus develops a notion of transcendence as sensibility which at once describes the transactional movement of/between bodies and worlds *and* the invisible ways in which a (material, historical, political) alterity structures, changes, or transforms my own body from within. The notion of alterity retained here, then, should not be understood in terms of the classical phenomenological problem of the experience of the other *as* other;¹⁰ rather, a notion of alterity is invoked – in a new form – in order to account for the ways in which, ontologically speaking, (human) bodies are formed and transformed through their imperceptible interactions with social, historical, and political structures which operate outside the

⁹ Tom Sparrow, *Levinas Unhinged* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2013), 1.

¹⁰ See, for example, the fifth of Husserl’s *Cartesian Meditations*, 89-151.

classical phenomenological conceptualisation of the living body and which are not themselves 'given' in any first-person phenomenological experience. The notion of alterity employed here, then, forms a materialisation and historicization of the alterity of time within the body itself.

Insofar as the sensory life of the body does not appear as a noema that could be noetically grasped, then, the notion of sensibility calls for a phenomenology different from the one explicitly endorsed and rejected by Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, and Levinas, respectively. This other phenomenology would not be reducible to, in Dan Zahavi's words, a 'surface phenomenology'¹¹ which would only be capable of describing obviously appearing phenomena such as chairs and tables, yet neither would it revert into an idealist phenomenology of essence. This other phenomenology, then, must navigate the difficult terrain prior to the differentiation into subject and object; a terrain which is not intentionally constituted by a subject, but out of which, on the contrary, distinct subjects and objects are formed. This, then, entails a different methodology, one which we shall demonstrate in our reading throughout: interrogating what is left 'unthought'¹² in each of the three authors, transcendence as sensibility will show itself only through a certain absence, through detours, delays.

This paradoxical showing, in turn, mirrors the way in which the sensory life of the body is not given but rather *pregiven* in experience; not as a noema that could be intentionally grasped, but as what Anthony Steinbock calls a 'limit phenomenon,' which are 'those "phenomena" that are in some respect given as not being able to be given.'¹³ If such limit phenomena fall outside phenomenology as it is traditionally conceived, they do not transcend any phenomenology absolutely. It is my argument that the transformation of transcendence traced here can help us develop a critical phenomenology¹⁴ of sensibility

¹¹ Dan Zahavi, *Self-Awareness and Alterity: A Phenomenological Investigation*, 2. ed. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2020), note 8, 245.

¹² For the notion of an unthought, see Merleau-Ponty's 'The Philosopher and His Shadow': 'At the end of Husserl's life there is an unthought-of element in his works which is wholly his and yet opens out on something else.' Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'The Philosopher and His Shadow,' in *Signs*, trans. Richard C. McCleary (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 160.

¹³ Anthony Steinbock, *Limit-Phenomena and Phenomenology in Husserl* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 1.

¹⁴ Throughout this thesis, I use the terms 'classical' and 'critical' phenomenology. By 'classical,' I mean phenomenology insofar as it is concerned with uncovering structures of experience in abstraction from any historical specificity. Whilst Husserlian phenomenology, as we shall see in chapter two, provides the

which can account for the contextual structuring of the ways in which bodies come to move and feel. Thus, I am not so much claiming, or aiming, to ‘do’ phenomenology in any classical sense of applying the reduction to lived experience. Rather, I engage with phenomenology to better understand the existential, ontological, and political significance of a dimension of bodily life – sensibility – which does not ‘appear’ in a traditional phenomenological sense. Yet insofar as sensibility, as we shall see, inadvertently reveals itself in each of the three authors as well as in life, the notion of sensibility is precisely what pushes ‘classical’ phenomenology towards its own transformation from within.

Beyond the touching-touched: movement as a model for sensibility

Phenomenological accounts of bodily life generally privilege the perceptual model of the touching-touched, first developed by Husserl and taken up and appropriated by Merleau-Ponty.¹⁵ The weight given either to the non-coinciding or the binding of the touching-touched varies according to the project of the philosopher.¹⁶ Yet in any account, we must allow at least a minimal hinge that at once separates and binds the touching and the touched in order to prevent any immediate and flat coinciding of the body with itself.¹⁷ This

conceptual framework for understanding the historical structuring of experience, it does not yet consider this historical structuring in any specific sense. As I will explain in more detail below, the emerging field of critical phenomenology investigates the specific ways in which experience is itself contextually structured. For analyses of the specific methodology and aims of critical phenomenology, see, for example: Lisa Guenther, ‘Critical Phenomenology,’ in *50 Concepts for a Critical Phenomenology*, ed. Gail Weiss, Ann Murphy, and Gayle Salamon (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2020); Gayle Salamon, ‘What’s Critical About Critical Phenomenology?’ *Puncta: Journal of Critical Phenomenology* 1 (2018): 8-17; Mérédith Laferté-Coutu, ‘What is Phenomenological About Critical Phenomenology? Guenther, Al-Saji, and the Husserlian Account of Attitudes,’ *Puncta: Journal of Critical Phenomenology* 4, no. 2 (2021): 89-106.

¹⁵ Ideas II, 152-159; PhP, 92-96. Merleau-Ponty takes up the notion of the touching-touched again in ‘The Chiasm – The Intertwining,’ to which we return in chapter five. For a critical phenomenological analysis of touch, see, for example, Alia Al-Saji, ‘Bodies and Sensings: On the Uses of Husserlian Phenomenology for Feminist Theory,’ *Continental Philosophy Review* 43, no. 1 (April 2010): 13-37.

¹⁶ Derrida emphasises the necessity for the non-coincidence of the touching-touched to break with self-presence. See Derrida, *On Touching*, 179-80. Luce Irigaray rethinks the binding of the touching-touched in intrauterine life – a ‘tangible invisible’ – and develops the notion of a non-objectifying touch which, in Judith Butler’s words, ‘offer[s] an alternative to the erotics of simple mastery.’ Judith Butler, ‘Merleau-Ponty and the Touch of Malebranche,’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Taylor Carman and Mark Hansen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 194. See Luce Irigaray, ‘The Invisible of the Flesh: A Reading of Merleau-Ponty,’ *The Visible and the Invisible*, “The Intertwining – The Chiasm,” in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. Carolyn Burke & Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).

¹⁷ This is also Butler’s argument, even as they follow Irigaray’s thinking of a non-objectifying touch that is perhaps closer to the binding than the non-coinciding of the touching-touched: ‘[T]here must be a certain openness to the outside that postpones the plausibility of any claim to self-identity. The “I” is occasioned by

hinge, this thesis argues, should be understood concretely *as* the sensible materiality of the body. This hinge is not nothing, a metaphysical and immaterial hollow; it *is* the sensible body in fluid relation with its world. This hinge, as the imperceptible yet material locus of the interaction between the sensible body, the world, and other bodies, thus ascribes material depth to the sense in which it can be said that my body is always already 'outside' itself, has always already transcended itself.

The notion of sensibility as the hinge between touching and touched surfaces in various ways in Husserl, Levinas, and Merleau-Ponty, even if it is never explicitly developed in their work. In *Ideas II*, Husserl describes an '*Umschlagspunkt*' or a "'turning-point," which lies in my Body,' and which, as 'the point of the transformation from causal to conditional process,' 'is hidden from me.'¹⁸ Similarly, Levinas, in the chapter on 'Substitution' in *Otherwise than Being*, describes the 'excluded middle'¹⁹ which links 'the diastole and the systole of the heart'²⁰ and the breathing of air, that is, the communication of the body with itself and its environment. Merleau-Ponty's analysis, in the chapter on 'Sensing' in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, of the anonymity of sensory life as the literal 'communion'²¹ between body and world already carries us towards the ontology of the flesh which precisely makes possible the reversibility of touching and being tangible. It is this anonymous turning-point, the excluded middle, which *is* the materiality of my body in the world, and which precludes any pure auto-affection that would not always already be, in Derrida's words, '*constitutively* haunted'²² by alterity.

Yet this sensible materiality is not merely a formal component of bodily life but is itself dynamic, transformational, and, as we shall see, always already contextually dense. Anthony Steinbock's methodological distinction between static, genetic, and generative phenomenology will aid us in uncovering the ontological, material, and historical structuring of sensibility. Whilst static phenomenology describes formal structures abstracted from their temporal becoming, genetic phenomenology describes these formal structures in their

alterity, and that occasion persists as its necessary and animating structure.' Butler, 'Merleau-Ponty and the Touch of Malebranche,' 189.

¹⁸ *Ideas II*, 168.

¹⁹ OTB, 97.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 109.

²¹ PhP, 219.

²² Derrida, *On Touching*, 179.

temporal becoming but abstracted from their historical dimension. Generative phenomenology, in turn, concerns structures of experience *in* their temporal and historical becoming and thus spans beyond a single life. Generative phenomenology, then, makes possible a phenomenological investigation of phenomena such as birth and death as well as historical structures such as patriarchy which are not immediately 'given' in any first-person phenomenological experience, and which thus cannot be investigated from a static or genetic point of view. Yet, as Steinbock is careful to emphasise, static, genetic, and generative approaches can only be abstractly distinguished; in reality, they operate at once, and thus any analysis of one layer will already implicate and draw us towards the others: 'Undertaking static analysis is doing generative phenomenology, only abstractly; or put still differently, static analysis is already situated in generativity.'²³

The formal characterisation of sensibility as the gap between the touching and the touched, then, would designate its 'static' instantiation, although 'static' is a somewhat misleading way in which to describe something that is first and foremost a movement. As Husserl shows us, it is the capacity for *self*-movement that qualifies the body as a living body (*Leib*) rather than as a 'mere' material thing (*Körper*).²⁴ The notion of sensibility developed here designates the movements *within* my body as well as the global movements *of* my body. Movements within my body include the autonomous processes of a heart beating, lungs breathing, blood flowing in veins, which are also material movements in and of the world. This includes their mundane modalities such as they are taken for granted in everyday life, but also their modalities in stages or moments of our lives in which we are going through bodily change, such as pregnancy, illness, injury, and moments of pleasure and pain. Common to these moments of change or transition, as I will argue, is the visceral sense of *being a body*.

But if the phenomenological conceptualisation of the living body, as some have argued,²⁵ presents its de-materialisation, the notion of sensibility developed here is at once a re-materialisation of the living body as well as a re-vitalisation of its materiality as part of the

²³ Steinbock, *Home and Beyond*, 266.

²⁴ See Ideas II, 61; 159-60. The distinction between *Körper* and *Leib* is fundamental to the phenomenological conception of the living body. Whilst the notion of *Körper* refers to the body in its extension and materiality, the notion of *Leib* refers to the body such as it is lived phenomenologically. See also Ideas II, 152-3. I will return to this distinction in greater detail in chapter one.

²⁵ See Sparrow, *Plastic Bodies*, 54; 69.

world. The notion of sensibility thus destabilises the strict distinction between *Körper* and *Leib*, between the materiality and the life, or the liveliness, of bodies and of the world. Materiality is precisely not inert, still, or rigid, but is vibrantly moving and transforming, and the notion of sensibility thus describes something like the movement of the life of (human) bodies.²⁶ Movement here should not be understood as a mere change in position through which the moved body remains the same. Rather, movement is understood in its phenomenological sense as a bodily assumption of space through which, as we shall see in chapter two, the body continuously temporalizes and individualises itself.²⁷ Whilst the notion of sensibility developed here describes at once the movements within my body (blood flowing, heart beating, lungs breathing) as well as the global movements of my body (walking, dancing, running), these two kinds of movement are not reducible to one another. The movements *within* my body operate according to a semi-autonomous rhythm, and for as long as I am a living body, these movements cannot cease. Yet these movements are nevertheless affected by – and affect in turn – the movements *of* my body as well as my body's emotional and existential situation.

Whether I am running or sleeping, frightened, relaxed, or stressed impacts the pace at which my heart beats, the fluctuation of hormones, and the rhythm of my breathing, which in turn feeds back into the global movements *of* my body: if my heart beats fast and my breathing is shallow due to stress, my global movements tend to become less precise until I pause to breathe deeply and calm my body down at a physiological level. Whilst the movements within my body are for the most part not available to conscious control, the global movements of my body are so to a higher degree, even if in normal everyday life, I am not constantly conscious of these largely habitual movements. Whilst these different kinds of movement – the movements within my body and the global movement of my body – are not reducible to one another, then, both are nonetheless characterizable, as I will argue throughout, in terms of sensibility. This is insofar as in both cases, there is no distinction between moving subject and moved object: rather, I *am* this body that moves, this body *of* movement, whether or not 'I' am aware of it.

²⁶ For an analysis of the contextual structuring of human physiology, see Shannon Sullivan, *On the Physiology of Sexist and Racist Oppression* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

²⁷ Merleau-Ponty famously writes that 'we must not say that our body is *in* space, nor for that matter *in* time. It *inhabits* space and time.' PhP, 140. See also PhP, 105.

What distinguishes the life of (human) bodies, then, is the capacity for the self-movement within and of the body and hence the capacity for changing or transforming oneself from within, without the necessity for an 'agent' behind the action. Sensibility, then, although grammatically a noun, is more correctly understood in its functioning as a verb insofar as it designates the movement of life, the movement of bodies, the capacity to move and be moved by others. The notion of sensibility thus denotes the very capacity to be affected as a material, living body in a material, living world. The notion of sensibility, in our conception, has a distinctly physical sense similarly to the way in which it can be said that a measuring instrument is sensitive to changes in its environment, although the notion of sensibility should not be understood in a purely mechanistic sense but rather as designating the bodily capacity to be solicited by and to respond to a world. The antonym of sensibility would, as the lesser used *insensibility* denotes, designate something like a dead zone, apathy, indifference to life, a physical and emotional incapacity to be moved. Sensibility, whilst relying upon empirical materiality, is not reducible to it, if materiality is understood in a mechanistic, machinic, or biological sense.

At each of the levels of sensibility – the static, genetic, and generative – the empirical and the transcendental intertwine and collide. This is insofar as the sensible dimension of bodily life simultaneously conditions the body's creative power, its capacity to touch, *and* its susceptibility to being touched as a material object in the world. The notion of sensibility designates the imperceptible ways in which the body structures, and is in turn structured by, its interactions with the world, others, and itself. It is thus at the level of sensibility, and not perception, that a genetic and generative sense sediments and materialises within the body itself. Transposing transcendence to the level of sensibility thus amounts to understanding not only the existential-individual meaning of my body but also the historical and generative density that is at once imprinted on it and that it, in living this history, reproduces and has the capacity to resist or change.

Sensibility, as the unreflected life of the body that is, in Merleau-Ponty's words, 'its initial, constant, and final situation,'²⁸ designates a constant perpetuation, (re)iteration,

²⁸ PhP, lxxviii. It should be noted that Merleau-Ponty takes this from Husserl: '*Self-perception*,' Husserl writes, '*is a reflection* (self-reflection of the pure Ego) and presupposes according to its essence an *unreflected consciousness*.' Ideas II, 259.

(re)generation, or (trans)formation of the ways in which we move, perceive, and think. It is a generative dimension of bodily life operating prior to the crystallising effects of perception and epistemic knowledge. Of course, at the same time, the notion of sensibility does not describe a distinct realm operating completely independently from perception. The ways in which my body moves, takes up space, its suppleness or resistance to sensory blows, its receptivity or revulsion to intimacy – its unique *style*, so to speak – is to a certain extent determined by perceptions, motor knowledge, habits, and beliefs it has acquired about itself, its world, and others. This is how our body *image* as, in Shaun Gallagher’s words, ‘a system of perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs pertaining to one’s own body’²⁹ can come to affect or change our body *schema* as ‘a system of sensory-motor capacities that function without awareness or the necessity of perceptual monitoring,’³⁰ and vice versa.³¹ Thus, a rethinking of transcendence as sensibility can help us understand how the particular ways in which our bodies move are determined by a complex cluster of factors: the efficiency of my heart to circulate blood, of my brain to form synaptic connections, and ultimately my belonging to this earth as bound by gravity; the ways in which I was held as a child, and the ways in which my parents, and before them, their parents, were held as children; the socio-cultural-historical contexts which invisibly prescribe normative ways of moving and acting based on gender, race, class.³² It is thus the generative dimension of transcendence which unlocks the critical and political potential of a phenomenology of bodily life.

The turn to the pre-reflective

The transformed notion of transcendence as sensibility developed here, then, forms a critical contribution to the emergence, since the turn of the millennium and in fields spanning phenomenology, analytic philosophy of mind, cognitive science, feminist theory,

²⁹ Shaun Gallagher, *How the Body Shapes the Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 24.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 24.

³¹ For an important investigation into the multiple body images we possess at any one time and the ways in which they are at once socially structured yet also a site of possible transformation, see Weiss, *Body Images*.

³² Due to limitations of scope, I focus exclusively on gender here. For an early account of the ways in which gender as a social demand structures bodily movement and experience, see Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, Vol. II: Lived Experience. See also Young, ‘Throwing Like a Girl.’ For phenomenological accounts of the lived experience of race at the level of the body, see, for example, Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (London: Penguin, 2021); George Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race in America*, 2nd ed. (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017).

and critical theory of race, of an increasing interest in the pre-reflective, pre-conceptual dimensions of bodily existence.

In the analytic philosophy of mind branch of phenomenology, the term 'pre-reflective self-awareness' has become the standard way in which to investigate this dimension of bodily existence. In *Self-Awareness and Alterity*, Zahavi develops this notion as a rejection of what he terms the 'reflection theory,' which is present in thinkers from Locke and Kant to contemporary philosophy. The reflection theory presupposes that self-awareness can only happen when the subject takes itself as an object, resulting in the notion that true self-awareness is impossible. Upon attempting to become aware of myself as a subject, I would immediately turn myself into an object, and thus, the 'reflection theory' goes, my subjectivity constantly evades itself, resulting in a 'blind spot' of subjectivity, the existence of which Zahavi vehemently rejects.³³ Zahavi rejects the reflection theory insofar as it relies upon the presumption 'that all awareness implies a subject-object structure.'³⁴ Instead, he argues, pre-reflective self-awareness is the awareness involved in every experience that it is I, and not another, who is experiencing this or that.

Thus, any conscious experience necessarily involves an 'immediate, tacit, and non-thematic kind of self-awareness'³⁵ of 'what-it-is-like' to experience something. This awareness is 'a kind of self-manifestation that lacks the ordinary structure of appearance. There is no distinction between subject and object, or between the dative and genitive of appearing. On the contrary, it is a kind of self-manifestation, a fundamental *shining*, without which it would be meaningless to speak of the dative of appearance.'³⁶ Pre-reflective self-awareness, then, is a structurally necessary component for any conscious experience and any subsequent reflection upon that experience. Whilst Zahavi emphasises the fact that 'pre-reflective self-awareness must be conceived not as a simple, static, and self-sufficient self-presence, but as a dynamic and differentiated openness to alterity,'³⁷ in his analysis, it has no real historical significance and thus effectively remains a formal component of conscious experience.

³³ Zahavi, *Self-Awareness and Alterity*, 197-8.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 74.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 141.

In contrast to this largely ahistorical approach, we have seen, since the turn of the millennium, a growing body of literature within feminist theory and critical theory of race that, relying upon a phenomenological framework, concerns itself with the ways in which specific historical, cultural, and political structures shape first-person phenomenological experience. The emerging field of critical phenomenology is an interdisciplinary praxis which investigates the concrete and multiple ways in which, in Alia Al-Saji's words, 'the political already structures experience at the lived, "prereflective" level of felt embodiment.'³⁸ Critical phenomenology, then, seeks to harvest the political potential of phenomenology: through a bracketing of the natural attitude, but importantly not of historically contingent structures such as patriarchy or white supremacy, it seeks to make 'the familiar newly strange and bring the unfamiliar in closer,'³⁹ thus gaining awareness of the lived experience of oppression. The becoming aware of invisible forces that structure our lives, it argues, is the first step towards transforming these structures. This praxis often 'does' phenomenology insofar as it applies methods to lived experience, using first-hand accounts as data, to gain an understanding of the contextually specific structures that are, or have historically been, essential to that experience.⁴⁰

Critical phenomenology, then, is critical in two senses: it is critical of classical phenomenology's quest to uncover an ahistorical and invariant structure in the variable, and it is critical in the sense in which critical theory is critical, of historical and political structures that operate 'outside' phenomenology. The notion of sensibility is developed following this double critical approach, and thus the thesis works in two directions at once: forming a critique of 'classical' phenomenology, it at the same time adopts a feminist perspective in order to account for the contextual structuring of the ways in which bodies come to move and feel. Conceptualising sensibility in terms of movement allows us to

³⁸ Alia Al-Saji, 'Feminist Phenomenology,' in *The Routledge Companion to Feminist Philosophy*, ed. Ann Garry, Serene J. Khader and Alison Stone (New York: Routledge, 2017), 143. Figures such as Simone de Beauvoir, Frantz Fanon, and Iris Marion Young are often identified as prefigures to the emerging field of critical phenomenology, coined by the 2020 publication of the anthology *50 Concepts for a Critical Phenomenology*, as well as the 2018 creation of *Puncta: Journal for Critical Phenomenology*.

³⁹ Gail Weiss, Ann Murphy, Gayle Salamon, 'Introduction: Transformative Descriptions,' in *50 Concepts for a Critical Phenomenology*, xiv.

⁴⁰ See, for example: Linda Fisher, 'Gendering Embodied Memory,' in *Time in Feminist Phenomenology*, ed. Christina Schües, Dorothea Olkowski, and Helen Fielding (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2011); George Yancy, 'White Gazes: What It Feels Like to Be an Essence,' in *Living Alterities: Phenomenology, Embodiment, and Race*, ed. Emily Lee (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2014).

consider not only the contextual structuring of the global movements of the body which have often been the focus of feminist phenomenology, but also the movement of desire such as this expresses itself at the level of the body. Whilst the thesis is not primarily a political project, then, it has a political potential which will be explored in the final chapter where, from a feminist perspective, I investigate the contextual structuring of the erotic as a modality of sensibility. The notion of a sensible eroticism will prove integral to our conceptualisation of sensibility as at once the locus of contextual structuring, yet also the site of possible transformation.

Why (which) phenomenology?

Yet, we might still object: why the need to go through phenomenology at all? After all, if the gap which allows for the touching and the touched cannot itself be touched, does not sensibility such as we have defined it transcend the limits of phenomenological experience, evidence, description, analysis? Such is Tom Sparrow's argument. In *Plastic Bodies: Rebuilding Sensation after Phenomenology*, he writes:

'[G]iven the radical immanence of sensation, I contend that it never enters, as it were, the intentional gap, and therefore evades any possible phenomenological intuition. Sensation lacks the transcendence necessary for the phenomenological observer to figure it against a background; it thus never rises, as such, to the level of explicit attention. As soon as it does it becomes perception, an afterimage of itself.'⁴¹

It is true, of course, that a phenomenological conceptualisation of sensibility runs up against the methodological problem of how to describe such processes which do not 'appear' as phenomena that could be intentionally grasped. Yet the impossibility of perceiving or grasping sensibility, as I will argue, does not preclude the possibility for a sensible or bodily experience and the subsequent reflection upon that experience.

Feeling my body move in space is not equivalent to having a perception of it insofar as perception, as Sparrow rightly argues, implies a distance between perceiver and perceived, whilst in movement there is no such distance: I *am* this body that moves. The sense of

⁴¹ Sparrow, *Plastic Bodies*, 39.

moving one's body is precisely a mode of sensibility which is not foreign to experience.⁴² Similarly, whilst I cannot see or touch my heart beating or my lungs breathing, I can feel these processes. If I stop to perceive myself moving, if I pause to notice the beating of my heart, chances are that my movement becomes forced and my heartbeat speeds up as I become increasingly self-aware or anxious. Husserl's claim that 'an experience has no perspectives [*Ein Erlebnis schattet sich nicht ab*]'⁴³ thus finds its concrete meaning in a sensible or bodily experience.⁴⁴ Whilst Husserl characterises an experience explicitly in terms of immanence, however, when thought at the level of bodily life, the immanence/transcendence dichotomy such as this has traditionally been conceived loses its sense. The body is precisely not locked in immanence but is fundamentally *in* the world, and thus, a sensible or bodily experience, whilst absolute, cannot be conceived in terms of immanence. Insofar as such a sensible experience is absolute, it does not, in the exact moment, lend itself to reflection, yet phenomenology's insight is precisely that reflection always comes after the experience.⁴⁵

Given that a bodily experience always unfolds within a specific context, however, any bodily experience has a historical 'thickness'⁴⁶ whose sense is not immediately given to the experiencing body. Any bodily experience is structured by and hence points towards a social, historical, and cultural context which is, however, not exhaustively present in that experience. To say that sensibility does not transcend any phenomenological experience, then, is not to claim that we can sense everything that happens in our bodies as it happens; this would be a reversion to a pure self-presence. It is, rather, to question the presupposition that phenomenology can only address experiences and phenomena insofar

⁴² It should be noted that Sparrow does not explicitly define movement as a mode of sensibility. Yet given that bodily self-movement structures perception without appearing perceptually, I argue that it should be understood as operating in the mode of sensibility.

⁴³ Ideas I, 79.

⁴⁴ We shall thus see that Sparrow is not ultimately right when he writes: 'Phenomenology, as the philosophy/science which studies phenomena *as they appear to consciousness*, is by definition correlationism. One might even say that the subject-object correlation is the proper object of phenomenological analysis.' Sparrow, *Plastic Bodies*, 42.

⁴⁵ 'At the natural standpoint we take it for granted, without thinking about it, that experiences do not exist only when we turn to greet them and grasp them in immanent experience (*Erfahrung*); and that if in immanent reflexion and as *retained* (in "primary" memory) they are still "objects of awareness," as having "just" been, then they really (*wirklich*) existed and were indeed really lived by us.' Ideas I, 150.

⁴⁶ This notion of a historical thickness is developed by Merleau-Ponty: 'The *perceiving person* is not spread out before himself in the manner that a consciousness must be: he has an historical thickness, he takes up a perceptual tradition, and he is confronted with a present.' PhP, 247-8. See also PhP, 224.

as they are transparently given to a subject, which thus entails a rethinking of the concept of experience as such.⁴⁷ The notion of sensibility developed here thus does not transcend phenomenology altogether, although it certainly calls for a different phenomenology. This phenomenology will take the form – in life, and in the three authors – of a series of detours.

Itinerary of detours

Insofar as the sensory life of the body only shows itself phenomenally in a delayed or displaced form, our investigation itself will take the form of detours. The thesis moves through three moments, guided by Husserl, Levinas, and Merleau-Ponty, respectively. Each moment, reiterating and repeating the developments of the others, reveals a different dimension of sensibility. With Husserl, we will uncover the temporality of sensibility as the temporality of movement; with Levinas, we will understand sensibility in relation to the notion of life and the fact of having been born; and with Merleau-Ponty, we will uncover the erotic dimension of sensibility. Thus, although part one on Husserl provides the general framework for the conceptualisation of transcendence as sensibility, each of the parts simultaneously rely on, and further concretise and develop, the others.

Chapter one begins from a critique of the privileging of the perceptual model of the touching-touched in phenomenological accounts of bodily existence. I identify and analyse three models of Husserl's notion of the touching-touched in *Ideas II*, developed by Jacques Derrida, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Alia Al-Saji, respectively. I argue that these models all point towards the need to move beyond the internal dynamic of the touching-touched if phenomenology is to take seriously the constitutive outside of the living body itself. Further developing Husserl's notion of the body as a 'turning-point' between physical processes and lived bodily experiences, I then conceptualise the gap between the touching and the touched as the sensibility of the body which cannot itself be touched. Drawing on Husserl's analyses of kinaestheses, I argue that a sensible experience is the experience of being a body that moves in the world. Finally, I argue that Husserl's analysis of the expressive body

⁴⁷ As Johanna Oksala argues: 'phenomenology can account for gender by helping us to understand how gendered experiences are constituted and how their constitution is tied not only to embodiment, but also to the normative cultural practices and structures of meaning.' Johanna Oksala, *Feminist Experiences: Foucauldian and Phenomenological Investigations* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2016), 108. See also Johanna Oksala, 'In Defence of Experience,' *Hypatia* 29, no. 2 (Spring, 2014): 388-403.

in section three of *Ideas II* provides the beginnings of a theory of intercorporeality that is more convincing than the more widely known notion of apperceptive transfer developed in section two of the book.

Chapter two investigates the temporality and historicity of sensibility through a critical transposition of Husserl's thinking on time, affection, and the lifeworld to the level of bodily life. Further developing Zahavi's notion of a pre-reflective self-awareness as the modality of the self-manifestation of the absolute flow of time, I argue that the most basic level at which such pre-reflective self-awareness operates is at a bodily or sensible level. I then argue that the notion of affection developed in *Analyses Concerning Passive Synthesis* begins to explain how the body's movements are formed and transformed through the simultaneous solicitation by and response to a world. The notion of affection thus also breaks with the idealist notion of a pure subject who unilaterally constitutes all sense. Finally, I argue that Steinbock's reading of the lifeworld as earth-ground and world-horizon pushes Husserl's phenomenology in a critical direction as it allows us to investigate the historical structuring of bodily movement.

Chapter three develops the notions of assimilative and non-assimilative sensibility through an ontological, rather than ethical, reading of Levinas. Whilst the notion of assimilative sensibility describes the digestive movement of enjoyment through which the sensible body nourishes itself, the notion of non-assimilative sensibility describes the incapacity of the sensible body to digest or assimilate the *there is*, on the one hand, and what Levinas terms the 'face,' on the other. I argue that the notions of assimilative and non-assimilative sensibility, whilst never used by Levinas himself, can help us understand the ambiguity of sensibility such as it operates in life itself and in Levinas's work. This ambiguity consists in the fact that the notion of sensibility at once describes the vulnerability of the body and its creativity and capacity for nourishment and pleasure. In critical dialogue with Robert Bernasconi, Tom Sparrow, and Judith Butler, I develop a 'transcendental empiricist' reading of the notion of the face which accounts for the non-assimilative sensibility through which the transcendental vulnerability of life is sensed.

From a critical feminist perspective, chapter four engages Levinas's late thinking on diachrony in order to formulate a notion of the sensible body as an original intercorporeality through the fact of having been born. I argue that an ontological, rather than ethical,

reading of Levinas's notion of substitution is needed in order to avoid perpetuating normative ideas surrounding motherhood and reproduction. Through an analysis of Levinas's evocations of the pregnant body, I argue that apart from all claims about ethics, the notion of substitution describes the situation of pregnancy in which the mother eats and breathes for the foetus who remains non-assimilable to the mother despite their intimate proximity. I then move from the particular case of pregnancy and the generation of new life to the universal fact of having been born. I conceptualise the notion of the oneself as descriptive of all living (human) bodies which, insofar as they were born from the body of another, retain a trace from that body. As such, the notion of the oneself, I argue, marks a move from the abstract concept of the subject to the concrete notion of the body as an original intercorporeality whose capacity to breathe autonomously rests upon an immemorial 'inspiration' by the body from which it was born.

Chapter five argues, contra Merleau-Ponty's claim that perception is primary, that a notion of sensibility is operative in the *Phenomenology of Perception* which pushes this work towards the ontology of the flesh. It engages this notion of sensibility to understand the body and world as rhythms that are solicited by and respond to one another. From a feminist perspective and in dialogue with Iris Marion Young, I argue that this notion of sensibility allows us to understand how some bodies are solicited to move more freely than others. I then turn to *The Visible and the Invisible*. I argue that Merleau-Ponty's notion of reversibility risks a thinking that cannot properly account for the alterity of different bodies, and that this warrants a distinction between perceptual reversibility and sensible flesh. I conceptualise the rhythm of flesh as one of the simultaneous binding and separation of bodies prior to any differentiation into subject and object. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's writings on child development, I argue that the rhythm of flesh thus conceived helps us understand that whilst the moment of binding to others is strongest at the earliest stage of life, it is never dissolved and can be reawakened in later stages of life, such as in love.

Chapter six bridges a gap in the literature as it brings together the notion of sensibility that is operative in Merleau-Ponty's work with a notion of eroticism that we find in the chapter on 'The Body as a Sexed Being' in the *Phenomenology*. It thus argues that the move from perception to sensibility is at the same time a move from sexuality to eroticism. This move in turn allows me to critically respond to the feminist critique which argues that Merleau-

Ponty advances a universalist notion of sexuality which cannot account for the different sexual orientations and identities that exist. Rather than making a heteronormative claim about desire, I argue that Merleau-Ponty's analyses make a more basic claim about the bodily dimension through which the erotic operates. I then conceptualise the erotic encounter in terms of the rhythm of flesh as developed in chapter five. I argue that an erotic encounter allows for a suspension of gender normative ways of moving and desiring, and hence an opening up for non-conforming ways of desiring. Yet it is important to emphasise that the degree to which bodies are capable of the kind of abandon needed for the erotic encounter is not universal. Moving beyond Merleau-Ponty and more properly into the critical dimension of a phenomenology of the erotic, I investigate how patriarchal structures of gender- and heteronormativity in turn structure, impact, or inhibit the erotic lives of bodies at the level of sensibility.

In each of the three parts of the thesis, the two senses of transcendence – as movement and as alterity – will be shown to collide at the level of sensibility, and this reconceptualization of transcendence as sensibility will in turn be shown to push classical phenomenology towards its own transformation from within. The thesis thus lays the groundworks, from within classical phenomenology, for a critical phenomenology of sensibility which, it argues, can account for the ways in which bodily existence and experience is structured in interaction with material, social, and historical factors that are not themselves 'given' in experience.

Part One

Husserl and Transcendence: Movement

Chapter 1

Transcendence as Sensibility in *Ideas II*

The notion of transcendence appears in various moments in Husserl's work, perhaps most explicitly in his analyses of perspectival variation in the perception of transcendent objects, in relation to the transcendence of the other, and in relation to intentionality. Common to these different notions, however, is the impossibility of thinking an absolute transcendence. Indeed, one of the central conceptual keys of phenomenology as a philosophical approach to experience is Husserl's transformation of the Kantian concept of transcendence: rather than signifying a forever unknowable horizon outside the world of phenomena, Husserl's notion of transcendence designates a certain doubling within the world of phenomena. This means that, for Husserl, there is no thing in itself behind the appearance, that things are precisely as they appear to us: '*what things are (...) they are as things of experience.*'⁴⁸ Husserl conceives the transcendence of intentionality through which things are given to us in experience in terms of consciousness and perception. The mantra that consciousness is always consciousness *of* something is expressed in the intentional structure of noesis-noema which in turn makes possible the description of "'that which appears as such'" faithfully and in the light of perfect self-evidence.⁴⁹ The transcendence of intentionality is thus an epistemological operation through which the conscious and perceiving subject strives to know the world with ever more clarity and fullness.

Despite the fact that the world is really given to the experiencing subject 'in the flesh,' however, if we remain at the level of the objectifying intentionality of perception or consciousness, we fail to account for the ways in which perception and consciousness is itself produced through the body's interactions with the world and others; and by

⁴⁸ *Ideas I*, 9.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 186.

extension, how the body is itself continuously formed through these interactions. Yet as Levinas writes in his essay 'Intentionality and Sensation': 'Despite the coherence of the above-mentioned themes surrounding the central idea of a consciousness open upon the world which is, for this consciousness, all that can be, Husserl holds on to a notion from which the message of intentionality should, it would seem, have freed him: the notion of sensation.'⁵⁰ Rather than the concept, from *Ideas I*, of sensation as the raw hyletic matter awaiting animation,⁵¹ Levinas conceives sensibility in terms of Husserl's analyses, in *Ideas II*, of sensings (*Empfindnisse*) and kinaestheses: 'Transcendence is produced by kinaesthesia: thought goes beyond itself not by encountering an objective reality, but by entering into this allegedly distant world. The body, zero point of representation, is beyond this zero.'⁵² Levinas thus points towards another kind of transcendence than the objectifying intentionality of consciousness and perception: the body, insofar as it is a body of movement, is always already in and towards the world prior to any conscious or perceptual grasping.

Through a critical reading of Husserl's analyses of the constitution of the living body in *Ideas II*, in this chapter, I further develop Levinas's transposition of the notion of transcendence to the level of bodily sensibility rather than consciousness or perception. Designating the materiality that constitutively links my body to the world, the notion of sensibility pushes the phenomenological conceptualisation of the living body beyond a solipsist framework. This reappropriation of transcendence to the level of bodily life, insofar as it marks the material implication of the body in the world, also makes possible a consideration of the constitutive outside to the phenomenological conceptualisation of the living body. The notion of the living body (*Leib*) describes the body such as it is lived phenomenologically and thus takes seriously bodily experiences, such as headaches and phantom pains, which may or may not have a 'real' referent. Yet I will argue that a critical phenomenology of sensibility cannot remain within a first-person phenomenological description of the living body but

⁵⁰ Levinas, 'Intentionality and Sensation,' 138.

⁵¹ *Ideas I*, 174-178.

⁵² Levinas, 'Intentionality and Sensation,' 148. For a phenomenological analysis of Husserl's notions of sensings and kinaesthesia, see Alia Al-Saji, 'The Site of Affect in Husserl's Phenomenology: Sensations and the Constitution of the Lived Body,' *Philosophy Today* 44, SPEG Supplement (2000): 51-59. For a good analysis of Husserl's transcendental aesthetic in relation to the living body, see Michela Summa, *Spatio-Temporal Intertwining: Husserl's Transcendental Aesthetic* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2014), 247-309.

must consider those material and contextual factors which are not themselves given in any bodily experience but which nonetheless structure that bodily experience itself. Where, if at all, do we find conceptual resources for considering this constitutive outside of the phenomenological conceptualisation of the living body in Husserl's work?

This constitutive outside of the body such as it is lived from the first-person point of view appears, as I will argue, inadvertently in two moments in *Ideas II*: in section one from the standpoint of the naturalistic attitude when Husserl points towards the body in its materiality; and in section three from the standpoint of the natural or personalistic attitude in his discussions of the expressive body which point towards the cultural and contextual structuring of the body itself. The material and historical structuring of my body transcend the first-person point of view given the ontological status of my body as at once 'the ultimate central here'⁵³ and, as we shall see in chapter two, the ultimate central now. If the materiality of the body transcends a classical first-person phenomenological analysis at a spatial level, then, the historical structuring of the body does so at a temporal level. Yet this does not mean, as I will argue, that the materiality and historicity of the body transcend any phenomenological analysis whatsoever. Indeed, given the fact that that the notion of sensibility developed here describes a level of bodily existence which operates at the edges of what is included in classical phenomenology, I do not aim or claim to stay faithful to Husserl's intentions or to the phenomenological method of reduction. In fact, a critical phenomenology of sensibility operates from the Merleau-Pontyan conviction of the impossibility and undesirability of a complete reduction.⁵⁴ A complete reduction is impossible given that this would entail the reduction of the materiality of the body from which experience is possible in the first place. Second, a complete reduction, given that this would reduce the historical and political structures that shape the very ways in which bodies come to move, feel, and think, is undesirable for a critical project that seeks to understand precisely how bodily experience is not transparent to itself, but is always already contextually dense.

Rather than a classical phenomenological analysis of the living body, then, I reappropriate elements from Husserl's analyses which are fruitful to my project to develop a critical

⁵³ *Ideas II*, 166.

⁵⁴ PhP, lxxvii.

phenomenology of sensibility. This means that we must, in line with the itinerary of a phenomenology of detours described in the introduction, read on the backside of what Husserl is explicitly discussing, even if this pushes us towards the edges of phenomenology itself. In this first part of the thesis, then, I excavate and reappropriate two dimensions that form the constitutive outside of the classical phenomenological conceptualisation of the living body. These two dimensions are the ontological status of the body as a material thing and the historically specific structuring of the living body. Chapter one restricts itself to a static analysis insofar as a patient transposition of the notion of transcendence to the level of sensibility is needed before we can begin to consider the genetic and generative structuring of sensibility itself, the task of chapter two.⁵⁵ Together, these two chapters that make up part one of the thesis lay the conceptual groundworks for an answer to the critical question: how do these dimensions of the constitutive outside (materiality, history) of the phenomenological conceptualisation of the living body interact and structure one another at the level of sensibility?

Opening up this question from within Husserlian phenomenology, in section 1.a, I identify and analyse three models of the touching-touched developed by Jacques Derrida,⁵⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty,⁵⁷ and Alia Al-Saji,⁵⁸ respectively. I argue that these models all point towards the need to move beyond the internal dynamic of Husserl's notion of the touching-touched if phenomenology is to take seriously the constitutive outside of the living body itself. In section 2.b, I conceptualise the gap between the touching and the touched concretely as the sensibility of the body which cannot itself be touched. I develop the notion of a pre-perceptual sensitivity from Husserl's characterisation of the body as a 'turning point' that translates physical processes into lived bodily experiences, and vice versa. Whilst the notion of sensibility describes a dimension of bodily life that operates on the edges of experienceability, I argue that it does not transcend any experience altogether. Drawing on Husserl's analyses of kinaestheses, I argue that a sensible experience is the experience of *being* a body that moves in the world, and that bodily movement is structured through the body's interaction with the world. In section 1.c, I move from an analysis of the relation

⁵⁵ For a definition of static, genetic, and generative phenomenology, see pp. 8-9 of this thesis.

⁵⁶ Derrida, *On Touching*, 159-182.

⁵⁷ PhP, 92-96.

⁵⁸ Al-Saji, 'Bodies and Sensings: On the Uses of Husserlian Phenomenology for Feminist Theory.'

between the body and the world to that between living bodies as I argue that Husserl's analysis of the expressive body in section three of *Ideas II* provides the beginnings of a theory of intercorporeality that is more convincing than the more widely known notion of apperceptive transfer developed in section two of *Ideas II*.

1.a. Three models of the touching-touched: coincidence, reversibility, reciprocity

In the first section of *Ideas II*, after having described the constitution of objects in relation to the living body, in chapter three of section two on 'The Constitution of Animal Nature,' Husserl turns to the constitution of the living body itself. In paragraphs 35-42, he analyses the three interrelated dimensions that make the body a living body rather than a mere material thing: 1) the living body's status as a thing that senses and senses itself in sensing the world; 2) its capacity for double sensation; and 3) its capacity for kinaesthetic self-movement. In this section, I analyse the first two of these through Husserl's notions of sensings and double sensation, both of which he analyses mainly in relation to touch. Whilst Husserl privileges the sense of touch in the constitution of the living body, I show how both sensings and double sensation refer back to the deeper dimension of a sensibility that cannot itself be touched. Indeed, the notion of sensibility designates the movements within and of the body itself which precisely make possible and structure perception.

Husserl privileges the sense of touch due to its inherent duplicity: I cannot touch anything without at the same time being touched by it. He explains that whenever my body touches something, it has not only a sensation of the touched thing, which has coldness or roughness as real properties, but 'also the experience of specifically Bodily occurrences of the type we call *sensings* {*Empfindnisse*}'.⁵⁹ *Empfindnisse*, a neologism of *Empfindung*, sensation, and *Erlebnis*, lived experience, is Husserl's term for how the body, in its interaction with its world, at the same time tacitly senses itself. Upon touching something cold, for example, my finger at once senses 'the coldness of the surface of a thing,'⁶⁰ and at

⁵⁹ *Ideas II*, 153/146. The English translation of Husserl's work customarily distinguishes between the notions of *Leib* and *Körper* by spelling the former with a capital B (Body), and the latter with a lower-case b (body). The notion of *Leibkörper* is usually translated as Corporeal body. When citing Husserl directly, I follow this method. However, insofar as I question the strict distinction between *Körper* and *Leib*, when not citing Husserl, I refer simply to the body or the living body.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 154.

the same time, it senses itself as affected by this interaction, that is, it also has a *sensing* of 'cold in the finger.'⁶¹ Sensings do not have extension like the thing, but are rather localised phenomenologically in or on the living body: 'The sensings do indeed spread out in space, cover, in their way, spatial surfaces, run through them, etc. But this *spreading out* and spreading into {*Ausbreitung* und *Hinbreitung*} are precisely something that differs essentially from *extension*.'⁶² Sensings, then, are not one-to-one copies of sensations received by the passive body from an 'outside'; rather, the notion of sensings describes the ways in which the living body experiences sensations in unique ways dependent upon the condition and situation of that living body. In this sense, Husserl's notion of sensings already breaks with what Merleau-Ponty, in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, will call the 'constancy hypothesis,'⁶³ namely, the idea that the same external stimulus will always produce the same internal sensation.

Sensings, then, far from being mechanical responses to stimuli, are one of the aspects which constitute the body as a living body rather than a mere material thing: the living body is the thing that senses the world and senses itself in sensing the world. Husserl explains that sensings, as the lived bodily experience of sensation, do not enrich or transform the physical body; rather, they are that through which this physical thing '*becomes Body, {wird Leib}*' insofar as '*it senses {es empfindet}*.'⁶⁴ Yet if the living body sensed itself only when sensing the world that is 'external' to it, Husserl argues, the living body would never really 'know' itself as itself. In its 'normal' sensing of the world, although it feels itself affected by this sensing, the living body remains in the background, as the invisible '*medium of all perception*.'⁶⁵ To understand how the body comes to 'know' itself as itself, then, we need to consider 'the special case in which the spatially experienced body, perceived by means of the Body {Leib}, is the Corporeal body {Leibkörper} itself.'⁶⁶

The capacity for double sensation further distinguishes the living body from a mere thing given that the living body does not touch itself as it would touch another object or even another living body. When I touch my desk with my hand, I at once sense the coolness of

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., 157/149.

⁶³ PhP, 8.

⁶⁴ Ideas II, 152/145.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 61.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 152/144.

the table as its real property and at the same time, I have a sensing of cold in my hand. When my right hand touches my left hand, however, 'the sensation is *doubled* in the two parts of the Body, since each is then precisely for the other an external thing that is touching and acting upon it, and each is at the same time Body.'⁶⁷ When my right hand touches my left hand, my left hand feels itself being touched not by some foreign object but by part of the same body of which the left hand is itself a part. Through the experience of double sensation, then, my body 'recognises' that what it is touching is not some object external to it, but precisely itself. Given that my body is the only object that has this capacity for double sensation for me, the notion of double sensation describes a kind of reflexivity of my body through which it recognises that this body is me, mine, and neither another's body nor another object in the world.⁶⁸

When my body touches itself, then, it is no longer solely the medium but also the 'object' of perception. Thus, the touching-touched describes how my body comes to 'know' its double ontological status as at once a perceiving subject and a perceptible object. Double sensations, then, as Joona Taipale writes, 'provide our lived-body with the characteristic of perceivability (e.g., visibility).'⁶⁹ Feeling itself being touched by itself, my body 'externalises' itself for itself; it is no longer the invisible background of all perception but brings itself partially into the foreground and thus, 'the perceived body appears as our *own* (...), that is, [as] the exteriority of the body that we *are*.'⁷⁰ Yet this perceivability is the perceivability of the living body *for itself*; ontologically prior to and as a condition for any self-reflexivity of the body is its material status as a perceptible thing in the world. Whilst the touching-touched describes how my body 'knows' itself as a living body, then, Husserl's analysis of the touching-touched remains solipsist and static: it does not, as Derrida argues in *On Touching – Jean-Luc Nancy*, by itself account for the constitutive outside that precisely makes possible and continuously (re-)structures my body's self-reflexive relation.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 153.

⁶⁸ As Merleau-Ponty writes, through the touching-touched, '[t]he body catches itself from the outside in the process of exercising a knowledge function; it attempts to touch itself touching, it begins "a sort of reflection."' PhP, 95.

⁶⁹ Joona Taipale, *Phenomenology and Embodiment: Husserl and the Constitution of Subjectivity* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2014), 54.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

i. *Coincidence: Derrida*

Derrida bases this critique upon a reading that models Husserl's account of the touching-touched in terms of coincidence: 'Coincidence, intuitive plenitude, direct immediacy – that is, according to Husserl, what characterises the experience of the touching-touched.'⁷¹ Such coincidence between the touching and the touched, Derrida argues, advances an idealist notion of the auto-affection of the pure 'I' that remains unmediated by any outside. Yet in order for there to be an actual double sensation, Derrida argues, there must be a gap between the touching and the touched; a gap which at once binds and separates the two terms, which allows for their communication but not their conflation. Without such gap, we are left with a pure self-presence or auto-affection that would never allow for any actual touch, given that touching needs something other than itself to touch, given that touching needs to traverse a certain, if minimal, distance, if it is to actually reach its term: 'it is necessary that the space of the material thing – like a difference, like the heterogeneity of a spacing – slip between the touching and the touched, since the two neither must nor can coincide if indeed there is to be a double apprehension.'⁷² Without a gap between the touching and the touched, without the conceptualisation of a constitutive outside to the phenomenological body – without a consideration of the living body's extension as a material thing, culture, language – we would revert into a pure self-presence without any possibility for touching at all; the living body would be like a fluid mass flowing indifferently with no possibility for any actual self-touching. Thus, Derrida's critique of the touching-touched points towards his critique of phenomenology in general: as a purported self-constitutive science, as a 'metaphysics of presence,'⁷³ it is unable to account for the alterity which precisely makes phenomenology possible in the first place.

Derrida's critique of Husserl's account of double sensation, then, relies upon the 'temporal coincidence [of the touching and the touched] meant to give it its intuitive plenitude, which is to say its dimension of direct immediacy.'⁷⁴ It is not at all clear, however, that such 'temporal coincidence' and 'direct immediacy' really figure at all or as decisively in Husserl's analyses as Derrida would have us think. Whilst the touching-touched certainly implies

⁷¹ Derrida, *On Touching*, 172.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 175.

⁷³ Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, 10.

⁷⁴ Derrida, *On Touching*, 172.

reciprocity, Husserl never insists upon the absolute simultaneity or coincidence which Derrida claims constitutes the very definition of Husserl's notion of the touching-touched. It is true that touch is a privileged sense for Husserl given that, as he argues, no other sense allows for a double sensation. Thus, Derrida's coincidence model of the touching-touched finds some support in Husserl's comparison of the sense of touch to the sense of vision which precisely does not bounce back upon itself in a double sensation: 'An eye does not appear to one's own vision' and 'similarly, we do not have a kind of extended ocularity such that, by moving, one eye could rub past the other and produce the phenomenon of double sensation.'⁷⁵ In vision, then, 'what we are denied is an analogon to the touch sensation, which is actually grasped along with the touching hand.'⁷⁶

As Robin Durie notes, Derrida's critique relies heavily upon this passage and its translation into French. The German 'mit' or 'with' becomes, in the French translation, 'en même temps,' 'at the same time.' Derrida asserts that '[t]he French translation introduces "at the same time" [*en même temps*] for *mit*, and it seems justified; it is perfectly faithful to the whole drift of the argument.'⁷⁷ As Durie rightly argues, however, Derrida's 'introduction, seemingly without motivation, of this temporal dimension – synchronicity'⁷⁸ is a strategic move necessary to his commitment to the method of deconstruction, yet Derrida ultimately relies, as Durie writes, 'on what amounts to a translational gloss.'⁷⁹ This is despite Derrida's purported emphasis on the importance of 'minute attention to detail,' of 'sticking to the text as closely as possible.'⁸⁰ It is true, then, that Husserl privileges the reciprocity between the touching and the touched over the non-reciprocity of seeing and being seen, yet such privileging of reciprocity does not, contrary to Derrida's claim, necessarily result in the absolute coinciding of the touching and the touched.

Further developing Durie's critique of Derrida, then, I argue that the latter conflates the reciprocity of the touching and the touched with a 'direct immediacy' in order to then be in a position to deconstruct such immediacy. However, whilst Derrida's critique relies on the

⁷⁵ Ideas II, 155.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 156/148: 'Es fehlt also das Analogon zur Tastempfindung, die wirklich mit der tastenden Hand erfaßt wird.'

⁷⁷ Derrida, *On Touching*, 171-2.

⁷⁸ Robin Durie, 'At the Same Time: Continuities in Derrida's Readings of Husserl,' *Continental Philosophy Review* 41, no. 1 (March 2008): 73-88, 80.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 81.

⁸⁰ Derrida, *On Touching*, 164.

positing of an absolute immediacy of the touching and the touched which is at best ambiguously present in Husserl's analysis, Derrida is nonetheless right to insist upon the need for a gap between the touching and the touched. The touching and the touched cannot completely coincide if there is to be an actual self-touching; there must be some mediation, some gap between the touching and the touched, 'some not-I (material thing, real [*reell*] space, extension, as opposed to phenomenological "spreading out and spreading into," and so forth)'⁸¹ which would precisely structure and allow for the experience of touching and being touched. It is this need for the non-coincidence of the body with itself that Merleau-Ponty had already tacitly recognised in 1945, in his reappropriation of the touching-touched in terms of reversibility.

ii. *Reversibility: Merleau-Ponty*

Perhaps sensing the need for the non-coincidence of the body with itself, Merleau-Ponty, in his reading of the touching-touched in the first part of the *Phenomenology of Perception*, projects a temporal lag in between the touching and the touched, thus advancing a model of the touching-touched in terms of reversibility rather than coincidence:

'I can palpate my right hand with my left while my right hand is touching an object. The right hand, as an object, is not the right hand that does the touching. The first is an intersecting of bones, muscles, and flesh compressed into a point of space; the second shoots across space to reveal the external object in its place.'⁸²

In this reappropriation of Husserl's notion of double sensation, Merleau-Ponty posits the touching-touched as a reversible relation between a subject and an object through which 'the two hands can alternate between the functions of "touching" and "touched."' ⁸³ The reversibility model, then, avoids the danger of the coinciding of the body with itself insofar as, as Merleau-Ponty writes, 'the two hands are never simultaneously both touching and touched.'⁸⁴

Yet whilst Derrida projects an absolute immediacy into Husserl's description of the touching-touched, conflating the two terms to the point of indistinction, Merleau-Ponty projects a temporal lag into the touching-touched which distinguishes the two to the point

⁸¹ Ibid., 175.

⁸² PhP, 94.

⁸³ Ibid., 95.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

at which there is not a *double* sensation but rather a reversibility between the hand as touching subject and the hand as touched object. As Al-Saji notes, on the reversibility model, my right hand that is touched is reduced to a mere object, 'a package of bones and muscles'⁸⁵ that does not have the capacity to feel itself being touched by the left hand.⁸⁶ Thus, Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of the touching-touched as a reversibility between the body as subject and the body as object risks, as Al-Saji argues, reducing the experience of being-touched to 'a passivity that cannot at once be subject.'⁸⁷ Merleau-Ponty's reversibility model of the touching-touched, whilst avoiding the idealist notion of the coinciding of the body with itself, then, runs the risk of advancing a theory that reduces the living body's self-relation to a self-objectification.

iii. Reciprocity: Al-Saji

If the coincidence model neglects the possibility for any actual self-touching due to the absolute indistinction of the touching and the touched, the reversibility model neglects the possibility for any actual self-touching due to the absolute distinction of the two terms. Al-Saji, staying closer to Husserl's text than both Derrida and Merleau-Ponty, reads the touching and the touched in terms neither of a coinciding of the body with itself, nor of a reversible process through which it takes itself as an object, but of a doubling of sensings or *Empfindnisse* produced in and through the reciprocity of one hand touching the other. Whilst most of Husserl's analyses of sensings describe how my body experiences itself in its interaction with some object external to it, sensings also describe the experience of the touching-touched of my own body. Immediately following the example of the sensing of something cold, Husserl writes: 'In the case of one hand touching the other, it is again the same, only more complicated, for we have then two sensations, and each is apprehendable or experienceable in a double way.'⁸⁸ Thus, although the two hands are reciprocally touching and being touched, this does not describe, as Derrida claims, a coinciding of the body with itself but rather, as Al-Saji argues, a doubling of sensings: 'These sensings do not fuse, nor is it a matter of the same sensation transferred back and forth. There is rather a

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Al-Saji, 'Bodies and Sensings: On the Uses of Husserlian Phenomenology for Feminist Theory,' 21.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 34.

⁸⁸ Ideas II, 154.

doubling of sensings, localised in *two* sites of the lived body – a doubling that is indeed constitutive of the differentiated and lived structure, the felt *two-ness*, of the body.⁸⁹

On Al-Saji's account, then, it is not that the two sensings fuse into one undifferentiated melting together, but that their reciprocity makes possible the shifting of attention from one sensing to another. The notion of a felt *two-ness*, however, still implies too strong of a differentiation of the body from itself and thus effectively risks reverting to Merleau-Ponty's reversibility model, even if such a reversion is precisely what Al-Saji's account works against. The phenomenological experience of the touching-touched such as Al-Saji interprets it, as I will argue, is better understood as a bodily sensing of reciprocity. Whilst the notion of two-ness evokes notions of duality, duplicity, and dualism, thus risking a reversion into a subject/object dialectic, the notion of reciprocity signifies an affective dynamic of mutual reciprocation which better describes Al-Saji's interpretation of the touching-touched. Rather than the coincidence model which conflates difference or the reversibility model which distinguishes difference to the point at which there is no possibility for a non-objectifying communication, then, what I term the reciprocity model developed by Al-Saji opens up for 'the possibility of a non-objectivating touch.'⁹⁰ Indeed, in everyday experience, it is not the case that I touch my body as a mere thing, nor do my hands completely fuse when touching, and thus Al-Saji's reciprocity model proves the most faithful, not only to Husserl's own account, but also to the actual phenomenological experience of self-touching.

Whilst the reciprocity model accounts for how the double status of the living body as at once subject and object allows for a self-relation that is not reducible to self-objectification, it is necessary, as Al-Saji also argues, to account for the ways in which my capacity to touch is itself mediated or structured by a constitutive outside.⁹¹ Whilst Derrida's and Merleau-Ponty's interpretations rely upon a misreading of Husserl's texts, then, there is nonetheless a truth to their insistence upon the need for a gap, a space of mediation, of non-coincidence, between the touching and the touched. Given that such mediation is not a concern for Husserl in his analysis of double sensation (in which, after all, he is concerned to

⁸⁹ Al-Saji, 'Bodies and Sensings: On the Uses of Husserlian Phenomenology for Feminist Theory,' 22.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁹¹ Al-Saji argues that in order for phenomenology to develop in a critical direction, 'the limits of Husserl's approach need to be made visible. In the context of my reading of *Ideas II*, it is the solipsism of Husserl's account of touch that needs to be addressed.' *Ibid.*, 30.

distinguish the living body from the mere *Körper* through the living body's unique capacity for double sensation), it is not a question of deciding, once and for all, whether Husserl is or is not committed to the simultaneity of the touching-touched and hence of the pure auto-affection and auto-constitution of the living body. It is a question, rather, of drawing out the productive dimensions of Derrida's critique and of Merleau-Ponty's interpretation which can help us propel Husserl's phenomenology of the body in a critical direction. One such productive dimension is the possibility for, and the need to, conceptualise the gap between the touching and the touched concretely in terms of a sensibility which cannot itself be touched.

1.b. Sensibility as the 'turning-point' between *Körper* and *Leib*

It is true that Husserl describes the touching-touched as a relation of my body to itself, and that he does not consider, in this passage, the constitutive outside that itself structures the touching-touched. The absence of such an outside in this passage, however, does not mean that there are not rich resources in *Ideas II* to conceptualise such an outside. To account for such an outside, however, it is necessary to move beyond the internal dynamic of the touching-touched. To do this, I conceptualise the gap in between the touching and the touched as the sensitivity or sensibility of the material body which is always already in fluid interaction with its world. The notion of sensibility, then, describes the level of bodily existence which makes possible and structures any capacity for self-touching. Where, if at all, do we find such a notion of sensibility in Husserl? Indeed, he mainly analyses the experience of one's own body in terms of tactile perception, such as when he considers 'the localisation of the interior of the Body,' only as 'mediated by the localisation of the field of touch. For example, I "feel my heart." When I press the surface of the Body "around the heart," I discover so to say, this "heart sensation," and it may become stronger and somewhat modified.'⁹² But is the interior of the body, the heart beating, for example, only experienceable through the mediation of touch? Do we not have a bodily sense of our heart beating without any mediation apart from that of our body itself; a sense that is at once intimate and strange?

⁹² *Ideas II*, 173-4.

What about the dimensions of the body that transcend normal experience, such as the synapses in the brain or the hormones fluctuating? Given that these bodily processes belong to what classical phenomenology excludes from its analyses as the *Körper*, does this mean that a phenomenological conception of the sensible materiality of the body is impossible? Or would a transposition of the phenomenological notion of transcendence to the level of sensibility precisely open up for a critical potential within phenomenology itself; a potential for phenomenology to seriously consider its constitutive outside and thus move decisively beyond any charge of solipsism and idealism? Given that the notion of sensibility transcends classical phenomenological analysis, we shall see that it only reveals itself on the backside of what Husserl is explicitly analysing. We shall follow his analyses of sensings or *Empfindnisse* and see how these refer back to the materiality of the body, and thus how a critical phenomenology of sensibility blurs the strict distinction between *Körper* and *Leib*.

Perhaps due to the uniqueness of the sense of touch, Husserl's analyses of sensings mostly concern the body's tactile interactions with objects 'external' to it. Yet he extends the notion of sensings to include the 'ones that form the material substrate for the life of desire and will, sensations of energetic tension and relaxation, sensations of inner restraint, paralysis, liberation, etc. All these groups of sensations, as *sensings*, have an immediate Bodily localisation.'⁹³ Whilst Husserl's analyses of sensings are mainly tied to the tactile realm, then, the term 'sensings' covers over a wider range of bodily lived experiences, including 'the sensations of pleasure and pain, the sense of well-being that permeates and fills the whole Body, the general malaise of "corporeal indisposition," etc.'⁹⁴ Thus, sensings describe not only the sensings that are experienced as effects of the contact of the surface of my body with things but also internal sensings such as a knot in our stomach when we are nervous or excess energy which in turn motivates us to run, dance, or scream. Whilst the motivating 'cause' for such internal sensings is less obvious than in the case of the sensing of cold when I touch an ice cube, sensings such as energetic tension or a knot in our stomach are nonetheless cases of the body sensing itself in its interaction with its world. Nervousness or tension does not arise out of nowhere but always as a bodily response to a situation. Sensings, then, are never purely 'immanent' to a solipsistic body, but are, rather, the

⁹³ Ideas II, 160.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

affective imprint upon or within the living body of an 'outside.' Thus, Al-Saji is right, in her critical reading of Husserl, to extend the notion of sensings to designate not only touch-sensings but more generally 'the way we feel our contact with the world, with others, and with our own life'⁹⁵ at a bodily level.

Sensings, then, describe the ways in which the body senses itself in its relations to the world at a pre-intentional level. I am nervous because I have to give a presentation and sense this at a bodily level through the knot in my stomach; I am embarrassed or frightened, and my shoulders slouch over into a closed posture so as to hide or shield itself; I touch a hot stove and my hand immediately withdraws in pain. Sensings do not operate solely through the sense of touch, then, but through my general bodily *sensitivity* to the world. This sensitivity plays out not through any one sense, but through an intertwining of touch, vision, hearing, smell, movement. Ultimately, then, sensitivity is an expression of the movement of life at the level of (human) bodies. Husserl writes that it is through the sensitivity or 'the capacity to be stimulated in general {Reizbarkeit überhaupt},'⁹⁶ that 'the material Body is intertwined with the soul.'⁹⁷ 'Soul' should here be understood, not as another thing added onto the body but precisely as the dimension of life that animates the body as a living body. Sensings, then, are the concrete effects or expressions of my body's ontological status as a sensitive thing. Whilst describing lived bodily experiences phenomenologically, sensings necessarily refer back to the physical body that is materially part of the world and the notion of sensings thus blurs the strict distinction between *Körper* and *Leib* upon which Husserl explicitly insists.

Indeed, despite Husserl's distinction between *Körper* and *Leib* in *Ideas II*, we find detailed analyses of the physical body to which sensings refer. In arguing for the correlation between the physical and the psychological, for example, he writes that whilst there is a 'localisation of psychic processes in the brain, in the frontal lobes,'⁹⁸ this localisation is not one that appears to me: 'my hand and other parts of my Body are appearing ones, and they appear as really connected with sense data. But the lobes of my brain do not appear to me.'⁹⁹

⁹⁵ Al-Saji, 'The Site of Affect in Husserl's Phenomenology: Sensations and the Constitution of the Lived Body,' 52.

⁹⁶ *Ideas II*, 164/157.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 172.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

Further, 'my frontal lobe is not the bearer of a field of touch and is for me not at all something appearing.'¹⁰⁰ This means, then, that my body, in its very materiality, has its own 'intentionality' which transcends my perceptual and conscious agency, whilst at the same time making any agency or intentionality possible at all.¹⁰¹ Husserl would undoubtedly object that an analysis of the physical body only comes about through an abstraction from the natural to the naturalistic attitude. Yet a critical phenomenology of the body, as I will argue, must be able to take the physiology of the body into account if it is to understand how sensings, the lived sense of being a body, are not static or isolated happenings but are themselves structured by processes that remain transcendent to the 'subject' of the body, and thus how, in Bernhard Waldenfels' words, '[w]e participate and intervene in a motion which is already on the road and which precedes our initiative.'¹⁰²

To this end, Husserl's characterisation of the sensible body as the 'turning point' or *Umschlagpunkt* through which physical or causal processes (e.g., hormones fluctuating) translate into lived bodily experiences (e.g., joy or stress) will prove helpful: 'the Body appears here at the same time as a "turning point" where the causal relations are transformed into conditional relations between the external world and the Bodily-psychic subject.'¹⁰³ It is this turning point that at once binds and distinguishes the *Körper* and the *Leib*. An increase in cortisol at the level of the *Körper*, for example, translates into the lived bodily experience of stress which is sensed through a faster heart rate, rapid breathing, and irritability. Yet the process through which the sensible body translates physical processes into particular lived experiences, or sensings, is not transparent to me, the 'subject' of this body, and thus the *Körper* and the *Leib* do not merge into one: 'The "turning point," which lies in the Body, the point of the transformation from causal to conditional process, is hidden from me.'¹⁰⁴ Husserl's analyses of the ontological status of the living body as having its own materiality as part of the world, a materiality whose workings for the most part remain transcendent to the subject of that body, thus already reveal – inadvertently,

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ The intentionality of the body would be an operative, rather than thetic, intentionality. For a definition of these two kinds of intentionalities, see page 3 of this thesis.

¹⁰² Bernhard Waldenfels, 'Bodily Experience Between Selfhood and Otherness,' *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 3, no. 3 (September 2014): 235-248, 242.

¹⁰³ Ideas II, 169.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 168.

perhaps – that the living body is precisely not a pure auto-affection but is, rather, constitutively dependent upon its materiality which precedes its capacity for self-touching. The materiality of sensibility, then, ascribes new depth to the phenomenological notion that my body is always already ‘outside’ itself, has always already transcended itself.¹⁰⁵

The phenomenological notion of sensings thus points towards a materiality that operates on the edges of what is traditionally deemed phenomenologically experienceable, indicating, as Al-Saji writes, the blurring of the strict distinction between *Körper* and *Leib*: ‘Although Husserl underlines the difference between lived bodies and mere material things in *Ideas II* (...) lived bodies are yet embedded in the material world and affected by it.’¹⁰⁶ This blurring is precisely what is indicated by Husserl’s use of the term *Leibkörper*, that is, the body ‘as a *physical-aesthesiological unity*’¹⁰⁷ which in the words of Waldenfels ‘includes not only the lived body by and through which we perceive and manipulate things,’ but also ‘the physiological apparatus (...) by which our own behaviour is not only realised but to some extent shaped.’¹⁰⁸ It is at the level of sensibility, then, that the transcendence of empirical materiality and the transcendental as the structuring of experience intertwine. Waldenfels precisely points to this collision of the empirical and the transcendental as he emphasises, commenting on Husserl’s argument that vision does not allow for a double sensation, that ‘what escapes my own eyes is not *something* or *somebody* seen, but the very *event of becoming visible*.’¹⁰⁹

Does the impossibility of grasping the sensible turning point at which the empirical and the transcendental collide mean, after all, that the notion of sensibility transcends phenomenology altogether? It does, if we presuppose a transparency of experience as unproblematically given to the experiencing subject. Yet a critical phenomenology acknowledges that sensibility is not given but rather pregiven to experience to varying degrees.¹¹⁰ Whilst givenness implies the perception of already constituted, ‘ready-made,’

¹⁰⁵ Waldenfels, in emphasising the bodily dimension of experience, similarly writes: ‘I get outside myself, not by chance, illness or weakness, but by being who I am.’ Waldenfels, ‘Bodily Experience Between Selfhood and Otherness,’ 242.

¹⁰⁶ Al-Saji, ‘Bodies and Sensings: On the Uses of Husserlian Phenomenology for Feminist Theory,’ 24.

¹⁰⁷ *Ideas II*, 163.

¹⁰⁸ Waldenfels, ‘Bodily Experience Between Selfhood and Otherness,’ 243.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 241.

¹¹⁰ See also page 6 of this thesis. The specific modality in which sensibility is experienceable will be developed in more detail in chapter two.

objects, pregiveness, on the other hand, precedes and makes possible perceptual objectification. Thus, the notion of pregiveness breaks with any linear or static notion of constitution. Rather than the static-eidetic notion, from *Ideas I*, of absolute consciousness that constitutes all transcendencies,¹¹¹ the notion of pregiveness embodies a generative thinking of the transcendental as essentially dynamic, as the continuous (re-)fashioning of sense of what is always already there.¹¹² Sensibility, then, is precisely not experienceable as an object of perception, but rather as the pregiveness of bodily existence.

If sensibility is not experienceable as a transcendent object but rather in its pre-objective pregiveness, however, we are justified in asking, first, whether sensibility is not better described in terms of immanence, and second, whether such 'immanence' of sensibility would not place it outside any possible phenomenological analysis.¹¹³ Here, it is necessary to distinguish between the phenomenological and the ontological perspectives. From a phenomenological perspective, I will argue, and we shall see this in greater detail in chapter two, that insofar as the sensory life of the body does not present itself from an angle or a side, a sensible or bodily experience is an absolute experience which does not operate according to a subject/object correlation. Phenomenologically speaking, then, a sensible experience presents a materialisation and concretisation of Husserl's claim that 'an experience has no perspectives [*Ein Erlebnis schattet sich nicht ab*].'¹¹⁴ Whilst Husserl characterises an experience explicitly in terms of immanence insofar as it does not present itself from a perspective, however, when thought at the level of bodily life, the immanence/transcendence dichotomy such as this has traditionally been conceived loses its sense. The body is precisely not locked in immanence but is fundamentally *in* the world, and thus, a sensible or bodily experience, whilst absolute, cannot be conceived in terms of immanence.

To say that a sensible experience is an absolute experience, however, is not to say that 'I' can experience everything that happens in my body. A sensible experience is precisely an anonymous or *bodily* experience that, as we shall see in greater detail in chapter two,

¹¹¹ *Ideas I*, 146.

¹¹² On the notion of pregiveness, see EJ, 29-31; 71-3. For an account of what Steinbock terms Husserl's 'regressive' method which begins from the pregiven world rather than from an absolute consciousness, see Steinbock, *Home and Beyond*, 79-85.

¹¹³ Indeed, this is Tom Sparrow's argument. See Sparrow, *Plastic Bodies*, 39 and pp. 15-6 of this thesis.

¹¹⁴ *Ideas I*, 79.

transcends the perception and the reflection of the I. This makes it essentially impossible to speak about sensibility *as* sensibility, given the fact that as soon as we do this, the sensory life of the body is already transformed from a bodily experience into a reflection upon that experience. Yet, as I argue throughout, this does not mean that the notion of sensibility pushes us into a post-phenomenological framework, as Sparrow argues.¹¹⁵ Rather, from an ontological perspective, we take seriously the material processes (and, as we shall see later, the socio-historical structures) that structure bodily experience itself, thus moving into a *critical* phenomenological framework. With this follows necessarily a different concept of experience as non-transparent to itself which will be further developed in relation to the erotic in chapter six.

If 'I' cannot catch the sensory life of the body in the act, however, this bodily experience is available to subsequent reflection to varying degrees. Whilst my body surely 'experiences' or registers processes such as the fluctuation of hormones and the synapses firing in my brain, 'I' do not register such bodily experiences. My heart beating, my lungs breathing, and my pulse throbbing in my veins are experienceable by 'me' to a higher degree; whilst these processes usually go by unnoticed by 'me,' the subject of my body, I can, however, at any moment direct my attention towards them and I am also sometimes surprised by them such as if my heart skips a beat or when my pulse throbs when I exercise, when I am frightened or nervous. Finally, I can become conscious of my style of walking or gesturing but such consciousness will likely alter my movements. In fact, any consciousness or perception of the processes that operate according to sensibility will likely alter these processes, either momentarily or more permanently. Whilst the sensory life of my body is available to 'me' to varying degrees, the sensible movements within and of my body have in common the fact that whilst they can at varying levels be *sensed* or felt, neither of them can be *perceived* as a *Gestalt*: I cannot directly touch my brain, my heart, or my movements; I can partially see my movements but never my moving body as *Gestalt*. In this sense, it is movement, rather than touch or vision, that is emblematic of what I have called a bodily or sensible experience.

In understanding how movement is sensed, it is helpful to bear in mind the distinction Husserl draws between presentational and kinaesthetic sensations.¹¹⁶ Presentational

¹¹⁵ Sparrow, *Plastic Bodies*, 21.

¹¹⁶ Ideas II, 62-3.

sensations present something other than the sensing itself, yet it is important to note, as Taipale emphasises, that 'even if the blue sky is something other than our sensing, our *sensations* or "*sensings*" of the blue sky are not lived through in any lesser manner.'¹¹⁷ Thus, whilst presentational sensations present something other than the sensing, the sensing itself *is* the lived bodily experience and on the 'sensing' side of presentational sensations, there is no distinction between subject and object. The sensing of cold in my entire body, whilst 'presenting' the current cold climate, *is* my sense of being a body. In contrast to presentational sensations, kinaesthetic sensations do not present anything. In kinaesthetic sensations, there is no distinction between sensing and what is sensed: 'the kinaesthetically *sensed* is nothing other than the kinaesthetic *sensing* itself.'¹¹⁸ Thus, Taipale notes, whilst the sense of touch constitutes a tactile sense-field, and the sense of vision constitutes a visual sense-field, 'there is no sensuous quality that could be present only to kinaestheses (...), and, for this reason, kinaesthesia does not qualify as a particular sense among others.'¹¹⁹ What is sensed is the movement itself, which is precisely the sensing *of* movement. The sensing of movement, then, illustrates par excellence the experience of *being* a body, given that it makes no sense to distinguish between the body as moving subject and moved object: *I am* this body that moves.

Despite Husserl's privileging of tactile perception, then, movement plays a privileged role in the structuring of perception itself. Indeed, the kinaesthetic movements within and of my body, as Husserl writes, *motivate* the presentational sensations;¹²⁰ if my eyes move to the right, then the visual perceptions I have change accordingly, and so on. Husserl writes that the movements of the whole body, the 'I can,' describes the capacity 'to freely move this Body (...) and to perceive an external world by means of it.'¹²¹ Without the movements of my heart beating, my lungs breathing, my eyes, and of my whole body, there would be no perception at all. Further, the particularity of my body's movements 'colour' my perception: the fluctuation of hormones such as cortisol stresses my body and I find it hard to look at the world with pleasurable curiosity; instead, I see potential obstacles and to-do lists

¹¹⁷ Taipale, *Phenomenology and Embodiment*, 29.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹²⁰ 'We constantly find here this two-fold articulation: kinaesthetic sensations on the one side, the motivating; and the sensations of features on the other, the motivated.' *Ideas II*, 63.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 159-60.

everywhere. In turn, my perceptions can also structure my body's movements: I hear a sudden loud noise and instantly recoil in fear; or I listen to waves breaking at the beach and my body intuitively relaxes, my breaths become deeper, my posture straighter. Thus, the indistinction between sensing and what is sensed in movement does not mean that movement operates independently from a world; movement, whilst not 'presenting' anything other than the movement itself, is, as we shall see in more detail in part three on Merleau-Ponty, just as much an expression of the body's interactions with itself and its 'outside' as are presentational sensations. Yet how do the body's movements play not only a basic practical role in the structuring of perception, but also an existential role in the expression of what Husserl, in section three of *Ideas II*, will describe as the person herself?

1.c. The role of movement for a theory of intercorporeality: the expressive body in *Ideas II*

The first two sections uncovered a conceptualisation, operative within *Ideas II*, of the constitutive outside to the phenomenological notion of the living body qua its ontological status as a *Leibkörper* that is constitutively open to and dependent upon its world. Whilst Husserl only considers sensings in relation to the body's interactions with the world, and not in relation to other living bodies, the notion of sensings nevertheless describes the way in which the living body is really affected and continuously reshaped by the world with which it is in constant and fluid interaction. The sensibility which puts my body in material communication with a world, then, also puts my body in material communication with other living bodies, characterising the body, in Al-Saji's words, as 'an original intercorporeity.'¹²² This follows indirectly from Husserl's analyses, even if he never explicitly goes this far. The notion of sensings, then, whilst beginning to make a case for the ontological openness of my body to the world, does not by itself account for the specific way in which my body takes on an existentially and historically specific sense. Before we can move more properly into the temporal and historical structuring of sensibility itself, it is necessary to understand in what sense the sensory life of the body has not only a material-ontological significance but also a specifically existential one.

¹²² Al-Saji, 'The Site of Affect in Husserl's Phenomenology: Sensations and the Constitution of the Lived Body,' 57.

To this end, I argue that Husserl's analyses of the expressive body developed towards the end of *Ideas II* provide a more convincing account of intercorporeality than the theory for which he is perhaps best known of apperceptive transfer or “analogising” apprehension¹²³ as developed in the fifth of the *Cartesian Meditations* and in section two of *Ideas II* on ‘The Constitution of Animal Nature.’ This is insofar as the theory of the expressive body avoids two pitfalls. First, given the immanent unity of the expressive body and the expressed person, Husserl's notion of expression precludes any reversion into a mind/body dualism or any presumption of a ready-made agent pre-existing its bodily expression. Instead, the person or the agent and her bodily expressions constantly co-constitute one another without either term pre-existing the other or being able to be separated out from the other. This is the sense in which I *am* this body that moves in the world. Second, the theory of expression precludes any apperceptive transfer theory of intersubjectivity, according to which we first perceive another *Körper* and subsequently project or ‘transfer’ the sense of *Leib* onto that *Körper*. Such a theory, given the fact that I only transfer myself onto the other, is not a theory of intersubjectivity at all, but of an expansion or projection of myself, that is, a reversion into solipsism. Contrary to the projection theory of intersubjectivity, a theory of intercorporeality based on the expressive body, as we shall see, shows that we immediately perceive the other person as an expressive whole through her movements. According to the apperceptive transfer theory, another body (*Körper*) gains the sense ‘living body’ (*Leib*) through a transfer of sense based on my already constituted living body: ‘Transferred over to the other Bodies thereby is first all that “localisation” I accomplish in various sense-fields (field of touch, warmth, coldness, smell, taste, pain, sensuous pleasure) and sense-regions (sensations of movement), and then in a similar way there is a transfer of my indirect localisation of spiritual activities.’¹²⁴ Insofar as the apperceptive transfer of sense begins from an already constituted subject who then projects her own sense-fields onto the other, however, the other is not apperceived as ‘other’ at all, but rather, as Husserl repeatedly writes, ‘as analogons of ourselves.’¹²⁵ The theory of apperceptive transfer thus lends itself to Levinas's critique of Husserl's thinking of intersubjectivity. Any theory that models the experience of the other upon a projection of oneself is not a theory of

¹²³ CM, 111.

¹²⁴ *Ideas II*, 172.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 176.

intersubjectivity at all but rather, Levinas writes, of ‘the solitary ego which has no relationship with the other qua other, for whom the other is another me, an *alter ego* known by sympathy, that is, by a return to oneself.’¹²⁶ Rather than this Cartesian account of intersubjectivity, however, a more convincing notion of intercorporeality reveals itself inadvertently in Husserl’s analyses of the expressive body in section three of *Ideas II* on ‘The Constitution of the Spiritual World.’

Moving from the naturalistic attitude to the natural or personalistic attitude, Husserl at the same time moves away from the theory of apperceptive transfer and towards a theory of intercorporeality through bodily expression. The relation between the bodily expression and the person that is expressed, he writes, is an immanent one: ‘The thoroughly intuitive unity presenting itself when we grasp a person *as such* (...) is the unity of the “*expression*” and the “*expressed*.”’¹²⁷ And further: ‘It is surely the case that this is not a connection in which the parts are “outside one another,” a connection in which each part could also exist for itself in abstraction from the form which binds them.’¹²⁸ In *Ideas II*, Husserl thus expands the notion of expression developed in *Logical Investigations*.¹²⁹ In *Logical Investigations*, Husserl held that what is commonly understood as bodily expressions (facial expressions, gestures, etc.) are not technically expressions but only *indications* of the spiritual life of the person.¹³⁰ Indication should here be understood in its technical sense, as a sign (e.g., smoke) indicates a signified (e.g., a fire).¹³¹ Whilst indication designates an external relation between sign and signified, expression describes an immanent relation between the two: a word, for example, is not a word without its meaning.

¹²⁶ EE, 85.

¹²⁷ *Ideas II*, 248.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 248-9.

¹²⁹ For analyses of the development of Husserl’s notion of expression from the *Logical Investigations*, where it applies only to linguistics, not to living bodies, see: Irene McMullin, ‘Embodied Expression: The Role of the Lived Body in Husserl’s Notion of Intention Fulfilment,’ *European Journal of Philosophy* 25, no. 4 (December 2017): 1739-1767; Molly Brigid Flynn, ‘The Living Body as the Origin of Culture: What the Shift in Husserl’s Notion of “Expression” Tells us About Cultural Objects,’ *Husserl Studies* 25, no. 1 (April 2009): 57-79; Joona Taipale, ‘Beyond Cartesianism: Body-Perception and the Immediacy of Empathy,’ *Continental Philosophy Review* 48, no. 2 (June 2015): 161-178.

¹³⁰ In *Logical Investigations*, Husserl argues that expression technically ‘excludes facial expression and the various gestures which involuntarily accompany speech without communicative intent’ and that “‘expressive movements’ (...) are without meaning in the special sense in which verbal signs have meaning: [expressive movements] only mean in the sense of indicating.’ Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, vol. 1, trans. John N. Findlay, from the second German edition (London: Routledge, 2001), 187-8.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 183-4.

Whilst expression is linked exclusively to linguistic expression in *Logical Investigations*, in *Ideas II*, Husserl expands the notion of expression to designate the person as an immanent unity of body and soul: 'The Body is, as Body, filled with soul through and through. Each movement of the body is full of soul, the coming and going, the standing and sitting, the walking and dancing.'¹³² Bodily movements, then, express persons in unique ways; in the particularities 'of facial expression, of gestures, of the spoken "word," of the individual's intonation, etc. – is expressed the spiritual life of persons, their thinking, feeling, desiring, what they do and what they omit to do.'¹³³ We are here moving towards a notion of the person as inseparable from the notion of the expressive body, thus preparing the ground for Merleau-Ponty's later argument that 'the body continuously expresses existence.'¹³⁴ The notion of the expressive body thus breaks with the idealist notion that there is a ready-made I or agent pre-existing the expressive movements of the body. Rather, the body is, as Merleau-Ponty will argue, 'the very movement of expression'¹³⁵ and thus the I is the expressive body itself which is constantly re-fashioning itself through its interactions with other bodies.

It is misleading, then, to describe, as Irene McMullin does, the expressive body 'as the unique vehicle of the ego's striving.'¹³⁶ Whilst the phenomenological notion of evidence is usually linked up with the fulfilment of an empty expectation in perception (I expect to see myself in the mirror when standing in front of it, and when I look, I indeed see myself), McMullin interestingly argues that Husserl's notion of the expressive body in *Ideas II* presents the most basic form of evidence as itself anchored in the movements of the expressive body, its 'I can.' McMullin explains that whilst my body can fail to fulfil my intention (I can attempt to jump a fence and fail), such failure does not make me doubt whether or not this is my body. The 'I can' of the body is then the most basic form of evidence, since I cannot, in non-pathological experience, doubt that these movements are mine, and not another's.¹³⁷ Whilst McMullin's transposition of the fulfilment of evidence

¹³² *Ideas II*, 252.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 246.

¹³⁴ PhP, 169.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 147.

¹³⁶ McMullin, 'Embodied Expression: The Role of the Lived Body in Husserl's Notion of Intention Fulfilment,' 1746.

¹³⁷ Yet given that, as we saw above, bodily experience is itself characterised by a certain thickness, a non-transparency to the 'subject' of that experience, however, bodily experience is never unproblematically given

from perception to the expressive body has the important potential to break with the notion of a disembodied will that pre-exists its bodily expression, however, McMullin undermines such potential by suggesting that ‘the ego hold[s] sway over the body.’¹³⁸

Such use of language, then, pushes the problem further back in tacitly presupposing an ego or an agent pre-existing its bodily expression. Whilst this is of course sometimes the case, such as when learning a new motor skill or a difficult dance move, most of the time, however, there is no agent pre-existing the movement. Rather, movement is, as Merleau-Ponty’s notion of motor intentionality designates, a ‘praktognosia’¹³⁹ through which it is *my body* that knows the world without the need for a mediating ego. This is testified to phenomenologically by dancers and musicians, as Waldenfels states: ‘Every player of a musical instrument knows that his or her fingers are quicker and more sensitive than any rational control could be.’¹⁴⁰ Indeed, in a recent phenomenological analysis of how dancers reflect through their bodies, Antoinette, a professional dancer, says about the creation of an improvised dance: “‘It feels as if it (...) comes from a deeper place in me.’”¹⁴¹ Husserl precisely points towards such praktognosia as he asks: ‘How does my will take hold when I perform a Bodily activity, what does it do *immediately*?’¹⁴² He answers that my body moves not through theoretical knowledge, but through a ‘practical understanding’¹⁴³ of what will happen. Whilst McMullin perhaps means to indicate such praktognosia, her use of idealist language risks reverting into another dualism in which the ‘ego’ that ‘holds sway’ over the body is a disembodied mind, its ‘will’ ready-made prior to the movement. McMullin’s language presupposes agency as something transparent and pre-existing bodily movement, whilst Husserl’s theory of expression in *Ideas II* precisely points towards the notion that the

to the subject; rather, it inadvertently points towards and perhaps belatedly reveals the material and historical structures that form that experience itself. Although this is not McMullin’s point, a critical transposition of evidence to bodily experience, then, begins to make a case for the importance of considering bodily experience as a form of evidence, a way of discovering and thus critiquing the wider socio-historical structures that shape that bodily experience itself. This would be in line with Johanna Oksala’s argument in her article ‘In Defence of Experience.’

¹³⁸ McMullin, ‘Embodied Expression: The Role of the Lived Body in Husserl’s Notion of Intention Fulfilment,’ 1742.

¹³⁹ PhP, 141.

¹⁴⁰ Waldenfels, ‘Bodily Experience Between Selfhood and Otherness,’ 242.

¹⁴¹ Camille Buttingsrud, ‘Bodies in Skilled Performance: How Dancers Reflect through the Living Body,’ *Synthese* 199 (2021): 7535-7554, 7541.

¹⁴² *Ideas II*, 271-2.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 272.

'I' that is expressed and the expressive movement continuously develop and transform alongside one another.

If the notion of the expressive body breaks with the idea of a ready-made agent pre-existing movement, it also breaks with the theory that intercorporeality involves some kind of projection or transfer of sense between bodies. The analyses of expression show that we do not first perceive a *Körper* to which we then transfer the sense of *Leib*. Rather, we directly perceive the other person through their bodily expression: 'The facial expressions are seen facial expressions, and they are immediately bearers of sense indicating the other's consciousness.'¹⁴⁴ Husserl confusingly uses the term 'indication' here, which, taken in its technical sense, contradicts his explicit argument that the body expresses, rather than indicates, the person. Yet given this explicit argument and the context of the rest of the analyses, his use of 'indication' in relation to bodily expression should arguably be understood here in a non-technical sense. Indeed, in a supplement to *Ideas II*, Husserl explicitly writes that '[e]mpathy is not a mediate experience in the sense that the other would be experienced as a psychophysical annex to his Corporeal body but is instead an immediate experience of others.'¹⁴⁵ Whilst the theory of apperceptive transfer is presented chronologically first in *Ideas II* from the standpoint of the naturalistic attitude, it is important to remember that the theory of intercorporeality provided through the notion of the expressive body is developed from the personalistic attitude to which, as Husserl writes, 'the naturalistic attitude is in fact subordinated,'¹⁴⁶ insofar as the naturalistic attitude requires an abstraction from the natural attitude. Rather than locating intercorporeality in the Cartesian account of apperceptive transfer, then, we find it in Husserl's notion of the expressive body, and, as Taipale writes, Husserl's theory of expression in *Ideas II* shows how 'the experiential life of others can be said to be present to us in an immediate manner.'¹⁴⁷ Such immediacy, however, does not result in a conflation of self and other, which would again put us in danger of the Levinasian critique. Rather, as Molly Brigid Flynn argues, Husserl's notion that the body expresses the soul 'allows us to understand how the other person as a whole can be directly given to me, though not all of him is. (...) We do not know

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 247.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 384-5.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 193.

¹⁴⁷ Taipale, 'Beyond Cartesianism: Body-Perception and the Immediacy of Empathy,' 164.

merely other people's bodies and take guesses at who they really are "inside." Rather, we really know other persons even though we do not know everything about them.¹⁴⁸ Indeed, experiencing others as we do in everyday life, we directly perceive them as persons through their bodily expressions, yet this does not mean that they are transparent to us. I precisely perceive them from my point of view, and, Husserl writes, 'even the "I move" is proper to me, this Ego, and as such can never be "comprehended in empathy" by another Ego.'¹⁴⁹ Whilst Husserl's notion of the expressive body avoids the pitfalls of the projection theory and thus provides a more convincing theory of intercorporeality, however, the static point of view employed in this chapter does not yet account for the temporal and historical structuring of bodily movement, the focus of chapter two.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued, through a critical reading of *Ideas II*, that the notion of transcendence should be understood concretely in terms of the sensory life of the body through which it is in fluid connection with the world and other bodies. I conceptualised sensibility specifically in terms of movement: as the material movements *within* my body which are also material movements in and of the world, the notion of sensibility describes the first dimension of the constitutive outside defined in the introduction to this chapter, namely, the ontological status of the living body as a thing in the world. As the movements *of* my body, the notion of sensibility begins to bridge the material and the social, given that it makes possible a conceptualisation of the ways in which individual movements sediment materially and become part of the body's physiological repertoire or style. Whilst Husserl's analysis of the expressive body begins to make a case for the significance of movement for a theory of intercorporeality, however, it does not yet account for how expressive, moving bodies are themselves continuously (re)structured. To understand the temporality and historicity of sensibility, we move from the static point of view to consider sensibility in its genetic and generative becoming. This transposition of transcendence to the level of sensibility thus points us towards Husserl's theory of time.

¹⁴⁸ Flynn, 'The Living Body as the Origin of Culture: What the Shift in Husserl's Notion of "Expression" Tells us About Cultural Objects,' 69.

¹⁴⁹ *Ideas II*, 216.

Chapter 2

The Temporality of Sensibility: Movement

Towards the end of *Ideas II*, Husserl writes that lived experiences are not unconnected from one another but rather form a meaningful and integrated chain, making up the cohesive life of the subject of those experiences: ‘every lived experience is a lived experience of an Ego, of an Ego that does not itself flow away in a stream as its lived experiences do. And there is constantly present an underlying basis {Untergrund} which is pre-given to it, to which it is related, or by which it is driven, in various ways.’¹⁵⁰ Thus, to understand ‘the *total style and habitus of the subject*,’¹⁵¹ Husserl writes, we are referred back to ‘a *background that is prior to all comportment* {Verhalten} and is instead presupposed by all comportment. (...) In a certain sense there is, in the obscure depths, a root soil {Wurzelboden}.’¹⁵² Whilst chapter one uncovered a notion of sensibility in its ‘static’ instantiation that is, as I argued, operative in *Ideas II*, in this chapter, we turn to the genetic and generative dimensions of sensibility.¹⁵³ Whilst Husserl does not explicitly conceive time and the living body together, I will argue that a critical transposition of his thinking on time, affection, and the lifeworld to the level of sensibility can help propel his phenomenology of the body in a critical direction. It should be said that Husserl’s thinking on time is complex, unfinished, and not outlined in any one text.¹⁵⁴ Thus, my purpose in this chapter is not to reconstruct his thinking on this matter, not

¹⁵⁰ *Ideas II*, 290/277.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 291-2/279.

¹⁵³ For a definition of static, genetic, and generative methodologies, see pp. 8-9 of this thesis.

¹⁵⁴ Husserl’s thinking on time spans the period from the 1904-05 lectures, edited by Edith Stein and finally published by Heidegger in 1928 and as volume ten of *Husserliana*, to the 1917-18 Bernau manuscripts published as volume 33 of *Husserliana*, and the 1929-1934 C-manuscripts published in *Husserliana Materialien* volume eight. For detailed analyses of the evolution of Husserl’s thinking on time in its various stages, see John Brough, ‘Introduction,’ in Hua X, xi-lvii; John Brough, ‘The Emergence of an Absolute Consciousness in Husserl’s Early Writings on Time-Consciousness,’ in *Edmund Husserl: Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers*, Vol. III: The Nexus of Phenomena: Intentionality, Perception and Temporality, ed. Rudolf Bernet, Donn Welton, Gina Zavota (London: Routledge, 2005); Rudolf Bernet, ‘Husserl’s New Phenomenology of Time: Consciousness in the Bernau Manuscripts,’ in *On Time: New Contributions to the Husserlian Phenomenology of Time*, ed. Dieter Lohmar and Ichiro Yamaguchi (Dordrecht: Springer, 2010).

only because this would require much more space than that for which this chapter allows, but also because such a reconstruction is not relevant for my project. Rather, I aim to bring to light Husserl's thinking on time, affection, and the lifeworld in relation to the living body in order to conceptualise the temporality and historicity of sensibility itself, thus moving further towards a critical phenomenology of sensibility.

I begin, in section 2.a., by outlining the three levels of time-constitution as defined in Husserl's early texts on time. In dialogue with John Brough¹⁵⁵ and Dan Zahavi,¹⁵⁶ I problematise the notion of an absolute flow of time. Further developing Zahavi's notion of a pre-reflective self-awareness as the modality of the self-manifestation of the flow, I argue that the most basic level at which such pre-reflective self-awareness operates is at a bodily or sensible level. Turning to *Analyses Concerning Passive Synthesis*, in section 2.b., I then show how the notion of affection concretises the formal structure of the living present. The notion of affection, I argue, begins to explain how the body's movements are formed and transformed through the simultaneous solicitation by and response to a world. The notion of affection thus also breaks with the idealist notion of a pure subject who unilaterally constitutes all sense. Finally, in dialogue with Derrida¹⁵⁷ and Steinbock,¹⁵⁸ in section 2.c, I analyse a fundamental ambiguity in Husserl's conceptualisation of the lifeworld between an idealist search for its invariant structure, on the one hand, and a generative notion of the lifeworld as always already sedimented with sense, on the other. I argue that Steinbock's reading of the lifeworld as world-horizon and earth-ground provides a productive way out of this ambiguity, insofar as this reading of the lifeworld allows us to begin to account for the ways in which bodily movement has not only a genetic but also a generative or historical sense. It is thus this conceptualisation of the lifeworld that pushes Husserl's phenomenology in a critical direction in the sense that it makes possible a critical understanding of the

¹⁵⁵ John Brough, 'Notes on the Absolute Time-Constituting Flow of Consciousness,' in *On Time: New Contributions to the Husserlian Phenomenology of Time*, ed. Dieter Lohmar and Ichiro Yamaguchi (Dordrecht: Springer, 2010).

¹⁵⁶ Dan Zahavi, 'Inner (Time-)Consciousness,' in *On Time: New Contributions to the Husserlian Phenomenology of Time*, ed. Dieter Lohmar and Ichiro Yamaguchi (Dordrecht: Springer, 2010).

¹⁵⁷ Jacques Derrida, *The Problem of Genesis in Husserl's Philosophy*, trans. Marion Hobson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

¹⁵⁸ Steinbock, *Home and Beyond*, 86-124.

material and historical factors that invisibly come to structure the ways in which bodies move and feel.¹⁵⁹

2.a. The living present, the living body: problems of infinite regress

Husserl's problem in the early texts on time pertains to the possibility of the consciousness of succession. Why, when listening to a melody, do we perceive this melody as a durational whole, and not as a series of disconnected tones? In answering this question, he distinguishes between three levels of time-constitution. The first level describes transcendent temporal unities that are constituted in empirical time, such as a train arriving at a station, or a violin playing a melody; on the second level are 'immanent unities in pre-empirical time,'¹⁶⁰ that is, the ways in which temporal unities, events, and durations are experienced phenomenologically; and the third level describes 'the absolute time-constituting flow of consciousness.'¹⁶¹ I first analyse the difference between the first and second levels before problematising the notion of the absolute flow. The second level describes i) the phenomenological experience of transcendent temporal unities (such as the subjective experience of watching a film or listening to a song) and ii) immanent experiences that have their own duration, but which do not refer to anything transcendent (such as experiencing a headache, anticipating a holiday, or constructing an argument). In discussing the temporal experiences constituted on the second level, Husserl often uses the term 'temporal object.'¹⁶² Yet this term is misleading given that it implies that a temporal

¹⁵⁹ A full analysis of historicity in relation to Husserl would have to include a discussion of the concept of homeworld which makes possible the description of the specific lifeworld of a group or culture. The homeworld is the normative and habitual world in which we always already live and is co-constituted over against an 'alienworld.' The aim of this chapter, however, is to employ Husserl's early writings on time in order to conceptualise the temporality of sensibility as the temporality of movement, and to open the possibility for an understanding of the historical structuring of sensibility through the notion of the lifeworld. Whilst I do not analyse the concept of homeworld in Husserl, then, in chapter six, I effectively employ a notion of homeworld as I investigate the structuring of sensibility within the specific lifeworld that is Western, patriarchal society. Analyses of home and alien appear in Husserl's later writings. See, for example, Edmund Husserl, *Zur Phänomenologie der Intersubjektivität: Dritter Teil: 1929-1935*, ed. Iso Kern (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973), 411-12; 428-437. The notions of homeworld and alienworld are further developed in their generative significance in Steinbock, *Home and Beyond*, 173-256. See also Taipale, *Phenomenology and Embodiment*, 99-146.

¹⁶⁰ Hua X, 77.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² 'Everywhere we have to distinguish: *consciousness* (flow), *appearance* (immanent object [Objekt]), transcendent *object* [Gegenstand]' Ibid., 80.

experience is constituted as an object standing over against a subject. What is at stake, however, is precisely an experience that has a particular temporal duration and whose beginning and end can be delimited but which is not given to the subject as an object.¹⁶³ In order to avoid objectifying language, then, I follow Brough's use of the term 'temporal unity' rather than 'temporal object.'¹⁶⁴

What makes possible the experience of a melody as a durational whole, Husserl argues, is the fact that consciousness itself has temporal extension. Thus, all experiencing life of consciousness has the structure of the living present which itself has the tripartite structure retention-primal impression-protention. The primal impression is the strict now-phase, an abstract point which cannot be experienced in itself, but only through its retentive and protentive modification. The primal impression immediately modifies retentionally to the just-past. The retention thus attaches itself like 'a comet's tail,'¹⁶⁵ along with a protention as an anticipation of what is to-come. Thus, Husserl emphasises what Zahavi calls the '*width of presence*.'¹⁶⁶ This stretching out of the present means that consciousness is not an atomistic now-point but is itself stretched out or continuously modified retentionally and protentively. It is because consciousness itself has this temporal extension that a consciousness of succession is possible. When listening to a melody, we do not experience it as a series of individual tones disconnected from one another; rather, each primal impression of a tone at once retains the just-past and stretches out to anticipate the to-come. Thus, we experience the melody as a temporal unity or as a 'running-off

¹⁶³ Husserl writes about temporal experiences: 'These unities, which become constituted in the absolute stream, exist in immanent time, which is *one*; and in this time the unities can be simultaneous or have durations of equal length (or perhaps have the same duration, that is, in the case of two immanent objects that endure simultaneously).' Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ 'Regardless of how one finally settles the issue of whether and in what sense experiencing is intentional, calling the experienced act an "object" is not the happiest terminological choice. Fortunately, Husserl also employs another term, "unity," to describe the experience. "Unity" is free of the freight carried by "object."' Brough, 'Notes on the Absolute Time-Constituting Flow of Consciousness,' 37. Zahavi has critiqued what he terms the 'internal object account' advanced by Brough for suggesting that the only way in which an experience can be given to itself is as an object grasped by a subject. On this account, any self-manifestation of experience to itself would necessarily be a self-objectification: 'according to what might be termed the *internal object* interpretation, inner time-consciousness makes us aware of the acts or *Erlebnisse* as temporal *objects* in subjective time.' Zahavi, 'Inner (Time-)Consciousness,' 328. I do not engage with this debate here, yet I would say that Brough's use of the term 'object' in the 1972 article to which Zahavi refers seems less like a conscious choice and more of an adoption of Husserl's own use of this term; and that the thrust of Brough's argument in fact does not differ as much from that of Zahavi as the latter would have us think. See Brough, 'The Emergence of an Absolute Consciousness in Husserl's Early Writings on Time-Consciousness.'

¹⁶⁵ Hua X, 37.

¹⁶⁶ Zahavi, 'Inner (Time-)Consciousness,' 320.

phenomenon {Ablaufphänomen}¹⁶⁷ that has a particular duration and flow: ‘Every temporal being “appears” in some running-off mode that changes continuously, and in this change the “object in its mode of running off” is always and ever a different object. And yet we continue to say that the object and each point of its time and this time itself are one and the same.’¹⁶⁸

Once the melody has been constituted as a running-off phenomenon that begins and ends, it can be recollected at a later point as something that has passed. Whilst the tripartite structure of the living present thus makes possible the experience of something as past, present, and future, the living present itself is a constant structure of consciousness. The retention is not ‘past’ in relation to the primal impression, and the protention is not ‘future.’ Rather, the retention-primal impression-protention are integral moments of the structure of the living present itself. Husserl critiqued Franz Brentano for conceptualising the consciousness of the past as an act of representation or imagination; contra this view, as Rudolf Bernet explains, Husserl understands the consciousness of the just-past as ‘a modality of perception itself.’¹⁶⁹ Indeed, Husserl writes: ‘The intuition of the past {Vergangenheitsanschauung} cannot itself be a pictorialisation {Verbildlichung}. It is an original consciousness.’¹⁷⁰ Thus, it is not the case that the just-past is *represented* as past in the present through the retention. If this were the case, it would be impossible to distinguish between a phantasy or memory of the past which are really re-presentations, on the one hand, and an actual experience of the just-past which is the pre-objective temporalisation of consciousness itself. Rather, the retention is itself an integral moment of the present act of experiencing. For this reason, it is important to differentiate between retention (also sometimes misleadingly called ‘primary memory’) as an integral moment of all experiencing life, and secondary memory or re-presentation (*Vergegenwärtigung*) which is precisely the re-collection of something past, a presenting ‘again.’¹⁷¹ The distinction

¹⁶⁷ Hua X 29/27.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 28.

¹⁶⁹ Bernet, ‘Husserl’s New Phenomenology of Time: Consciousness in the Bernau Manuscripts,’ 5. For Husserl’s critique of Brentano’s theory of time, see Hua X, 11-20. For an analysis of the development of Brentano’s theory of time-consciousness, see Guillaume Fréchette, ‘Brentano on Time-Consciousness,’ in *The Routledge Handbook of Franz Brentano and the Brentano School*, ed. Uriah Kriegel (New York: Routledge, 2017).

¹⁷⁰ Hua X, 33/32.

¹⁷¹ ‘We characterised primary memory or retention as a comet’s tail that attaches itself to the perception of the moment. Secondary memory, recollection, must be distinguished absolutely from primary memory or retention.’ Ibid., 37/35.

between the first and second levels is thus fairly simple: all experiencing life has the structure of the living present, and it is this stretching out of consciousness itself that makes possible the experience of transcendent temporal unities as having a duration. But why do we need a further differentiation within consciousness between immanent time and the absolute flow?

In answering this question, I follow Zahavi and Brough who – albeit in different ways – conceive this differentiation within consciousness itself as the differentiation between phenomenological experiences that begin and end and the experiencing life that does not itself begin and end *for me*. It is thus from a first-person phenomenological perspective that we can make sense of Husserl’s claim that ‘no concrete part {Stück} of the flow can make its appearance as nonflow. The flow is not a contingent flow, as an objective flow is.’¹⁷² Whilst the second level describes experiences whose beginning and end I ‘outlive’ – listening to a song, constructing an argument, writing an essay – the absolute flow designates the unity of the experiencing life of consciousness itself which does not begin or end *for me*. The second and third levels, then, both have the structure of the living present, and despite the fact that these two levels can thus only be abstractly distinguished, the conceptualisation of a third level of time-constitution is needed in order to account for the fact that my experiencing life does not itself begin and end with my particular experiences. As Brough writes: ‘Rather than saying that it carries out experiencing or temporalisation, it would be more accurate to say that the flow *is* experiencing. (...) Its existence, its life, is to experience. This means that primal impression, retention, and protention do not belong to the flow as properties. They *are* the primal flow in its various ways of constituting.’¹⁷³ Whilst the second level describes individual experiences that begin and end for me, the flow describes the unity of the life of the subject.

Given that the flow *is* my experiencing life whose beginning and end I cannot witness or outlive, Husserl argues that the flow cannot appear to the subject in the form of a temporal unity, such as in the case of experiencing a headache or a melody. Experiencing my own living as a temporal unity would amount to being able to regard my life from the point of view prior to my birth and after my death. That is, it would amount to being able to extract

¹⁷² Ibid. 118/114.

¹⁷³ Brough, ‘Notes on the Absolute Time-Constituting Flow of Consciousness,’ 31.

oneself from one's life and to consider it from beyond itself. Does the flow, then, simply transcend experience? Whilst the flow is not experienceable as a temporal unity, Husserl insists that it does not escape experience but appears to itself in its constituting activity: 'The flow of the consciousness that constitutes immanent time not only *exists* {*ist nicht nur*} but is so remarkably and yet intelligibly fashioned that a self-appearance of the flow necessarily exists in it, and therefore the flow itself must necessarily be apprehensible in the flowing.'¹⁷⁴ But how and to whom does the flow appear? Husserl insists that the flow does not require another flow behind it to which it would be given, since we would then have to answer the question of how that second flow would itself be apprehensible, and so on, *ad infinitum*. Husserl insists that this is not the case: 'The self-appearance of the flow does not require a second flow; on the contrary, it constitutes itself as a phenomenon in itself.'¹⁷⁵

Yet despite this assertion, the problem of the infinite regress occurs again and again in the early texts, suggesting that Husserl never resolved the problem to a satisfactory level.¹⁷⁶ As I will argue in dialogue with Zahavi, this is because Husserl did not adequately define the specific modality in which the flow manifests itself. As long as the manifestation of the flow is conceived as the manifestation of an object to a subject, we run the risk of an infinite regress, since we would be faced with the problem of how that subject appears to itself, and so on, *ad infinitum*. Husserl thus grapples with formulating a modality of non-objectifying experience that does not work according to the intentional structure of noesis-noema:

'Every act is consciousness of something, but there is also consciousness of every act. Every experience is "sensed," is immanently "perceived" (internal consciousness), although naturally not posited, meant (to perceive here does not mean to grasp something and to be turned towards it in an act of meaning).'¹⁷⁷

Whilst he here characterises the self-manifestation of the flow as an internal consciousness and immanent perception, it is evident that a different term is needed to describe this non-objectifying living through or experiencing that is life itself. This is because the notions of consciousness and perception imply an objectifying intentionality through which a subject

¹⁷⁴ Hua X, 88/83.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 123/119; 130/127. As Bernet writes: 'the problem of the *infinite regress* (...) lurks behind Husserl's phenomenology of time-consciousness, both in the early texts as well as in the Bernau Manuscripts and in the later time-manuscripts of the C-Group.' Bernet, 'Husserl's New Phenomenology of Time: Consciousness in the Bernau Manuscripts,' 9.

¹⁷⁷ Hua X, 130.

grasps an object, whilst the flow precisely manifests itself in a non-objectifying manner, is, as Husserl writes, 'not posited.'

Thus, Zahavi argues that this self-appearance of the flow should be understood as the pre-reflective self-awareness integral to all experiencing: 'In contrast to physical objects, which can exist regardless of whether or not they *de facto* appear for a subject, experiences are essentially characterised by their subjective givenness, by the fact that there is a subjective "feel" to them. To undergo an experience necessarily means that there is something "it is like" for the subject to have that experience.'¹⁷⁸ This pre-reflective self-awareness is thus not an awareness of oneself as an object. Rather, it is, Zahavi explains, the self-manifestation of experience itself: 'Prior to reflection, experiential states do present themselves, but not as objects. Metaphorically speaking, experiential states are characterised by a certain self-luminosity; they are self-intimating or self-presenting.'¹⁷⁹ Zahavi thus argues that the specification of the modality in which the flow manifests itself in terms of pre-reflective self-awareness resolves the problem of an infinite regress: 'It is precisely because consciousness is characterised by such a non-objectifying self-awareness that it is possible to avoid an infinite regress.'¹⁸⁰ Pre-reflective self-awareness precisely does not 'appear' as an object to a subject; rather, the flow of experiencing life, Zahavi writes, 'is given in and through and for itself.'¹⁸¹

Developing Zahavi's notion of pre-reflective self-awareness further, I will argue that the most basic level at which we can speak of such a pre-reflective self-awareness is at a bodily or sensible level. Indeed, Husserl at times defines time-consciousness in terms of sensibility: 'We regard sensing {Das Empfinden} as the original consciousness of time.'¹⁸² And again: 'Sensation is presenting time-consciousness {Empfindung ist gegenwärtiges Zeitbewußtsein}.'¹⁸³ Whilst Husserl does not analyse the theory of time-consciousness in relation to the living body, the non-objectifying modality in which the flow manifests itself, as I will argue, precisely describes a sensible experience as the sensing of *being* a body that moves in the world. This is insofar as, as we saw in chapter one, at the level of sensible

¹⁷⁸ Zahavi, 'Inner (Time-)Consciousness,' 325-6.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 333.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 334.

¹⁸² Hua X, 112/107.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

experience there is precisely no distinction between subject and object; rather, I *am* this body that moves.¹⁸⁴ Given that it makes no sense to speculate about another body ‘behind’ that body, this materialisation of pre-reflective self-awareness in turn strengthens Zahavi’s solution to the problem of an infinite regress insofar as it naturally precludes an infinite regress.

The notion of sensibility such as we have defined it precisely describes how the body continuously temporalizes itself through its movements prior to any reflection or perception. The structure of the living present, as Lanei Rodemeyer shows, gives a sense, a coherence, and a dynamic rhythm to bodily movement. In dance, Rodemeyer writes, ‘[r]etention is actively in play, in my body, as I transition from one position to the other. Otherwise, I would lose my balance, or lose the transition itself, or just stop.’¹⁸⁵ Similarly, when something comes dangerously close to my eye, she writes, ‘I blink. Here, my body, without my thinking about it – for if I thought about it, I would never blink in time – protects itself from a “future” possibility.’¹⁸⁶ Indeed, even the relative stillness of my body as it remains in a stable position is not the absence but rather a limit case of movement. Merleau-Ponty shows, transposing Husserl’s description of the retention that attaches itself to a primal impression like a ‘comet’s tail’¹⁸⁷ to the level of the body, that even this relative stillness of my body has a certain dynamic quality: ‘If I stand in front of my desk and lean on it with both hands, only my hands are accentuated and my whole body trails behind them like a comet’s tail.’¹⁸⁸

Even the movements within my body can be understood according to the living present. My heartbeats are precisely not a series of atomistic now-points, nor do they go *towards* anything; rather, they work according to a rhythm whose relative consistency sustains life itself. This rhythm is *relatively* consistent given that it can speed up, slow down, or run amok depending on whether I am running or sitting, whether I am calm or frightened, and so on. Yet for as long as my body is a living body, its movements cannot cease. Bodily movement, then, is constant, whether or not ‘we’ are actively performing a movement, and whether or

¹⁸⁴ For an analysis of the sensing of movement, see pp. 40-1 of this thesis.

¹⁸⁵ Lanei M. Rodemeyer, ‘The Body in Time/Time in the Body,’ in *Performance and Temporalisation: Time Happens*, ed. Stuart Grant, Jodie McNeilly, and Maeva Veerapen (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 132.

¹⁸⁶ Rodemeyer, ‘The Body in Time/Time in the Body,’ 133.

¹⁸⁷ Hua X, 37.

¹⁸⁸ PhP, 102.

not 'we' are aware of it. Our body constantly breathes, our heart beats, our digestion works, and at any moment, we can turn our attention towards these movements and reflect upon them, even if we can never grasp them reflectively *in* their prereflective operation. For as long as I live, these movements cannot cease, and thus the sensible flow of experiencing cannot cease, that is, it is absolute *for me*. It is thus from a first-person point of view that the claim about the absolute character of the flow should be understood, such as when Brough writes: 'The absolute consciousness flows but never finally flows away, never begins and ends as an individual act does. It is always there.'¹⁸⁹ And, as Merleau-Ponty writes: 'Just as it is necessarily "here," the body necessarily exists "now"; it can never become "past."¹⁹⁰

Of course, ontologically speaking, my body comes into being and ceases to be, yet from a first-person phenomenological perspective, my body can never become past or future for me, I cannot witness my birth or death. Husserl's claim that the absolute flow is not itself a temporal unity *in* time like a piece of music or a flight of birds should thus be understood from this formal or first-person point of view.¹⁹¹ If we remain at this formal or first-person point of view, however, we are left with a formal conceptualisation of sensibility or pre-reflective self-awareness as a structural component of experience. It is from this formal point of view that Zahavi is right when he writes: 'Whereas we live through a number of different experiences that arise, endure, and become past, the structure of protention-primal impression-retention might be considered an invariant field of presencing, or even better as an unchanging field of presencing (primal impression) and absencing (retention-protention).'¹⁹² This formal conceptualisation of the flow then paradoxically abstracts from any temporal or historical becoming. Yet is not Husserl already in the early texts doing something more with the double intentionality of the flow?

Husserl's conceptualisation of the double intentionality of the flow, as I will argue, provides a productive framework for understanding how the body continuously (trans)forms itself through its movements. At the same time, the transposition of the theory of time to the

¹⁸⁹ Brough, 'Notes on the Absolute Time-Constituting Flow of Consciousness,' 46.

¹⁹⁰ PhP, 141.

¹⁹¹ Hence Husserl can write that the flow is only 'quasi-temporal' insofar as it is not a temporal unity that can become past or future *for me*: 'This prephenomenal, preimmanent temporality {präphänomenale, präimmanente Zeitlichkeit} becomes constituted intentionally as the form of the time-constituting consciousness and in it itself.' Hua X, 88/83.

¹⁹² Zahavi, 'Inner (Time-)Consciousness,' 335.

level of bodily movement answers a second problem of infinite regress pertaining to Husserl's claim that the flow not only appears to itself but also constitutes itself. Husserl writes that the flow (third level) constitutes itself through the constitution of immanent temporal unities (second level):

'There is one, unique flow of consciousness in which both the unity of the tone in immanent time and the unity of the flow of consciousness itself become constituted at once. As shocking (when not initially even absurd) as it may seem to say that the flow of consciousness constitutes its own unity, it is nonetheless the case that it does.'¹⁹³

The flow of experiencing life, then, is not an underlying structure operating independently from temporal experiences that begin and end; rather, the flow continuously (re)constitutes itself through the continuous integration of new experiences. Vertical intentionality (*Querintentionalität*) cuts a 'slice' of time and thus accounts for temporal experiences that have a beginning, a duration, and an end. For our purposes, it is vertical intentionality that makes possible the demarcation of one bodily movement (such as a dance) as qualitatively different from another (such as going for a run) even if, as I argued above, there is no clear-cut break or discontinuity in movement for as long as my body is a living body.

Through a horizontal intentionality (*Längsintentionalität*), these individual movements are continuously retained in the flow: 'This continuity is retention of the total momentary continuity of the continuously preceding phases of the flow.'¹⁹⁴ The flow thus at once transcends individual movements, yet the flow is only 'constituted' through the continuous retention of these individual movements. The flow of experiencing life is thus continuously modified through the continuous retention and integration of new movements, and thus Husserl writes: '*two inseparably united intentionalities, requiring one another like two sides of one and the same thing, are interwoven with each other in the one, unique flow of consciousness.*'¹⁹⁵ These two intentionalities of the flow can only be considered as distinct from one another in an abstract sense. In reality, they are two sides of the same coin and there is, then, a relation of co-constitution between particular movements that begin and end and the constitution of the flow of experiencing life itself; the two are not reducible to one another but exist in a relation of intertwining. These two intentionalities understood

¹⁹³ Hua X, 84.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 85.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 87.

together thus describe the way in which the body continuously preserves and refashions its own history through its movements.

Husserl precisely speaks of retentional modification as at once a refashioning and retention of the weight of past retentions. Every time a new moment arises, this moment at the same time retains all past moments: 'each retention is in itself continuous modification that carries within, so to speak, the heritage of the past in the form of a series of adumbrations.'¹⁹⁶ A retention, then, is not only a retentional modification of *this* primal impression; it 'is also continual modification of all earlier continuous modifications of that same initial point.'¹⁹⁷ Every time we breathe, gesture, walk, dance, and so on, we at once rely upon, reiterate, and inflect every earlier instance of breathing, gesturing, walking, dancing. *This* living present, then, not only has internal coherence but forms a meaningful continuity with past living presents. They sediment into a particular style of gesturing, walking, dancing, and so on, which is, with every repeated act, continuously reiterated or perpetuated and thus can also be refashioned and destroyed.¹⁹⁸

The metaphor of the wave employed occasionally by Husserl is helpful here. Zahavi cites from an unpublished manuscript (L I 15 2b): 'An act is nothing on its own, it is a wave in the stream of consciousness.'¹⁹⁹ Building on this quotation, Brough explains:

'Acts, then, are not like flotsam bobbing on the sea of consciousness, which they would be if they were independent objects; they *are* the waves of consciousness. To carry the metaphor of the wave further, waves may *be* the sea and not flotsam *on* the sea, but they are still demarcated from one another, and are perceived as beginning, rolling along for a while, and then subsiding or breaking on the shore.'²⁰⁰

This makes sense more concretely when understood at the level of bodily movement. Each particular movement cannot be extracted from the movements of my body that continue as long as I am a living, moving body. Yet each movement, given that it has a particular dynamic quality and duration, nonetheless presents itself as a wave on the sea of which it is a part and which it continuously (re)constitutes. Thus, individual movements sediment into a habitual style of moving, and this habitual style of moving is itself only (re)constituted

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 31.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ The contextual structuring and the existential significance of different styles of moving will be investigated in more detail in chapter five from a feminist perspective.

¹⁹⁹ Cited in Zahavi, 'Inner (Time-)Consciousness,' 336.

²⁰⁰ Brough, 'Notes on the Absolute Time-Constituting Flow of Consciousness,' 39.

through individual movements. In this sense, each individual movement points beyond itself, contains within itself the wider history of the body, as Al-Saji explains: ‘By means of habit, the Body’s history contracts into its present, and remains active in light of the Body’s present situation and interests.’²⁰¹ It is precisely because individual movements (*Querintentionalität*) and the history of the body (*Längsintentionalität*) co-constitute one another that the body constantly forms and hence also has the capacity to transform its own history which is expressed in its style of moving. The double intentionality thus expresses the plasticity of the moving body itself: through movement, the sensible body forms and transforms itself, without a conscious or perceptual ‘agent’ behind the action. Husserl’s conceptualisation of the double intentionality of the flow thus begins to resolve the second problem of infinite regress pertaining to his claim that the flow constitutes itself. In order to preserve the absolute character of the flow and to avoid an infinite regress of infinite flows, Husserl writes, the flow constitutes and coincides with itself: ‘Thus there extends throughout the flow a horizontal intentionality that, in the course of the flow, continuously coincides with itself.’²⁰² And again: ‘the constituting and constituted coincide, and yet naturally they cannot coincide in every respect.’²⁰³ Yet the self-constitution of the flow, when considered at the abstract level of consciousness, runs the risk of reverting into an idealism and solipsism according to which consciousness constitutes its own unity without any mediation from an outside. When considered at the level of the body, however, the self-constitution of the flow of experiencing life at once precludes idealism and an infinite regress. Given that there is no pure transcendental body, given that bodily movement is by definition *in* the world, charges of solipsism and idealism are precluded in advance. Indeed, as Maren Wehrle writes: ‘being a temporal body does not only mean spontaneity and agency, but also it means being situated within a world and time that has existed long before we even appeared on the scene.’²⁰⁴ This transposition of Husserl’s theory of time to the level of bodily movement thus provides another reading according to which the self-constitution of the flow of life is not an unmediated auto-affection, but only

²⁰¹ Alia Al-Saji, *Rhythms of the Body: A Study of Sensation, Time and Intercorporeity in the Phenomenology of Edmund Husserl* (PhD Thesis, Emory University, 2002), 85.

²⁰² Hua X, 85.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 88.

²⁰⁴ Maren Wehrle, ‘Being a Body and Having a Body. The Twofold Temporality of Embodied Intentionality,’ *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 19, no. 3 (July 2020): 499-521, 508.

works through the mediation of a world and other bodies. Indeed, bodily movement is formed only through an affective interaction with a concrete world, as we shall see in more detail in the next sections.

2.b. Body-world movement: solicitation/response

In *Analyses Concerning Passive Synthesis*, Husserl writes that the analysis of internal time-consciousness cannot tell us ‘what gives unity to the particular object with respect to content, what makes up the differences between each of them with respect to content’²⁰⁵ because the analysis of internal time-consciousness ‘abstracts precisely from content.’²⁰⁶ Thus, in order to account for the specific ways in which the body forms itself through movement, a conceptualisation of affection is needed. With the notion of affection, Husserl does not so much replace as he concretises the formal structure of the living present. Whilst the structure of the living present, as I have argued, accounts for how the movements of my body have a sense and coherence so that I can walk, type on my laptop, breathe, and so that my heart can beat, it is affection which provides each movement with a specific quality or sense that distinguishes it from other movements. Whilst Husserl does not explicitly conceptualise affection in relation to the living body, affection nevertheless operates at a prereflective level which, as I will argue, is best understood at the level of the body.

Husserl defines affection as ‘the allure {Reiz} given to consciousness, the peculiar pull that an object given to consciousness exercises on the ego.’²⁰⁷ As I write this text, a noise intrudes on me, and if the affective prominence of the noise is strong enough, I eventually interrupt my writing and turn towards the noise. Yet before any active turning towards, my body, insofar as it is sensitive to its surroundings, has already registered its affective prominence. Indeed, Husserl writes that even before the attentive turning towards of the I, ‘the pull proceeding from the noise has so genuinely struck the ego that it has come into relief for the ego, even if only in the antechamber of the ego.’²⁰⁸ Further, ‘we do not always have an affection that is actually noticeable.’²⁰⁹ Thus, before any perceptual or conscious

²⁰⁵ ACP, 174.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 196/148.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 215.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 211.

registering, something exercises an affective allure on my body at the level of sensibility, and, according to Husserl, for as long as the body is a living body, it is affected to a greater or lesser extent. The degrees of affection correspond to degrees of liveliness: ‘positive affective force is the fundamental condition of all life in dynamic connection and differentiation; if it is decreased to zero, its life ceases, precisely in its vivacity {Lebendigkeit}.’²¹⁰ To be a living body, then, *is* to be affected, and a zero level of affection is the same as death. Affection thus breathes life into the formal structure of the living present; it designates the ‘varying vivacity {Lebendigkeit} of a lived-experience,’²¹¹ and ‘the entire living present, as it were, takes on a constantly varying affective relief.’²¹² In fact, Husserl already hints towards this qualitative variability of living presents in the early writings, as he writes that whilst the structure of the living present is fixed, primal sensations ‘do not all make use of the formal possibilities in the same way.’²¹³

That which affects me at the level of sensibility, then, is not given to me as a perceptual or reflective object but is rather *pregiven*: ‘Any kind of constituted sense is *pregiven* insofar as it exercises an affective allure, it is given insofar as the ego complies with the allure and has turned towards it attentively, laying hold of it.’²¹⁴ The notion of affective *pregiveness* thus moves us into a genetic framework insofar as it is concerned not with formal structures but rather with the way in which a subject/body is affected prior to perceptual and reflective grasping. It is thus the notion of *pregiveness* that will allow us to investigate the temporal and historical structuring of sensibility itself. Indeed, it is precisely fluidity which characterises the dimension of *pregiveness*: ‘before every movement of cognition the object of cognition is already present as a *dynamis* which is to turn into an *entelecheia*.’²¹⁵ Thus, the ‘field of passive data in its originality’²¹⁶ can only be considered in abstraction from the subject’s objectification of it. This field, then, is essentially ‘fluid,’²¹⁷ yet it is neither ‘a pure chaos, a mere “swarm of data,”’²¹⁸ nor a field of ready-made objects to be passively

²¹⁰ Ibid., 219/170.

²¹¹ Ibid., 214/166.

²¹² Ibid., 212.

²¹³ Hua X, 81.

²¹⁴ ACP, 210.

²¹⁵ EJ, 29.

²¹⁶ Ibid., 72.

²¹⁷ Ibid., 59.

²¹⁸ Ibid., 72.

received by the subject. It is rather an affective and pre-perceptual dimension of bodily experience at which passivity and activity are not distinct from one another but intertwine and collide. Indeed, Husserl writes that whilst affection 'is the accomplishment of passivity,'²¹⁹ only the naïve attitude thinks that this basic passivity is a mere receptivity, and thus Husserl calls for 'a *more radical conception of passivity*'²²⁰ which recognises that 'the distinction between passivity and activity is not inflexible.'²²¹

How, precisely, should we understand the relation between passivity and activity such as Husserl describes it? Husserl's insistence that even the deepest level of passivity involves some level of activity could be seen as an attempt to save the sovereign subject who would unilaterally constitute all sense. Yet in fact, his destabilisation of any strict distinction of activity and passivity at the level of affection by definition precludes such reinstalment of a transcendental subject who would, precisely, be a pure activity. The notion of affection, then, provides a transformed notion of constitution given that it, in Steinbock's words, designates 'not simply the intentional directedness on the part of the subject, but coevally the affective force on the part of the "object" or "object phase" that *solicits* the subject.'²²² The notion of a passive synthesis thus describes the way in which bodily movement is formed through the simultaneous sollicitation by and response to a concrete world.²²³ This is perhaps particularly clear in aesthetic and artistic experiences, through the appreciation or the creation of artistic forms, the latter of which Merleau-Ponty's example of the singer illustrates: 'The performer is no longer producing or reproducing the sonata: he feels himself, and the others feel him to be at the service of the sonata; the sonata sings through him or cries out so suddenly that he must "dash on his bow" to follow it.'²²⁴ Yet whilst aesthetic and artistic experiences bring to the forefront the way in which a particular world or situation motivates particular bodily movements, the dynamic of sollicitation/response, as we shall see in more detail in chapter five, is not only active in aesthetic/artistic experiences but describes an existential structure of bodily life.

²¹⁹ ACP, 210.

²²⁰ EJ, 60.

²²¹ Ibid., 108.

²²² Steinbock, *Home and Beyond*, 155.

²²³ We shall investigate this dynamic of sollicitation/response, as well as its existential and political significance, in further detail in chapter five in relation to Merleau-Ponty.

²²⁴ VI, 151.

Whilst Husserl never explicitly develops the analysis of affection in this existential sense, the notion of affection allows us to account for the fact that movement has not only a temporal but also an affective, situational, and existential sense. Maxine Sheets-Johnstone emphasises that ‘any movement is not simply an objective happening *in* space and *in* time, but creates a qualitatively spatial and temporal dynamic, a dynamic which is precisely experienced as expansive, spiralling, swift, and so on.’²²⁵ She continues: ‘Something as simple as a kick may be vigorous or weak, energetic or nonchalant, as when, in walking down a street and seeing a small stone, one changes the ambling rhythm of one’s walk and swiftly kicks it.’²²⁶ Here, the stone exercises an affective pull, motivating my body to kick it, thus inflecting the affective relief of this living present differently than if I had walked down the street in a straight line. In this case, the kicking of the stone may express an emotional attitude such as playfulness or anger, and the degree to which I am inclined to kick the stone may be a more general expression of my existence as someone who is curious about a world that is available to my exploration.

As we shall see in more detail in chapter five, the qualitative dynamics of movement, then, designate a particular way of being in the world which is not contextually neutral. As Sheets-Johnstone writes: ‘a certain way of moving calls forth a certain world and a certain world calls forth a certain way of moving’²²⁷: whilst a safe world motivates an open way of moving which, in turn, calls forth an open world to be explored or conquered, a hostile world motivates an inhibited way of moving in the world. Yet a certain way of moving is not only an expression of an emotional state in the moment but is necessarily structured through the repetition and sedimentation of past movements. Thus, the notion of affection not only designates the relation of my body to the world in the present but also to its own past and future; if my past has a strong affective pull on me in a negative sense, this restricts my movements in the present and correspondingly calls forth a less open world with fewer possibilities for movement. If the past lives in my body in a pleasurable way, this frees my movements and calls forth an open world, providing more possibilities for movement. Whilst the notion of affection describes the genetic structuring of bodily movement,

²²⁵ Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, ‘Kinaesthesia: An Extended Critical Overview and a Beginning Phenomenology of Learning,’ *Continental Philosophy Review* 52, no 2 (June 2019): 143-169, 151.

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, ‘Thinking in Movement,’ *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 39, no. 4 (Summer, 1981): 399-407, 405.

however, it does not yet explain how historical structures that transcend an individual life can affect the formation of bodily movements. Moving more properly into the generative dimension of sensibility, we thus turn to Husserl's notion of the lifeworld.

2.c. The transcendence of the lifeworld: generative perspectives

With the notion of the lifeworld, Husserl seeks to return to original experiencing life, the sedimentations and idealisations of which objective science takes for granted at face value. The problem, Husserl writes, is not with objective science per se, but with the forgetting of the concrete subjective operations upon which the idealisations of science are ultimately grounded. This forgetting of origins necessitates a continuous critique, dismantling, or deconstruction:

'It is necessary to dismantle {Abbau} everything which already pre-exists in the sedimentations of sense in the world of our present experience, to interrogate these sedimentations relative to the subjective sources out of which they have developed and, consequently, relative to an effective {leistende} subjectivity. This is (...) the subjectivity whose operations of sense have made the world which is pregiven to us what it is, namely, *our* world – no longer a pure world of original experience but a world having the sense of a world exactly determined and determinable in itself.'²²⁸

Whilst Husserl here describes the impossibility of a complete *Abbau* to a ground zero free of sedimentation, at the same time, he insists that the regressive inquiry be not a backtracking through factual historical events. Rather, 'this world which is ours is only an example through which we must study the *structure and the origin of a possible world in general* from subjective sources.'²²⁹ In the *Crisis*, too, he argues that a science of the lifeworld be not a science of its variable objects, but rather of its invariant structure which, he writes, 'is not itself relative.'²³⁰ The purpose, then, would be 'to set in motion a radical reflection upon the great task of a pure theory of essence of the life-world.'²³¹ He thus never abandons the dream of uncovering an invariant structure of the lifeworld, of history itself. Whilst the notion of an invariant structure of the lifeworld perhaps makes sense from the point of view of static phenomenology which is concerned with uncovering structures of experience abstracted from temporal and historical becoming, a static conception would strip the

²²⁸ EJ, 48-9/47.

²²⁹ Ibid., 49.

²³⁰ Crisis, 139.

²³¹ Ibid., 141.

lifeworld of all specificity insofar as the lifeworld is inherently a conceptualisation of historical life, existence, and situatedness: 'The world in which we live and in which we carry out activities of cognition and judgement (...) is always already pregiven to us as impregnated by the precipitate [*Niederschlag*] of logical operations.'²³² How, then, should we conceive this apparent contradiction?

As Derrida argues in *The Problem of Genesis in Husserl's Philosophy*, this double movement, Husserl's constant ambiguity and oscillation between, on the one hand, an idealist notion of the transcendental as the invariant in the variable, and, on the other, a generative notion of the transcendental as itself historically changeable, is descriptive not only of the historical development of Husserl's philosophy but forms its philosophical core. Thus, in Derrida's words, 'it will be constantly impossible to determine the real beginning of this dialectic,'²³³ where 'this dialectic' refers at once to the conceptual intersection of the transcendental and the empirical *and* to the historical development of Husserl's philosophy itself. Indeed, it is this dialectical contradiction, the point at which the transcendental and the empirical cross over, which is the very driving force for the movement, the transformation, of phenomenology itself.²³⁴ Whilst Derrida's dialectical conceptualisation of Husserl's ambiguity between a pure notion of the transcendental and a notion of the transcendental as always already sedimented with sense instantiates the possibility for a way out of this ambiguity, the emphasis on dialectics is still too abstract. Is there a concrete material way to escape the loop in which Husserlian phenomenology is trapped?

Rather than rejecting Husserl's phenomenology on the basis of his ambiguity, Steinbock helps us find the points in Husserl's texts that open the possibility for a productive reading. Steinbock identifies two non-essentialist transcendental notions of the lifeworld at play in Husserl, both of which are described in terms of territory, as earth-ground and world-

²³² EJ, 42.

²³³ Derrida, *The Problem of Genesis in Husserl's Philosophy*, xx.

²³⁴ Merleau-Ponty makes a similar point in his preface to *Phenomenology of Perception*: 'Phenomenology is the study of essences, and it holds that all problems amount to defining essences, such as the essence of perception or the essence of consciousness. And yet phenomenology is also a philosophy that places essences back within existence and thinks that the only way to understand man and the world is by beginning from their "facticity."' PhP, lxx. For a critical reading which employs the intersection of the transcendental and the historical in Husserl's later work as a productive ambiguity necessary for the work of critique, see Andreea Smaranda Aldea, 'Making Sense of Husserl's Notion of Teleology: Normativity, Reason, Progress and Phenomenology as "Critique from Within,"' *Hegel Bulletin* 38, no. 1 (May 2017): 104-128.

horizon.²³⁵ Husserl tends to characterise the world as the totality of things, thus advancing a view of the lifeworld as itself a totalised object, as ‘*one Objective world*, only one Objective time.’²³⁶ In §37 of the *Crisis*, however, he points to a non-totalising view of ‘world.’ He writes that there is ‘an essential distinction among the possible ways in which the pregiven world, the ontic universe [*das ontische Universum*], can become thematic for us.’²³⁷ One is as the consciousness of ‘things or objects *within the world-horizon*,’²³⁸ which makes possible ‘the task of a life-world ontology.’²³⁹ Husserl is not interested in such a task at this point but instead turns to the notion of the horizon and ground *for* these objects. The second way in which we can become aware of the pregiven world, then, is as the horizon ‘for existing objects.’²⁴⁰ Yet this world-horizon, Husserl continues, ‘does not exist as *an* entity, as an object, but exists with such uniqueness that the plural makes no sense when applied to it.’²⁴¹ Steinbock argues that insofar as the horizon is never given as something that could be thematised, but in its pregivenness resists all thematization, it is precisely ‘indeterminate and open’²⁴² rather than infinite or teleological. The lifeworld as horizon is then not a fixed foundation from which meaning is drawn but is itself constantly in flux.

Similarly, Husserl refers to ‘the concrete life-world’²⁴³ as ‘the grounding soil [*der gründende Boden*].’²⁴⁴ Steinbock notes that Husserl consistently uses the term ‘*Boden*’ rather than ‘*Grund*’ to emphasise the materiality of this ‘ground.’²⁴⁵ ‘*Boden*’ designates a kind of living soil or ground which is not fixed or unilaterally foundational but is rather dynamic. Indeed, in a manuscript from 1934, some 30 years prior to the Earthrise photograph which would

²³⁵ Steinbock, *Home and Beyond*, 97.

²³⁶ CM, 140. This idealist notion of looking at the world as a totalised object is retained in the *Crisis*, in which Husserl argues that through a ‘universal epoché,’ one can extract oneself from the lifeworld in order to consider, from ‘above,’ the process through which it is continuously being produced: ‘it is from this very ground that I have freed myself through the epoché; I stand *above* the world, which has now become for me, in a peculiar sense, a *phenomenon*.’ *Crisis*, 152. Whilst I agree that a version of the epoché is necessary in order to gain critical distance from the world in which one is always already caught up, the idea that this would provide one a view of the world from ‘above’ bears witness to Husserl’s residual idealism. Looking at the world from ‘above’ is, to borrow Oksala’s phrase, ‘as impossible as lifting ourselves in the air by our hair.’ Oksala, ‘In Defence of Experience,’ 400.

²³⁷ *Crisis*, 142.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, 143.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, 142.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 143.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*

²⁴² Steinbock, *Home and Beyond*, 108.

²⁴³ *Crisis*, 131.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁵ Steinbock, *Home and Beyond*, 110.

shock much of the world, Husserl wonders how we have come to consider the Earth as an object, when our phenomenological experience of it is not the experience of an object at all, but rather one of an always already pregiven and presupposed ground. Husserl, then, writes that the Earth, *for us*, 'does not move,'²⁴⁶ but is taken for granted as the ground from which any experience, any movement, at all is possible. The transcendental notion of the lifeworld as earth-ground is then the generative analogy to the transcendental notion of the living body as genetically pregiven: 'the earth can no more lose its sense as "primordial homeland" {"Urheimstätte"}, as the ark of the world, than my flesh {Leib} can lose its wholly unique ontic sense as primordial flesh {Urleib}.'²⁴⁷ It is because I am a material, finite body that I belong to this material, finite planet. Indeed, as Steinbock notes, even if I do not identify with a tradition or a religion, even if I am homeless or without a family,

'my body, our bodies, would bear the densities and modulations of the earth, generation after generation. Even if I had been kidnapped by "extraterrestrials," my historicity would be structured by the rhythms of my body: my heartbeat, my breathing; I would live in or through a specific earthly atmosphere; I would have these kinds of legs and arms because they are both of earthly gravity and walk upon an earthly ground.'²⁴⁸

This is true for everything that belongs to this earth, including all animal and vegetal life and this notion of the transcendental as earth-ground, then, transcends human life. Thus, just as affection ascribes genetic depth to the formal structure of internal time-consciousness, so the historicity and materiality of the lifeworld ascribes generative depth to the genetic becoming of an individual life. As Joonas Taipale explains: 'paradoxically, genetic constitution takes place within a generative framework, but the generative framework has a genetic constitution.'²⁴⁹ The lifeworld, then, presents at one and the same time the alterity of time and my place within it. Thus, the lifeworld can never be grasped once and for all because it is continuously being produced. We shall see more specifically in the following chapters how the openness towards a generative horizon makes possible a consideration of the ways in

²⁴⁶ Edmund Husserl, 'Foundational Investigations of the Phenomenological Origin of the Spatiality of Nature: The Original Ark, the Earth, Does Not Move,' trans. Fred Kersten, revised by Leonard Lawlor, in Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology*, ed. Leonard Lawlor and Bettina Bergo (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2002), 130.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 130/323.

²⁴⁸ Steinbock, *Home and Beyond*, 119.

²⁴⁹ Taipale, *Phenomenology and Embodiment*, 116.

which historical, cultural, and social structures which do not appear in any sensible or bodily experience nonetheless structure that experience.

Conclusion

In these first two chapters on Husserl, we have begun to develop a notion of transcendence as sensibility that is, as I argued in chapter one, implicitly operative in *Ideas II*. Through a critique of the privileging of the perceptual model of the touching-touched, I argued that a conceptualisation of sensibility is needed if we are to understand how the constitutive outside to the classical phenomenological notion of the living body itself structures bodily existence and experience. Yet insofar as the notion of sensibility describes a dimension of bodily life that operates prior to the differentiation into subject and object, the notion of sensibility presents a methodological problem for any phenomenology: if the sensory life of the body does not appear as a phenomenon, then (how) is it experienceable at all? Through an analysis of Husserl's notion of kinaesthesia, I argued that the sense of *being* a moving body is a sensible experience par excellence. This is because in movement, there is no distinction between mover and moved: rather, I *am* this body that moves. I then argued that Husserl's notion of the expressive body developed in *Ideas II* from the standpoint of the natural attitude provides a more convincing theory of intersubjectivity or intercorporeality than the notion of apperceptive transfer developed in *Ideas II* from the standpoint of the naturalistic attitude. I argued that movement provides the beginnings for a theory of intercorporeality and lays the foundations for Merleau-Ponty's notion that movement expresses existence.

In chapter two, we then turned to the temporal and historical structuring of sensibility itself. Beginning from Husserl's early texts on time, I argued that a critical transposition of the notion of the living present to the level of bodily sensibility resolves the problem of an infinite regress more convincingly than the solutions found in Husserl and the literature. At the same time, the notion of the living present allows us to conceptualise the temporality of sensibility as the temporality of movement. I then argued that Husserl's later notion of affection describes the process through which bodily movement is formed through the simultaneous solicitation by and response to a concrete world. Whilst, for as long as I live, the movements of and within my body continue to move according to the structure of the

living present, then, the notion of affection shows how the affective, emotional, and existential quality of my bodily movements is formed in relation to a world. As such, with the notions of affection and passive synthesis, Husserl verges on moving from a classical phenomenology which retains the idea of a pure transcendental subject to whom the world is given in a transparent way towards a critical phenomenology for which the subject/body is always already caught up in the world in which she lives.

In each of the sections of this chapter, then, one moment of Husserl's thinking was shown to push beyond itself: the formal structure of the living present was shown to move towards a genetic account of the process through which the living body constitutes its own history through movement. The notion of affection was then needed to properly account for such a genetic structuring of bodily movement in relation to a world. Yet whilst the notions of the living present and affection together account for the genetic structuring of bodily movement, they do not yet account for the generative or historical structuring of movement. Thus, we turned to Husserl's notion of the lifeworld and argued, in dialogue with Steinbock, that the notions of the lifeworld as world-horizon and earth-ground lay the conceptual ground for understanding the ways in which bodily movement is formed through the body's interactions with material and historical structures that transcend a single generation. The two senses of transcendence defined in the introduction – as the movement of/between bodies and as the alterity of material and historical dimensions which are not themselves given in experience – were thus shown to collide at the level of sensibility.²⁵⁰ Moving more properly into a generative dimension, the notion of the lifeworld as world-horizon and earth-ground points towards a critical phenomenology in both senses: it is critical of the classical phenomenological idealist project of uncovering an invariant structure in the variable, and it opens up for a critical approach to the material and historical structuring of the sensory life of the body. We shall develop the generative dimension of sensibility in more detail in part two of the thesis as we, through an ontological rather than ethical reading of Levinas, conceptualise sensibility in relation to the notion of life and the fact of having been born.

²⁵⁰ See pp. 5-6 of this thesis for a definition of the two senses of transcendence.

Part Two

Levinas and Transcendence: Life

Chapter 3

Assimilative and Non-Assimilative Sensibility

In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas writes: 'Infinity is characteristic of a transcendent being as transcendent; the infinite is the absolutely other. The transcendent is the sole *ideatum* of which there can be only an idea in us; it is infinitely removed from its idea, that is, exterior, because it is infinite.'²⁵¹ Rather than Husserl's conceptualisation of transcendence-in-immanence and Heidegger's notion of transcendence as finitude, then, Levinas's more radical notion of transcendence designates the breakup of any totalising system which swallows all singularity and alterity into its own internal logic. One such system is, Levinas argues, Western philosophy with its privileging of comprehension, perception, and understanding, modes of knowledge which presuppose a transcendental and sovereign subject who sets out to grasp an object, thus reducing its alterity. Designating that which cannot be integrated into any system of knowledge, Levinas's formulation of transcendence, then, can be summarised in a notion he borrows from Descartes and Kant; namely, the radical excess of the infinite over any idea we could have of it. Levinas thus claims that transcendence enigmatically exceeds thought, consciousness, knowledge, understanding; in short, any kind of comprehension. As such, transcendence in Levinas's sense is not strictly a concept, insofar as it resists any conceptualisation, any kind of formation that would be graspable; in this sense, it is the excess over, or the outside of, form.

With his thinking on transcendence, Levinas thus proposes an other way of thinking than that of phenomenology and ontology; one which constantly refuses being rigidified into a final intelligibility. This way of thinking, Levinas claims, provides a more adequate account of the alterity of the other than, for example, Husserl's descriptions of the alter ego as analysed in chapter one. Yet as Levinas writes a few pages following the passage cited

²⁵¹ TI, 49.

above, this way of thinking and this relation with the other do not operate radically outside the realm of totality, as if totality and infinity were two diametrically opposed realms.²⁵²

Rather:

‘Between a philosophy of transcendence (...) and a philosophy of immanence (...), we propose to describe, within the unfolding of terrestrial existence, of economic existence (as we shall call it), a relationship with the other that does not result in a divine or human totality, that is not a totalisation of history but the idea of infinity. Such a relationship is metaphysics itself.’²⁵³

The notion of a transcendence that can never be subsumed to any kind of totality, we now learn, does not amount to the positing of a transcendent world ‘behind’ the one that appears to us in immanence; indeed, this would only be the positing of another kind of (divine) totality different to the (human) totality of which, as we saw in chapter one, the Husserlian thinking of intersubjectivity is Levinas’s prime example.²⁵⁴ Avoiding the positing of a noumenal world behind the phenomenal one, Levinas thus writes that it is *within* the unfolding of terrestrial existence that the transcendence of the other reveals itself: ‘This “beyond” the totality and objective experience is, however, not to be described in a purely negative fashion. It is reflected *within* the totality and history, *within* experience.’²⁵⁵ Thus, despite Levinas’s polemical language and the insistence upon an absolute transcendence, in this chapter and the next, I will argue that he, rather than breaking with the Husserlian notion of a transcendence-in-immanence, as if despite himself, effectively radicalises it.²⁵⁶

This radicalisation is perhaps most evident in Levinas’s notion of the face. Husserl emphasises the gap between one’s own experiencing life, on the one hand, and one’s perception of the other ego, on the other. I cannot experience the other ego such as she experiences herself: ‘if what belongs to the other’s own essence were directly accessible, it would be merely a moment of my own essence, and ultimately he himself and I myself

²⁵² Indeed, Bernasconi notes that if totality and infinity were diametrically opposed, this would allow for their dialectical reintegration according to a Hegelian logic, a possibility which Levinas rejects. See Robert Bernasconi, ‘Rereading *Totality and Infinity*,’ in *The Question of the Other: Essays in Contemporary Continental Philosophy*, ed. Arleen B. Dallery and Charles E. Scott (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989), 24-5.

²⁵³ TI, 52.

²⁵⁴ See pp. 43-4 of this thesis.

²⁵⁵ TI, 23.

²⁵⁶ This radicalisation of the notion of a transcendence-in-immanence, however, does not receive its ultimate formulation until the notion of substitution, the focus of chapter four.

would be the same.²⁵⁷ Consequently, the perception of the other is at the same time an
appresentation of her experiencing life which remains transcendent to me. With his notion
of the face, Levinas effectively radicalises the sense in which the other is transcendent to
me. The face, he writes, is at once ‘a living presence’²⁵⁸ given that it attends its own
manifestation,²⁵⁹ yet insofar as this ‘manifestation’ is not that of an object given to a subject
but rather, as Levinas will say, the trace of an absence, the face imposes itself ‘above and
beyond the manifested and purely phenomenal form.’²⁶⁰ The face, then, is that which at
once ‘manifests’ itself yet by definition cannot be perceived. Insofar as the face does not
operate in a noumenal world behind the phenomenal one, it is ‘immanent,’ yet given that it
never presents itself as a perceptual object or congeals into a formation that would be
graspable, it is a transcendence.²⁶¹ With the notion of the face, Levinas thus effectively
radicalises Husserl’s notion of a transcendence-in-immanence and at the same time
reconceptualises the phenomenological notion of the phenomenon: rather than designating
that which presents itself in front of a subject, the face, as we shall see in the final section of
this chapter, only ‘reveals’ itself insofar as it comes from the outside, as a transcendence
that disrupts my powers for perceptual and reflective assimilation.²⁶² It is this radicalisation
of the notion of a transcendence-in-immanence, as I will argue in this chapter and the next,
that helps propel ‘classical’ phenomenology towards its own transformation from within.

I make this argument, in this chapter, through a tracing of the notion of transcendence such
as it relates to materiality, sensibility, and the body in *Existence and Existents*, *On Escape*,
and *Totality and Infinity*. We shall thus trace the way in which the notion of an infinite or
absolute transcendence, as if despite Levinas’s own intentions, transcends itself and returns

²⁵⁷ CM, 109.

²⁵⁸ TI, 66.

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 91.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 200.

²⁶¹ See also ‘Enigma and Phenomenon,’ published in between *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*, in which Levinas writes: ‘This way the Other has of seeking my recognition while preserving his *incognito*, (...) this way of manifesting himself without manifesting himself, we call enigma – going back to the etymology of this Greek term, and contrasting it with the indiscreet and victorious appearing of a *phenomenon*.’ Emmanuel Levinas, ‘Enigma and Phenomenon,’ trans. Alphonso Lingis, revised by Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley, in *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), 70. We will return to the question of whether, and in what sense, the face ‘appears’ in the final section of this chapter.

²⁶² For a good analysis of the relation of Levinas’s work to Husserlian phenomenology, see John E. Drabinski, *Sensibility and Singularity: The Problem of Phenomenology in Levinas* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001), especially 13-41.

to the sensible materiality of the body and the world. Emphasising the ontological dimension of Levinas's work over the ethical project, then, I follow what Tom Sparrow calls a 'heretical'²⁶³ reading, insofar as the ethical, for many readers of Levinas, is essential. Yet I argue that the metaphysical notion of transcendence which, in disrupting the powers of the sovereign subject, inaugurates the ethical is not incompatible with the ontological notion of sensibility. On the contrary, given that sensibility is the name for that bodily dimension which transcends the powers of the sovereign subject and its ability for comprehension, the notion of sensibility, I argue, forms a concretisation and materialisation of transcendence. Vice versa, the disruptive function of sensibility such as it operates within Levinas's work and within life itself is given its proper articulation through its conceptualisation as a radical transcendence. The notion of sensibility is conceived as a radical transcendence insofar as, as we shall see in relation to the *there is* and the elemental, it describes the ways in which the body is (re)constituted out of its real contact with a sensible materiality which nevertheless retains the power to disrupt, change, or transform the body from within.²⁶⁴

More explicitly than in the work of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, then, the notion of sensibility is present throughout Levinas's philosophy, although it is described with varying and even contradictory characteristics in different phases of his work. This chapter traces three of Levinas's articulations of sensibility, from the overwhelming sensory presence of the *there is* as described in *Existence and Existents* to the sensibility of enjoyment and that of the face as analysed in *Totality and Infinity*. I argue that despite the often-contradictory characterisations of these terms – the *there is* is described in terms of horror and evil; enjoyment in terms of nourishment and pleasure; and the face in terms of goodness and the opening of the ethical – these three terms yet share the structural point that they each describe a dimension of bodily existence that operates below the level of cognition and perception, that is, each designates an instance of sensibility. Yet this does not mean that they are reducible to one another; rather, their relation should be understood in terms of the complex interaction of what I term assimilative and non-assimilative sensibility.

²⁶³ Sparrow, *Levinas Unhinged*, 1.

²⁶⁴ My reading is thus in line with Drabinski's as he writes that Levinas's many analyses of insomnia, nausea, enjoyment, and eros describe 'modalities of the subject's extension beyond itself in relation to an alterity. The relation to alterity alters the traditional sense of transcendence at its root. This makes Levinas's sense of transcendence radical.' Drabinski, *Sensibility and Singularity*, 64-5.

Whilst the notion of assimilative sensibility describes the digestive movement of enjoyment through which the body nourishes itself, the notion of non-assimilative sensibility describes the incapacity of the body to digest or assimilate the *there is*, on the one hand, and the ‘face’ of the other (human) body, on the other. Thus, whilst the *there is* and the face share the fact that each disrupts the powers of the sovereign subject, it is important to recognise their difference. I argue that the *there is* should be understood as something akin to what Merleau-Ponty will call the flesh of the world, the sensible materiality from which everything is ultimately made. This sensible materiality in its vastness can neither be assimilated nor can we escape from it. The face, on the other hand, refers specifically to another living (human) body and the impossibility of assimilating the basic vulnerability of that living body.²⁶⁵ The notions of assimilative and non-assimilative sensibility, then, whilst never used by Levinas himself,²⁶⁶ encapsulate and thus help us make sense of the ambiguity of sensibility such as it operates in Levinas’s work and indeed in life itself. As such, my aim is not to remain faithful to or reconstruct Levinas’s argument; my aim is, rather, to draw out a notion of transcendence as sensibility that is operative in his work, and which can help us understand the ambiguous functioning of sensibility. This ambiguity consists in the fact that the materiality of sensibility, whilst embodying the condition of possibility for life itself, at the same time designates the vulnerability of bodies to the sensible and other living bodies. The ambiguity, then, is that between assimilative and non-assimilative sensibility, given that the capacity for nourishment and pleasure at the same time entails the body’s susceptibility to violence.

In section 3.a, I challenge any linear reading of Levinas’s work which would conceptualise the *there is* as the sphere of immanence which the face of the other punctuates and from which it finally escapes in the opening of the ethical. In dialogue with Simon Critchley,²⁶⁷ I argue that insofar as the notion of the *there is* returns again and again throughout Levinas’s work, it is never finally overcome. I argue that the *there is* is experienceable in the modality

²⁶⁵ Whilst my analysis of the face confines itself to human intercorporeality, this is not to say that non-human animals are necessarily excluded from the role of the face.

²⁶⁶ Levinas does, however, use the terms assimilation and assumption to describe both enjoyment and the ethical relation in *Otherwise than Being*: enjoyment describes ‘an ego assimilating {assimilant} the other in its identity, and coiling in over itself,’ OTB, 73/92 whilst the ethical relation ‘paralyses with the weight of its very silence the power to assume {assumer} this weight.’ *Ibid.*, 84/105.

²⁶⁷ Simon Critchley, ‘Il y a – Holding Levinas’s Hand to Blanchot’s Fire,’ in *Maurice Blanchot: The Demand of Writing*, ed. Carolyn Bailey Gill (London: Routledge, 1996).

of non-assimilative sensibility. In section 3.b, I turn to Levinas's descriptions, in *Totality and Infinity*, of the enjoyment of the elemental, as the diurnal side of the *there is*. I conceptualise enjoyment as operating in the modality of assimilative sensibility, and I argue that the assimilative sensibility of enjoyment provides us with a notion of the independence of the body that is not reducible to a pure mastery. In section 3.c, I develop what Sparrow calls a 'transcendental empiricist'²⁶⁸ reading of the face. Key to this reading is the conceptualisation of the face, developed in dialogue with Judith Butler,²⁶⁹ not as referring to any specific part of the body, but rather as designating what might be called the transcendental vulnerability of life itself which is, I argue, experienceable in the modality of non-assimilative sensibility.

3.a. The return of the *there is*: against a linear reading of Levinas

Given the chronological order in which Levinas, in *Existence and Existents*, *Time and the Other*, *Totality and Infinity*, and *Otherwise than Being*, presents the various stages on the road to the ethical, it is intuitive, and indeed logical within Levinas's project as a whole, to employ what Simon Critchley, following Paul Davies,²⁷⁰ calls a 'linear narrative'²⁷¹ in the reading of Levinas. Such a reading, Critchley writes, 'would begin with one ("bad") experience of neutrality in the *il y a* and end up with another ("good") experience of neutrality in *illegality*, after having passed through the mediating moments of the Subject and *autrui* (roughly, sections II and III of *Totality and Infinity*).'²⁷² Upon such a reading, then, the *there is* would designate the sphere of pure immanence which the face of the Other punctuates and overcomes in the opening of the ethical. Indeed, this is the way in which Levinas explicitly presents matters as he writes that 'society with the Other (...) marks the end of the absurd rumbling of the *there is*.'²⁷³ Yet the notion of the *there is*, as Critchley notes, continues to haunt Levinas's texts throughout his work and thus complicates any linear reading that would proceed from the horror of the *there is* to the goodness of the

²⁶⁸ Sparrow, *Levinas Unhinged*, 111.

²⁶⁹ Judith Butler, *Prekarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), 128-151.

²⁷⁰ Paul Davies, 'A Linear Narrative? Blanchot with Heidegger in the Work of Levinas,' in *Philosophers' Poets*, ed. David Wood (London: Routledge, 1990).

²⁷¹ Critchley, 'Il y a – Holding Levinas's Hand to Blanchot's Fire,' 112.

²⁷² Ibid.

²⁷³ TI, 261.

ethical.²⁷⁴ Far from having been overcome, the *there is*, Critchley writes, returns again and again as a 'standing reserve of non-sense from which Levinas will repeatedly draw the possibility of ethical significance, like an incessant buzzing in the ears that returns once the day falls silent and one tries to sleep.'²⁷⁵

Thus, whilst Levinas, throughout his work, presents the dimension of the ethical as that which punctuates and finally escapes the horror of the *there is*, the notion of the *there is* returns again and again. Indeed, in chapter five of *Otherwise than Being*, immediately following the chapter on 'Substitution,' Levinas writes: 'The incessant murmur of the *there is* strikes with absurdity the active transcendental ego, beginning and present. But the absurdity of the *there is*, as a modality of the-one-for-the-other, signifies.'²⁷⁶ The *there is*, we hear, is not contrary to but is rather a *modality* of the-one-for-the-other, that is, of the ethical relation. Further down the page, he writes that '[t]o support without compensation,' that is, to exist in the ethical relation, 'the excessive or disheartening hubbub and encumberment of the *there is* is needed.'²⁷⁷ Equally as perplexing, in the 1975 text 'God and Philosophy,' Levinas writes that God is 'transcendent to the point of absence, to the point of a possible confusion with the stirring of the *there is*.'²⁷⁸ Contrary to the seemingly linear trajectory of Levinas's work, then, I will argue that the *there is* is never overcome or dissolved but remains as an atmosphere which strikes us – in life, and in Levinas's texts – in various limit situations, of which insomnia and physical suffering are his prime examples.

In *Existence and Existents*, Levinas ultimately seeks to analyse what he calls hypostasis, the event in the instant through which a being posits itself and breaks up the uninterrupted anonymity of the *there is*: 'By hypostasis anonymous being loses its *there is* character. An entity – that which is – is a subject of the verb *to be*, and thus exercises a mastery over the fatality of Being, which has become its attribute. Someone exists who assumes Being, which henceforth is *his* being.'²⁷⁹ In this section, however, we shall trace the notion of the *there is*

²⁷⁴ Similarly, Richard A. Cohen writes in his translator's notes to *Time and the Other*: 'The *there is* again appears in *Totality and Infinity*, where it is also called "the elemental." It is a notion of continued significance for all Levinas's subsequent thought, and is always assumed when it is not explicitly invoked.' TO, 46.

²⁷⁵ Critchley, 'Il y a – Holding Levinas's Hand to Blanchot's Fire,' 112.

²⁷⁶ OTB, 164.

²⁷⁷ Ibid.

²⁷⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, 'God and Philosophy,' trans. Alphonso Lingis, revised by Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley, in *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings*, 141.

²⁷⁹ EE, 83. See also the analyses of the *there is* and hypostasis in *Time and the Other*, 39-57.

such as it operates prior to the event of hypostasis. This is because, as we shall see, whilst hypostasis designates an interruption of the *there is*, this is only a temporary interruption. How, then, should we characterise the *there is* such as 'it' operates prior to hypostasis? This question is in a sense impossible to ask given the fact that the operations of the *there is* take place prior to language and substantivisation. Indeed, the *there is* describes what is left once all distinguishable forms of the world disappear. It designates 'the menace of pure and simple presence'²⁸⁰ in the absence of any thing: 'The disappearance of all things and of the I leaves what cannot disappear, the sheer fact of being in which *one* participates, whether one wants to or not, without having taken the initiative, anonymously.'²⁸¹ The *there is* takes on an anonymous character insofar as '*there is*, in general, without it mattering what there is (...). *There is* is an impersonal form, like in it rains, or it is warm.'²⁸² The *there is*, then, is not strictly a substantial 'it,' but rather a doing or, as Levinas writes, a 'pure verb,'²⁸³ an anonymous rumbling, the vibration of materiality itself.

Indeed, Levinas writes, the *there is* designates 'a density, an atmosphere, a field, which is not to be identified with an object that would have this density.'²⁸⁴ As such, the notion of the *there is* describes a dimension prior to the differentiation into subject and object: 'The subject-object distinction by which we approach existents is not the starting point for a meditation which broaches being in general.'²⁸⁵ And further: 'Existence is not synonymous with the relationship with a world; it is antecedent to the world.'²⁸⁶ By this, Levinas does not posit what Jean Wahl calls a 'bad transcendence,'²⁸⁷ that is, a world behind the appearances, outside our world. Rather, Levinas indicates that the *there is* (which within the framework of *Existence and Existents* is sometimes referred to as 'existence') precedes and is generative of the subject/object relations with which reflection and thematization operate. The notion of the *there is* then describes something akin to what Merleau-Ponty will call the flesh of the world (and in fact we find references to the *there is* in Merleau-

²⁸⁰ EE, 59.

²⁸¹ Ibid., 58.

²⁸² Ibid.

²⁸³ Ibid., 17.

²⁸⁴ Ibid., 64.

²⁸⁵ Ibid., 58.

²⁸⁶ Ibid., 21.

²⁸⁷ Jean Wahl, *Human Existence and Transcendence*, trans. and ed. William C. Hackett (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2016), 25.

Ponty's later work²⁸⁸); the *there is* designates the material dimension that is always already 'there,' of which we can never rid ourselves seeing as we are made from it.

Indeed, Levinas conceptualises the *there is* in terms of a naked materiality which imposes itself in the night. The night designates for Levinas a kind of phenomenological reduction which inadvertently reveals the *there is* as a basic materiality, not as another being that could be grasped or perceived, but as the plenitude of existence itself which escapes perception and comprehension. Thus, the notion of the night functions not only as a phenomenological description but also as a philosophical category integral to Levinas's critique of Western philosophy's obsession with consciousness and thematization. The night, then, does not exclusively refer to the actual night but rather to any experience in which the bare materiality of the world 'reveals' itself: 'One can also speak of different forms of night that occur right in the daytime. Illuminated objects can then appear to us as though in twilight shapes.'²⁸⁹ If in the daytime, we do not notice the *there is*, this is not because 'it' is not still 'there,' lurking in the background, but rather because we are caught up in our projects, feelings, and personal affairs which cover over the bare materiality of the *there is*. Indeed, Levinas writes that the night does not simply wash away the sharp edges of objects, temporarily modifying their appearance; rather, the night reveals (by way of a kind of absence) the bare materiality of objects which constantly pulsates or *sweats* in them whether or not we notice: 'Darkness does not only modify their contours for vision; it reduces them to undetermined, anonymous being, which sweats in them.'²⁹⁰

Whilst in the daytime, the *there is* recedes into the background, in insomnia we gain a certain kind of awareness of the *there is* as inescapable: 'The impossibility of rending the invading, inevitable, and anonymous rustling of existence manifests itself particularly in

²⁸⁸ In 'Eye and Mind,' Merleau-Ponty writes: 'It is necessary that the thought of science – surveying thought, thought of the object in general, be placed back in the "there is" {un "il y a"} which precedes it, back in the site, back upon the soil of the sensible world {*du monde sensible*} and the soil of the worked-upon world such as they are in our lives and for our bodies, not that possible body which we may legitimately think of as an information machine, but this actual body I call mine, this sentinel standing silently under my words and my acts.' Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Eye and Mind,' trans. Carlton Dallery, revised by Ted Toadvine and Leonard Lawlor, in *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*, ed. Ted Toadvine and Leonard Lawlor (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 352/12. Merleau-Ponty's notion of the flesh will be addressed in more detail in chapter five.

²⁸⁹ EE, 59.

²⁹⁰ Ibid.

certain times when sleep evades our appeal.²⁹¹ Insomnia designates a wakefulness or vigilance through which the body is overwhelmed by the *there is* in the night, yet this is not a conscious or perceptual experience insofar as consciousness and perception imply a distance between subject and object. On the contrary, Levinas writes, ‘the vigilance of insomnia which keeps our eyes open has no subject’²⁹² and is ‘quite devoid of objects.’²⁹³ Insofar as the insomniac is subjected to the mastery of the night, she does not really *have* an experience of the night or the *there is*: ‘It is not that there is *my* vigilance in the night; in insomnia it is the night itself that watches. It watches.’²⁹⁴ Thus depersonalised and dispossessed, she is ‘the object rather than the subject of an anonymous thought.’²⁹⁵ Against this imposing openness, Levinas writes, ‘it is impossible to take shelter in oneself, to withdraw into one’s shell. One is exposed.’²⁹⁶ The relationship with the *there is* is thus not really a relationship or an encounter at all insofar as there are no things, no parties involved. If the *there is* is not given to perception or consciousness, then, how is it experienceable? Insomnia is described as a visceral sensing of the double impossibility of escaping or assimilating the elemental materiality of everything in its vastness: ‘Being is evil not because it is finite but because it is without limits.’²⁹⁷ There is no digestion of the elemental as there is in enjoyment; rather, ‘there is being prey to, delivered over to something that is not a “something.”’²⁹⁸ The indifference and non-responsiveness of the *there is*, the always present possibility that the universe does not care about us is what Levinas describes as horrifying: ‘Being is essentially alien and strikes against us. We undergo its suffocating embrace like the night, but it does not respond to us. There is a pain in Being.’²⁹⁹ The *there is*, then, designates the sensible materiality of all that exists and from which all bodies are ultimately made. In this sense, the *there is* never leaves us and its presence embodies the constant possibility that it might swallow us up. In this sense, the *there is* is experienceable in the modality of non-assimilative sensibility such as we have defined it. Ridding oneself of

²⁹¹ Ibid., 65.

²⁹² Ibid.

²⁹³ Ibid.

²⁹⁴ Ibid., 66.

²⁹⁵ Ibid.

²⁹⁶ Ibid., 59.

²⁹⁷ TO, 51.

²⁹⁸ EE, 62.

²⁹⁹ Ibid., 23.

the *there is* is thus akin to the double impossibility of escaping or catching one's shadow, a paradox which manifests itself in Levinas's many phenomenological analyses of insomnia, shame, nausea, and fatigue.³⁰⁰

Indeed, these affective states express the impossible need for the subject to break with her own self-identity. Levinas writes that 'being me involves a bond with oneself, an impossibility of undoing oneself. To be sure, a subject creates a distance from itself, but this stepping back is not a liberation. It is as though one had given more slack rope to a prisoner without untying him.'³⁰¹ Levinas here argues that the distance to myself involved in reflection, in which I take myself as an object in order to regain mastery over myself, is only an illusory liberation. In fact, this simultaneous self-differentiation and self-affection is nothing more than another reduction to sameness, insofar as the subject returns to itself in comprehension. Thus, whilst seeming to liberate oneself from oneself through self-mastery, this distance does little more than emphasise 'the fact of being riveted to oneself, the radical impossibility of fleeing oneself to hide from oneself.'³⁰² In *On Escape*, Levinas argues that this impossibility of fleeing or hiding is precisely descriptive of the feelings of shame and nausea. The experience of shame involves an exposure of oneself in one's very being, and thus of the impossibility of fleeing oneself.

In Levinas's conception, shame expresses an ontological dimension of the fact of being a body, and thus shame is not reducible to embarrassment or the empirical fact of being naked. Levinas shows this through a phenomenological analysis of the dancer: 'The nakedness of a music hall dancer, who exhibits herself (...) is not necessarily the mark of a shameless being, for her body appears to her with that exteriority to self that serves as a form of cover. Being naked is not a question of wearing clothes.'³⁰³ The shamefulness we feel when we are exposed is thus not linked to any contingent attributes or features. Rather, it is linked to our very facticity, to our very existence as a body that takes up space in the world: 'the fault consists not in the lack of propriety but almost in the very fact of having a

³⁰⁰ For an analysis of nausea and shame, see OE, 63-73; for an analysis of fatigue and indolence, see EE, 23-36; for an analysis of physical suffering, see TO, 69-70.

³⁰¹ EE, 87.

³⁰² OE, 64.

³⁰³ Ibid., 65.

body, of being there {d'être là}.³⁰⁴ Analogous to shame is the feeling of nausea, which 'sticks to us'³⁰⁵ insofar as 'the state of nausea that precedes vomiting, and from which vomiting will deliver us, encloses us on all sides. Yet it does not come from outside to confine us. We are revolted from the inside.'³⁰⁶ This impossibility of escaping one's own body in nausea describes the impossibility of escaping being: 'the nature of nausea is nothing other than its presence, nothing other than our powerlessness to take leave of that presence.'³⁰⁷

These analyses of insomnia, shame, and nausea, then, show that what cannot disappear is the materiality of the *there is* which then gains a paradoxical role. As that from which bodies are ultimately made, it is constitutive of those bodies; yet precisely because of its constitutive function and its continuous imposing presence, it operates prior to and thus disrupts the powers of the sovereign subject. It is thus at once the condition for and the limitation of subjectivity itself. Indeed, Levinas writes: 'The anonymous current of being invades, submerges every subject, person or thing.'³⁰⁸ Similarly, in the language of *Otherwise than Being*, he writes:

'The *there is* is all the weight that alterity weighs supported by a subjectivity that does not found it. But one must not say that the *there is* results from a "subjective impression." In this overflowing of sense by nonsense, the sensibility, the self, is first brought out, in its bottomless passivity, as pure sensible point, a dis-interestedness, or subversion of essence.'³⁰⁹

Thus, the self that arises out of the *there is* is not the sovereign self, narcissistic and self-founding. Rather, given that it is made from and can at any moment be disrupted by the *there is*, it is a subject whose freedom is always already questioned by the fact that its own

³⁰⁴ Ibid., 67/117. This echoes the Heideggerian Da-sein. Yet rather than signifying the ecstatic 'being-ahead-of-itself-in-already-being-in-the-world' such as in Heidegger, with the notion of shame, Levinas invokes a having to be oneself, being encumbered with one's own being, being riveted to oneself. See Jacques Rolland's annotation to this passage in OE, 82-4. See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2010), 185-6. This impossibility of escaping one's body and one's identity would have been acutely felt for anyone of Jewish descent in 1935, and thus, we could say along with Robert Bernasconi that 'Levinas's achievement is that he has developed a philosophy that arises from the non-philosophical experience of being persecuted.' Robert Bernasconi, "'Only the Persecuted...'" Language of the Oppressor, Language of the Oppressed,' in *Ethics as First Philosophy: The Significance of Emmanuel Levinas for Philosophy, Literature and Religion*, ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak (New York: Routledge, 1996), 85.

³⁰⁵ OE, 66.

³⁰⁶ Ibid.

³⁰⁷ Ibid., 68.

³⁰⁸ EE, 57-8.

³⁰⁹ OTB, 164.

origin lies outside itself, in a materiality that it does not control and whose magnitude it cannot fathom or assimilate. This is why the *there is* retains the power to strike against us, and why it is described in terms of horror. As Sparrow writes, in the night, one finds oneself 'caught in the grip of an alterity that not only approaches from the outside, but which wells up inside of us to disrupt and menace the smooth operation of the intellect and the cultivation of a solipsistic identity.'³¹⁰ Given that the *there is* is at once constitutive and critical of the subject, then, the *there is*, and not only the face, has always already questioned the sovereign subject.

Indeed, some of the literature notes the similarity of the functions of the *there is* and that of the face, insofar as both disrupt and dispossess the sovereign subject, even if Levinas labels the interruption by the *there is* in terms of horror and that by the face in terms of goodness and responsibility. Kris Sealey writes: '[I]f, by "ethical," Levinas refers to the radical contestation of all forms of subjective power, and the radical rupture of everything meaningful and phenomenologically present in the world, then the *il y a* is precisely that which gives to the ethical its signification.'³¹¹ And Critchley, conceptualising the *there is* in terms of death that I cannot grasp, will, or predict and which hence opens the dimension of something other than my sovereign powers, suggests that already with the notion of the *there is*, 'the guiding intention of Levinas's work is achieved: namely that if death is not a self-relation, if it does not result in self-communion and the achievement of a meaning to finitude, then this means that a certain plurality has insinuated itself at the heart of the self.'³¹² The literature thus tends to emphasise the similarity of the *there is* and the face or the other and hence advance an ontological or materialist reading of Levinas's thinking of transcendence rather than a pious one that locates goodness in the face and evil in materiality. Whilst I agree with these readings to that extent, however, the near-conflation of the *there is* and the face fails to account for whether and how these notions are different. To this end, as we shall see in greater detail in the final section of this chapter, I

³¹⁰ Sparrow, *Levinas Unhinged*, 12.

³¹¹ Kris Sealey, 'The 'Face' of the *il y a*: Levinas and Blanchot on Impersonal Existence,' *Continental Philosophy Review* 46, no. 3 (October 2013): 431-448, 443. In another article, Sealey writes about the exposure in the night described in *Existence and Existents*: 'The exposure sketched here is similar to the exposure inflicted upon the subject by the proximal approach of the face.' Kris Sealey, 'Levinas's Early Account of Transcendence: Locating Alterity in the *il y a*,' *Levinas Studies* 5 (2010): 99-116, 116.

³¹² Critchley, 'Il y a – Holding Levinas's Hand to Blanchot's Fire,' 110.

conceptualise the materiality of the *there is* in terms of the sensibility or the 'flesh' of the world that connects everything that exists, whilst the notion of the face describes the instantiation of sensibility at the level of (human) living bodies.

3.b. Enjoyment and assimilative sensibility

If the bare materiality of everything – the elemental – in *Existence and Existents* designates horror, in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas shows that the elemental is also the source of the body's survival, nourishment, and joy. In section II of *Totality and Infinity* entitled 'Interiority and Economy,' through analyses of enjoyment, dwelling, and labour, Levinas analyses the situation of the I that has temporarily freed itself from being delivered over to the elemental, yet the I nonetheless depends upon the elemental for its sustenance: 'A being has detached itself from the world from which it still nourishes itself!'³¹³ The ambiguity that the separated being's independence from the elemental is only maintained in and through its simultaneous dependence upon it, he writes, is the very situation of being a body: 'There is here an ambiguity of which the body is the very articulation.'³¹⁴ The body is precisely what at once makes agency possible yet at the same time binds us to the earth; such binding makes any notion of a transcendental or sovereign body senseless. Whilst the analyses of enjoyment describe the process through which the body extracts itself from its being overwhelmed by the *there is*, then, the body's continuous dependence upon the elemental means that the notion of the body formulated in this section is not that of a virile subject who sets out to conquer a world available to its exploration.

As such, Levinas's analyses, with their nuanced investigation of the fragility of enjoyment, read as an implicit critique of the Husserlian notion of the body as an already constituted 'I can.'³¹⁵ This necessitates a critique of the privileging of cognition and perception insofar as both presuppose a subject-object relation in which each term (body/subject, world) is

³¹³ TI, 116. The notion of a separated being is integral to the possibility for the ethical relation, since only a separated being, Levinas writes, can be called to respond to the Other: 'Enjoyment accomplishes the atheist separation; it deformatizes the notion of separation, which is not a cleavage made in the abstract, but the existence at home with itself of an autochthonous I.' Ibid., 115.

³¹⁴ Ibid., 116.

³¹⁵ Ideas II, 159-60; 228. Of course, the body as an 'I can' is, for Husserl, structured through a correlative 'I cannot.' As a human body, I cannot fly, and what 'I can' do at this moment may change according to my situation, such that 'we come up against the "it won't budge," "I cannot," "I do not have the power."' Ibid., 271.

already constituted. The sensibility of enjoyment, on the contrary, ‘does not aim at an object, however rudimentary,’³¹⁶ and it ‘is endowed with a dynamism other than that of perception.’³¹⁷ Rather than i) a Husserlian epistemological relation through which the body seeks to know or represent the world to itself, or ii) a Heideggerian utilitarianism through which the body engages with objects as useful tools ready to hand, then, Levinas’s notion of enjoyment designates the ‘pure expenditure’³¹⁸ through which the body takes pleasure in the elemental for the sake of taking pleasure: ‘Life’s relation with the very conditions of its life becomes the nourishment and content of that life. Life is *love of life*, a relation with contents that are not my being but more dear than my being: thinking, eating, sleeping, reading, working, warming oneself in the sun.’³¹⁹

Enjoyment, then, does not operate according to Husserlian intentionality which Levinas critiques as being a form of representationalism insofar as the subject sets out to grasp or represent to itself a noematic object without being affected or changed by this object in return.³²⁰ Levinas writes that Husserlian intentionality describes a situation in which ‘the other does not determine the same; it is always the same that determines the other.’³²¹ Contrary to the intentionality that begins from a conscious or perceiving subject, Levinas writes: ‘The body naked and indigent is the very reverting, irreducible to a thought, of representation into life, of the subjectivity that represents into life which is sustained by these representations and *lives of them*; its indigence – its needs – affirm “exteriority” as non-constituted, prior to all affirmation.’³²² Rather than an intentional relation that begins from an already constituted body and aims at a world distinct from it but available to its exploration, then, the sensibility of enjoyment describes a pleasurable immersion of the body in the elemental, the diurnal side of the *there is*. The elemental designates the medium out of which all subjects and objects arise: this medium is ‘a common fund or terrain, essentially non-possessable, “nobody’s”’: earth, sea, light, city. Every relation or

³¹⁶ TI, 137.

³¹⁷ Ibid., 187.

³¹⁸ Ibid., 133.

³¹⁹ Ibid., 112.

³²⁰ Insofar as this thesis does not form a comparative study of the respective philosophies of Husserl, Levinas, and Merleau-Ponty, but rather excavates a notion of sensibility which is operative in each of their works, in this chapter and the next, I do not assess the legitimacy of Levinas’s often sweeping criticisms of Husserl.

³²¹ Ibid., 124.

³²² Ibid., 127.

possession is situated within the non-possessable which envelops or contains without being able to be contained or enveloped. We shall call it the elemental.³²³ The body that enjoys, then, does not comprehend that which it enjoys; rather, the body's very ability to comprehend depends upon its prior enjoyment of the exteriority of the elemental which as 'non-constituted' is precisely *constitutive* of life itself.

Sensibility thus describes a bodily dimension "anterior" to the crystallisation of consciousness, I and non-I, into subject and object.³²⁴ Enjoyment operates prior to and as generative of the strict differentiation into subject and object, and this is how Levinas argues that 'a transcendental function *sui generis* must be recognised'³²⁵ in sensibility. Yet Levinas's critique of intentionality does not mean that he breaks with this notion altogether; rather, as John Drabinski argues, Levinas reverses its directionality so that sense is not projected from a transcendental subject but rather comes from the sensible elemental which the body takes up in enjoyment. Thus, Drabinski writes, insofar as the I does not constitute the element which it enjoys but rather is constituted by it, 'in the affective state of enjoying, the first position of the I is contested.'³²⁶ Indeed, Levinas writes that in enjoyment, 'it is the very movement of constitution that is reversed. It is not the encounter with the irrational that stops the play of constitution; the play changes its sense {sens}.'³²⁷ Here, the French *sens* refers at once to the reversal of the directionality and the reversal of the meaning of intentionality.

Given that the notion of the elemental describes the diurnal side of the *there is*, the elemental and the *there is* are two sides of the same coin: both designate the flesh of the world of which bodies are made. How, then, are they different? What is the precise modality that characterises the enjoyable immersion in the elemental as different from the horrible submersion in the *there is*? Insofar as enjoyment designates a kind of digestive movement through which the sensible body assimilates that which is other than it, it differs from the non-assimilative sensibility through which the body is overwhelmed by the *there is*. Thus, enjoyment operates in the mode of assimilative sensibility:

³²³ Ibid., 131.

³²⁴ Ibid., 188.

³²⁵ Ibid.

³²⁶ Drabinski, *Sensibility and Singularity*, 113.

³²⁷ TI, 129/136.

‘Nourishment, as a means of invigoration, is the transmutation of the other into the same, which is in the essence of enjoyment: an energy that is other, recognised as other, recognised, we will see, as sustaining the very act that is directed upon it, becomes, in enjoyment, my own energy, my strength, me. All enjoyment is in this sense alimentation.’³²⁸

Yet this assimilation is not a reduction of the other to the same where the same remains unchanged. That is, the digestive movement of enjoyment is not a linear directionality proceeding out from an active body onto a passive world that the body dominates. Rather, the sensible body only maintains itself in and through its enjoyment of the elemental and the elemental that is other *sustains* the very activity that digests it. Thus, the sensible body does not constitute the sensible elemental which it enjoys; rather, the elemental pre-exists the sensible body: ‘This relation of myself with myself is accomplished when I *stand* [*me tiens*] in the world which precedes me as an absolute of an unrepresentable antiquity.’³²⁹ It is in this sense, as Drabinski argues, that ‘the anteriority of the sensible [has] a transcendental role.’³³⁰

The body thus nourishes and maintains itself only through its enjoyment of that which is not ‘of’ it. Enjoyment is, then, inhabited by an ambiguity insofar as the body’s nourishment and strengthening from the elemental at the same time entails its vulnerability to the very elements that it enjoys: ‘*To be a body* is on the one hand *to stand* [*se tenir*], to be master of oneself, and, on the other hand, to stand on the earth, to be in the *other*, and thus to be encumbered by one’s body.’³³¹ It is precisely the model of the French *se tenir* that expresses this situation. *Se tenir* at once means to maintain or nourish oneself and to maintain a stance or posture. Levinas writes: ‘To sense {Sentir} is precisely (...) to maintain oneself at home with oneself {se tenir chez soi}.’³³² This maintaining oneself is how enjoyment as a dependence upon the elemental turns into a kind of egoism: ‘Enjoyment is a withdrawal into oneself, an involution. What is termed an affective state does not have the dull monotony of a state, but is a vibrant exaltation in which dawns the self.’³³³ Enjoyment, whilst signifying a relation with the sensible elemental that pre-exists the sensible body, is

³²⁸ Ibid., 111.

³²⁹ Ibid., 137/146.

³³⁰ Drabinski, *Sensibility and Singularity*, 108.

³³¹ TI, 164.

³³² Ibid., 138-9/147.

³³³ Ibid., 118.

yet a digestive movement into oneself, 'a "coiling" as a movement towards oneself,'³³⁴ a kind of snowballing upon oneself. With the notion of enjoyment, Levinas thus provides us with a notion of independence which is not reducible to that of pure sovereignty. The independence that the sensible body gains through its digestion of the elemental, Levinas writes, is 'not a mastery on the one hand and a dependence on the other, but a mastery in this dependence.'³³⁵

Yet it is precisely insofar as the assimilative sensibility of enjoyment at the same time designates the vulnerability of the sensible body qua its constitutive dependency upon the sensible for its life, that enjoyment can at any moment revert into the horror of the *there is*: 'But to possess by enjoying is also to be possessed and to be delivered to the fathomless depth, the disquieting future of the element.'³³⁶ Indeed, the elemental is the diurnal side of the *there is*; both are described in terms of depth, materiality, and anonymity, and, Levinas writes: 'The element extends into the *there is*.'³³⁷ Insofar as the elements I enjoy come 'from nowhere, from "something" that is not, appearing without there being anything that appears – and consequently *coming always*, without my being able to *possess* the source,'³³⁸ enjoyment is not secured against the night. Enjoyment can at any moment revert into horror, into a being overwhelmed by powers beyond our control, and hence assimilative sensibility can at any moment turn into non-assimilative sensibility. The assimilative sensibility through which the sensible body, in Levinas's terms, maintains itself at home with itself, may at any moment be thrown off course and thus, Levinas writes, enjoyment 'is not ensured against the unknown that lurks in the very element it enjoys.'³³⁹

Yet whilst the assimilative sensibility of enjoyment does not begin from a pre-formed, sovereign subject, enjoyment nonetheless ensures the recollection of the I at home with itself. Whilst enjoyment makes some way towards a questioning of the sovereign subject, then, it still leaves, as Drabinski writes, 'a sort of quasi-constitutive function to the I,'³⁴⁰ thus prompting the need for a more radical questioning of the subject. This more radical

³³⁴ Ibid.

³³⁵ Ibid., 114.

³³⁶ Ibid., 158.

³³⁷ Ibid., 142.

³³⁸ Ibid., 141.

³³⁹ Ibid., 144.

³⁴⁰ Drabinski, *Sensibility and Singularity*, 118.

questioning will be formulated with the notion of the face, seeing as, as Drabinski writes: 'for Levinas, only the exteriority of the facing face is capable of questioning spontaneity and freedom.'³⁴¹ Thus, whilst the sensibility of enjoyment already reverts the directionality of intentionality, Drabinski notes, '[e]thics further radicalises this reversal.'³⁴² The last two sections have traced the sensible relation between body and world, and we have followed the oscillation between, on the one hand, a non-assimilative sensibility through which the sensible is experienced as overwhelming in its vast power over human bodies; and, on the other hand, an assimilative sensibility through which this very same element is enjoyed as a vital source of nourishment and pleasure. Yet both of these modes of sensing the element designate a relation with what is impersonal, the flesh of the world, whilst the face, to which we now turn, designates the flesh of (human) intercorporeality: 'This coming forth from nowhere opposes the element to what we will describe under the name of face [visage], where precisely an existent presents itself personally.'³⁴³

3.c. The non-assimilative sensibility of the face: a 'transcendental empiricist' reading

In 'Rereading *Totality and Infinity*,' Robert Bernasconi identifies and analyses two dominant interpretations of the face: the empirical and the transcendental.³⁴⁴ Whilst the empirical reading understands the face as something that can really be experienced in the world, the transcendental reading understands the face as the pre-empirical condition of possibility for ethical subjectivity.³⁴⁵ Analysing the intersection of the transcendental and the empirical notions of the face in the work of Levinas, Bernasconi adds: 'The puzzle is that Levinas himself seems unable to decide between these rival interpretations.'³⁴⁶ Indeed, we find evidence both for the empirical and the transcendental readings of the face in *Totality and Infinity*. The intersection of these two languages comes to light through Levinas's question regarding whether or not, and how, the face can be experienced. He poses this question in

³⁴¹ Ibid., 117.

³⁴² Ibid., 115.

³⁴³ TI, 142.

³⁴⁴ Bernasconi, 'Rereading *Totality and Infinity*.'

³⁴⁵ Sparrow employs an empiricist reading, whilst Drabinski employs a transcendental one. Both of these readings will be analysed below.

³⁴⁶ Bernasconi, 'Rereading *Totality and Infinity*,' 23.

the first sentence of section three of *Totality and Infinity*: 'Is the face not given to vision? How does the epiphany as a face determine a relationship different from that which characterises all our sensible experience?'³⁴⁷ The face, he continues, is not given as a perceptual *Gestalt* that could be grasped, seen, or objectified which would precisely install it at the level of economic existence, of the same: 'The relation with the face is not an object-cognition.'³⁴⁸ Rather: 'The face is present in its refusal to be contained. In this sense it cannot be comprehended, that is, encompassed. It is neither seen nor touched – for in visual or tactile sensation the identity of the I envelops the alterity of the object, which becomes precisely a content.'³⁴⁹ Thus, the experience of the face, he writes, is 'totally different from experience in the sensible sense of the term {l'expérience au sens sensible du terme}, relative and egoist.'³⁵⁰ Yet at the same time, he insists that the face does not transcend experience absolutely as in a negative theology. In fact, the 'experience' of the face, precisely as an epiphany or a revelation rather than a perception, is described as an absolute experience, 'the experience of something absolutely foreign, a *pure* "knowledge" or "experience," a *traumatism of astonishment*.'³⁵¹ Given that such an astonishing experience could not come from ourselves, it must come from the other: 'it does not come from our a priori depths – it is consequently experience par excellence.'³⁵²

The face, then, is at once beyond experience and a pure experience. How should we make sense of this apparent contradiction? Drabinski, defending a transcendental reading, emphasises the sense in which the face transcends and precedes the constitutive powers of the I. Drawing on Levinas's claim that the face is given as an epiphany that one could never predict, perceive, or grasp insofar as, as he writes, '[t]ranscendence is not a vision of the Other, but a primordial donation,'³⁵³ Drabinski argues:

'[T]he donative aspect of the face-to-face complicates the view that in *Totality and Infinity* the Other appears before a pre-formed subject or I. On many occasions, Levinas's own characterisation of the welcome of the Other lends itself to the claim that the subject is already an I that meets the Other. But, our reading of the sense-

³⁴⁷ TI, 187.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 75.

³⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 194.

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 193/211.

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 73.

³⁵² *Ibid.*, 196.

³⁵³ *Ibid.*, 174.

bestowing function of the face understands the unicity of the I to be a subjectivity whose very sense of itself is bestowed from the outside.³⁵⁴

According to Drabinski, then, the face has a transcendental functioning insofar as it gives rise to ethical subjectivity which, unlike the sovereign subject, does not have its origin in itself but rather in being questioned by the other. Drabinski explicitly follows Alphonso Lingis's argument that there are two notions of sensibility at work in *Totality and Infinity*, one of which would be related to enjoyment, and would, in Lingis's words, designate a 'sensuality, which is appropriation and self-appropriation,'³⁵⁵ and the other of which would be 'a sensibility for the face of another, which is expropriation and responsibility.'³⁵⁶ Whilst Drabinski defends a transcendental reading of the face, then, given his conceptualisation of the transcendence of the other in terms of sensibility, his transcendentalism is intertwined with a certain empiricism that is yet not a flat positivism.

Vice versa, Tom Sparrow explicitly employs an empiricist reading of the face in order to counter Levinas's refusal to ascribe any empirical characteristics to the face. Sparrow identifies this refusal as a problematic aspect of the notion of the face given that such absence of phenomenality 'compromises the ability of the face to appear to us within immanence, and therefore divests the face of its phenomenologically evident imperative.'³⁵⁷ Rather than respecting the singularity of the other, a notion of the face that is completely stripped of phenomenality, Sparrow argues, risks advancing a view that is deaf to real (race, gender, disability, etc.) differences and hence results in a violent reduction of the singularity of the other. Contrary to Levinas's assumption, Sparrow writes: 'There is enough in the contours of the face, the hue of the skin, and the sparkle of the eyes to interrupt violence without having to appeal to divine command. The mundane is excessive enough to dislocate totality.'³⁵⁸ Sparrow thus argues that the materiality of the face itself disrupts totality and gives rise to ethical subjectivity.

³⁵⁴ Drabinski, *Sensibility and Singularity*, 125.

³⁵⁵ Alphonso Lingis, 'The Sensuality and the Sensitivity,' in *Face to Face with Levinas*, ed. Richard A. Cohen (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1986), 227.

³⁵⁶ Lingis, 'The Sensuality and the Sensitivity,' 227. See Drabinski, *Sensibility and Singularity*, 108. Similarly, in a recent article, Irina Poleshchuk writes: 'These two senses of sensibility articulate constituent elements of subjectivity: as opened toward the other and as pervaded with the transcendence of the face of the other.' Irina Poleshchuk, 'Transcendence and Sensibility,' *Levinas Studies* 11 (2016): 1-20, 12.

³⁵⁷ Sparrow, *Levinas Unhinged*, 91. For a similar argument, see Rudi Visker, 'Is Ethics Fundamental? Questioning Levinas on Irresponsibility,' *Continental Philosophy Review* 36, no. 3 (July 2003): 263-302.

³⁵⁸ Sparrow, *Levinas Unhinged*, 108-9.

Although Sparrow employs an empiricist reading, then, this empiricism is not divorced from a certain transcendentalism. Indeed, Sparrow explicitly acknowledges this intertwining of the empirical and the transcendental as he seeks to advance ‘a “transcendental empiricist” reading of Levinas that privileges what he calls the “transcendental function” of sensation.’³⁵⁹ Derrida similarly argues that whilst Levinas claims that the face is never reducible to the physical face, it must yet have a basis in some form of physicality if the discussion is not to revert into a mind/body dualism: ‘If the face of the other was not *also, irreducibly, spatial exteriority, we would still have to distinguish between soul and body, thought and speech; or better, between a true, nonspatial face, and its mask or metaphor, its spatial figure. The entire Metaphysics of the Face would collapse.*’³⁶⁰ Thus, a transcendental empiricist reading is in fact necessary in order to make sense of what something like the face might mean, not only within the logic of Levinas’s ethical project but concretely in life itself.

How, then, might a transcendental empiricist reading of the face be possible? The answer to this question pertains to how one conceptualises a phenomenon and an experience, concepts whose meaning Levinas pushes to the limit. Whilst Levinas is famously critical of phenomenology, however, rather than rejecting it altogether, with his thinking on transcendence and sensibility, he in fact propels a transformation of it.³⁶¹ Indeed, in his 1984 text ‘Peace and Proximity,’ he writes that he has not described the formal structure of the face ‘without attempting to deformalize these structures and rediscover them in their concreteness, that is, without a phenomenology.’³⁶² Yet this phenomenology is not reducible to what Dan Zahavi calls a ‘surface phenomenology’³⁶³ for which phenomena are given in a transparent way. How, then, should we understand the specific ‘phenomenology’

³⁵⁹ Ibid., 111.

³⁶⁰ Jacques Derrida, ‘Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas,’ in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 2001), 143.

³⁶¹ This is also Drabinski’s main argument as he writes that ‘Levinas inaugurates a new style of phenomenology,’ and that this new style is brought about ‘only through the explosion of the horizons of phenomenology from within phenomenology itself. Levinas puts phenomenology in tension with itself and develops his own position out of this tension.’ Drabinski, *Sensibility and Singularity*, 14.

³⁶² Emmanuel Levinas, ‘Peace and Proximity,’ trans. Peter Atterton and Simon Critchley, in *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings*, 166.

³⁶³ Zahavi, *Self-Awareness and Alterity*, note 8, 245.

of the face? Citing Vassili Grossman's *Life and Fate*, Levinas sketches an answer to this question:

'[T]he story is of the families, wives, and parents of political detainees travelling to the Lubyanka in Moscow for the latest news. A line is formed at the counter, a line where one can see only the backs of others. A woman awaits her turn: "[She] had never thought that the human back could be so expressive, and could convey states of mind in such a penetrating way. Persons approaching the counter had a particular way of craning their neck and their back, their raised shoulders with shoulder blades like springs, which seemed to cry, sob, and scream.'"³⁶⁴

In *Precarious Life*, Judith Butler comments on this passage: 'the "face" seems to consist in a series of displacements such that a face is figured as a back which, in turn, is figured as a scene of agonized vocalisation.'³⁶⁵ What shows itself in the outstretched backs of the others, then, is something like the vulnerability of the other's life, and, Butler continues: 'To respond to the face, to understand its meaning, means to be awake to what is precarious in another life or, rather, the precariousness of life itself.'³⁶⁶ Thus, a transcendental empiricist reading of the face is possible insofar as the face amounts to, in Derrida's words, a 'nonphenomenal phenomenon,'³⁶⁷ that is, insofar as the (empirical) phenomenology of the face discloses a nonphenomenological dimension of life itself, or what might be called its transcendental vulnerability.

Indeed, the face, Levinas writes, 'is not dis-closure, but the pure denuding of exposure without defence. Exposure as such, extreme exposure to death, to mortality itself.'³⁶⁸ Given that the face designates this vulnerability which is not a *thing* that could be perceived or grasped once and for all, the face is not simply any face perceived at any time; rather, what Levinas calls the face is glimpsed at rare moments when the absolute vulnerability of another body reveals itself. Whilst the vulnerability of life cannot be grasped or perceived as a *Gestalt*, then, this does not mean that it escapes any experience whatsoever. Rather, what the face designates – the exposure and vulnerability of life itself – is, as I will argue, experienceable in the modality of non-assimilative sensibility. This notion of a non-assimilative sensibility is indicated in Stella Sandford's description of the face: 'What

³⁶⁴ Levinas, 'Peace and Proximity,' 167.

³⁶⁵ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), 133.

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 134.

³⁶⁷ Derrida, 'Violence and Metaphysics,' 160.

³⁶⁸ Levinas, 'Peace and Proximity,' 167.

distinguishes it from enjoyment, also affective, is the fact that, uniquely, the encounter with the Other is one in which the sensible “resists.” The Other is not assimilable, not available for alimentation or transmutation into the same; one cannot “enjoy” the Other, indeed the Other puts an end to all enjoyment.³⁶⁹ Non-assimilative sensibility, then, is a bodily sensing of the other’s – and by extension, one’s own – vulnerability, a sensing which makes a demand upon me to respond to the fact that I am part of and dependent upon a wider intercorporeality. Such a response is never an assimilation, for an attempted assimilation (by murder, for example) would not grasp the vulnerability of the other’s life at all; it would only kill this life itself, thus precisely missing it altogether.

The vulnerability of life, then, is lodged in an empirical corporeality, but it is not reducible to this corporeality if by corporeality we mean something that can be measured and weighed. Thus, as Cristian Ciocan writes, the face designates what, ‘when facing someone, we cannot see, or at least, what shows itself in withdrawal. The face falls under the category of the corporeal, certainly, but in it, there is also the invisible.’³⁷⁰ Such vulnerability, then, is not reducible to what Husserl calls the ‘naively objectivist’³⁷¹ view of a positivist realism which takes that which can be measured and weighed for granted as true at face value. Yet whilst the face is not reducible to the empirical physicality of an actual face, it nonetheless only reveals itself in and through an actual, physical body, and, writes Levinas, ‘the whole body - a hand or a curve of the shoulder - can express as the face.’³⁷² The corporeality that is present in front of us reveals by way of a certain absence a more metaphysical dimension in the sense that the face can neither be comprehended nor perceived. This is precisely Sparrow’s point when he writes about the sensible materiality of the *there is* that it ‘is written on the body of the other, is discernible in the scars and laugh lines, crow’s feet and fatigued countenance of the other. This is a metaphysical point, not an empirical one.’³⁷³

We see, then, how our transcendental empiricist reading of the face pertains to our argument presented in the introduction that the metaphysical notion of transcendence and

³⁶⁹ Stella Sandford, *Metaphysics of Love: Gender and Transcendence in Levinas* (London: The Athlone Press, 2000), 116-7.

³⁷⁰ Cristian Ciocan, ‘The Problem of Embodiment in the Early Writings of Emmanuel Levinas,’ trans. Kascha Semon, *Levinas Studies* 4 (2009): 1-12, 14.

³⁷¹ Crisis, 292.

³⁷² TI, 262. In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas will characterise the face ‘as a trace of an absence, as a skin with wrinkles.’ OTB, 93.

³⁷³ Sparrow, *Levinas Unhinged*, 101.

the ontological notion of sensibility are not incompatible but that in fact, sensibility concretises and materialises transcendence. This is because the transcendence of the face – the vulnerability of life itself – operates and reveals itself at the level of a material sensibility that is not a flat positivism, in the form of a nonphenomenal phenomenon or what we, following Anthony Steinbock, have called a limit phenomenon.³⁷⁴ Given that this transcendental empiricist conceptualisation of the face pushes to the limit what is traditionally deemed phenomenologically experienceable, then, it challenges classical phenomenology. Yet given that the face, as I have argued, designates a limit phenomenon that is experienceable in the modality of non-assimilative sensibility, the notion of the face does not transcend phenomenology altogether but rather contributes to its transformation from within.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have traced three formulations of transcendence as sensibility in Levinas, from the notion of the *there is* to that of enjoyment and the face. I argued that these notions should be understood in terms of the oscillation of assimilative and non-assimilative sensibility. We saw how the notions of assimilative and non-assimilative sensibility describe the ambiguity of life itself, its simultaneous capacity for nourishment and its fundamental vulnerability. We analysed non-assimilative sensibility in the form of the *there is*, the basic materiality from which everything is ultimately made, and in the form of the relation to an other (human) body. Yet this analysis of the relation to the other living body remained, in this chapter, at a static and genetic level abstracted from any generative becoming.³⁷⁵ The next chapter turns to the analyses of diachrony and substitution in *Otherwise than Being* in order to develop the generative notion of the body as an original intercorporeality through the fact of having been born. These analyses, as we shall see, in fact describe the first instantiation of the other insofar as the gift of life from an immemorial other founds any possibility for sensing the vulnerability of the other in later stages of our lives.

³⁷⁴ See page 6 of this thesis.

³⁷⁵ For a definition of static, genetic, and generative phenomenology, see pp. 8-9 of this thesis.

Chapter 4

Inspiring Breathing: Having Been Born

In chapter three, we excavated and developed a notion of transcendence as sensibility through a reading of three key notions of Levinas's work up until *Totality and Infinity*: the horror of the *there is*, the enjoyment of the elemental, and the non-assimilative sensibility of the 'face.' Whilst chapter three developed the notions of assimilative and non-assimilative sensibility at a static and genetic level, in this chapter we turn to *Otherwise than Being* in order to excavate a generative dimension of transcendence as sensibility.³⁷⁶ In *Totality and Infinity*, transcendence is ultimately thought in terms of fecundity and the future that the child brings, yet given that fecundity is strangely and unequivocally bound up with paternity, it remains not only politically problematic but also ontologically untenable.³⁷⁷ Whilst fecundity points towards the future, substitution points to a past which has never been present. In *Otherwise than Being*, then, transcendence is thought in terms of a diachronic and anarchic time, 'a past more ancient than every representable origin, a pre-original and anarchical *passed*.'³⁷⁸ This notion of diachrony is developed from Levinas's critique of the present, identity, materiality, the coinciding of the subject/body with itself. Whilst, as we saw in chapter two on Husserl, the body continuously 'synthesises' itself through its movements which have the structure of the living present,³⁷⁹ a critical reading of

³⁷⁶ Static, genetic, and generative methods are defined in the introduction to this thesis, pp. 8-9.

³⁷⁷ In section four of *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas writes that transcendence is possible only in fecundity through which the subject at once transcends himself in the begetting of a child whilst at the same time remaining himself: 'I do not have my child; I am my child. Paternity is a relation with a stranger who while being Other (...) is me, a relation of the I with a self which yet is not me. In this "I am" being is no longer Eleatic unity. In existing itself there is a multiplicity and a transcendence. In this transcendence the I is not swept away, since the son is not me; and yet I *am* my son. The fecundity of the I is its very transcendence.' TI, 277. Yet *Totality and Infinity*, in its association of eros with the feminine, effectively argues that the feminine is the precondition for, but is herself excluded from, fecundity as paternity: 'The Other who welcomes in intimacy is not the *you* [vous] of the face that reveals itself in a dimension of height, but precisely the *thou* [tu] of familiarity.' Ibid., 155.

³⁷⁸ OTB, 9.

³⁷⁹ See pp. 57-65 of this thesis.

Levinas's thinking on sensibility and time in *Otherwise than Being*, as I will argue in this chapter, provides a productive framework for conceptualising the way in which the body's capacity for this self-synthesis itself depends upon having been given the gift of life from another body in a time that remains immemorial to me; and, by extension, the way in which the trace of this immemorial time of gestation and birth continues to operate within bodily existence throughout life.

Indeed, Levinas argues, whilst the living present explains how the subject/body continuously differentiates itself and recollects itself – its auto-affection – the living present ultimately ensures the unity of the subject/body and does not account for that which *precedes* its capacity to recollect, synthesise, and move. The living present, then, is a 'diastasis of the identical and its recapture or reminiscence,'³⁸⁰ where diastasis refers to the dislocation of bones without fracture. Husserl's notion of the living present, Levinas writes, explains how the subject/body continuously unifies itself through the differentiation of itself: 'Differing within identity, modifying itself without changing, consciousness glows in an impression inasmuch as it diverges from itself, to *still* be expecting itself, or *already* recuperating itself. Still, already – are time, time in which nothing is lost.'³⁸¹ Husserl's emphasis on retention and recollection, Levinas adds, 'excludes from time the irreducible diachrony whose meaning the present study aims to bring to light, behind the *exhibition* of being.'³⁸²

Rather than the recuperable time of Husserl, then, Levinas's notion of diachrony gives us conceptual tools to investigate the condition of possibility for this recuperable time itself, that is, the time of gestation and birth. Indeed, Levinas describes this diachronic time as an 'irrecuperable pre-ontological past, that of maternity,'³⁸³ and, he writes: 'This diachrony of the subject is not a metaphor.'³⁸⁴ This diachrony is not a metaphor; rather, it evokes at once the time of gestation and birth of the subject/body from the body of another and the way in which the body retains a trace, throughout life, of this other body from which it was born. Any bodily 'I can' is necessarily conditioned by this time before birth which the subject who

³⁸⁰ OTB, 29.

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 32.

³⁸² *Ibid.*, 34.

³⁸³ *Ibid.*, 78.

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 57.

exists by definition cannot recuperate or recollect,³⁸⁵ as Lisa Guenther emphasises in her description of ‘the strange temporality of birth’: ‘Birth points to a time of existence that is already *me* but never quite *mine*: a time on the cusp of selfhood, prior to my identity as a self-conscious ego.’³⁸⁶ This means, then, as Guenther writes, that ‘my existence is not quite my own, that my time is already bound up with the time of the Other.’³⁸⁷ Whilst the evocations of the pregnant body that we find in *Otherwise than Being* describe the literal situation of the other in the same, the notion of the oneself, as I will argue in the final section, marks a move from the particular case of bearing a child and giving birth to the universal fact of having been born. Given that all living (human) bodies were born from the body of another, they retain, throughout life, this other body from which they were born as a trace, an immanent alterity, which in advance and continuously disrupts any claims to sovereignty and self-coinciding. When thought together, then, diachrony and sensibility form a materialisation of the alterity of time within the body itself.

The immemorial time of gestation and birth then describes at once an epistemological and an ontological limitation of the sovereign subject: ‘This diachrony prevents the one from joining up with itself and identifying itself as a substance, contemporary with itself, like a transcendental ego.’³⁸⁸ But it also inscribes a *methodological* limitation to a static or genetic phenomenology which limits itself to what is experienceable from the first-person point of view. As Nicholas Smith explains, the fact of birth then challenges Husserl’s guiding principle, the evidence through intuition: ‘Unlike people, trees, and buildings, however, my own birth and death cannot – as a matter of principle – be given intuitively to me.’³⁸⁹

Levinas’s notion of diachrony thus prompts us to instigate the methodological move from a static and genetic towards a generative phenomenology, even if he never uses these terms himself. Here, generativity refers at once to the ontological-material generativity of life through gestation and birth, and to bodily existence across generations. Hence, the notion

³⁸⁵ ‘The immemorial is not an effect of a weakness of memory, an incapacity to cross large intervals of time, to resuscitate pasts too deep.’ *Ibid.*, 38.

³⁸⁶ Lisa Guenther, *The Gift of the Other: Levinas and the Politics of Reproduction* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006), 3.

³⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

³⁸⁸ OTB, 57. ‘The subjectivity as *the other in the same*, as an inspiration, is the putting into question of all affirmation for-oneself, all egoism born again in this very recurrence.’ *Ibid.*, 111.

³⁸⁹ Nicholas Smith, ‘Phenomenology of Pregnancy: A Cure for Philosophy?’ In *Phenomenology of Pregnancy*, ed. Jonna Bornemark and Nicholas Smith (Stockholm: Södertörn Philosophical Studies, 2016), 35.

of diachrony, when read in an ontological rather than an ethical register, effectively opens up for the possibility for a historical approach to bodily existence, even if it is precisely this dimension of historicity that is missing from Levinas's account. What follows, then, is not a phenomenological account of the lived experience of pregnancy, but rather a move towards an ontology of the life of human bodies.

This chapter, then, insofar as it is interested in the ontological, rather than the ethical, implications of Levinas's work, continues our 'heretical' reading from chapter three.³⁹⁰ If in Levinas's early work, however, the ontological dimension of his analyses of bodily existence and sensibility largely serve a preparatory function for, and hence can easily be analysed separately from, his explicitly ethical project, in *Otherwise than Being*, the 'ethical' becomes intertwined with sensibility itself. Whilst *Totality and Infinity* began from an already existing subject who is questioned by another, *Otherwise than Being* begins from the claim that the other is always already *within* the subject/body who has thus always already been 'questioned' by and called to respond to the other. Consequently, it becomes increasingly difficult to separate the ontological from the ethical dimension, even if it is precisely this separation, as I will argue in the first section, that is necessary if we are to avoid perpetuating normative ideas surrounding the maternal body as a naturally self-sacrificing vehicle for reproduction. To aid our heretical reading, then, we shall trace the ontological dimension through the references to breathing, inspiration, and respiration that figure throughout the book alongside or 'underneath' Levinas's specifically ethical project.

Tracing the ontological dimension of sensibility through the references to breathing also pertains to a methodological problem expressed through Levinas's notions of the saying and the said. With these notions, Levinas asks how it is possible to philosophise about that which transcends any conscious grasping or reflection. Given that philosophy operates within the realm of the said, it cannot, by definition, adequately express the saying: 'The plot of the saying that is absorbed in the said is not exhausted in this manifestation. It

³⁹⁰ This is a heretical reading also insofar as Levinas, despite his employment of the pregnant/maternal body as a model for substitution, undoubtedly did not intend to provide an ontology of life or indeed to engage with the actual reality of birth. This is attested to by the absence of any mention of the maternal body in the 1968 text, 'Substitution,' which formed the basis for chapter four of the same name in *Otherwise than Being*, although even in the earlier text, Levinas describes substitution in very visceral terms. See Emmanuel Levinas, 'Substitution,' trans. Peter Atterton, Simon Critchley, and Graham Noctor, in *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings*.

imprints its trace on the thematization itself.³⁹¹ Whilst the saying can never present itself as a saying within language insofar as language operates at the level of the said, then, the task of philosophy is to hear the 'echo' of the saying through the said. It is in this impossible task, rather than in Husserl's uncovering of the invariant in the variable, that the 'reduction' consists for Levinas: 'The movement back to the saying is the phenomenological reduction. In it the indescribable is described.'³⁹² Whilst the discussion of the saying and the said works explicitly in the service of Levinas's ethical project, in the final chapter of *Otherwise than Being*, he conceptualises it as a reduction to breathing: 'But in reducing the said to the saying, philosophical language reduces the said to breathing opening to the other and signifying to the other its very signifyingness.'³⁹³

Although Levinas does not – apart from this rather enigmatic reference to breathing – explicitly conceptualise the reduction to the saying in terms of the body, it is precisely with these notions that he effectively sketches the methodological problem in any philosophical account of bodily existence or experience. Given that philosophy operates through language and reflection, it cannot, by definition, adequately convey pre-reflective bodily experience or existence. Yet it tries in an attempt that necessarily fails but yet conveys an 'echo' of this bodily experience which 'breathes' through language, albeit in a different form. Were we able to adequately express pre-reflective bodily experience through reflective language, we would express something like the very pulsation or respiration of the body itself: 'Saying uncovers, beyond nudity, what dissimulation there may be under the exposedness of a skin laid bare. It is the very *respiration* of this skin prior to any intention.'³⁹⁴ Tracing sensibility through the notion of breathing then works as a double strategy: at once separating the ontological from the ethical dimension, it in the same move conveys some of the sense of this pre-reflective dimension of bodily life.

In section 4.a., then, I analyse Levinas's early formulation of transcendence as the need for escape as well as the ultimate resolution to this need in the notion of substitution in *Otherwise than Being*. Given Levinas's analyses of subjectivity as substitution in terms of a radical passivity that has always already happened below the level of consciousness or

³⁹¹ OTB, 46-7.

³⁹² Ibid., 53.

³⁹³ Ibid., 181/228.

³⁹⁴ Ibid., 49/62.

perception, substitution, I argue, is best understood as an ontological description of bodily existence. Yet as I argue in critical dialogue with Critchley³⁹⁵ and some of the feminist responses to Levinas,³⁹⁶ the problem for anyone committed to Levinas's ethical project – feminist or not – arises precisely when the bodily or ontological dimension of subjectivity as substitution is understood as emblematic of ethics. In section 4.b., then, I propose an ontological, rather than an ethical reading of substitution. Through an analysis of Levinas's descriptions of sensibility and his evocations of the pregnant body, I argue that apart from all claims about ethics, the notion of substitution describes the situation of pregnancy in which the mother eats and breathes for the foetus who remains non-assimilable to the mother despite their intimate proximity. In section 4.c., I move from the particular case of pregnancy and the generation of new life to the universal fact of having been born. I conceptualise the notion of the oneself as descriptive of all living (human) bodies which insofar as they were born from the body of another, retain a trace from that body. As such, the notion of the oneself, I argue, marks a move from the abstract concept of the subject to the concrete notion of the body as an original intercorporeality whose capacity to breathe autonomously rests upon an immemorial 'inspiration' by the body from which it was born. We shall see also that it is with the notions of substitution and the oneself that the two senses of transcendence defined in the introduction³⁹⁷ – as alterity and movement – collide most strongly.

4.a. What is substitution? A critique of an 'ethical' reading

Otherwise than Being can perhaps be seen as the ultimate formulation of Levinas's critique of the sovereign subject. Whilst *Totality and Infinity* began from an already existing subject whose sovereignty is called into question by another in the relation with the face, *Otherwise than Being* begins from the claim that the other is always already *within* the same, a situation which Levinas ultimately conceptualises in terms of substitution in chapter four of the same name. But although substitution forms the 'centrepiece'³⁹⁸ of *Otherwise than Being* and perhaps of Levinas's later thinking as such, this does not mean that the argument

³⁹⁵ Simon Critchley, *The Problem with Levinas*, ed. Alexis Dianda (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 64-91.

³⁹⁶ Particularly Guenther, *The Gift of the Other*, and Sandford, *Metaphysics of Love*.

³⁹⁷ See pp. 5-6 of this thesis for a definition of the two senses of transcendence.

³⁹⁸ OTB, xlvii.

of the book should be understood to proceed in any progressive order. Indeed, in the first chapter, Levinas writes: ‘The different concepts that come up in the attempt to state transcendence echo one another,’³⁹⁹ and so despite the necessary ordering into chapters, ‘the themes in which these concepts present themselves do not lend themselves to linear exposition, and cannot be really isolated from one another without projecting their shadows and their reflections on one another.’⁴⁰⁰ The chronological exposition of the chapters does not reflect the relation between the themes addressed; rather, each chapter echoes, speaks, or breathes through the others. Thus, although I focus here on the notion of substitution insofar as it forms Levinas’s ultimate attempt to ‘state transcendence,’ the themes of sensibility and proximity – addressed earlier in the book – are always already implied in this notion of substitution.⁴⁰¹

To understand what is at stake and what is meant by the notion of substitution, it is necessary to go back, for a moment, to Levinas’s early formulation, from the 1930s and 40s, of transcendence as the need to escape identity, of which bodily materiality is the ultimate manifestation. This need for escape is not simply the need to escape a feature or a property of one’s being; rather, it is the need to break with this being itself: ‘Thus, escape is the need to get out of oneself, that is, *to break that most radical and unalterably binding of chains, the fact that the I [moi] is oneself [soi-même]*.’⁴⁰² Whilst the need for escape is most explicitly formulated in the early works in the phenomenological descriptions of bodily suffering, nausea, and shame and as analysed in chapter three,⁴⁰³ the need for escape remains the driving force for Levinas’s insistence upon transcendence throughout his work.⁴⁰⁴ Yet this need for escape should not be understood as the need to get to a

³⁹⁹ Ibid., 19.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁰¹ As are the notions of justice and the third party as formulated in chapter five of *Otherwise than Being*, although I will not address these themes here.

⁴⁰² OE, 55.

⁴⁰³ See pp. 83-4 of this thesis.

⁴⁰⁴ This is also Critchley’s argument when he writes that the problem of Levinas’ philosophy ‘is *how to escape*. (...) The escape route sketched in the work from the mid-1950s and 1960s is through the notion of infinity. We’ll look at different escape routes as we proceed, but the issue is that we’re stuck to ourselves. We are irredeemably riveted to ourselves and that’s tragic. How can that be overcome?’ Critchley, *The Problem with Levinas*, 26. Bernasconi, too, writes that Levinas’s ‘interest already in *On Escape* was on our aspiration to exit being: (...). He dropped the word {excence} later, resorting instead to the word *transcendence* from which he had originally distinguished it, but this structure remained the guiding thread of his thinking from beginning to end.’ Robert Bernasconi, ‘Subjectivity Must Be Defended: Substitution, Entanglement, and the Prehistory of

noumenal world behind the phenomenal one, nor is it a desire for death. Rather, the need for escape expresses the paradox of having to escape one's self-identity without annihilation. Levinas thus formulates this ambiguous need for escape in the early work not in terms of a transcendence but rather of an ex-cendence, denoting the need to get out (*ex*) rather than to get beyond or across (*trans*): 'The ground of this theme is constituted – if one will pardon the neologism – by the need for *ex-cendence*.'⁴⁰⁵ If the need for escape is formulated as the impossible need to break with one's self-identity, such an escape, as Levinas suggests as early as *Time and the Other*, will only be possible through the relation with the other.

Indeed, in this text, hypostasis, the act through which the I posits itself as a self-identical ego, is conceptualised as the *solitude* or solipsism of the ego which by definition could only be broken by an other. Levinas asks the familiar question of how a relation with the other is possible which neither annihilates my own self nor reduces the other's alterity: 'How can a being enter into relation with the other without allowing its very self to be crushed by the other?'⁴⁰⁶ This question, he continues, 'is the very problem of the preservation of the ego in transcendence.'⁴⁰⁷ In *Totality and Infinity*, he explains this problem in greater detail: 'As classically conceived, the idea of transcendence is self-contradictory. The subject that transcends is swept away in its transcendence; it does not transcend itself. If, instead of reducing itself to a change of properties, climate, or level, transcendence would commit the very identity of the subject, we would witness the death of its substance.'⁴⁰⁸ How, then, might such an escape be possible through the relation with the other?

Levinas's solution to the need for escape in *Totality and Infinity* takes the form of fecundity which is thought as a simultaneous continuation of the subject only through the discontinuity that the new child brings, yet this notion ultimately fails given its conceptualisation as paternity.⁴⁰⁹ Thus, it becomes not only politically problematic but also

the Me in Levinas,' in *The Oxford Handbook of Levinas*, ed. Michael L. Morgan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 262.

⁴⁰⁵ OE, 54. See also EE, 15.

⁴⁰⁶ TO, 77.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid. See also TI, 276: 'The acuity of the problem lies in the necessity of maintaining the I in the transcendence with which it hitherto seemed incompatible.'

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid., 274.

⁴⁰⁹ See Luce Irigaray, 'The Fecundity of the Caress: A Reading of Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, "Phenomenology of Eros,"' in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*. See also Sandford, *Metaphysics of Love*, 33-81, for a critical analysis

ontologically untenable. Whilst the idea of fecundity sees the possibility for escape in having a child, with the notion of substitution, Levinas makes the more fundamental claim that the subject has always already 'escaped' through its pre-originary substitution for another. The notion of substitution, then, begins not from a solitary subject whose sovereignty must then be questioned by the other, but rather from the premise that the subject is always already interrupted by the other. This means that 'from the start, the other affects us despite ourselves,'⁴¹⁰ hence the move from the subject as a host to the subject as hostage.

According to Levinas, the subject has always already substituted herself for another prior to any consciousness, perception, or reflection, in a past that has never been present:

'Substitution is not an act; it is a passivity inconvertible into an act, the hither side of the act-passivity alternative.'⁴¹¹ The notion of substitution, then, provides us with a seemingly ontological conceptualisation of subjectivity as always already questioned by and hence responsible for another, thus always already 'freed' from the enchainment to herself. Yet this ontological notion of subjectivity has, for Levinas, a distinctly ethical sense insofar as this original questioning and opening of the subject means that subjectivity is always already ethical prior to any conscious choice: 'Responsibility for another is not an accident that happens to a subject, but precedes essence in it, has not awaited freedom, in which a commitment to another would have been made.'⁴¹² How, then, should we understand subjectivity as substitution? In an ontological or an ethical sense – or both?

In 'What is the Question to which "Substitution" is the Answer?', Robert Bernasconi argues for a 'transcendental or quasi-transcendental'⁴¹³ understanding of substitution. The question to which substitution is the answer, Bernasconi writes, is the transcendental question of what must be the case for something like 'ethics' to be possible: 'Levinas introduces the concept of substitution to address the question of what the subject must be like for ethics to be possible.'⁴¹⁴ Thus, Bernasconi argues, with the notion of substitution,

of the significance for Levinas's philosophy of the changing roles of the feminine, sexual difference, eros, fecundity, and paternity in Levinas up until *Totality and Infinity*.

⁴¹⁰ OTB, 129.

⁴¹¹ Ibid., 117.

⁴¹² Ibid., 114.

⁴¹³ Robert Bernasconi, 'What is the Question to which "Substitution" is the Answer?' in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, ed. Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 245.

⁴¹⁴ Ibid., 234-5.

Levinas is describing rather than prescribing: 'Levinas is not preaching. He is not saying that one *should* sacrifice oneself. He merely wants to account for its possibility.'⁴¹⁵ Bernasconi's argument is supported by Levinas's claim that '[i]t is through the condition of being hostage that there can be in the world pity, compassion, pardon and proximity – even the little there is, even the simple "After you, sir."⁴¹⁶ On this account, the notion of substitution describes subjectivity as always already disrupted by the other prior to any consciousness or perception, and it is this pre-originary disruption which in turn makes ethical behaviour possible.

Yet at the same time, Levinas insists that substitution itself *is* already 'ethical,' *is* already responsibility and expiation: 'The ego is not an entity "capable" of expiating for the others: it is this original expiation.'⁴¹⁷ Of course, 'ethics' for Levinas precisely does not refer to any doctrine of morality that could be empirically defined and universally applied. In this sense, when Levinas claims that subjectivity as substitution is already ethical, he does not mean that substitution involves any ethical acts or moral behaviour; he merely describes the condition of being always already questioned by another. In this sense, we can say, with Bernasconi, that subjectivity as substitution indeed describes what the subject must be like for something like ethical behaviour to be possible – already questioned, disrupted, opened by the other. Subjectivity as substitution would thus be 'transcendentally' ethical in Levinas's specific sense of this term, as the condition of possibility for, but not necessarily resulting in, 'empirical' ethical acts and behaviour (the little 'after you sir').

But if this is the case, it follows that 'ethics' in Levinas's sense becomes little more than another name to describe the ontological notion of subjectivity as always already substituted prior to any consciousness or perception and thus ethics risks losing any sense in distinction from ontology. Ethics, as Simon Critchley argues, becomes conflated with an ontology of pre-conscious, pre-reflective subjectivity: 'Substitution risks reducing ethical subjectivity to what appears to be a descriptive fact about the subject. Your ego might be a Heideggerian or a Hegelian, but pre-reflectively you are still a pre-conscious subject of substitution and recurrence.'⁴¹⁸ Of course, for Levinas, the ontological and the ethical are

⁴¹⁵ Ibid., 235.

⁴¹⁶ OTB, 117.

⁴¹⁷ Ibid., 118.

⁴¹⁸ Critchley, *The Problem with Levinas*, 87.

not two separate realms that would act independently of one another; if this were the case, then each would revert into reigning totalities. Yet if substitution describes subjectivity as always already ethical, Critchley argues: 'The problem is that it appears as if we're ethical despite ourselves. (...) As a consequence, Levinas has no explanation for the *motivation* to act morally.'⁴¹⁹ Given Levinas's emphasis on the radical passivity and the pre-conscious level at which substitution has always already taken place, then, it becomes increasingly difficult to understand the specificity of the ethical. Whilst this poses a problem for anyone committed to Levinas's ethics, I want to take this as a cue for an ontological, rather than an ethical, reading of substitution.⁴²⁰

How, then, should we understand substitution in an ontological sense? Whilst Bernasconi's transcendental argument makes a move to explain what the subject must be like for something like ethical behaviour to be possible, it leaves the question of how to understand substitution itself largely untouched. What does substitution mean? At what level would we have to understand this notion in order for it really to make sense? I will argue, and we shall see this in more detail in the next two sections, that the way in which the notion of substitution must be thought in order for it to make concrete sense is at a bodily or sensible level. Indeed, Levinas analyses substitution in increasingly visceral terms, although he never defines it as a notion that has a specifically bodily signification. Yet the notion of substitution forms an account of the pre-history of the subject, describing an anarchic and immemorial time that comes before and, in an absolute sense, cannot be recuperated by the subject, although it remains as a trace that continuously disrupts any claims to sovereignty: 'The subjectivity as *the other in the same*, as an inspiration, is the putting into question of all affirmation for-oneself, all egoism born again in this very recurrence.'⁴²¹ I want to argue, although Levinas never goes this far, that these descriptions make sense most concretely when thought in relation to the time of gestation and birth, and, correlatively, in relation to the fact of having been born. Indeed, the fact that all living

⁴¹⁹ Ibid.

⁴²⁰ Tom Sparrow makes a similar point as he argues that Levinas's conceptualisation of sensibility provides 'a non-correlationist ontology, although he is reluctant to call it ontology for fear that his work will be read too closely to Heidegger's (...). Moreover, it seems that Levinas's position would be strengthened if he allowed that what he calls ethics is actually grounded in ontology.' Sparrow, *Plastic Bodies*, 147.

⁴²¹ OTB, 111.

(human) bodies are born from the body of another perhaps forms the strongest critique of the sovereign subject.

This is perhaps part of the reason why Levinas, in *Otherwise than Being* (but not in the 1968 text, 'Substitution,' which forms the basis for chapter four of the same name in *Otherwise than Being*⁴²²), employs the figure of pregnancy and maternity, the 'gestation of the other in the same,'⁴²³ as the model for substitution:

'The-one-for-another has the form of sensibility or vulnerability, pure passivity or susceptibility, passive to the point of becoming an inspiration, that is, alterity in the same, the trope of the body animated by the soul, psyche in the form of a hand that gives even the bread taken from its own mouth. Here the psyche is the maternal body {Psychisme comme un corps maternel}.'⁴²⁴

Yet whilst the conceptualisation of the pregnant/maternal body as the very locus of the ethical relation might seem, at first glance, as a welcome rectification of Levinas's exclusion of the feminine from ethics in *Totality and Infinity*,⁴²⁵ it is precisely this intertwining of the pregnant/maternal body with the 'ethical' which remains problematic.⁴²⁶ As the feminist literature has rightly argued, positing the pregnant/maternal body as *emblematic* of the ethical relation raises at least two problems for any feminist reader, the first pertaining to the normative idea of the selfless mother reflected and reinforced by this model, and the second pertaining to the problem of abortion.

Defenders of Levinas argue, in various ways, that the maternal body should be understood not in a literal sense as referring to actual women but rather as a metaphor that plays a specific role within and lends rhetorical support to Levinas's philosophy.⁴²⁷ Yet as Stella

⁴²² Levinas, 'Substitution.'

⁴²³ OTB, 75.

⁴²⁴ Ibid., 67/85.

⁴²⁵ Kathryn Bevis makes such an argument as she writes that whilst the feminine in *Totality and Infinity* functioned 'as little more than a container or vessel for male subjectivity,' *Otherwise than Being* effectuates 'a radical reassignment of the metaphor of dwelling to the human body itself – specifically to the maternal body as a dwelling and, crucially, to the subject indwelling itself as a maternal body – [which] allows Levinas to achieve a more successful articulation of his philosophical position on the transcendence of the ethical relationship between self and Other.' Kathryn Bevis, "'Better than Metaphors?' Dwelling and the Maternal Body in Emmanuel Levinas,' *Literature and Theology* 21, no. 3 (September 2007): 317-329, 322-3.

⁴²⁶ This perhaps explains partly why most commentators who are committed to Levinas's ethical project (e.g., Bernasconi and to a lesser extent Critchley) largely avoid engaging with Levinas's example of the maternal body and the question of birth (another reason is that Levinas did not speak about the maternal body in the 1968 text, 'Substitution,' upon which both Bernasconi and Critchley rely).

⁴²⁷ For some recent examples of this argument, see: Nimrod Reitman, 'Pregnant Pause: The Maternal Placeholder in Levinas,' *Angelaki* 26, no. 6 (December 2021): 49-67; Mihail Evans, 'Lévinas, Derrida and the

Sandford rightly points out – in relation to the category of the feminine in *Totality and Infinity* but equally applicable to that of maternity in *Otherwise than Being* – any metaphor necessarily refers, at some level, to the empirical content from which it precisely draws its meaning, and so the notion of the maternal cannot be understood in any meaningful sense in abstraction from the empirical situation of motherhood.⁴²⁸ The maternal body, then, only works as a meaningful metaphor or model for the ethical relation because maternity is traditionally understood in terms that very much reflect Levinas’s notion of ethics: putting the other before oneself, tearing the bread out of one’s own mouth: the selfless and self-sacrificing mother.⁴²⁹

Failing to recognise the relation between the category of the feminine and empirical women, or that of the maternal and empirical mothers, as Sandford argues, not only ignores the way in which a metaphor works as a meaningful rhetorical/literary device; it also fails to appreciate the way in which concepts influence or structure our understanding of the empirical content to which those concepts refer: ‘The descriptive and/or ideological content of the notion of the feminine cannot simply be dismissed as unrepresentative of empirical women because how we understand what it is to be an empirical woman is *influenced* – to some extent, that is, *constituted* – by this (and other) notions of the feminine.’⁴³⁰ Thus, any responsible implementation of the notion of the ‘feminine’ or the ‘maternal’ must consider not only its theoretical functioning within a given philosophy and the empirical content from which it draws its meaning, but also the political stakes involved in its employment. Whilst the situation of parenthood is perhaps the only case in which Levinas’s controversial claim that ethics means being responsible even for the faults of the other⁴³¹ resonates somewhat phenomenologically, then, it is telling that it is the maternal, and not the parental, that is Levinas’s example. Traditionally, it has been the mother, not the father, who was expected

Ethics and Politics of Reproduction,’ *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 48, no. 1 (September 2017): 44-62; Jennifer Rosato, ‘Woman as Vulnerable Self: The Trope of Maternity in Levinas’s *Otherwise than Being*,’ *Hypatia* 27, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 348-365.

⁴²⁸ Sandford, *Metaphysics of Love*, 58-9.

⁴²⁹ For a feminist critique of the model of the maternal body for ethics, see Donna Brody, ‘Levinas’s Maternal Method from “Time and the Other” Through *Otherwise than Being*: No Woman’s Land?’ in *Feminist Interpretations of Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Tina Chanter (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001).

⁴³⁰ Sandford, *Metaphysics of Love*, 49.

⁴³¹ Levinas writes: ‘Maternity, which is bearing par excellence, bears even responsibility for the persecuting by the persecutor.’ OTB, 75.

to sacrifice herself for others, this being most obviously the case insofar as it is women, not men, who, willingly or unwillingly, can bear children and whose social role has historically been reduced to their reproductive capacities.

This leads us to the second and perhaps more serious problem with the modelling of ethics upon the maternal body. When the maternal body is thought as emblematic of the ethical relation, it becomes impossible to think abortion in ethical terms. The woman who for whatever reason chooses to terminate a pregnancy and who hence 'rejects' the call from the other within her is excluded from the realm of ethical subjectivity as such, indeed, is cast as an unethical subject. Thus, when Critchley writes that '[i]f ethics does not include some dimension of conscious agency, then it risks becoming sheer coercion,'⁴³² this resounds doubly in the case of maternity, given that women have historically been coerced into bearing children. As a result, the feminist reader committed to Levinas's ethics is forced either to reject the maternal body as a model for ethics, or to find a way to think abortion and ethics together.

The best example of the latter is Lisa Guenther's book *The Gift of the Other* in which she develops a maternal ethics which is not exclusively bound up with empirical women. Emphasising Levinas's notion that the ethical relation is 'like a maternal body,'⁴³³ Guenther writes: 'The word "like" is important here. It holds open a gap or delay between responsibility and maternity. To bear the Other ethically is not *the same* as literally bearing a child in pregnancy. To ignore the word "like" in this phrase would be to collapse the distance between birth and ethics, perhaps insisting on a maternal "duty" to procreate.'⁴³⁴ Guenther is careful to emphasise the importance of recognising that '[w]hile anyone, male or female, may become "like" a maternal body, only a woman can become pregnant, and only a woman can be faced with her own unwanted pregnancy,'⁴³⁵ and hence the importance of recognising the real historical situation which has traditionally coerced women into bearing children. To do this, Guenther argues, maternal ethics needs a feminist politics which she develops from Levinas's notion of the third:

⁴³² Critchley, *The Problem with Levinas*, 88.

⁴³³ Translation modified. The French reads 'Psychisme comme un corps maternel.' OTB, 67/85.

⁴³⁴ Guenther, *The Gift of the Other*, 105-6.

⁴³⁵ *Ibid.*, 141.

‘Given the exposure of the responsible self to violence and persecution – given the possibility of abusing the generosity of Others or being abused oneself – we need a politics of justice that protects both mothers and children from a reification of the ethical asymmetry between self and Other into a social asymmetry between those whose role it is to bear Others and those who enjoy the luxury of being borne, perhaps without even realising it.’⁴³⁶

Yet whilst Guenther makes a convincing case for the need for a feminist politics to keep maternal ethics ‘in check,’ I am not convinced that she manages to sufficiently respond to the problem of modelling a Levinasian conception of ethics upon the maternal body in the first place. Responding to the objection that modelling ethics upon the maternal body reinforces the normative idea of the selfless mother, Guenther argues that this notion of self-sacrifice amounts to a misunderstanding of what Levinas means by ‘ethics.’ Levinas’s notion of ethical subjectivity, she argues, is not reducible to a pure self-sacrifice and hence does not simply reflect the normative notion of the selfless mother: ‘The traditional image of the mother as pure selflessness, pure sacrifice to the Other, amounts not to ethics but to the empty ideal of a nonself.’⁴³⁷ A few pages on, she elaborates: ‘The persecution of the hostage is not the same as self-sacrifice; in bearing the fault of the Other and forgiving *for* him, I become uniquely myself. My own flesh acquires a new, ethical significance in being given to the Other whom it bears.’⁴³⁸

It is true, of course, that ethics, in Levinas’s sense, does not annihilate subjectivity but rather describes an a priori disruption of sovereignty which gives rise to a new kind of ‘ethical’ subjectivity. Yet employing the maternal body as the model par excellence for this kind of subjectivity remains problematic insofar as it perpetuates normative ideas about motherhood as the supreme responsibility for others before oneself, rather than imagining different ways of thinking about motherhood that are not stuck within patriarchal ideals. Guenther seeks to resist the dichotomy between, on the one hand, a conservative antifeminist myth that casts women as naturally self-sacrificing mothers, and, on the other, a liberal feminist myth that argues that insofar as women have historically been reduced to their biological function of reproduction, they must be liberated from motherhood as such.⁴³⁹ Guenther explains that whilst the first myth reduces women to their biological

⁴³⁶ Ibid., 138.

⁴³⁷ Ibid., 111-2.

⁴³⁸ Ibid., 126-7.

⁴³⁹ Ibid., 9.

function of reproduction, the second myth contests the first myth but in over-privileging the autonomous and sovereign subject, it advances a reading according to which 'any gift is a loss, a theft, a diminishment of what's properly one's own.'⁴⁴⁰ We might add that this second myth inadvertently affirms the patriarchal notion of a sovereign subject rather than questioning sovereignty as such.

Yet whilst Guenther thus seeks to avoid the double myth of pure submission and pure sovereignty, the hyperbolic ethical language which she adopts from Levinas – of hostage, persecution, expiation – compromises the attempt to find this middle way.⁴⁴¹ It appears, then, that any reading, feminist or not, encounters a problem when it comes to understanding substitution as a pre-reflective, pre-conscious – that is, as I will argue in more detail in the next section, effectively a *bodily* process – which is emblematic of 'ethics.' Consequently, it seems that we must choose between, on the one hand, a rather disembodied reading that presupposes substitution (whatever it might mean) as the condition of possible for ethics, or, on the other, an ontological reading which does not necessarily think substitution and sensibility in 'ethical' terms. What is left if we strip Levinas's analyses of all claims about ethics? What is left, as I will argue in the following sections, is a thinking on time as bound up with the pre-reflective dimension of bodily life which can help us bring to light the generative dimension of transcendence as sensibility.

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid., 9.

⁴⁴¹ This is visible also in Guenther's argument – in relation to *Totality and Infinity* – that whilst Levinas explicitly devalues the feminine in her exclusion from the ethical relation of paternal fecundity, the feminine is effectively both the precondition for and the prime example of the ethical relation insofar as, Guenther writes, 'the ethical response involves a *feminization* of the self.' Ibid., 73. Explaining what she means by a 'feminisation' of the self, she writes: 'to respond to the Other is, in a certain sense, to be *feminized* by the face-to-face encounter, to the point where I welcome the stranger without reserve: not simply as a guest, but rather as a master who turns me into a guest in my own home.' Ibid., 72. The calling into question of my sovereignty by the meeting with the other in the ethical relation, Guenther argues, implicitly recalls my original dependency upon a feminine other who gave birth to me: 'the stranger who commands me to give welcome also commands me – if only silently – to remember the gift of the feminine Other: not by returning it to the source, but by passing it on to another.' Ibid. 58. Thus, to become feminised, in Guenther's sense, does not amount to a demand to reproduce but rather to become *like* the feminine other who welcomed me into the world. Given that bodies of all sexes and genders, insofar as they were born from the body of another, are in effect always already 'feminised,' the feminisation of the self does not exclusively apply to empirical women. Whilst Guenther convincingly recalibrates the notion of the feminine such as it operates within Levinas's philosophy, what kind of ideological presumptions does her notion of the feminine itself implicitly retain or invoke? Whilst a full reading of Guenther's argument falls outside the scope of this chapter, I would only say here that the language of mastery – the notion that the feminine welcome allows the other 'to dwell in the home as if it were his own, as if he were king of the castle,' *ibid.*, 60 or that the feminine welcomes the other as 'a master who turns me into a guest in my own home,' *ibid.*, 72 – rather than challenging the notion of mastery as such in fact serves to reinforce the normative idea of the at once cunning and passive 'feminine' other who 'lets' the ('masculine') subject be masterful.

4.b. Before the first breath: an ontological reading of substitution

Up until *Totality and Infinity*, the assimilative sensibility of enjoyment and the non-assimilative sensibility of the *there is* and the face, as we saw in chapter three, are thought as two distinct modes of sensibility. In *Otherwise than Being*, however, assimilative and non-assimilative sensibility collide at various levels in Levinas's evocations of the pregnant body. Whilst sensibility in *Totality and Infinity* is analysed most explicitly in terms of enjoyment, in *Otherwise than Being*, it is increasingly associated with suffering, persecution, having the other under one's skin. The gestation of life cannot ultimately be 'chosen,' and thus Levinas characterises sensibility in terms of a passivity or a 'non-initiative [that] is older than any present.'⁴⁴² Pregnancy does not immediately lend itself to knowledge or perception of it and hence 'sensibility is being affected by a non-phenomenon, a being put in question by the alterity of the other, before the intervention of a cause, before the appearing of the other.'⁴⁴³ Levinas describes this situation in terms of persecution: 'Is not the restlessness of someone persecuted but a modification of maternity, the groaning of the wounded entrails by those it will bear or has borne?'⁴⁴⁴ Levinas's hyperbolic evocation of pregnancy in terms of persecution and suffering serve to emphasise, in an exaggerated way, the non-assimilative sensibility that partly characterises the modality of coexistence of mother and foetus. Despite the absolute dependence of the foetus upon the mother for its survival and development, they yet remain irreducible to one another: 'To be in contact is neither to invest the other and annul his alterity, nor to suppress myself in the other.'⁴⁴⁵

The contact of mother and foetus is then not reducible to an assimilation of one by the other; rather, what at once separates and binds the two bodies is conceptualizable as the sensible materiality from which all living bodies are ultimately formed and which we analysed in chapter three in terms of the *there is* and the elemental.⁴⁴⁶ Whilst the analyses of enjoyment in *Totality and Infinity* describe the situation of an already born body that is immersed or 'steeped' in the elemental, the notion of substitution in *Otherwise than Being* evokes the capacity of the sensible materiality of a living body to generate and sustain new

⁴⁴² OTB, 75.

⁴⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid., 86.

⁴⁴⁶ See pp. 78-91 of this thesis. We will analyse this sensible materiality that binds everything together in relation to Merleau-Ponty's notion of flesh in chapter five.

life from within itself. For this new life to form, the pregnant body differentiates itself from itself to make room within itself for the other. With this comes necessarily a disruption *from within* of any coinciding of the body with itself. Levinas characterises this situation as an escape or a transcendence of identity from within: 'It is not a flight into the void, but a movement into fullness, the anguish of contraction and breakup.'⁴⁴⁷ Playing on the meanings of the word 'anguish' or *angoisse* whose etymology describes it not only as a state of distress but also as physical pain from constriction or narrowness, Levinas characterises this situation in terms of suffering and restlessness.⁴⁴⁸ If Levinas had previously understood physical suffering as the ultimate manifestation of the impossibility of escaping bodily materiality and identity,⁴⁴⁹ in *Otherwise than Being*, a certain conceptualisation of physical suffering becomes emblematic of the way in which the body has always already escaped identity through having the other within itself. Yet this does not mean that transcendence as an escape from identity is possible only through the specific case of pregnancy; this would place an undue burden on women to bear children. Rather, the case of pregnancy is highlighted insofar as it illustrates par excellence the fact that all living (human) bodies were born from the body of another, and in this sense, as we shall see in the final section, all living bodies retain a trace of the other within themselves which in advance and continuously precludes any claims to self-coincidence and identity.

Yet the pregnant body is not only characterised in terms of pain and suffering, but also in terms of enjoyment: 'The signification proper to the sensible has to be described in terms of enjoyment and wounding, which are, we will see, the terms of proximity.'⁴⁵⁰ Sensibility is now conceived in terms of enjoyment *and* wounding insofar as the assimilative sensibility of enjoyment is necessary for the survival and nourishment of both the pregnant body and the foetus. The mother, Levinas writes, must enjoy her bread in order to give it to the foetus who in turn assimilates it whilst remaining other, or non-assimilative, to the maternal body itself: 'It is the passivity of being-for-another, which is possible only in the form of giving the very bread I eat. But for this one has to first enjoy one's bread, not in order to have the

⁴⁴⁷ OTB, 108.

⁴⁴⁸ Anguish here also works as a distinctly physical counter term to Heideggerian anxiety. See Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 182-192; 327-329.

⁴⁴⁹ See TO, 69-70. See also pp. 83-5 of this thesis for an analysis of Levinas's early descriptions of nausea and shame.

⁴⁵⁰ OTB, 62-3.

merit of giving it, but in order to give it with one's heart, to give oneself in giving it.⁴⁵¹ This is a sensible interaction: it is not that the mother consciously 'chooses' to give the bread that she eats to the foetus; rather, her body does this below the level of reflection or perception.

Whilst Levinas conceptualises the interaction of what I term the assimilative and non-assimilative sensibility between the mother and the foetus in terms of eating, the modality of sensibility through which this happens is even more strongly illuminated through the case of breathing. Completely automatically and without any thought at all, the mother, insofar as she is a living body, breathes and thereby provides oxygen to the foetus who assimilates it through the placenta.⁴⁵² Indeed, this interaction of assimilative and non-assimilative sensibility that describes the relationship of mother and foetus as one of simultaneous binding and separation is, although Levinas never intended this, descriptive precisely of the mediating functioning of the placenta. As the French biologist H el ene Rouch explains in an interview with Luce Irigaray, the placenta at once binds and separates the mother and the foetus: 'On the one hand, it is the mediating space between mother and foetus, which means that there's never a fusion of maternal and embryonic tissues. On the other hand, it constitutes a system regulating exchanges between the two organisms.'⁴⁵³ Consequently, Rouch continues, the placenta 'establishes a relationship between mother and foetus, enabling the latter to grow without exhausting the mother in the process, and yet not simply being a means for obtaining nutritious substances.'⁴⁵⁴

It is in this ontological rather than ethical register that I interpret Levinas's conceptualisation of this situation of the other in the same of which the pregnant body is emblematic as a substitution: 'The non-interchangeable par excellence, the I, the unique one, substitutes itself for others.'⁴⁵⁵ In our terms, the interaction of the pregnant body and the foetus is

⁴⁵¹ Ibid., 72.

⁴⁵² Michael Marder explains, in a still 'ethical' register: 'Before he takes his first autonomous breath, the child has already received the gift of the maternal expiration. Unlike the pain and suffering of labour, feeding, and the sleepless nights that accompany parenthood and motherhood, the mother's generosity of offering her breath to the other is a true gift neither perceived, nor recognised as such.' Michael Marder, 'Breathing "to" the Other: Levinas and Ethical Breathlessness,' *Levinas Studies* 4 (2009): 91-100, 94-5.

⁴⁵³ H el ene Rouch in interview with Luce Irigaray, 'On the Maternal Order,' in Luce Irigaray, *Je, Tu, Nous: Toward a Culture of Difference*, trans. Alison Martin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 39.

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁵ OTB, 117.

literally a substitution through which the pregnant body, prior to any level of conscious reflection, responds to the needs of the child. Whilst substitution, for Levinas, has a distinctly ethical sense, then, the notion of substitution is perhaps an even more apposite conceptualisation of the ontological and material process through which the pregnant body literally and completely automatically substitutes itself, its own sustenance, oxygen, and nutrients, for the foetus whose very life in turn depends upon this substitution. Stripped of all 'ethical' significance, then, the notion of substitution evokes the concrete process through which one living body sustains another. This means that any living body does not have its origin in itself, as if it were author of its own existence, but rather in another's substitution for it. The notion of substitution does not only refer to the particular case of pregnancy and gestation, then, but is a way of thinking about the ontological status of all living bodies: insofar as they were all born from the body of another, their origin consists in the substitution from another. If Levinas's analyses of diachrony and sensibility help us to think concretely the time before birth – in a sense the alterity of time itself – how does this trace of the diachronic time of birth continue to operate within the bodily existence of all living (human) bodies?

4.c. Having been born: the oneself

With the notion of the oneself, Levinas describes the modality in which a substituted subject exists, and thus the oneself, as I will argue, does not only refer to the pregnant body but more generally describes the bodily existence of all bodies insofar as their existence depends upon an immemorial substitution from another body. The oneself, Levinas writes, is 'an attachment that has already been made, as something irreversibly past, prior to all memory and all recall. It was made in an irrecuperable time which the present, represented in recall, does not equal, in a time of birth or creation, of which nature or creation {*créature*} retains a trace, unconvertible into a memory.'⁴⁵⁶ Here, the translation of the French *créature* into creation rather than creature deflects from the sense in which the created one, the child, retains a trace of its own creation from the maternal body, a trace of that which can never be recollected or remembered. The notion of the oneself, then, apart from all ethical significations, gives us a notion of the body as an original intercorporeality

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid., 104-5/132-3.

through the fact of having been born. Indeed, Levinas writes: 'The sensible – maternity, vulnerability, apprehension – binds the node of incarnation into a plot larger than the apperception of the self. In this plot I am bound to others before being tied to my body.'⁴⁵⁷ How, then, does this trace of birth continue to operate within the bodily sensibility of the subject throughout its life? How does the notion of the oneself differ from the earlier analyses of bodily materiality from the 1930s and 40s?

Emphasising the irreducibility of the oneself to the perception or reflection of oneself, Levinas writes:

'The reflection on oneself proper to consciousness, the ego perceiving the self, is not like the antecedent recurrence of the oneself {soi-même}, the oneself {l'un} without any duality of oneself, from the first backed up against itself, up against the wall, or twisted over itself in its skin, too tight in its skin, in itself already outside of itself {en soi déjà hors de soi}.'⁴⁵⁸

The oneself then describes a binding of the body to itself which is yet not a peaceful contentment; rather, this binding is at the same time a separation of the body from itself which makes bodily existence essentially uncomfortable. It is described hyperbolically as a writhing, a discomfort, a being ill at ease in one's own skin. Whilst Levinas does not explicitly conceptualise the oneself in relation to the touching-touched, I will argue that he, with the notion of the oneself, effectively conceptualises the gap which at once binds and separates the touching and the touched and which has always already disrupted any coinciding of the body with itself.

The paradoxical function of this gap as at once binding and separating the body to/from itself is evident in the description of the oneself as the

'presynthetic, pre-logical and in a certain sense atomic, that is, in-dividual, unity of the self, which prevents it from splitting, separating itself from itself so as to contemplate or express itself, and thus show itself, if only under a comic mask, to name itself otherwise than by a pro-noun. This prevention is the positivity of the one. It is in a certain sense atomic, for it is without any rest in itself, "more and more one," to the point of breakup, fission, openness.'⁴⁵⁹

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid., 76.

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid., 104/132.

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid., 107.

The oneself, then, is at once ‘atomic,’ an indivisible unity, which prevents it from ‘splitting,’ that is, from creating a lag within itself through which it would separate itself from itself so as to grasp itself as an object. Yet the paradox consists in the notion that this binding of the body to itself does not amount to a flat self-presence or an auto-affection insofar as the oneself opens itself or breaks open from within. In this sense, the notion of the oneself describes the sensibility that operates in/as the gap that at once binds and separates the body to/from itself. The oneself is neither a flat self-presence which would ‘equalise difference,’ nor does it describe a notion of the body in terms of a subject-object dialectic: ‘The oneself does not rest in peace under its identity, and yet its restlessness is not a dialectical scission, nor a process equalising difference.’⁴⁶⁰ The notion of the oneself thus avoids the double danger analysed in chapter one: it avoids, on the one hand, a conceptualisation of the body as a pure self-presence as analysed in relation to Derrida’s critique of Husserl’s notion of the touching-touched⁴⁶¹; and, on the other hand, it avoids a conceptualisation of the body that separates itself from itself to such an extent that the only self-relation possible is a self-objectification, as analysed in relation to Merleau-Ponty’s reading of the touching-touched.⁴⁶²

The oneself, then, which is ‘without any duality’ yet constantly moves and pants: ‘The restlessness of respiration, the exile in oneself, the in itself without rest (...) is a panting, a trembling of substantiality, a hither side of the here.’⁴⁶³ Whilst Levinas does not explicitly characterise the oneself as such, I will argue that this notion expresses something like the movement or the vibration of the life of (human) living bodies which operates in/as the gap between the body as touching subject and the body as touched object. Indeed, Levinas writes:

‘The expression “in one’s skin” is not a metaphor for the in-itself; it refers to a recurrence in the dead time or the *meanwhile* which separates inspiration and expiration, the diastole and systole of the heart beating dully against the walls of one’s skin. The body is not only an image or figure here; it is the distinctive in-oneseif {/’*en-soi-même*} of the contraction of ipseity and its breakup.’⁴⁶⁴

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁶¹ See pp. 29-31 of this thesis.

⁴⁶² See pp. 31-2 of this thesis.

⁴⁶³ OTB, 180.

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid., 109/138-9.

The oneself is not a metaphor, rather it is, as I argue along with Critchley, best understood as a literal conceptualisation of bodily existence: ““Substitution,” it seems to me, makes a very strong claim for a pre-conscious, non-conscious, un-conscious conception of identity, an identity that repeats, that throbs, that insists, that contracts. It’s an identity that’s not just *like* a heart beating, it *is* a heart beating, it *is* a lung breathing, it *is* my blood flowing.’⁴⁶⁵ Indeed, the oneself, Levinas writes, is a ‘materiality more material than all matter,’⁴⁶⁶ meaning that the oneself should not be understood as a positivist conceptualisation of the biological body ‘which, perfectly espoused by its form, is what it is; [the oneself] is in itself like one is in one’s skin, that is, already tight, ill at ease in one’s own skin.’⁴⁶⁷ The notion of the oneself, then, is not simply a reformulation of the abstract concept of the subject but rather forms a concrete conceptualisation of the body as a living, throbbing, breathing body. But if this is the case, does not the notion of the oneself merely rehearse the early conceptualisation of the impossibility to transcend one’s identity through the impossibility of escaping one’s own body? Does not the notion of the oneself in fact reinforce identity rather than accomplish its escape? This is Critchley’s argument: substitution does not accomplish transcendence as the need for escape insofar as, he writes, ‘substitution is not a challenging of the concept of identity but a deepening of it. This is the force of Levinas’s claim about the subject in-itself as “in itself one.”’⁴⁶⁸ Critchley thus argues that the deepening of identity necessarily results in a failure of the need for escape. Contra Critchley, Bernasconi argues that the duality of the oneself in *Otherwise than Being* ‘allows the book to be seen as a direct continuation of *Existence and Existents*.’⁴⁶⁹ Whilst in the early work, there is no solution to the need to escape identity, the notion of substitution, Bernasconi argues, accomplishes this escape. Insofar as the other is always already within me and calls me to respond, ‘the encounter with the other, which I experience as a command, is in truth a liberation from my apparent enchainment to myself.’⁴⁷⁰ Whilst Bernasconi identifies ethical responsibility as central to the liberation of the enchainment of the self to itself, I will

⁴⁶⁵ Critchley, *The Problem with Levinas*, 86.

⁴⁶⁶ OTB, 108.

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁸ Critchley, *The Problem with Levinas*, 86.

⁴⁶⁹ Bernasconi, ‘Subjectivity Must Be Defended: Substitution, Entanglement, and the Prehistory of the Me in Levinas,’ 263.

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid.

argue for an ontological interpretation according to which the oneself, insofar as it is understood as an original intercorporeality, has always already escaped any flat self-identity.

Given the fact that the oneself was born from the body of another, that '[t]he oneself cannot form itself; it is already formed with absolute passivity,'⁴⁷¹ any claim to a flat identity or self-coincidence is precluded in advance. The oneself then retains the structure of the other in the same: 'This describes the suffering and vulnerability of the sensible as *the other in me*. The other is in me and in the midst of my very identification.'⁴⁷² It is this immanent alterity, this trace of the diachronic time of birth, that disrupts any claims to self-coincidence: 'The oneself is prior to self-coinciding.'⁴⁷³ Thus, although the oneself remains a conceptualisation of identity, this identity is one whose solitude is broken in advance, that is, it is an original intercorporeality. In this sense, although the notion of the oneself reformulates rather than breaks with the concept of identity as such, the oneself is an escape from the identity identified by Levinas in the early work. In the early work, the body was thought as chained to itself prior to any relation with the other, that is, it was a solipsist conceptualisation of the body. Whilst in the early work, bodily materiality was thus understood as the locus of the need for and the obstacle to any escape from identity, in *Otherwise than Being*, the body itself harbours the very possibility for escape. This is in a double sense: insofar as the body is an original intercorporeality, it has always already escaped any notion of identity as a pure auto-affection; and this makes possible the continuous breaking open of identity itself, the bodily openness to an outside: 'Then the recurrence to oneself cannot stop at oneself, but goes to the hither side of oneself; *in* the recurrence to oneself there is a going to the hither side of oneself.'⁴⁷⁴

This trace of alterity that is retained within the identity of the oneself is detectable in Levinas's references to inspiration and respiration: 'What we are here calling oneself, or the other in the same, where inspiration arouses respiration, the very pneuma of the psyche, precedes this empirical order, which is a part of being, of the universe, of the State, and is

⁴⁷¹ OTB, 104.

⁴⁷² Ibid., 124-5.

⁴⁷³ Ibid., 195.

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid., 113-4.

already conditioned in a system.⁴⁷⁵ What does it mean to say that inspiration arouses respiration? It precisely means that my capacity to breathe is given to me – inspired – by a maternal other who once breathed for me. It is this immemorial inspiration that has always already opened my body up from within and which makes possible at once the indivisibility of my body and its continuous opening up. Indeed, Levinas conceptualises this simultaneous indivisibility and openness of the oneself in terms of breathing: ‘It is as though the atomic unity of the subject were exposed outside by breathing, by divesting its ultimate substance even to the mucous membrane of the lungs, continually splitting up.’⁴⁷⁶ Through breathing, the body opens itself from within and in a certain sense exposes its extreme vulnerability to the elements: ‘It is a fission of the nucleus opening the bottom of its punctual nuclearity, like to a lung at the core of oneself {comme jusqu’à un poumon au fond de soi}.’⁴⁷⁷ The fact of breathing exposes a ‘cellular irritability,’⁴⁷⁸ the extreme susceptibility of the body to its environment. As Sparrow writes, ‘the Levinasian body ultimately becomes a *susceptible* body, where susceptibility is understood as the radical passivity which arises from the diachrony of sensibility.’⁴⁷⁹ Whilst I argued, in chapter three, that what shows itself in the non-assimilative sensibility of the face is the vulnerability of the other’s life,⁴⁸⁰ with the notion of the oneself and breathing, the vulnerability of my own life is exposed below any level of conscious reflection or perception.

For Levinas, sensibility as enjoyment results in a kind of corporeal egoism as we saw in chapter three, a coiling over oneself, a maintaining oneself at home with oneself.⁴⁸¹ Now, sensibility is conceived as an extreme susceptibility even to the point of the membranes of the lungs. But why must sensibility be an extreme susceptibility, a discomfort, a writhing? Indeed, whilst Levinas’s descriptions of sensibility in these terms perhaps resonate phenomenologically for late pregnancy and childbirth, they do not describe the modality of bodily existence of all bodies at all times. As Sparrow argues, then, Levinas’s hyperbolic descriptions as he identifies sensibility increasingly with susceptibility, exaggerate the

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid., 115-6.

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid., 107.

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid., 49/63-4.

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid., 143.

⁴⁷⁹ Sparrow, *Plastic Bodies*, 157.

⁴⁸⁰ See pp. 91-7 of this thesis.

⁴⁸¹ See pp. 89-90 of this thesis.

vulnerability of the body over its capacity for enjoyment: '[I]f we are going to allow Levinas to say that the sensitivity of the skin – sensibility generally – is susceptibility, then this condition must be understood as ambivalent. Above all it should be maintained that my exposure to the other equally enables and disables, figures and disfigures my body. A priori this exposure is neither painful nor pleasurable.'⁴⁸² Is breathing not also included in the assimilable sensibility of enjoyment, the process through which the body maintains and nourishes itself? Whilst the mother breathes for the unborn foetus, the first breath after birth must be taken by the child herself. Is breathing then not, in fact, emblematic not only of the fundamental susceptibility of sensibility but also of the sensible body's relative autonomy and its capacity for enjoyment?

In *To Be Born*, Luce Irigaray writes: 'We were also the ones who gave birth to ourselves through our first breathing. In spite of the long dependence of the little human on others for its survival, it gave life to itself to come into the world, and it gave life to itself alone.'⁴⁸³

Whilst the first breath is not a conscious act, for Irigaray, it yet bears witness to the inherent life force of the child and at the same time forms the first step towards a relative autonomy that is yet not sovereignty or domination: '[The human being] can do nothing else, but such an exploit will prey on its entire existence as an incentive to and an anguish of venturing to attempt the impossible: to live by oneself. Coming into the world amounts to exposing oneself to dying for living.'⁴⁸⁴ Irigaray adds: 'Of course, this "by itself" does not exclude the intervention of other elements in its evolution.'⁴⁸⁵ Whilst Irigaray thus emphasises the ambiguity of breathing – at once emblematic of the autonomy of the sensible body and its exposure to injury and death – Levinas, in his critique of the sovereign subject, overprivileges the level of susceptibility involved in the fact of breathing necessary for life.

At the end of *Otherwise than Being*, he writes:

'That the breathing by which entities seem to affirm themselves triumphantly in their vital space would be a consummation, a coring out of my substantiality {une dénucléation de ma substantialité}, that in breathing I already open myself to my

⁴⁸² Sparrow, *Plastic Bodies*, 172.

⁴⁸³ Luce Irigaray, *To Be Born: Genesis of a New Human Being* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 1.

⁴⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

subjection to the whole of the invisible other (...) is to be sure surprising. It is this wonder that has been the object of the book proposed here.⁴⁸⁶

Taking its first autonomous breath, Marder similarly writes: 'The ostensibly autonomous respiring existent (...) forgets – or rather fails to remember – the preoriginary inspiration.'⁴⁸⁷ The problem, then, is not with breathing or enjoyment per se, but with the possibility that the relative autonomy of the breathing body presents itself *as if* it were an absolute sovereignty and hence forgets the original inspiration from the other which precisely makes possible any autonomous breathing.

Irigaray too emphasises, although in a very different way, the immemorial origin of the human being which can never be recuperated, as she writes: 'Unlike a tree, a human being (...) comes into the world by separating off from its first vital roots,'⁴⁸⁸ and thus, '[w]e are forever deprived of an origin of our own.'⁴⁸⁹ Yet rather than conceptualising this immemorial diachrony at the origin of the subject as the source of an extreme susceptibility, for Irigaray, this diachronic origin gives rise to the possibility for the human being to cultivate her breathing and thus to assume her existence without this turning into sovereignty or domination: 'If the little human succeeded in coming into the world by breathing by itself, a culture of its own breathing is also what can enable it to pass constantly from the vital to the spiritual stage of its existence.'⁴⁹⁰ With Irigaray, then, we see a different conceptualisation of breathing as at once recalling the original dependency upon the immemorial other who breathed for me and gave me life, and at the same time instigating the possibility for cultivating a bodily autonomy that is yet not a sovereignty. Whilst Levinas conceptualises breathing in terms of an extreme exposure and subjection to everything, Irigaray notes in breathing a potential for a rethinking of the autonomy of the living body beyond the extreme dichotomies of subjection and domination. Reading Levinas and Irigaray together, then, reveals a thinking according to which autonomous breathing does not necessarily result in egoism but rather functions as a silent reminder of the immemorial inspiration by the maternal body. It is in this sense that Levinas's description of the substituted subject as 'an openness of which respiration is a modality or a foretaste, or,

⁴⁸⁶ OTB, 180-1/227-8.

⁴⁸⁷ Marder, 'Breathing "to" the Other: Levinas and Ethical Breathlessness,' 91-2.

⁴⁸⁸ Irigaray, *To Be Born*, 10.

⁴⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, vi.

⁴⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

more exactly of which it retains the aftertaste'⁴⁹¹ makes sense. My autonomous respiration retains the aftertaste or the trace of the maternal body's substitution for me, her breathing and inspiring for me.

It is in this ontological rather than ethical register that I interpret Levinas's characterisation of the body as a psyche: 'The animation, the very pneuma of the psyche, alterity in identity, is the identity of a body exposed to the other, becoming "for the other," the possibility of giving.'⁴⁹² Whilst it is possible to trace Levinas's usage of the term 'psyche' to a biblical sense⁴⁹³ – not least given the discussion of bearing witness to the infinite in chapter five of *Otherwise than Being*⁴⁹⁴ – I wish to emphasise the ontological and material significance of the notion of the psyche, even if this is perhaps not what Levinas had in mind. This ontological reading of the psyche, then, also rids itself of any 'ethical' connotations in Levinas's sense. Etymologically, psyche derives from the Greek *psukhē* meaning breath, life, or soul. Pneuma, as used today in the sense of pneumatic, is traceable back to the Greek verb *pnein*, to breathe, and the noun *pneuma*, wind. The pneuma of the psyche, then, is something like the breath of life itself, the movement of life which animates or 'ensouls' a living body. Indeed, Levinas writes: 'Freedom is animation itself, breath, the breathing of outside air {le souffle, la respiration d'un air du dehors}, where inwardness frees itself from itself, and is exposed to all the winds.'⁴⁹⁵ It is the activity of breathing which animates the living body as always already 'soulful,' and hence, as Silvia Benso writes, Levinas's notion of 'psychism, which the tradition has understood as nonmaterial, spiritual being, is described and defined through the body.'⁴⁹⁶

⁴⁹¹ OTB, 115.

⁴⁹² Ibid., 69.

⁴⁹³ For such a biblical reading, see Reitman, 'Pregnant Pause: The Maternal Placeholder in Levinas.' Marder also makes this biblical connection as he, citing the account in Genesis of how God breathed life into Adam's nostrils, writes that 'creation *imago Dei* announces the initial heteronomy of the human subject.' Marder, 'Breathing "to" the Other: Levinas and Ethical Breathlessness,' 93. Commenting on the passage recounting how God created Eve from Adam's rib, and how the two lived together in a fecund relation, Marder continues: 'Expiring for the other (human being), the subject accomplishes the authorship of what was inspired by the other (God). Strictly speaking, this subject is maternal.' Ibid., 94 In Marder's reading, the breath of God is the first forgotten breath, always already interrupting the sovereignty of the subject; the production of a child recalls this initial heteronomy and is the finite accomplishment of the divine gift of God.

⁴⁹⁴ OTB, 144-152.

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid., 180/226.

⁴⁹⁶ Silvia Benso, 'The Breathing of Air: Presocratic Echoes in Levinas,' in *Levinas and the Ancients*, ed. Brian Schroeder and Silvia Benso (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008), 20.

Whilst the references to breathing, inspiration, and psyche are to be found throughout *Otherwise than Being*, these perhaps reach their apex in the final short chapter entitled 'Otherwise Said' (*Autrement dit*), in which Levinas characterises the subject as 'a lung at the bottom of his substance.'⁴⁹⁷ In this final section of the book, Critchley writes: 'Levinas tried to articulate the argument in a different register and sketches the dimensions of what I call the *pulmonary subject*, where the breath of spirit or *pneuma* becomes the materiality of the lungs.'⁴⁹⁸ Rather than reducing the spiritual to the material which would be a kind of positivism, the animation through breathing effectively spiritualises the material, as Benso writes: 'In other words, nature is itself spiritual while remaining nature, and vice versa.'⁴⁹⁹ Sparrow, commenting on Benso's text, writes: 'This interpretation of living disengages the body from its reliance on the soul by localising the animation of subjectivity in the intercorporeal, rather than spiritual, realm. The problem of the interaction of body and soul drops off in favour of a phenomenology of corporeal life and its reliance on the elemental.'⁵⁰⁰ Yet the point is precisely not that the spiritual realm drops off but that the body, in its materiality, is itself 'spiritualised' through its interaction with the elemental. Animation, then, does not merely describe, as Jennifer Rosato suggests, 'the relation between body and psyche or soul,'⁵⁰¹ as if this were a relation of two pre-existing entities. Rather, the notion of the body *as a psyche* describes the body as itself spiritualised, animated, or soulful. Indeed, Levinas writes: 'The psyche is not grafted on to a substance, but alters the substantiality of this substance which supports all things. It alters it with an alteration in which identity is brought out.'⁵⁰² What is offered through this ontological reading of the notion of the psyche, then, is a conceptualisation of the body as always already soulful through the original inspiration from an immemorial other and through the basic rhythm of breathing which, whilst happening completely automatically, can nonetheless be encouraged to become deeper or shallower.

The role played by alterity is significant in that it describes at once the immemorial other who breathed for me and gave me life and the sensible materiality that, through the simple

⁴⁹⁷ OTB, 180.

⁴⁹⁸ Critchley, *The Problem with Levinas*, 82.

⁴⁹⁹ Benso, 'The Breathing of Air: Presocratic Echoes in Levinas,' 16.

⁵⁰⁰ Sparrow, *Plastic Bodies*, 158.

⁵⁰¹ Rosato, 'Woman as Vulnerable Self: The Trope of Maternity in Levinas's *Otherwise than Being*,' 353.

⁵⁰² OTB, 145-6.

fact of breathing, continues to flow through me throughout my life. There is, Levinas writes, 'a claim laid on the same by the other in the core {coeur} of myself, the extreme tension of the command exercised by the other in me over me {par autrui en moi sur moi}, (...). Through this alteration {altération} the soul animates the object; it is the very pneuma of the psyche.'⁵⁰³ It is the double trace of alterity *within* the sensible body – that of the original inspiration from a maternal other and that of the sensible elemental – that animates the living body as a living, moving body.⁵⁰⁴ In this sense, the two senses of transcendence as described in the introduction – as movement and as alterity⁵⁰⁵ – collide most explicitly in Levinas's discussions of substitution and the oneself. Two interrelated meanings of alterity are at play here; first, the noun which refers to the Latin *alter*, the other (of the two); and second, the verb *to alter*, to change something. In the context of the oneself as an original intercorporeality these two senses collide: it is the trace of alterity from the maternal body that is retained within my body which has always already altered my body so that there can be no 'unaltered,' absolute, or fixed foundation for a sovereign subject. Yet given that the maternal body itself retains the trace of an immemorial other who gave her life, and before her, another other, and so on, the trace of the other within me points towards an intergenerational intercorporeality. It is on the basis of the sensible body as an original intercorporeality that points towards an indefinite past, rather than in the disembodied notion of paternity, that the futurity of fecundity can be concretely understood.

Conclusion

In this second part of the thesis, we have reappropriated a notion of transcendence as sensibility in Levinas, and at the same time moved from an ethical or pious to an ontological reading of his work. In chapter three, I brought to light the ambiguous functioning of sensibility through the development of the notions of assimilative and non-assimilative sensibility. Through a reading of Levinas's analyses of the body and sensibility up until

⁵⁰³ Ibid., 141/180.

⁵⁰⁴ Bettina Bergo is thus right when she writes that 'it is the "placement" of the other, as transcendence-in-immanence (...) and as radical transcendence, that stands centre-stage in the works from 1974 through 1984.' Bettina Bergo, 'Ontology, Transcendence, and Immanence in Emmanuel Levinas's Philosophy,' *Research in Phenomenology* 35, no. 1 (January 2005): 147-171, 165.

⁵⁰⁵ See pp. 5-6 of this thesis for a definition of the two senses of transcendence.

Totality and Infinity, assimilative sensibility was argued to describe the body's capacity for enjoyment and nourishment, whilst non-assimilative sensibility was argued to describe the body's being overwhelmed by the *there is*, on the one hand, and the sensing of the vulnerability of life – what Levinas calls the 'face' – on the other. Turning to *Otherwise than Being*, in this chapter, we have moved from a static and genetic towards a generative dimension of transcendence as sensibility. From a feminist critical perspective, I argued that the notions of diachrony, sensibility, substitution, and the oneself, when thought together, are productive for conceptualising the sensible body as an original intercorporeality. I did this concretely through the references to breathing and inspiration, as I argued that it is the immemorial inspiration by another body as well as the body's autonomous breathing that animates the body as a living, moving body. In dialogue with Irigaray, I criticised Levinas's reduction of sensibility to susceptibility in the later work, as I argued that breathing should be understood as at once a modality of enjoyment and as exposing the fundamental vulnerability of life. Whilst our reading was ontological rather than ethical, then, the notion of the body as an original intercorporeality is not divorced from a certain ethical significance. Given that the notion of the oneself describes the interconnectivity of living (human) bodies across generations, it itself opens up for an ethical response to past and future generations.

Despite Levinas's insistence upon an infinite and absolute transcendence, then, this ontological reading of his work argued that he effectively radicalises the Husserlian notion of a transcendence-in-immanence. This argument was ultimately carried out in our reading of the oneself as an original intercorporeality through the fact of having been born. The body as the oneself, I argued, retains within itself – as an immanent alterity, a transcendence-in-immanence – the trace of an indefinite number of immemorial others who breathe through it. It is this trace of the immemorial other within the sensible body which in advance precludes any claim to sovereignty and at the same time forms a materialisation of the alterity of time within the sensible body itself. Yet whilst this ontological reading of Levinas's later work begun to excavate the generative dimension of transcendence as sensibility, it did so in abstraction from any historical specificity. Further developing this notion of the body as an original intercorporeality, then, the final part of the

thesis turns to Merleau-Ponty in order to investigate the historical and political structuring of the sensory life of the body in relation to the erotic.

Part Three

Merleau-Ponty and Transcendence: Eroticism

Chapter 5

Binding Bodies and Worlds with Merleau-Ponty

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty transposes the existentialist notion of transcendence as the taking up of existence to the level of the body, as he writes: ‘My body is this meaningful core that behaves as a general function and that nevertheless exists and that is susceptible to illness. In the body we learn to recognise this knotting together of essence and existence.’⁵⁰⁶ The living body is neither a passive object, nor is it an absolute power; rather, given that, as Merleau-Ponty writes, ‘[t]he body is our general means of having a world,’⁵⁰⁷ the body continuously takes up and transforms the givens of its situation into its own meaningful core, its own essence: ““Transcendence” is the name we shall give to this movement by which existence takes up for itself and transforms a *de facto* situation.’⁵⁰⁸ Yet insofar as the living body is also an object in the world, the way in which it takes up existence is itself structured by its material, social, and historical situation. Thus, rather than designating the projective movement from a subject that sets out to grasp an object (as in Husserl), or the movement of an alterity coming from the outside to question the subject (as in Levinas), transcendence for Merleau-Ponty describes the movement of co-constitution between a body and a world where neither term has priority over the other. With his thesis that perception is primary, Merleau-Ponty conceives this movement of transcendence in terms of perception. On his account, the perceiving body and the perceived world are necessarily implicated in one another, yet this does not mean that the perceived world is laid out transparently to the perceiving body:

‘I thus cannot conceive a perceptible place in which I am not myself present. But the very places in which I find myself are never completely given to me; the things which

⁵⁰⁶ PhP, 148.

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid., 147.

⁵⁰⁸ Ibid., 173.

I see are things for me only under the condition that they always recede beyond their immediately given aspects. Thus there is a paradox of immanence and transcendence in perception. Immanence, because the perceived object would not be able to be foreign to the one who perceives; transcendence, because it always involves a beyond of what is actually given.⁵⁰⁹

Whilst the perceiving body never has an absolute hold upon the perceived world which always contains more perspectives than can be perceived at a given moment, the world itself should not be understood as a transcendent object 'but as the universal style of all possible perceptions.'⁵¹⁰ With his conception of the mutual implication of the perceiving body and the perceived world, Merleau-Ponty thus famously breaks with i) the empiricist notion of the world as an object standing over against a perceiving subject,⁵¹¹ and ii) the intellectualist notion of the perceived world as the immanent construction of a consciousness.⁵¹² Yet despite this double departure from classical idealism and empiricism, Merleau-Ponty's primacy of perception thesis risks reverting into another kind of idealism: if, as he writes, 'the perceived object would not be able to be foreign to the one who perceives,'⁵¹³ the implication is that the perceiving body only takes up and perceives the world according to its own perceptual activity, thus resulting in a corporeal solipsism.⁵¹⁴ On this account, the world could offer nothing that would be foreign to the perceiving body which would then be invariably present to the world.

Perhaps sensing this danger, Merleau-Ponty ascribes, throughout the *Phenomenology*, an anonymity and a 'thickness' to perception in his allusions to a pre-personal fund out of which perception is itself generated:

'If, as we have said, every perception has something anonymous about it, this is because it takes up an acquisition that it does not question. The *perceiving person* is not spread out before himself in the manner that a consciousness must be: he has

⁵⁰⁹ PriP, 92-3.

⁵¹⁰ Ibid., 93.

⁵¹¹ Merleau-Ponty writes that for empiricism, 'the perceiving subject stands before the world in the same way that the scientist stands before his experiments.' PhP, 25.

⁵¹² For intellectualism, Merleau-Ponty writes, 'there is no sensible knowledge and (...) one senses insofar as one judges.' Ibid., 36. For a good account of the double departure from idealism and empiricism instigated by Merleau-Ponty's conceptualisation of perception, see Martin Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988), 51-81.

⁵¹³ PriP, 93.

⁵¹⁴ For a critique of Merleau-Ponty's perceptual correlationism, see Sparrow, *Plastic Bodies*, 67-83.

an historical thickness, he takes up a perceptual tradition, and he is confronted with a present.⁵¹⁵

Inadvertently challenging his thesis that perception is primary, then, Merleau-Ponty's analyses show that perception itself relies upon an anonymous dimension that transcends any perceptual grasping. How should we conceive this anonymous dimension? Whilst his notion of an anonymous body has been critiqued by the feminist literature as naïvely referring to a general body stripped of all particularity and difference,⁵¹⁶ I will argue, in dialogue with Al-Saji⁵¹⁷ and Sparrow,⁵¹⁸ that the anonymity of which Merleau-Ponty speaks should be understood to refer to the sensible dimension through which the body is fundamentally open – that is, sensitive – to the world, other bodies, and the socio-historical givens of its situation. Thus, rather than describing the body 'in general,' the notion of anonymity, when thought at the level of the sensory life of the body as analysed in the chapter on 'Sensing' in the *Phenomenology*, precisely allows us to understand how the ways in which different bodies come to move and feel is formed through their sensory interactions with a historically specific world. At the same time, this notion of sensibility prevents Merleau-Ponty's thinking on perception from reverting into idealism insofar as it shows that perception does not give rise to itself but is rather generated out of the sensory life of the body. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty writes: 'The perceived object and the perceiving subject owe their thickness to sensing.'⁵¹⁹

In this chapter and the next, then, I will argue that Merleau-Ponty's notion of transcendence as the bodily taking up of existence operates most basically at the level of sensibility rather than perception. Whilst Merleau-Ponty never explicitly distinguishes between sensibility and perception, and indeed often conflates the two,⁵²⁰ I argue that it is precisely this distinction we need to make if we are to understand how the way in which different bodies

⁵¹⁵ PhP, 247-8. See also PhP, 223; 224.

⁵¹⁶ Shannon Sullivan, 'Domination and Dialogue in Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*,' *Hypatia* 12, no. 1 (1997): 1-19.

⁵¹⁷ Alia Al-Saji, "'A Past Which Has Never Been Present': Bergsonian Dimensions in Merleau-Ponty's Theory of the Prepersonal,' *Research in Phenomenology* 38, no. 1 (January 2008): 41-71.

⁵¹⁸ Sparrow, *Plastic Bodies*, 67-143.

⁵¹⁹ PhP, 53. See Al-Saji, "'A Past Which Has Never Been Present,'" for a critical analysis of how sensory rhythms congeal into habitual ways of perceiving, and thus of the plasticity, rather than rigidity, of perception itself.

⁵²⁰ When asked by a person in the audience following his 'Primacy of Perception' talk, for example, whether the body is not 'much more essential for sensation than it is for perception,' Merleau-Ponty asks rhetorically: 'Can they be distinguished?' PriP, 118.

come to move, feel, and perceive is itself structured through their imperceptible interaction with the world and other bodies. It is thus through the reappropriation of transcendence as sensibility, rather than perception, that we will unlock the critical potential of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. Whilst this chapter excavates and reappropriates a notion of transcendence as sensibility which, as I will argue, is operative, if never explicitly developed in Merleau-Ponty's work, chapter six draws out a link between this notion of sensibility and Merleau-Ponty's analyses of the erotic in the chapter on 'The Body in its Sexed Being' in the *Phenomenology*. In dialogue with some of the feminist literature on sex and gender, the final chapter of the thesis thus moves more explicitly into a critical phenomenology as it investigates the specific structuring of this sensible eroticism within the context of patriarchy. The final two chapters of the thesis thus bring to light a certain dialectic between the two chapters of the *Phenomenology of Perception* which, I argue, reflects a certain dialectic between sensibility and eroticism in life itself.

In section 5.a., then, I analyse the chapter on 'Sensing' in the *Phenomenology* in order to develop a notion of sensibility as the imperceptible process through which the body is solicited by and responds to a particular world. In this way, the chapter on 'Sensing,' I argue, pushes the *Phenomenology* towards the later ontology of the flesh. In section 5.b, I turn to 'The Chiasm – The Intertwining' and argue, in dialogue with Derrida,⁵²¹ Beata Stawarska,⁵²² and Sparrow,⁵²³ that Merleau-Ponty's notion of reversibility is fraught with a symmetry that risks a thinking that cannot adequately account for the alterity of different bodies. I argue that this warrants a distinction between the perceptual model of reversibility and the sensible rhythm of flesh. The notion of sensible flesh, when thought as distinct from perceptual reversibility, I argue, allows us to formulate another notion of intercorporeality which operates not according to a subject-object dialectic but rather according to a sensible rhythm of binding and separation. In section 5.c, I interpret Merleau-Ponty's texts on child development through this conception of a sensible intercorporeality. I argue that Merleau-Ponty's writings on child development and the body schema allow us to understand the binding/separation of sensible intercorporeality as a matter of scale: whilst the binding to

⁵²¹ Derrida, *On Touching*, 183-215.

⁵²² Beata Stawarska, 'From the Body Proper to Flesh: Merleau-Ponty on Intersubjectivity,' in *Feminist Interpretations of Maurice Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Dorotea Olkowski and Gail Weiss (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006).

⁵²³ Sparrow, *Plastic Bodies*, 132-142.

other bodies is strongest at the earliest stage in life, the moment of binding is never undone but can be reawakened in later stages of life such as in friendship and love.

5.a. The sensible rhythm of body/world: sensibility in the *Phenomenology*

Whilst references to the pre-personal appear throughout the *Phenomenology of Perception*, it is in the chapter on 'Sensing' (Le sentir), as I will argue, that Merleau-Ponty provides the most sustained analysis of the modality of the pre-personal dimension of bodily life.

Wondering why the perceived world is not laid out transparently to the perceiving subject, he answers that this is because the perceiving subject is not transparent to itself but is inhabited by a certain anonymity, such that 'I can never say "I" absolutely and (...) every act of reflection, every voluntary taking up of a position is established against the background and upon the proposition of a pre-personal life of consciousness.'⁵²⁴ I will argue, although Merleau-Ponty never explicitly makes this connection, that the notion of the pre-personal should be understood to refer to the sensory life of the body which operates prior to and as condition for perception. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty describes sensibility as the sensitivity of the body to its world prior to any personal act or choice on the part of the subject: 'I see blue because I am *sensitive* {*sensible*} to colours; whereas personal acts create a situation: I am a mathematician because I decided to be one.'⁵²⁵ Whilst perception, as Sparrow explains, 'is constantly striving to pull objects out of their ambiguous presence and into workable relief from their background,'⁵²⁶ the sensory life of the body, as we shall see, operates prior to the subject-object distinction. In this sense, the notion of sensibility does not describe the experience *of* something but rather, as Merleau-Ponty writes, 'a non-thetic, pre-objective, and preconscious experience.'⁵²⁷ Merleau-Ponty describes this level of bodily experience in terms of *le sentir*, *la sensorialité*, *sensibilité*, and *la sensation*. To avoid the misconception that sensibility entails an objectifying experience *of* something, I will use the terms sensing, sensory life, and sensibility.

⁵²⁴ PhP, 216.

⁵²⁵ Ibid., 223/249.

⁵²⁶ Sparrow, *Plastic Bodies*, 112.

⁵²⁷ PhP, 252.

The pre-personal, then, refers to the level at which the body is fundamentally open and sensitive to the world insofar as the body is *of* the world: 'In short, my body is not merely one object among all others, not a complex of sensible qualities among others. It is an object sensitive {un objet *sensible*} to all others, which resonates for all sounds, vibrates for all colours.'⁵²⁸ Merleau-Ponty illustrates the ways in which body and world 'resonate' through a near essentialist account of how various colours motivate different kinds of movements and attitudes from the body: 'red signifies effort or violence,' 'green signifies rest and peace';⁵²⁹ and, he writes, 'red and yellow encourage abduction; blue and green adduction.'⁵³⁰ Whilst the specific signification of different colours varies individually, culturally, and historically, however, Merleau-Ponty's analysis nonetheless allows us to understand how different aesthetic or sensory environments solicit our bodies in different ways. Analysing the ways in which our body *lives* colours prior to their perceptual categorisation, he argues that this bodily experience is not reducible to the categorisation of sensible 'qualities' that we, in the natural attitude, take for granted as adequately descriptive of sensory life: 'blue and red are not this indescribable experience that I aim at when I coincide with them.'⁵³¹ The notion of sensibility, then, designates the fluidity of my body and that of the sensible as 'rhythms' before these are separated into the categories of subject and object.⁵³² Only when I subsequently reflect upon the sensing of colours do distinct sensible 'qualities' such as 'blue' or 'red' appear.

The notion of sensible qualities, then, is the 'result of a second-order or critical act of vision'⁵³³ which comes into operation when, 'rather than abandoning my whole gaze to the world, I turn toward this gaze itself and I wonder *what I am actually seeing*.'⁵³⁴ Merleau-Ponty, in the chapter on 'Sensing,' thus invites us to return to this sensible openness of the body to its world to understand the ways in which perceptual objectivities such as 'blue,' rather than being given ready-made, are, in fact, formed *out of* sensory life itself. Insofar as this sensory life operates prior to the distinction between perceiving subject and perceived

⁵²⁸ Ibid., 245/273.

⁵²⁹ Ibid., 219.

⁵³⁰ Ibid., 217.

⁵³¹ Ibid., 220.

⁵³² See Al-Saji, "'A Past Which Has Never Been Present,'" for an analysis of the notion of rhythm in Merleau-Ponty and Bergson.

⁵³³ PhP, 235.

⁵³⁴ Ibid.

object, sensibility by definition transcends any perceptual or reflective grasping. Once the sensory life of the body is grasped by perception, it is already in the past, and it is in this sense that the notion of sensibility describes ‘a past that has never been present’⁵³⁵ from the point of view of perception and reflection. It is precisely because perception does not give rise to itself but is generated out of a sensory life that by definition cannot be known by perception, that perception is ‘thick,’ that is, non-transparent to itself. The ways in which we come to perceive thus depends upon the sensory life of our bodies, and for this reason, it is necessary, as Sparrow argues, ‘to distinguish the body, as *what gives rise to perception*, from perception as *an embodied activity*.’⁵³⁶

How, then, should we describe this sensory life itself? Merleau-Ponty characterises the sensible relation between body and world in terms of rhythm: ‘I find in the sensible the proposition of a certain existential rhythm (...) and (...), taking up this proposition, and slipping into the form of existence that is thus suggested to me, I relate myself to an external being, whether it be to open myself up to it or to shut myself off from it.’⁵³⁷ Rather than designating an unreachable ‘external’ quality in the object (empiricism) or the subjective experience of a state ‘in me’ that may or may not correspond to such an ‘external’ quality (intellectualism), Merleau-Ponty argues that sensations have a ‘motor physiognomy,’⁵³⁸ that is, they solicit a certain bodily response. Effectively, he thus further develops Husserl’s notion, from *Ideas II*, of sensings (*Empfindnisse*) as distinct from sensations (*Empfindungen*).⁵³⁹ The sensation is the ‘objective’ sensible quality, such as the wavelengths that make up what we perceive as ‘blue,’ whilst the sensing designates the way in which our body lives the sensation. Whilst Husserl’s examples mainly concern tactile sensings such as the burning sensing on my skin upon touching a hot object, what Merleau-Ponty points to in the ‘Sensing’ chapter is rather the way in which the whole body, prior to perception and reflection, responds to the world’s solicitation. Thus, whilst Husserl’s notion of sensings designates the localisation of a sensation on the body, Merleau-Ponty’s effective

⁵³⁵ Ibid., 252.

⁵³⁶ Sparrow, *Plastic Bodies*, 82.

⁵³⁷ PhP, 221.

⁵³⁸ Ibid., 217.

⁵³⁹ *Ideas II*, 153. See pp. 26-8; 34ff. of this thesis for an analysis of Husserl’s notion of sensings.

development of this notion involves a dynamically spontaneous yet pre-reflective taking up of the sensation by the sensible body.

Merleau-Ponty illustrates the paradoxical temporality implied in the relation of the sensible and the sentient through an analogy to that of sleep and sleeper:

‘I breathe slowly and deeply to call forth sleep, and suddenly, one might say, my mouth communicates with some immense external lung that calls my breath forth and forces it back. A certain respiratory rhythm, desired by me just a moment ago, becomes my very being, and sleep, intended until then as a signification, turns itself into a situation. Similarly, I offer my ear or my gaze with the anticipation of sensation, and suddenly the sensible catches my ear or my gaze; I deliver over a part of my body, or even my entire body, to this manner of vibrating and of filling space named “blue” or “red.”’⁵⁴⁰

The body, then, must somehow be attuned and open to the blue before having perceived it in order, precisely, to receive it. This attunement is what Merleau-Ponty terms ‘the blue attitude’⁵⁴¹ in which ‘[t]he sensible gives back to me what I had lent to it, but I received it from the sensible in the first place.’⁵⁴² Sensing then designates a kind of creative mimicry between body and world, where mimicry should not be understood as the mere copy of an original but rather as a movement of co-constitution. This mimicry is evoked by the word ‘resonance’⁵⁴³ which stems from the Latin *resonare*, *resound*, and *resonantia*, *echo*, describing a process whereby two or more rhythms ‘echo’ or mirror one another, thus creating a deeper reverberation than any one of them could on their own. If body and world resonate in the, in Al-Saji’s words, ‘sensory encounter,’⁵⁴⁴ if my body’s attitude and the sensible ‘respond’ to one another, my body is ‘synchronised’⁵⁴⁵ with the sensible and, writes Merleau-Ponty, ‘I am this sky that gathers together, composes itself, and begins to exist for itself, my consciousness is saturated by this unlimited blue.’⁵⁴⁶ Avoiding at once the empiricist reduction of sensation to objective data in the world and the intellectualist

⁵⁴⁰ PhP, 219.

⁵⁴¹ Ibid.

⁵⁴² Ibid., 222.

⁵⁴³ As quoted above, Merleau-Ponty uses the word ‘resonance’ to describe the sensitivity of the body to the world. See PhP, 245/273.

⁵⁴⁴ Al-Saji, “‘A Past Which Has Never Been Present,’” 55.

⁵⁴⁵ PhP, 219.

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid., 222. Note that the use of the term ‘consciousness’ here is misleading insofar as the blue attitude designates a strictly bodily relation operating below the level of consciousness. Merleau-Ponty will later emphasise the limitations of the *Phenomenology* insofar as it ‘remained governed by classical concepts’ such as ‘consciousness’ and ‘synthesis.’ SW, 9-10.

reduction of sensation to an internal construction of the mind, Merleau-Ponty thus defines sensibility 'as coexistence or communion {comme coexistence ou communion}'⁵⁴⁷ of body and world.

Yet does not this emphasis on synchrony and coexistence result in another idealism according to which the sensible body could never truly be surprised by anything? If, as Merleau-Ponty writes, 'sensation does not consist of the sensible invading the sensing being,'⁵⁴⁸ how can we conceive of instances in which the sensible does in fact invade the sensing being – in illness, injury, natural disasters? Indeed, Merleau-Ponty's privileging of cases in which the sensible body and the sensible world resonate easily with one another lends itself to a Levinasian critique: the notion of sensibility such as Merleau-Ponty describes it cannot properly account for the alterity and volatility of the sensible.⁵⁴⁹ Whilst Merleau-Ponty is not interested in cases in which the sensible unilaterally overwhelms or violates the sensible body, however, his emphasis on the dual movement between body and world nonetheless provides conceptual tools to investigate cases of resonance and dissonance between sensible body and world.

Indeed, as Al-Saji argues, the coexistence of body and world described by Merleau-Ponty should not be understood as a conflation of the two terms but rather as signifying 'different rhythms of existence, different speeds or tempos of being, which define different bodies, material things, and aspects of the world.'⁵⁵⁰ Whilst Merleau-Ponty privileges cases of resonance, it is not the case that the body and the world always or necessarily resonate. Indeed, he writes that the blue attitude cannot be forced by the body, precisely because, in order for it to really be 'blue,' the sensible must respond to the attitude of my body. If my body desires the blue attitude and attempts to force it, but the sensible instead provides the sensations suitable for a red attitude, I am stuck in a struggle of painful repetition with

⁵⁴⁷ PhP, 221/247. In 'The Chiasm – The Intertwining,' we find a similar discussion of colours to that in the chapter on 'Sensing': 'Between the alleged colours and visibles, we would find anew the tissue that lines them, sustains them, nourishes them, and which for its part is not a thing, but a possibility, a latency, and a *flesh* of things.' VI, 132-3.

⁵⁴⁸ PhP, 221.

⁵⁴⁹ For Levinas's critique of Merleau-Ponty's later ontology, see Emmanuel Levinas, 'Sensibility,' trans. Michael B. Smith, in *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Galen A. Johnson and Michael B. Smith (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University press, 1990). For a critique of Merleau-Ponty's privileging of synchrony, see Sparrow, *Plastic Bodies*, 94-98.

⁵⁵⁰ Al-Saji, "A Past Which Has Never Been Present," 49.

myself and the sensible.⁵⁵¹ Insofar as my body must adopt the blue attitude that is at once suggested to it, but which it is precluded from 'knowing' in advance of adopting it, Merleau-Ponty writes that 'I must find the response to a poorly formulated question.'⁵⁵² There is, then, an element of surrender in this act; in order to coexist with the sensible, I cannot stand before the blue of the sky and demand that it give itself over to me; I have to 'abandon myself to it,'⁵⁵³ risking always that it might not respond in the way in which my body desired.

Whilst Merleau-Ponty privileges cases in which the rhythm of the body and that of the sensible come together in harmonious resonance, then, it is important to recognise cases where the body does not easily resonate with the rhythm of the sensible. In contrast to the mirroring or echoing effect of resonance, the notion of dissonance describes an inharmonious meeting of different rhythms, and we speak of emotional dissonance when there is a conflict between the emotion expressed (such as a smile), perhaps due to social expectations, and the emotion actually felt. At the ontological/material level, there is dissonance, too, as Sparrow explains: 'The world possesses rhythms that solicit synchronisation from our bodies; it challenges us with dissonant rhythms; it meets our bodies' groping with inconvenient designs and incapacitating sounds. Some of these we can catch onto, others not.'⁵⁵⁴ A certain level of dissonance is an integral part of everyday life: going for a run and not being able to run as smoothly as usual for no particular reason or banging one's head on the doorframe that one usually and unthinkingly ducks to avoid. Whilst all bodies experience some level of what critical disabilities and feminist scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson calls 'misfitting' with the world from time to time, however, such sensory dissonance is more frequent, and carries a different existential significance, for marginalised bodies such as wheelchair users or blind people, for whom the world is not built to resonate.⁵⁵⁵

⁵⁵¹ PhP, 222.

⁵⁵² Ibid.

⁵⁵³ Ibid. Compare the following section in the beginning of Husserl's *Ideas II*: 'But we are no longer performing the seeing in this eminent sense {i.e., as knowledge} when we, seeing the radiant blue sky, live in the rapture of it. If we do that, then we are not in the theoretical or cognitive attitude but in the affective {*Gemütseinstellung*}.' *Ideas II*, 10-11/8.

⁵⁵⁴ Sparrow, *Plastic Bodies*, 129.

⁵⁵⁵ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, 'Misfits: A Feminist Materialist Disability Concept,' *Hypatia* 26, no. 3 (Summer 2011): 591-609. See also Jenny Chamarette, 'Overturning Feminist Phenomenologies: Disability, Complex

Given that all sensory life unfolds within a certain social and historical context, then, cases of sensory resonance and dissonance have not only a quotidian but also a socio-historical dimension that transcends individual bodies. Whilst Merleau-Ponty does not, in the chapter on 'Sensing,' address this socio-historical dimension of sensory life, in the chapter on 'Others and the Human World,' he writes: 'Prior to {any} coming to awareness, the social exists silently and as a solicitation,'⁵⁵⁶ and 'my life has a social atmosphere just as it has a flavour of mortality.'⁵⁵⁷ It would make sense, then, although Merleau-Ponty never explicitly goes this far, to say that specific socio-historical contexts solicit different bodies in different ways; and that the ways in which some bodies are solicited to move are in fact at odds with the inherent capacities of those bodies, thus creating a sensory dissonance between what the body is able to do, on the one hand, and what it is being solicited or 'invited' to do, on the other. This contradictory situation is described in Iris Marion Young's seminal essay 'Throwing Like a Girl,' in which she analyses and defines a feminine bodily motility which is, she argues, more restricted, inhibited, and self-referred than the typical 'masculine' body which unambiguously throws itself into tasks. Focusing on the particular case of movement in sport, Young argues that this contradictory bodily motility can be extended to the entire mode of being a feminine body in patriarchal society: 'Feminine bodily existence is an *inhibited intentionality*, which simultaneously reaches towards a projected end with an "I can" and withholds its full bodily commitment to that end in a self-imposed "I cannot."⁵⁵⁸ In our terms, the restrictive motility described by Young suggests that the context of patriarchy does not solicit 'feminine' bodies to move as openly or as freely as it does 'masculine' bodies, and consequently, the way in which 'feminine' bodies take up their existential situation typically results in a more inhibited way of moving, a point we shall investigate further in relation to the erotic in the next chapter.

The feminine bodily motility defined by Young can thus be understood to be marked by a sensory dissonance between the capacity inherent in all (able-bodied) living bodies to move in a relatively uninhibited way and the 'feminine' body whose situatedness within patriarchy

Embodiment, Intersectionality, and Film,' in *Rethinking Feminist Phenomenology: Theoretical and Applied Perspectives*, ed. Sara Cohen Shabot and Christina Landry (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018).

⁵⁵⁶ PhP, 379.

⁵⁵⁷ Ibid., 382.

⁵⁵⁸ Young, 'Throwing Like a Girl,' 36.

implicitly or explicitly proscribes, as Young writes, that '[t]o open her body in free, active, open extension and bold outward-directedness is for a woman to invite objectification.'⁵⁵⁹

Whilst the notion of sensibility thus describes an existential structure of bodily life, this does not mean that the degree to which sensory life is expressed freely is the same for all bodies.⁵⁶⁰ The anonymity of the body does not mean, then, as Shannon Sullivan argues, that Merleau-Ponty advances a view of the body as a clean slate, as 'an anonymous body that has no particularity – such as that provided by gender, sexuality, class, race, age, culture, nationality, individual experiences and upbringing, and more.'⁵⁶¹ Rather, whilst Merleau-Ponty's analysis remains at the level of the body and the world, it is precisely at the level of the sensory life of the body, as I will argue in more detail in chapter six, that the body can be understood to be fundamentally sensitive not only to general sensations such as colour and light, but also to other living bodies as well as social, cultural, and historical factors. Whilst the notion of sensibility that I excavate here describes an existential dimension of the living body, then, the ways in which this sensory life is individuated and particularised in different living bodies depends on a complex combination of individual, environmental, cultural, social, historical, and political factors.

What is described in the 'Sensing' chapter, and what will later become more explicit with the notion of flesh, then, is the simultaneous binding and separation of the sensible world and the sensible body. The notion of sensibility excavated here thus already pushes the

⁵⁵⁹ Ibid., 45. Whilst I restrict myself to the question of gender here, it is important to recognise the significance of race, too. In *Black Bodies, White Gazes*, George Yancy describes how, upon entering an elevator in which a white woman is present, he feels his body thrown back at him through her nervous body language, her clutching her purse in racist fear: 'I feel trapped. I no longer feel bodily expansiveness within the elevator, but corporeally constrained, limited. I now begin to calculate, paying almost neurotic attention to my body movements, making sure that this "Black object," what now feels like an appendage, a weight, is not too close, not too tall, not too threatening. (...) So, I genuflect, but only slightly, a movement that somewhat resembles an act of worship.' Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes*, 32. Analysing this passage and Frantz Fanon's notion of a 'historical-racial schema,' (Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 91) Sparrow writes: 'whereas the white body is *solicited* by the world to actively complete it, the black body is made to *perform* in a world that has always already been completed for it.' Sparrow, *Plastic Bodies*, 96. Arguably, then, the experience of being a black body in a white world is equally one of sensory dissonance.

⁵⁶⁰ Sonia Kruks makes a similar argument as she writes: 'Although the general characteristics of the prepersonal body are not in themselves gendered, Merleau-Ponty's account allows for the possibility that our *styles* of embodiment may be so.' Sonia Kruks, 'Merleau-Ponty and the Problem of Difference in Feminism,' in *Feminist Interpretations of Maurice Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Dorotea Olkowski and Gail Weiss (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 36.

⁵⁶¹ Sullivan, 'Domination and Dialogue in Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*,' 1.

Phenomenology towards the later ontology of the flesh.⁵⁶² We shall see, however, that Merleau-Ponty's ambiguous conflation of sensibility and perception in the *Phenomenology* reappears in the later work in the ambiguous conflation of sensible flesh and perceptual reversibility. Whilst Merleau-Ponty's analyses of sensibility in the *Phenomenology* do not touch on the sensible relation between living bodies, but only that between body and world, a conceptualisation of flesh as operating in the modality of sensibility rather than perceptual reversibility will help us formulate the notion of a sensible intercorporeality, thus effectively strengthening the notion, formulated in chapter four, of the body as an original intercorporeality through the fact of having been born.⁵⁶³

5.b. From perceptual reversibility to sensible flesh: binding/separation

Merleau-Ponty's enigmatic notion of the flesh describes the monistic sensible materiality from which everything is ultimately made. Avoiding a notion of the flesh as some underlying or fixed stratum that would remain unchanged, Merleau-Ponty writes: 'The flesh is not matter, is not mind, is not substance.'⁵⁶⁴ The flesh, then, is not a noun or a thing but rather a term which describes the movement or vibration of being itself. Indeed, he writes: 'We must not think the flesh starting from substances, from body and spirit – for then it would be the union of contradictories – but we must think it, as we said, as an element, as the concrete emblem of a general manner of being.'⁵⁶⁵ To avoid language that suggests a substantialist notion of the flesh, Merleau-Ponty characterises it in terms similar to Levinas's notion of the elemental as analysed in chapter three: 'To designate it, we should need the old term "element," in the sense it was used to speak of water, air, earth, and fire.'⁵⁶⁶ Thus,

⁵⁶² Indeed, in his lecture course on *The Sensible World and the World of Expression* given during his inaugural year as chair of the Collège de France, Merleau-Ponty writes that the reader of the *Phenomenology* 'might think that the work was only a phenomenology – [an] introduction that left the question of being untouched, whereas I didn't differentiate between ontology and phenomenology, [he might think] that the study of the being of sense that remained necessary after this phenomenology would be independent of it, whereas in my view all that we are is implicated in our manner of perceiving.' SW, 10. See also Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, 153-4; Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (St Leonards, Australia: Allen & Unwin, 1994), 95; David Morris, 'The Enigma of Reversibility and the Genesis of Sense in Merleau-Ponty,' *Continental Philosophy Review* 43, no. 2 (May 2010): 141–165, 160; Al-Saji, "'A Past Which Has Never Been Present,'" 42-3; Sparrow, *Plastic Bodies*, 107.

⁵⁶³ See pp. 117-127 of this thesis.

⁵⁶⁴ VI, 139.

⁵⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 147.

⁵⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 139. See pp. 78-91 of this thesis for an analysis of Levinas's notions of the *there is* and the elemental.

the flesh is not exclusive to human bodies but designates the sensible materiality from which all bodies are made.

When the flesh folds over itself, Merleau-Ponty writes, it separates itself into sentient and sensible, seeing and visible, and 'what we call perception is born.'⁵⁶⁷ It is this origin of the sensible and the sentient from a common flesh which allows him to claim that the two terms are reversible. Two interrelated notions of reversibility are ambiguously at work in 'The Chiasm – The Intertwining,' both of which are conceived in terms of the perceptual modalities of vision and touch. First, there is a reversibility between touching and being tangible, seeing and being visible: 'my hand, while it is felt from within, is also accessible from without, itself tangible.'⁵⁶⁸ This notion describes the double ontological status of the living body as at once a subject that can touch and an object that is tangible, that is, an intracorporeal reversibility. Second, there is a reversibility between touching and touched, seeing and seen: 'the seer and the visible reciprocate one another and we no longer know which sees and which is seen.'⁵⁶⁹ This kind of reversibility implies a relation between a body which touches and is in turn touched by the world or another body, that is, an intercorporeal reversibility. With this notion of reversibility, Merleau-Ponty seems to want to argue for the sentient body's material implication in, rather than separation from, the world/flesh, thus implicitly critiquing any notion of a sovereign subject/body in possession of the world: 'he who sees cannot possess the visible unless he is possessed by it, unless he *is of it*.'⁵⁷⁰

Whilst there is thus a clear claim, in 'The Chiasm – The Intertwining,' regarding the reversibility of body and world, it is unclear whether Merleau-Ponty, in this text, argues that living bodies also stand in a relation of reversibility to one another (he does write that living bodies are connected via the common flesh, yet this connectivity does not, as I will argue below, necessarily imply reversibility). In 'The Philosopher and His Shadow,' however, Merleau-Ponty conceptualises reversibility explicitly in terms of the relation of two living bodies:

⁵⁶⁷ VI, 154.

⁵⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 133.

⁵⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 139.

⁵⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 134-5.

‘The reason why I have evidence of the other man’s being-there when I shake his hand is that his hand is substituted for my left hand (...). My two hands “coexist” or are “compresent” because they are one single body’s hands. The other person appears through an extension of that compresence; he and I are like organs of one single intercorporeity.’⁵⁷¹

Merleau-Ponty here appropriates Husserl’s notion of the touching-touched in its intercorporeal instantiation. The point he is making in this text is that the notion of intercorporeality to be drawn from Husserl does not reside in the projection theory analysed in the fifth of the *Cartesian Meditations* and in chapter one of the thesis⁵⁷²; intercorporeality is, rather, a bodily communication operating below the level of analysis and conscious reflection. Yet it is true, as Beata Stawarska notes, that ‘even though I can align my hands to make the sign of an “amen” or appraise a performance by clapping my hands together, I cannot *shake hands* with myself, no matter how I would twist and turn my arms.’⁵⁷³ Thus, when I shake the other’s hand, it is not correct to say that my left hand is ‘substituted’ for the other’s hand, as Merleau-Ponty writes. Intracorporeal reversibility – my left hand touching my right hand, my attempt to shake hands with myself – does not, contrary to Merleau-Ponty’s suggestion, map onto intercorporeal reversibility – my hand touching or being touched by another’s hand, my shaking hands with someone else. In the intracorporeal relation of touching-touched, as we saw in chapter one, there is a reciprocity of sensings, and I can at any moment shift my attention from touching to touched; my body is at once the receiver and the giver, at once passive and active.⁵⁷⁴ Yet this relation does not directly map onto the intercorporeal relation: I cannot feel my touch such as the other feels it, and I cannot always – in cases of violence and domination, for example – revert another’s touching me into a touching of them in turn.

Merleau-Ponty’s ontology, in suggesting a one-to-one relation between intra- and intercorporeal reversibility, thus effectuates, in Stawarska’s words, ‘a massive reduction of the specifically *intersubjective* experience of the body manifest in an encounter with another embodied person to the corporeal dynamic operative within the body proper (le corps propre).’⁵⁷⁵ By describing the relation with the other body as an ‘extension’ of my own

⁵⁷¹ Merleau-Ponty, ‘The Philosopher and His Shadow,’ 168.

⁵⁷² See pp. 42-7 of this thesis.

⁵⁷³ Stawarska, ‘From the Body Proper to Flesh: Merleau-Ponty on Intersubjectivity,’ 99.

⁵⁷⁴ See pp. 27-34 of this thesis.

⁵⁷⁵ Stawarska, ‘From the Body Proper to Flesh: Merleau-Ponty on Intersubjectivity,’ 92.

body, Merleau-Ponty privileges the merging, rather than the separation, of body and world, and body and body. This fascination with 'one single intercorporeity,' Derrida argues, 'runs the risk of *reappropriating* the alterity of the other more surely, more blindly, or even more violently than ever.'⁵⁷⁶ Sparrow, too, argues that Merleau-Ponty's 'faith in reversibility (...) effectively misrepresents the intercorporeal relation by attenuating the volatility introduced by the transcendence of the other qua sensible.'⁵⁷⁷ Merleau-Ponty's notion of reversibility, then, is fraught with a symmetry that risks a thinking that cannot adequately account for the alterity, the difference, of bodies and worlds.

This is despite his insistence that 'it is a reversibility always imminent and never realised in fact. My left hand is always on the verge of touching my right hand touching the things, but I never reach coincidence; the coincidence eclipses at the moment of realisation.'⁵⁷⁸ This passage in fact reveals that reversibility is not, contra Merleau-Ponty's claim, 'the ultimate truth.'⁵⁷⁹ Rather, the perceptual model of reversibility, as I will argue, itself presupposes sensible flesh. This is because the notion of reversibility retains a tacit subject-object dialectic, whilst the notion of flesh operates prior to the differentiation into subject and object. I will thus argue that Merleau-Ponty's reductive thinking of alterity pertains to the notion of perceptual reversibility, but not necessarily to the notion of sensible flesh. This occasions the need to distinguish between reversibility understood as a modality of perception, and flesh understood as operating in the modality of sensibility.⁵⁸⁰ It is the flesh that at once binds and separates bodies and the world and makes something like reversibility possible. Yet flesh is not a merging of everything into a still substance where no difference resides, rather flesh has its own rhythm, as I will argue below.

Perceptual reversibility presupposes the existence of an irreducible hinge between the two poles of the dialectic; this hinge *is* the materiality of sensibility which allows for reversibility to take place at all. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty argues as much: 'this hiatus between my right hand touched and my right hand touching (...) is not an ontological void, a non-being: it is

⁵⁷⁶ Derrida, *On Touching*, 191.

⁵⁷⁷ Sparrow, *Plastic Bodies*, 138.

⁵⁷⁸ VI, 147-8.

⁵⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 155.

⁵⁸⁰ Sparrow makes a similar argument: 'Indeed, his reversibility thesis becomes more persuasive when we distinguish the sensible and perceptual life of the body, then restrict reversibility to the level of perception while assigning an irreducible alterity (irreversibility) to sensing.' Sparrow, *Plastic Bodies*, 142.

spanned by the total being of my body, and by that of the world; it is the zero of pressure between two solids that makes them adhere to one another.⁵⁸¹ It is this hiatus, this sensible materiality of my body and of the world, which at once binds and separates the perceiving and perceptible body and which hence calls for the distinction between sensible flesh and perceptual reversibility. Elizabeth Grosz, too, points towards the need to distinguish between flesh and reversibility: 'While [the flesh] does not displace perception as the thematic object of investigation, it is a more elementary and prior term, the condition of both seeing and being seen, of touching and being touched, and of their intermingling and possible integration, a commonness in which both subject and object participate, a single "thing" folded back on itself.'⁵⁸² Whilst the dynamic of touching/touched depends upon a tacit subject/object distinction which precisely designates the capacity for the two terms to reverse, this reversibility itself relies upon the flesh as 'the formative medium of the object and the subject.'⁵⁸³ Through the development of this hinge that at once binds and separates the touching and the touched as sensibility, we shall unlock the rhythm of a sensible intercorporeality which is not reducible to the touching/touched of perceptual reversibility. The sensible materiality of flesh at once binds and separates the thing/body seen and the body that sees: 'the thickness of flesh between the seer and the thing is constitutive for the thing of its visibility, as for the seer of his corporeity; it is not an obstacle between them, it is their means of communication.'⁵⁸⁴ It is true, then, as Derrida writes, that Merleau-Ponty constantly oscillates between an ontology which privileges the continuity or 'communion' of bodies and world and one that privileges the fission between bodies and world.⁵⁸⁵ On the one hand, Merleau-Ponty writes, there is a synchronisation of body and world through the common flesh: 'The thickness of the body, far from rivalling that of the world, is on the contrary the sole means I have to go unto the heart of the things, by making myself a world and by making them flesh.'⁵⁸⁶ At the same time, however, 'it is not possible that we blend into [the world], nor that it passes into us, for then the vision would vanish at the moment

⁵⁸¹ VI, 148.

⁵⁸² Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 95.

⁵⁸³ VI, 147.

⁵⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 135.

⁵⁸⁵ Derrida, *On Touching*, 211-14.

⁵⁸⁶ VI, 135.

of formation, by disappearance of the seer or of the visible.⁵⁸⁷ Yet Merleau-Ponty's ambiguous description of flesh as at once binding and separating body/body and body/world is, as I will argue, not so much a contradiction in his analyses as it forms the operational core or the rhythm of flesh itself.⁵⁸⁸ Paradoxically, Merleau-Ponty writes, 'this distance is not the contrary of this proximity, it is deeply consonant with it, it is synonymous with it.'⁵⁸⁹ It is according to this rhythm of binding and separation that Merleau-Ponty's ontology, in the words of Fred Evans and Leonard Lawlor, provides 'both more intimacy and more alterity among the denizens of the world.'⁵⁹⁰ Conceptualising the rhythm of the flesh in these paradoxical terms, as the simultaneous binding and separation of/to oneself, the world, and others can thus help us escape the subject-object dialectic into which perceptual reversibility falls.

The notion of sensible flesh, then, allows us to formulate another theory of intercorporeality, not in terms of a subject/object dialectic through which one term would, to borrow Levinas's language, reduce the other to the same,⁵⁹¹ but rather in terms of a sensible and fluid rhythm of binding and separation operating prior to or below the strict differentiation into subject and object. The flesh not only founds the communication between a body and the world but also that between living bodies:

'If we can show that the flesh is an ultimate notion, that it is not the union or compound of two substances, but thinkable by itself, if there is a relation of the visible with itself that traverses me and constitutes me as a seer, this circle which I do not form, which forms me, this coiling over of the visible upon the visible, can traverse, animate other bodies as well as my own.'⁵⁹²

And: 'the field open[s] for other Narcissus, for an "intercorporeity."⁵⁹³ The flesh, then, has always already put my body in fluid interaction with a world and other bodies. Indeed, there

⁵⁸⁷ Ibid., 131.

⁵⁸⁸ My use of the term 'rhythm' instead of, for example, 'logic' is a conscious and strategic choice: whilst 'logic' immediately connotes conceptuality, 'rhythm' better describes the sensible modality of the flesh.

⁵⁸⁹ VI, 135.

⁵⁹⁰ Fred Evans and Leonard Lawlor, 'The Value of Flesh: Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy and the Modernism/Postmodernism Debate,' in *Chiasms: Merleau-Ponty's Notion of Flesh*, ed. Fred Evans and Leonard Lawlor (New York: State University of New York Press, 2000), 10.

⁵⁹¹ In his short essay on Merleau-Ponty's ontology, Levinas writes, in his characteristic style, that the social unity of intercorporeality does not consist in the 'mutual knowledge' of the reversibility of the hands such as Merleau-Ponty suggests, but rather 'in the *difference* – the proximity of one's neighbour.' Levinas, 'Sensibility,' 63.

⁵⁹² VI, 140.

⁵⁹³ Ibid., 141.

is, Merleau-Ponty writes, a ‘fundamental fission or segregation of the sentient and the sensible which, laterally, makes the organs of my body communicate and founds transitivity from one body to another.’⁵⁹⁴ Despite this sensible communication, Merleau-Ponty emphasises that this is not a merging: ‘I am always on the same side of my body; it presents itself to me in one invariable perspective.’⁵⁹⁵ This reading of the flesh as operating in the modality of sensibility thus sketches the notion of a sensible intercorporeality which works according to a rhythm of binding and separation.⁵⁹⁶ Indeed, in a working note from January 1960, Merleau-Ponty writes that we must ‘rediscover as the reality of the inter-human world and of history a surface of separation between me and the other which is also the place of our union.’⁵⁹⁷ This ‘surface,’ he continues, ‘is the invisible hinge upon which my life and the life of the others turn to rock into one another, the inner framework of intersubjectivity.’⁵⁹⁸ This notion of a sensible intercorporeality operating according to the rhythm of flesh will become integral to the notion of a sensible eroticism developed in chapter six. We have moved from a sensible relation between body and world to that of body and body. Thus, the notion of sensibility describes a sensitive openness to and dependence on the world and other living bodies which is strongest at the earliest stage of life.

5.c. The earliest bond: body schema/image

In ‘The Child’s Relations with Others,’ Merleau-Ponty, following developmental psychologists of his time,⁵⁹⁹ describes how the first year of life is characterised by fluidity, rather than differentiation, between the child, others, and her world. Before the child has an awareness of her body as separate from and visible to others, Merleau-Ponty writes, she lives her bodily existence uninhibited and unselfconsciously. At the earliest stage of life,

⁵⁹⁴ Ibid., 143.

⁵⁹⁵ Ibid., 148.

⁵⁹⁶ This reading thus pushes Merleau-Ponty’s conceptualisation of the flesh closer to the notion of the oneself as an original intercorporeality as developed in relation to Levinas in chapter four. See pp. 117-127 of this thesis.

⁵⁹⁷ VI, 234.

⁵⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁹ See, for example: Henri Wallon, ‘Comment se développe chez l’enfant la notion du corps propre,’ *Enfance* 16, no. 1-2 (January – April 1963): 121-150, originally published in 1931; Jean Piaget and Bärbel Inhelder, *The Psychology of the Child*, trans. Helen Weaver (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

then, the relation between the infant and others is, he writes, 'not simply logically symmetrical but form[s] a real system.'⁶⁰⁰ The terms of this system ('me' and 'other') oscillate into one another and in this process continuously transform the system itself through its '*auto-organisation*.'⁶⁰¹ The notion of syncretic sociability means that the child identifies herself not with a stable or static self as distinct from others but rather with her momentary situation and others in it: 'The child *is*, in fact, the situation and has no distance from it.'⁶⁰² This initial stage of child development is thought not at the level of the psyche or the mind, but rather in terms of bodily behaviour. The body, in Merleau-Ponty's conception, is not understood as an object closed in on itself but rather as a system or body schema that is always already in and towards the world and others: 'if we are dealing with a schema, or a system, such a system would be relatively transferable from one sensory domain to the other in the case of my own body, just as it could be transferred to the domain of the other.'⁶⁰³ At the earliest stage of life, Merleau-Ponty thus suggests, the infant's body schema in fact includes or merges with other bodies.

This move from the mind to the body as always already bound to others then makes possible an account of how bodies take on ways of moving and behaving through their initial 'pairing' with other bodies, thus moving away from the classical problem of solipsism as analysed in relation to Husserl in chapter one,⁶⁰⁴ and moving closer to a theory of intercorporeality: 'And the problem of knowing how conduct can be transferred from another to me is infinitely less difficult to solve than the problem of knowing how I can represent to myself a psyche that is radically foreign to me.'⁶⁰⁵ Whilst the Husserl of the fifth of the *Cartesian Meditations* develops a theory of intersubjectivity beginning from the sphere of ownness,⁶⁰⁶ Merleau-Ponty begins from the state of undifferentiated syncretism. Thus, as Martin Dillon notes, the question for Merleau-Ponty is not how we move from

⁶⁰⁰ CRO, 150.

⁶⁰¹ Ibid.

⁶⁰² Ibid., 175.

⁶⁰³ Ibid., 147-8. For the notion of the body schema, see also the chapters, in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, on 'The Spatiality of One's Own Body and Motricity,' and 'The Synthesis of One's Own Body.' PhP, 100-155.

⁶⁰⁴ See pp. 42-8 of this thesis.

⁶⁰⁵ CRO, 146.

⁶⁰⁶ CM, 94-100.

solipsism to intersubjectivity but rather how we move from a fluid kind of intercorporeality to a sense of my body as distinct from other bodies.⁶⁰⁷

Drawing on Jacques Lacan's theory of the mirror stage,⁶⁰⁸ Merleau-Ponty explains how the child, from around the age of six months, is able to recognise herself in the mirror and thus perceives her own body as visible to, and separate from, others. This process involves a simultaneous identification and alienation of the child with/from herself in the mirror image: 'At the same time that the image of oneself makes possible the knowledge of oneself, it makes possible a sort of alienation. I am no longer what I felt myself, immediately, to be; I am that image of myself that is offered by the mirror.'⁶⁰⁹ Merleau-Ponty suggests that others, too, can act as 'mirrors' for the child: 'just as there is a global identification of the child with his visual image in the mirror, so also will there be a global identification of the child with others.'⁶¹⁰ The child thus comes to perceive her own body through the reflection of herself not only through the mirror but also through the perception of other bodies. The mirror image then has a normative and socially mediating function given that it 'turns the child away from what he actually is, in order to orient him towards what he sees and imagines himself to be.'⁶¹¹ The mirror stage thus describes at once the first step towards the formation of a sense of self as distinct from others, and at the same time the beginning of a socially and culturally mediated perceptual awareness of one's own body.

In this sense, as Martin Dillon argues, the transition through the mirror stage describes the transition from the body schema to the formation of a body image: 'The body image is thus the thematization of the corporeal reflexivity underlying the corporeal schema.'⁶¹² Whilst I agree with Dillon to that extent, it is, however, misleading to say that the 'the body image involves thematic corporeal reflexivity,'⁶¹³ if by 'thematic' we mean a reflective awareness of one's body. The difference between the body schema and the body image, as I will argue, is better understood as the qualitative difference between the sensing of *being* a body of

⁶⁰⁷ Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, 120-1.

⁶⁰⁸ Jacques Lacan, 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I,' in *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London & New York: 2001).

⁶⁰⁹ CRO, 165.

⁶¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 163.

⁶¹¹ *Ibid.*, 166.

⁶¹² Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, 124.

⁶¹³ *Ibid.*

movement as analysed in part one of the thesis,⁶¹⁴ on the one hand, and the perception of one's body as if from the outside, on the other. On this reading, the body image involves a perceptual awareness of one's own body such as (one imagines that) it appears to others, yet this does not necessarily imply the actual, visual perception of oneself in the mirror or a thematic awareness of oneself. In this sense, the body image has a semi-objectifying function which operates implicitly even when no actual self-perception is in play.⁶¹⁵ Movement operating primarily according to the body schema, on the other hand, describes a pre-perceptual sensing of *being* a body which does not, in that moment, imply any objectifying perception of one's own body.⁶¹⁶ This conceptualisation of the body schema in terms of sensibility and the body image in terms of perception finds support in cognitive scientist Shaun Gallagher's definition of these terms. He defines the body schema as 'a system of sensory-motor capacities that function without awareness or the necessity of perceptual monitoring,'⁶¹⁷ and the body image as 'a system of perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs pertaining to one's own body.'⁶¹⁸ In this sense, Gallagher continues: 'the difference between body image and body schema is like the difference between a *perception* (or conscious monitoring) of movement and the actual *accomplishment* of movement, respectively.'⁶¹⁹

Merleau-Ponty, too, describes the body schema in terms of a habitual way of moving which is not itself perceived but is that according to which we perceive: 'the body schema is not perceived – It is [the] norm or privileged position in contrast to which the perceived body is defined. It is prior to explicit perception.'⁶²⁰ Whilst Merleau-Ponty never explicitly distinguishes between the body schema and the body image, the notion of body image is nonetheless operatively present in his work: 'my body schema already includes presentations of myself that are only obtained from the point of view of others (frontal view of my face): [the] advent of a vision of [the] self is [the] advent of others (mirror stage).'⁶²¹ If

⁶¹⁴ See pp. 40-1; 56-8 of this thesis.

⁶¹⁵ Drawing on Lacan, Merleau-Ponty writes: 'And this image would henceforth be either explicitly posited or simply implied by everything I see at each minute.' CRO, 165.

⁶¹⁶ This is not to say, of course, that one's body schematic style of moving is not structured in interaction with one's socially mediated body image.

⁶¹⁷ Gallagher, *How the Body Shapes the Mind*, 24.

⁶¹⁸ Ibid.

⁶¹⁹ Ibid.

⁶²⁰ SW, 103-4.

⁶²¹ Ibid., 118.

the mirror stage describes the process through which the child learns that she is a self separately from others, at the level of the body, this marks the point at which she no longer moves unselfconsciously and uninhibited in fluid interaction with her world and other bodies.⁶²² As she begins to perceive her body through the lens of others, she forms a socially mediated body image which, as we shall see in more detail in chapter six, can come to structure and interact with her body schematic style of moving and feeling in complex ways.⁶²³

Yet it is important to note that what is described here as a transition from the sensible body schema to the perceptual body image is not a linear process through which the sensible and fluid way of moving unselfconsciously in a binding with others would be forever left behind in favour of a perceptual self-awareness of oneself as distinct from others. Whilst the theory of the mirror/body image marks a decisive stage in the development of the child's bodily sense of self, this process of bodily boundary negotiation, as Merleau-Ponty writes, 'is never completely finished.'⁶²⁴ Indeed, there is a constant negotiation and co-constitution between the body schema, the unreflective and pre-perceptual sense of being a moving body, on the one hand, and the body image, the implicit or explicit perceptual awareness of one's own body, on the other. The body schema and the body image are thus operational

⁶²² The scientific literature has showed that the formation of a body image – the capacity to perceive one's body as if from the outside, and thus to 'imagine' possible movements for oneself – is necessary in order to learn new and improve existing motor skills. The body image thus has a practical function in the continuous development of body schematic movement. See Gallagher, *How the Body Shapes the Mind*, 17-64; Shogo Tanaka, 'Body Schema and Body Image in Motor Learning: Refining Merleau-Ponty's Notion of Body Schema,' in *Body Schema and Body Image: New Directions*, ed. Yochai Ataria, Shogo Tanaka and Shaun Gallagher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

⁶²³ Whilst body schematic movement does not involve the perceptual objectification of one's own body, then, this does not mean that the degree to which bodies come to move freely is the same for everyone. Indeed, this relation between body schema and body image can be extended to the contextual structuring of bodily movement as analysed in section one. According to Gail Weiss, 'the contradictory modalities of "feminine" bodily existence identified by Young occur (...) because many women mediate their own relationship with their bodies by seeing their bodies as they are seen by others and by worrying about what they and these (largely invisible) others are seeing as they are acting.' Weiss, *Body Images*, 46-7. The restrictive bodily movement identified by Young can be explained by the notion that women have a disproportionately high perceptual awareness of themselves insofar as, as I argued, patriarchy does not solicit 'feminine' bodies to move in a free and uninhibited way. Such perceptual awareness characteristic of 'feminine' bodily spatiality would not be the same as the heightened perceptual awareness needed for learning a new dance move or bettering our front crawl. The latter is the perceptual attention needed to consciously learn or improve a motor skill, whilst the heightened perceptual awareness characteristic of 'feminine' bodily comportment is a perception of one's own body such as (one imagines) others perceive it. The domination of the body image in 'feminine' bodily spatiality, then, results in body schematic movement that is not as free or open to others as it could be.

⁶²⁴ CRO, 149.

simultaneously.⁶²⁵ At certain moments, the perceptual awareness of one's body becomes dominant such as in situations in which one feels uncomfortable, exposed, or when one tries to learn a new motor skill, whilst at other moments, the sensing of being a body is dominant, such as when one unthinkingly goes about one's day or when one performs movements that one comfortably masters.

The earliest stage of life would thus be marked by a dominant body schema as the infant unselfconsciously grasps, smiles, cries, and moves in response to its situation and others in it. Merleau-Ponty, following the predominant theory at the time, conceives this as meaning that the child fuses or merges with others and her environment. Yet contemporary psychological and neurological studies into neonatal mimicry⁶²⁶ as well as the phenomenologically evident fact that infants as young as a few hours old imitate the facial expressions of others and continuously correct their imitation to better match the other's expression implies a minimal bodily awareness of the difference between her own expression and that of the other, which in turn suggests a minimal bodily sense of herself as distinct from others. Thus, the earliest stage of life is not characterised by a complete merging of the child with her environment and other bodies, yet neither is it a strict separation. As we saw in chapter four, even before birth, the relation between mother and foetus is not one of merging but rather one of the simultaneous binding and separation of bodies.⁶²⁷ As Hélène Rouch writes, then, the problem of the formation of a sense of self as distinct from others is only a pseudo-problem insofar as the foetus was in fact never fused with the other body: '[S]urely all that's needed is to reiterate and mark, on another level, a differentiation that already exists during pregnancy thanks to the placenta and at the moment of birth, as a result of the exit from the uterine cavity?'⁶²⁸

Merleau-Ponty thus exaggerates the level of merging with other bodies at the earliest stage of postnatal life. Yet rather than conceptualising the relation between infant and other/world in terms of a merging *or* a differentiation, conceptualising this relation in terms

⁶²⁵ For a critical analysis of the co-implication of the body schema and the body image for the continuous negotiation of the sense of the body as one's own, see Shiloh Whitney, 'Merleau-Ponty on the Mirror Stage: Affect and the Genesis of the Body Proper in the Sorbonne Lectures,' *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology* 49, no. 2 (October 2018): 135-163.

⁶²⁶ See, for example, Gallagher, *How the Body Shapes the Mind*, 65-85, particularly 83.

⁶²⁷ See pp. 114-117 of this thesis.

⁶²⁸ Rouch in interview with Irigaray, 'On the Maternal Order,' 42.

of the simultaneous binding and separation of bodies will allow us to formulate a notion of a sensible intercorporeality which does not operate according to a subject/object dialectic but rather according to the rhythm of flesh as analysed above. The rhythm of flesh allows us to conceive intercorporeality in terms of a scale or gradation of binding/separation of bodies, where the moment of binding at times is stronger than that of separation, and vice versa. At the earliest stage of life, then, the moment of binding is stronger than that of separation, as the notion of syncretic sociability suggests. Yet it is not that the binding to others is broken off as the child develops an increasingly independent sense of self; rather, the binding to others remains operative throughout life and can at moments become stronger. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty suggests that the moment of binding is not completely abandoned as the child grows up; it remains, rather, as a structural element or a constant possibility 'in other zones of adult life,'⁶²⁹ such as, for example, in love.⁶³⁰ To understand how the simultaneous binding and separation of infancy lives on in adult life, then, we turn, in the final chapter of the thesis, to Merleau-Ponty's analyses of the erotic in the 'The Body in its Sexed Being.'

Conclusion

In this chapter, I excavated and reappropriated a notion of sensibility that, I argued, is operative in the chapter on 'Sensing' in the *Phenomenology of Perception*. In dialogue with Al-Saji and Sparrow, I argued that Merleau-Ponty's references to an anonymous dimension of bodily life, far from designating a 'pure' body free from historical sedimentations, describes the fundamental sensitivity of the body to its world, others, and the socio-historical context in which it is situated. I then turned to Merleau-Ponty's later ontology and argued that a differentiation between sensible flesh and perceptual reversibility is needed in order to avoid a thinking of intercorporeality that reduces the transcendence of the other body. I then began to develop a notion of a sensible intercorporeality operating according to the rhythm of binding and separation of bodies, such that bodies never coincide absolute, nor are they ever absolutely distinct. Finally, I analysed Merleau-Ponty's writings of child development in relation to the sensible body schema and the perceptual body image. I

⁶²⁹ CRO, 183.

⁶³⁰ For an analysis which relates object relations theory to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology in order to understand the ways in which childhood relations structure the relationship to love and intimacy in adult life, see Laura McMahon, "'The Separation That is Not a Separation But a Form of Union': Merleau-Ponty and Feminist Object Relations Theory in Dialogue,' *Human Studies* 43, no. 1 (March 2020): 43-67.

argued that whilst the moment of unselfconscious binding to others is stronger at the earliest stage in life, the binding to other bodies is never broken off but can be reawakened in later stages of life such as in love. In the final chapter, we shall see more concretely how this sensible binding to the world and others is characterised by a certain eroticism, and how this sensible eroticism is itself structured by socio-historical factors that do not themselves appear in experience.

Chapter 6

The Movement of Desire: Sensible Eroticism

In chapter five I began to argue that Merleau-Ponty's existentialist conceptualisation of transcendence as the taking up of existence works most basically at the level of bodily sensibility rather than perception. I argued that this notion of sensibility allows us to understand how patriarchal society does not solicit 'feminine' bodies to move as freely as it does 'masculine' bodies. In this chapter, I develop these analyses further as I investigate the contextually specific ways in which transcendence as the taking up of existence structures the erotic lives of bodies. This final chapter of the thesis thus develops a critical phenomenological-existentialist approach to the erotic dimension of bodily life through the work of Merleau-Ponty⁶³¹ and some of the feminist literature surrounding sexual desire and gender. Reading the chapter, in the *Phenomenology*, on 'The Body as a Sexed Being' through the lens of that on 'Sensing' as analysed in chapter five, I argue that Merleau-Ponty's analyses of the erotic should be understood to operate at the level of sensibility rather than consciousness or perception. This move from perception to sensibility already takes us 'beyond' Merleau-Ponty, and thus my claim is not to discover a notion of the erotic that remains latent in his work and which he sought, but failed, to fully develop. My aim is, rather, to excavate and reappropriate elements of his phenomenology that can help us

⁶³¹ Whilst Levinas, more explicitly than Merleau-Ponty, describes erotic desire and pleasure phenomenologically, I have not written on the erotic in Levinas for two reasons: first, his analyses of eros remain divorced from a consideration of the existential situation of the body in question and, second, his descriptions of eros are bound up with a binary conceptualisation of sexual difference which can only think the erotic relation in heterosexual terms. See TO 84-90; TI 256-266; 270-273; OE, 61-63. For a critical analysis of Levinas's thinking on eros as bound up with sexual difference, see Sandford, *Metaphysics of Love*, 33-63. Whilst Merleau-Ponty does not have a 'concept' of eros as such, I argue in this chapter that reading his analyses of the erotic through the analyses of sensibility in the chapter on 'Sensing' provides conceptual tools for investigating the different ways in which the erotic life force of bodies expresses itself depending upon their existential situation.

develop a critical understanding of the ways in which bodies *live* desire prior to perception and reflection.⁶³²

Insofar as the bodily experience of erotic desire is not necessarily informed or structured by knowledge of psychoanalytic theory, I do not draw on the psychoanalytic conceptualisation of sexuality. This is not to say that a reading that marries phenomenology and psychoanalysis could not prove fruitful for a conceptualisation of sexuality, yet such a reading would require an investigation that far exceeds the scope of this chapter. Given that the theorisation of sexuality is so intrinsically bound up with its psychoanalytic formulation, however, I will, where possible, refrain from using the term 'sexuality,' and refer, instead, to the erotic, eroticism, sensuality, and desire. Where the term 'sexuality' does unavoidably appear (not least because this is the term used by Merleau-Ponty himself), I ask the reader to understand this not in its psychoanalytic specificity, but rather in terms of eroticism such as this is lived phenomenologically. This move from perception to sensibility, which is at the same time a move from sexuality to eroticism, in turn forms a critical response to the feminist literature which has criticised Merleau-Ponty for considering sexuality in a universalist way, according to which the male heterosexual is the norm against which all other sexualities stand out.⁶³³ Rather than making a heteronormative claim about sexuality or desire, however, I will argue that Merleau-Ponty's analysis makes a more basic claim about the bodily dimension through which the erotic operates.

In our conception, then, the notion of a sensible eroticism expresses the way in which the body is fundamentally open to one's world and other bodies. This openness is not synonymous with the materiality of the body in its passivity, exposure, and vulnerability to

⁶³² Whilst this chapter focuses specifically on the ways in which eroticism plays out in and between human bodies, this is not to say that one cannot invest erotic energy in one's work, in art, and so on.

⁶³³ See Judith Butler, 'Sexual Ideology and Phenomenological Description: A Feminist Critique of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*,' in *The Thinking Muse: Feminism and Modern French Philosophy*, ed. Jeffner Allen and Iris Marion Young (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989); Sara Heinämaa, *Toward a Phenomenology of Sexual Difference: Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Beauvoir* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 86-7; Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 86-111. Heinämaa uses Merleau-Ponty's notions of bodily expression and style to develop an understanding of how sexual identities *become* at a pre-reflective, bodily level, rather than being reducible to biological sex. Sexual identity, she writes, 'is detectable not (just) in the shape of the organs, but also, and more primarily, in the postures of the body, in the gestures of the face and the hands, and in the rhythms of their movements. These behaviours are not under the control of the will. Rather, volitional acts are dependent on them.' Heinämaa, *Toward a Phenomenology of Sexual Difference*, 69. Whilst such analysis illustrates how gender identities (which for Heinämaa seem to be restricted to male or female) are constantly produced rather than given, it says little about how bodies *live* desire, which is what I seek to do in this chapter.

others but is rather like an invitation extended to or a question posed by the body to others. Whilst sensibility and eroticism are thus two sides of the same coin, the notion of eroticism allows us to form an understanding of the ways in which bodies live desire that is more specific than that for which the more general notion of sensibility allows. Whilst the notion of sensibility, as I have argued throughout, accounts for the ontological, material, and affective openness of the body to its world and others, the notion of a sensible eroticism designates, as Audre Lorde writes, in 'Uses of the Erotic,' a passion, a zest for life, a capacity for joy, for friendship, for the pursuit of knowledge, of pleasure.⁶³⁴ Indeed, Merleau-Ponty describes eroticism as 'an intentionality that follows the general movement of existence and that weakens along with it';⁶³⁵ it is an 'odour'⁶³⁶ or an 'atmosphere'⁶³⁷ which is 'coextensive with life.'⁶³⁸ Whilst the notion of eroticism developed here describes something like the desire for life itself and is thus not reducible to sexual desire, in this chapter, I develop a feminist critical understanding of the ways in which this sensible eroticism expresses or instantiates itself in the specifically sexual domain. Whilst I focus largely on the erotic encounter in order to illuminate the sensible dimension through which eroticism works, then, it is important to note that eroticism, as an existential dimension of bodily life, is at play even when no encounter is in question.

Whilst eroticism is conceived as an existential dimension of bodily life which never breaks off or leaves, Merleau-Ponty's insistence upon the 'osmosis between sexuality and existence,'⁶³⁹ as I will argue, provides conceptual tools for understanding how this sensible eroticism expresses itself in different stages of one's life and depending upon one's individual and socio-historical situation. The body expresses its existential situation erotically, which means that the way in which we engage in erotic encounters is never neutral but always has an existential sense or 'style.' The sexual lives of bodies thus cannot be conceived mechanically but rather as expressing a deeper attitude that may have nothing to do with erotic sex as such. This is how our genetic and generative⁶⁴⁰ history

⁶³⁴ Audre Lorde, 'Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,' in *Sister Outsider* (London: Penguin, 2019).

⁶³⁵ PhP, 159.

⁶³⁶ *Ibid.*, 172.

⁶³⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶³⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴⁰ For a definition of genetic and generative methods, see pp. 8-9 of this thesis.

which is not necessarily predominantly ‘sexual’ comes, in turn, to structure, influence, or inform our concrete erotic encounters. As we shall see in more detail in the final section of this chapter, one of the ways in which the existential situation of women living in patriarchal society expresses itself in their relations to sex takes the form of a lack of desire and difficulty or resistance to abandoning oneself to the other.⁶⁴¹ Vice versa, the repression of erotic desire or the experience of sexual violence often translates into other areas of bodily existence that are not predominantly ‘sexual,’ for example, in the prevalence of chronic gut disorders amongst women who have suffered childhood sexual abuse.⁶⁴²

Whilst it makes sense that concrete experiences of sexual violence would have some bodily effect, however, it is less obvious how ideal structures like heteronormativity and patriarchy come to structure the degree to which bodies are open or closed to erotic encounters. Does this happen purely at a cognitive or psychological level, or does it also happen at a bodily level? Drawing on gender theory and the novel field of social neuroendocrinology, I show that bodies also, at a sensible level, ‘take up,’ respond to, and appropriate the gender norms that historically prescribe the eroticism of women as shameful, laughable, pathological or, in the case of the maternal and elderly body, non-existent. A close reading of ‘The Body as a Sexed Being’ in dialogue with the feminist literature and in the context of our development of the notion of sensibility, then, will allow us to move towards a critical phenomenology of the erotic, where eroticism is not reducible to a thinking on sexual identity or difference, but rather describes the movement of desire such as this is lived at the level of the body.

Yet to say that eroticism operates prior to sexual difference is not to say that it operates at a ‘pure’ or valueless level, abstracted from all historical sedimentations. Rather, a critical phenomenology of the erotic can precisely help us uncover a basic structure of bodily existence – eroticism as the openness of (human) bodies and the desire for life itself – whilst

⁶⁴¹ We shall critically investigate what is widely considered the most common sexual ‘problem’ reported by women, namely, a lack of or a low level of sexual desire. See for example Sari M. van Anders, et al. ‘The Heteronormativity Theory of Low Sexual Desire in Women Partnered with Men,’ *Archives of Sexual Behaviour* 51, no. 1 (January 2022): 391–415; Nikki Hayfield and Victoria Clarke, “‘I’d Be Just as Happy with a Cup of Tea’”: Women’s Accounts of Sex and Affection in Long-Term Heterosexual Relationships,’ *Women’s Studies International Forum* 35, no. 2 (March-April 2012): 67-74; Bella Ellwood-Clayton, *Sex Drive: In Pursuit of Female Desire* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2012).

⁶⁴² D. A. Drossman, et al., ‘Sexual and Physical Abuse in Women with Functional or Organic Gastrointestinal Disorders,’ *Annals of Internal Medicine* 113, no. 11 (December 1990): 828–833, cited in Sullivan, *On the Physiology of Sexist and Racist Oppression*, 70.

at the same time investigating the ways in which this basic structure is itself contextually and historically structured. Indeed, a critical phenomenology of the erotic is sensitive to the ways in which, in Lisa Guenther's words, '[s]tructures like patriarchy, white supremacy, and heteronormativity permeate, organise, and reproduce the natural attitude in ways that go beyond any particular object of thought.'⁶⁴³ The aim is thus not to reduce patriarchal and heteronormative structures in order to reach a utopian eroticism that would be free of these, but rather to understand how such structures, which do not, strictly speaking, have 'fleshy existence' infiltrate the erotic lives of bodies at the level of sensibility; and to ask whether and how bodies can step into this process of structuring and, perhaps, structure it otherwise.

In section 6.a., I elucidate the relation between sexuality, existence, and erotic perception through Merleau-Ponty's analysis of Schneider. Given that Schneider is confined to perceiving other bodies as objects without any affective value, his 'sexual inertia,' Merleau-Ponty explains, resides in a loss of what he calls 'erotic perception' which, I argue should be understood to operate at the level of sensibility. This move from perception to sensibility at the same time allows me to respond to some early critiques which, I argue, are somewhat misplaced insofar as they presuppose Merleau-Ponty's analyses to operate at the level of objectifying perception rather than pre-objective sensibility. If section 6.a. formulates what a phenomenology of the erotic is not – sexuality as rooted in the perceptual categorisation into subject and object, masculine and feminine – section 6.b. provides a more positive account of eroticism such as this plays out in the erotic encounter between bodies. I conceptualise the erotic encounter in terms of the sensible rhythm of flesh as analysed in chapter five.⁶⁴⁴ I argue that an erotic encounter understood as the simultaneous binding and separation of bodies allows for a momentary suspension of heteronormative ideas about how bodies ought and ought not desire, move, feel, and touch, and hence, a possibility for 'being' one's gender otherwise. Yet the possibility for momentarily suspending these norms does not mean that the degree to which bodies are capable of the kind of abandon required for erotic encounters is not structured by the reality of gender

⁶⁴³ Lisa Guenther, 'Critical Phenomenology,' in *50 Concepts for a Critical Phenomenology*, 11. Due to limitations of scope, I do not, in this chapter, investigate the ways in which factors of race play into this contextual structuring of the erotic lives of bodies.

⁶⁴⁴ See pp. 143-155 of this thesis.

norms. Section 6.c. moves beyond Merleau-Ponty and more properly into the critical dimension of a phenomenology of the erotic as it asks how patriarchal structures of gender- and heteronormativity in turn structure, impact, or inhibit the erotic lives of bodies at the level of sensibility.

6.a. Sexuality, existence, erotic perception: responding to some early critiques
Rejecting both a physiological definition of sexuality that reduces it to anatomical reflexes and a psychological one that reduces it to mental representations, Merleau-Ponty, in 'The Body as a Sexed Being,' instead formulates a phenomenological notion of sexuality as intrinsically bound up with existence. Whilst crediting Freud for having uncovered 'a dialectical movement in functions believed to be "purely bodily" and in reintegrating sexuality into human existence,'⁶⁴⁵ Merleau-Ponty critiques psychoanalysis for ascribing a sexual significance to all aspects of existence and consequently of reducing the two terms to each other. He goes on to analyse the oscillation of existence and sexuality through the case of Johann Schneider, a war veteran injured by a piece of shrapnel to the occipital region of his brain. Throughout the book, Merleau-Ponty analyses, through Goldstein and Gelb's examinations of Schneider, the different ways in which his injury has affectively 'flattened' almost all aspects of his existence. We hear how he cannot perform abstract movements, such as touching his nose or reaching his arm out, that do not have a concrete aim other than the movement itself. We hear how his attempts to make new friends almost always fail because he has lost the ability to spontaneously interact with others, thus conferring on his movements and engagements a forced deliberateness. In his erotic life, too, he is above all disinterested: he never takes any sexual initiative, he does not kiss and does not find other bodies sexually attractive. In fact, Merleau-Ponty writes, 'the very word "satisfaction" no longer means anything to him.'⁶⁴⁶ Merleau-Ponty argues that Schneider's 'sexual inertia'⁶⁴⁷ is not the effect of a physiological or psychological defect but is the expression, rather, of an alteration of 'the very structure of erotic perception or experience.'⁶⁴⁸

⁶⁴⁵ PhP, 160.

⁶⁴⁶ Ibid., 159.

⁶⁴⁷ Ibid., 157.

⁶⁴⁸ Ibid., 158.

Different from objective perception, Merleau-Ponty writes, 'erotic perception is not a *cogitatio* that intends a *cogitatum*; through one body it aims at another body, and it is accomplished in the world, not within consciousness.'⁶⁴⁹ The objective perception through which we perceive already objectified objects, then, 'is inhabited by a more secret one: the visible body is underpinned by a strictly individual sexual schema that accentuates erogenous zones, sketches out a sexual physiognomy, and calls forth the gestures of the masculine body.'⁶⁵⁰ The 'abnormality' of the case of Schneider then reveals the 'normal' operation of eroticism which we, in the natural attitude, take for granted. For 'normal' bodies, erotic perception responds to an erotic 'pull' from the world or other bodies prior to any perceptual objectification of this world or these bodies. Erotic perception thus operates at the level of pre-objective sensibility such as we have described it, and Schneider's problem is precisely that he is confined to perceiving other bodies as abstracted from any affective, let alone specifically sexual, 'pull.' What determines or regulates the desire for engaging in erotic encounters is, for Merleau-Ponty, something like the desire for life itself. Eroticism is bound up with 'an "intentional arc" that weakens for the patient and that for the normal subject gives experience its degree of vitality and fecundity.'⁶⁵¹ Erotic life is thus the behavioural expression or dramatization of this life force; it designates the way in which the sensible body takes up the givens of a situation, such as another body, and transforms it into something desirable. In this transformation, however, sexuality 'as such' necessarily escapes its own manifestation: 'Sexuality hides from itself under a mask of generality, it ceaselessly attempts to escape from the tension and the drama that it institutes.'⁶⁵² Just as the desire for life expresses itself in sexuality, sexuality dissolves into certain behaviours, moods, and attitudes that lose their specifically 'sexual' sense along the way.

It is this difficulty or impossibility of defining sexuality 'as such' that Martin Dillon refuses to accept as he argues that 'Merleau-Ponty's failure to describe the phenomenon of sexuality cannot be excused on the grounds that the interfusing of sex with existence precludes such a description. Were that the case, we could not speak significantly about sexual needs as

⁶⁴⁹ Ibid., 159.

⁶⁵⁰ Ibid., 158.

⁶⁵¹ Ibid., 160.

⁶⁵² Ibid., 171.

being different from historical influences or anxiety, etc.’⁶⁵³ Of course, Dillon is right that if, as he takes Merleau-Ponty to ultimately conclude, ‘sexuality is finally indistinguishable from existence,’⁶⁵⁴ then both phenomena lose any concrete sense. It is not clear, however, that this is indeed Merleau-Ponty’s own conclusion, nor one to be legitimately drawn from his analysis. It is true that there is a fundamental ambiguity in Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of sexuality, that he claims that ‘it is impossible to characterise a decision or an action as “sexual” or as “nonsexual.”’⁶⁵⁵ In the footnote on dialectical materialism at the end of the chapter, however, he writes that this does not mean that all aspects of existence are simply the same. Rather, ‘one of the orders of signification can be considered dominant in each case, one gesture can be considered “sexual,” another one “loving,” and still another “warlike.”’⁶⁵⁶ And further: ‘A style of life – such as an evasive attitude and a need for solitude – is perhaps a generalised expression of a certain state of sexuality.’⁶⁵⁷ It is not the case, then, that sexuality and existence are indistinguishable, as Dillon writes, but rather that they oscillate according to what Gavin Rae calls a ‘logic of entwinement.’⁶⁵⁸ Thus Dillon, in simplifying Merleau-Ponty’s analysis, ends up rigidifying terms that are in fact characterised by an inherent dynamism. Merleau-Ponty’s ambiguous description of the relation between sexuality and existence, rather than exposing ‘an uncharacteristically weak theoretical standpoint’⁶⁵⁹ as Dillon claims, precisely attests to such a dynamism.

Whilst Dillon takes issue with the elusive character of sexuality such as Merleau-Ponty describes it, Judith Butler, in an early critical text, emphasises this as the strong point. Sexuality, they argue, just *is* the way in which we dramatize, take up, express our existence, our given situation. Yet Merleau-Ponty, in Butler’s argument, does not stay true to his own claims about the historicity of existence, insofar as his description of sexuality ignores the concrete forms of sexual orientation that exist. Butler’s critique addresses, first, Merleau-Ponty’s failure to account for the ways in which sexuality and sexual norms are produced

⁶⁵³ Martin Dillon, ‘Merleau-Ponty on Existential Sexuality: A Critique,’ *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology* 1, no. 1 (January 1980): 67-81, 73.

⁶⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁶⁵⁵ PhP, 172.

⁶⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 178.

⁶⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 172.

⁶⁵⁸ Gavin Rae, ‘Merleau-Ponty on the Sexed Body,’ *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology* 51, no. 2 (November 2020): 162-183, 176.

⁶⁵⁹ Dillon, ‘Merleau-Ponty on Existential Sexuality: A Critique,’ 70.

rather than given,⁶⁶⁰ and second, his presumption that Schneider's sexual inertia is inherently 'abnormal' in relation to a 'natural' sexuality which would be heterosexual. Thus, Butler argues that Merleau-Ponty's analysis, whilst rejecting naturalistic reductions of sexuality to the function of reproduction, in fact reverts into universalising and hence 'naturalising' claims about sexuality such as it must be for everyone. By 'everyone,' Butler argues, Merleau-Ponty in fact means heterosexual men, insofar as he presumes this to be the norm against which Schneider stands out. Butler even rather absurdly calls Schneider 'a feminist of sorts'⁶⁶¹ insofar as he derives no sexual arousal from pornographic and objectifying pictures of women.

Responding to Butler, Anna Foutier argues convincingly that Butler views the case of Schneider in abstraction from his own situation (which *is* abnormal for him following the injury) and from the context of the *Phenomenology* as a whole (Schneider is used in almost every chapter in the first part to analyse impairments to being in the world, thus the treatment of his case in the sexuality chapter presupposes some knowledge about his situation).⁶⁶² Further developing Foutier's critique, I argue that Butler negates any existential effects of the injury on Schneider's life such as he lived it before. Like Dillon, then, Butler, in this early text, abstracts and rigidifies elements of Merleau-Ponty's analysis that are in fact characterised by a dynamism. Rae, responding to Butler's critique, emphasises the pre-objective structure of erotic perception which operates prior to and as a condition for categories such as feminine, masculine, queer, gay, straight, etc. In contrast to Butler's starting point from such sexual orientations, Rae writes: 'Merleau-Ponty affirms the anonymity of the sexual schema to suspend the conceptual schemas of reflectivity to avoid prejudging the pre-reflective lived body and, indeed, let the latter reveal itself as it is not as how we may wish it to be.'⁶⁶³ It is not that eroticism operates at some valueless 'natural' stage, but rather that the categorisation into sexual identities and orientations is the result of the reflection upon anonymous, pre-reflective, fluid bodily 'schemas' or 'rhythms.' Rather

⁶⁶⁰ Butler, 'Sexual Ideology and Phenomenological Description: A Feminist Critique of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*,' 90.

⁶⁶¹ Rae, 'Merleau-Ponty on the Sexed Body,' 95.

⁶⁶² Anna Foutier, 'Language and the Gendered Body: Butler's Early Reading of Merleau-Ponty,' *Hypatia* 28, no. 4 (Fall 2013): 767-783, 774.

⁶⁶³ Rae, 'Merleau-Ponty on the Sexed Body,' 174.

than starting from the categorisation into sexual identities or orientations, then, a phenomenological approach to eroticism must start from these rhythms themselves.

Insofar as Merleau-Ponty does not, and does not claim to, address the historically differentiated ways in which bodies come to desire differently, the feminist critique is not unfounded, although it is somewhat misplaced. This is because Merleau-Ponty's analysis in 'The Body as a Sexed Being,' rather than making a claim about the universalist character of desire such as it must be for everyone, in fact makes a more basic claim about the strictly bodily or sensible dimension of our most intimate intercorporeal relations. Indeed, insofar as the 'visible body' is underpinned by a 'secret' sexual schema, Merleau-Ponty implies, the visual perception of another body does not by itself generate sexual desire: Schneider is perfectly capable of seeing other bodies, but they do not express or mean anything to him. The visible contains, as its own immanent excess, an erotic pull which is 'suggested' to the pre-objective erotic perception of another body, and the 'erotic "comprehension"'⁶⁶⁴ at work here transcends any consciousness or even perception of it. Just as Merleau-Ponty, in the chapter on sexuality, argues that 'desire comprehends blindly by linking one body to another,'⁶⁶⁵ in 'Sensing,' he writes that 'the term that [sensation] intends is only recognised blindly through the familiarity of my body with it.'⁶⁶⁶ The linking of bodies in erotic perception is thus a 'blind' process which implies a strange temporality; just as, in order for my body to 'commune' with the blue, my body must adopt a blue attitude which it receives from the sensible itself, so in order for my body to have an erotic encounter, my body must adopt a specific erotic attitude which it paradoxically 'receives' from another body. The erotic attitude, then, like the blue attitude, cannot be willed or forced, for this is precisely what makes sexuality a problem for Schneider. He can *only* will himself to engage in an erotic situation and thus quickly loses any interest. Insofar as we cannot know in advance to whose 'sexual schema' our erotic perception will respond, the risk of abandoning oneself to the erotic encounter with another body is analogous to that of abandoning oneself to the sensory encounter with 'blue.'

⁶⁶⁴ PhP, 159.

⁶⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶⁶ Ibid., 221.

6.b. The need for abandon: the sensible rhythm of erotic encounters

A phenomenological conceptualisation of eroticism such as this works in sexual life thus allows us to understand how an erotic encounter, in Beauvoir's words, 'demands total abandon'⁶⁶⁷ to *being* a body if the encounter is to be pleasurable or empowering. The paradox is that pleasure and empowerment require a certain passivity, a daring to give oneself over to one's desire, to one's body, and to the other. An erotic encounter, then, always involves a certain level of vulnerability as bodies that were once separate move closer to one another in their rhythm of binding. This paradox of the erotic encounter is expressed precisely by the rhythm of flesh, as the simultaneous binding and separation of bodies.⁶⁶⁸ Indeed, Jonna Bornemark, in a phenomenological description of a sexual fantasy, characterises the erotic encounter in these terms of binding and separation. She describes the touching of another of 'those places where I normally only touch myself, where the skin becomes membrane, the inside of my mouth in the kiss, (...). You break my borders and you dislocate my own self-encounter when wet perforated parts meet.'⁶⁶⁹ Whilst Merleau-Ponty is not concerned with providing an account of an erotic encounter, in the *Visible and the Invisible*, we detect a certain eroticism of sensibility itself. The body, he writes, is '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.'⁶⁷⁰ Whilst the blurring of contours effectuated through the erotic binding of bodies entails a certain loss of separateness, this is not an objectification of one body by the other but is rather the very precondition for pleasure and intimacy. Bornemark precisely draws attention to the paradoxically unifying power of the space between bodies in the erotic encounter, through the double function of the limit as at once separating and binding: 'the limit is what we share.'⁶⁷¹ The dynamic sharing of a limit – of the skin or the feeling of love – thus neither completely conflates nor absolutely differentiates bodies; it is, rather, the hinge that allows for their intertwinement.

Understanding the erotic encounter through the sensible rhythm of flesh, then, implies that it operates below any strict or binary categorisations into subject and object, masculine and

⁶⁶⁷ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 422.

⁶⁶⁸ See pp. 143-155 of this thesis for an analysis of the rhythm of flesh.

⁶⁶⁹ Jonna Bornemark, 'The Erotic as Limit-Experience: A Sexual Fantasy,' in *Phenomenology of Eros*, ed. Jonna Bornemark and Marcia Sá Cavalcante Schuback (Södertörn: Södertörn Philosophical Studies, 2012), 263.

⁶⁷⁰ VI, 144.

⁶⁷¹ Bornemark, 'The Erotic as Limit-Experience: A Sexual Fantasy,' 262.

feminine, activity and passivity. Melissa Febos describes in her memoir how, after decades of troubling, unpleasurable sexual relations inhibited by anxieties about looking, moving, desiring in a too 'masculine' way – that is, anxieties about gender conformity – she found true pleasure with one partner:

'Our sex does not feel like an exchange of power, but like a natural event that can only occur when both of us stop thinking of ourselves and trust our bodies completely. No one plays the boy, because no one *plays* anything. It can't happen unless we trust that we'll be loved at our most animal. Intimacy (...) is a closeness to another person that requires closeness with oneself.'⁶⁷²

It was only once Febos shifted the balance from being governed by a dominant perceptual body image (perceiving herself as if from the outside as being too 'masculine') to a trust in her sensible body schema, her style of moving, feeling, desiring, that she could finally give herself over to the erotic relation, trusting that her body and her desire would not be ridiculed, rejected, or violated.⁶⁷³ Katherine Angel, too, in her personal reflection on desire, writes about her erotic experience with one partner: 'I have sunk down into my self, into my desire. I have become a body. I have sounds, but I have fewer words.'⁶⁷⁴

Pleasure thus requires that one abandon oneself to *being* a sensible body prior to the differentiation into subject and object which the perceptual body image entails. Yet to say that the erotic encounter operates prior to the categorisation into subject and object, 'masculine' and 'feminine,' is not to say that it operates in a utopian realm free from gender norms. Rather, an erotic encounter operates at a generative level of bodily life that has the capacity to momentarily suspend, and thus inadvertently expose, the restrictive force that binary gender norms otherwise impose upon the movement of bodies. We saw above that the 'abnormal' case of Schneider's affective flattening makes visible the eroticism that is a basic structure of 'normal' bodily life, but which is, in the natural attitude, taken for granted and thus not noticed. Conversely, the erotic encounter suspends the gender norms that are usually taken for granted as 'normal' or even 'natural' and reveal these as not necessarily 'normal' or 'natural' at all.⁶⁷⁵ The erotic thus describes a generative level insofar as this

⁶⁷² Melissa Febos, *Girlhood* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 127-8.

⁶⁷³ For an analysis of the body schema and the body image, see pp. 149-155 of this thesis.

⁶⁷⁴ Katherine Angel, *Unmastered: A Book on Desire, Most Difficult to Tell* (London: Penguin, 2014), 42.

⁶⁷⁵ In a recent article, Gail Weiss argues that Merleau-Ponty's discussions of 'abnormal' cases such as Schneider's serve to challenge rather than reinforce what is usually taken for granted as normal or accepted as normative. See Gail Weiss, 'The Normal, the Natural, and the Normative: A Merleau-Pontyan Legacy to

momentary suspension opens the possibility for living out other kinds of desire that do not necessarily conform to the normative prescriptions of how genders ought to desire, move, touch, feel.

Angel asks: 'Could we not aim for a wondrous, universal, democratic pleasure detached from gender; a hedonism available to all?'⁶⁷⁶ Yet such democratic pleasure, as I will argue, would not be 'detached' or free from gender, but would, rather, be a way of 'being' one's gender differently, in ways that do not necessarily conform with binary norms. This way of being one's gender differently is not reducible to Butler's notion of the parodic repetition of drag which, '[i]n imitating gender, (...) implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency.'⁶⁷⁷ Given that, as I argue, eroticism operates at the level of bodily sensibility prior to consciousness, 'being' one's gender differently in the erotic encounter is not really parody understood as a more or less conscious act which, in exaggerating gender normative ways of moving and desiring, exposes the constructedness of these. 'Being' one's gender differently in the erotic encounter is not a conscious effort; it is rather a trusting in one's body schematic way of moving and desiring which does not necessarily conform to gender normative ideas. The suspension of norms and the trust in one's own body then go hand in hand and make possible the exploration of non-conforming and non-binary ways of desiring, yet these would precisely not be 'detached' from gender, but rather other ways of 'inhabiting' gender.

Erotic encounters in adult life, then, recall the rhythm of binding and separation of bodies to/from one another as described in chapter five in relation to child development, thus reiterating the sensible binding and separation of bodies that defines intercorporeality as such.⁶⁷⁸ The binding of bodies in the erotic encounter is not a merging and erasure of their separate autonomy; this would again be the objectification of one by the other. As Levinas writes in *Time and the Other*, eros 'differs from possession and power (...). It is neither a struggle, nor a fusion, nor a knowledge.'⁶⁷⁹ And further: 'If one could possess, grasp, and

Feminist Theory, Critical Race Theory, and Disability Studies,' *Continental Philosophy Review* 48, no. 1 (March 2015): 77-93.

⁶⁷⁶ Katherine Angel, *Tomorrow Sex Will Be Good Again: Women and Desire in the Age of Consent* (London: Verso, 2021), 68.

⁶⁷⁷ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 2nd edition (New York: Routledge, 2007), 187.

⁶⁷⁸ See pp. 149-155 of this thesis.

⁶⁷⁹ TO, 88.

know the other, it would not be other.⁶⁸⁰ Yet whilst the erotic encounter is not governed by a subject/object dialectic, it is not still or static but is essentially dynamic. Erotic experience, Merleau-Ponty writes, is 'a passive experience, given to everyone and always available of the human condition in its most general moments of autonomy and dependence.'⁶⁸¹ 'Passive' here is not reducible to receptivity but should rather be understood in its specificity as the passive activity or the active passivity of sensibility in its pre-perceptual rhythm. Whilst the erotic encounter is not predominantly governed by received power structures, then, it designates a rhythmic movement of bodies that are at once dependent and autonomous, autonomous through their dependence. The openness of bodies is thus the condition for pleasure to be experienced in giving oneself over to *being* a body. Yet it is precisely this openness that makes bodies at once capable of intimacy and susceptible to violence.

It is this risk of violence that Merleau-Ponty points towards at the end of the chapter on sexuality, as he invokes a Sartrean understanding of desire in terms of the master/slave dialectic.⁶⁸²

'Insofar as I have a body, I can be reduced to an object beneath the gaze of another person and no longer count for him as a person. Or again, to the contrary, I can become his master and gaze upon him in turn. But this mastery is a dead end, since, at the moment my value is recognised by the other's desire, the other person is no longer the person by whom I wanted to be recognised: he is now a fascinated being, without freedom, and who as such no longer counts for me.'⁶⁸³

This Sartrean understanding of desire as essentially objectifying contradicts Merleau-Ponty's previous analyses of the ways in which erotic perception works prior to any objectification. There is, then, an effective ambiguity in 'The Body as a Sexed Being' between, on the one hand, an understanding of eroticism as a modality of sensibility through pre-objective erotic perception, and, on the other, an understanding of sexual desire as inherently objectifying and stuck in the alternative between the objectification of the other and the objectification of oneself. In this latter conception, there would be no possibility for an empowering egalitarian erotic encounter. Whilst Sartre conceives this objectifying relation as essentially

⁶⁸⁰ Ibid., 89.

⁶⁸¹ PhP, 170.

⁶⁸² See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (London: Routledge, 2003), 364-378; 393-412.

⁶⁸³ PhP, 170.

descriptive of eroticism, however, Merleau-Ponty's evocation of Sartre, given its contrast with the rest of the chapter, should be read as emphasising one potential outcome of the erotic encounter. Thus, rather than rejecting Merleau-Ponty's analysis of eroticism because of this ambiguity, I propose a productive reading that employs this ambiguity to better understand the risk involved in any erotic encounter.

Bodies abandoning themselves to their sensibility or sensuality always do so at the risk of the kind of objectification Merleau-Ponty mentions. Given that women are at higher risk of objectification and violence than men, however, it is not surprising that women, as we shall see in more detail in the final section, generally find it more difficult to give in to their bodies, to their desire. Indeed, the difficulty of finding the balance between *being* a body without being objectified is, as Beauvoir writes, not universal in degree: insofar as woman is already Other, 'she has to reconquer her dignity as transcendent and free subject while assuming her carnal condition: this is a delicate and risky enterprise that often fails.'⁶⁸⁴ Whilst, as I have argued, an erotic encounter is not unilaterally governed by structures of domination, objectification, or received ideas and norms prescribing how bodies should and should not move, look, or feel, then, this is not to say that these norms do not to a large extent structure the degree to which bodies are *capable* of the kind of abandonment needed for the erotic encounter to be empowering.

6.c. The (un)freedom of desire: genetic and generative perspectives

To understand the contextual structuring of the capacity for the kind of abandon required for an erotic encounter, we turn to Merleau-Ponty's most explicit formulation of transcendence as the taking up of existence which appears towards the end of the chapter on 'The Body as a Sexed Being':

'Existence is indeterminate in itself because of its fundamental structure: insofar as existence is the very operation by which something that had no sense takes on sense, by which something that only had a sexual sense adopts a more general signification, by which chance is transformed into reason, or in other words insofar as existence is the taking up of a *de facto* situation. "Transcendence" is the name we

⁶⁸⁴ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 427.

shall give to this movement by which existence takes up for itself and transforms a *de facto* situation.’⁶⁸⁵

Transcendence as the bodily taking up of an existential situation, as I will argue in relation to the erotic in the remainder of this chapter, works most basically not at the level of perception, but rather at the level of bodily sensibility. We see this sensible operation of transcendence in Merleau-Ponty’s description of the case of a young girl who, after having been forbidden to see her lover, develops aphonia and anorexia. He describes the movement of transcendence through which her body ‘translates’ the prohibition of her desire into aphonia through an analogy to sleep in almost identical terms to the description of sensibility in terms of sleep in the chapter on ‘Sensing’ as analysed in chapter five.⁶⁸⁶ The passage is thus worth citing in full:

‘Moreover, the situation of aphonia can be compared to sleep: I lie down in my bed, on my left side, with my knees drawn up; I close my eyes, breathe slowly, and distance myself from my projects. But this is where the power of my will or consciousness ends. Just as the faithful Dionysian mysteries invoke the god by imitating the scenes of his life, I too call forth the visitation of sleep by imitating the breathing and posture of the sleeper. (...) Sleep “arrives” at a particular moment, it settles upon this imitation of itself that I offered it, and I succeed in becoming what I pretended to be: that unseeing and nearly unthinking mass, confined to a point in space and no longer in the world except through the anonymous vigilance of the senses. This last link is surely what makes waking up possible: things will return through these half-open doors, or the sleeper will return through them to the world.’⁶⁸⁷

In both chapters, then, the anonymity of sensibility is emphasised as that which at once allows one to fall asleep, to withdraw into one’s body, and to wake up to the world and other bodies. Merleau-Ponty argues that the bodily symptoms of aphonia and anorexia are neither examples of bad faith, nor purely physiological effects. Just as falling asleep is neither a question of wilfully ‘choosing’ to sleep nor of being forcefully put to sleep, aphonia is neither a question of choosing not to speak despite being capable of doing so, nor is it explained by purely physiological or mechanical reasons: ‘the young woman never *stops* speaking; rather, she “loses” her voice as one loses a memory.’⁶⁸⁸ The memory and the voice have not been destroyed but lie dormant, just as active consciousness does when we

⁶⁸⁵ PhP, 173.

⁶⁸⁶ For an analysis of sleep in relation to sensibility, see page 138 of this thesis.

⁶⁸⁷ PhP, 166-7. Compare this to the passage on sleep in ‘Sensing,’ *Ibid.*, 219.

⁶⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 164.

sleep. Thus, in sleep as in aphonia, Merleau-Ponty writes, one is 'no longer in the world except through the anonymous vigilance of the senses.'⁶⁸⁹ One is withdrawn into one's body, which at the same time inescapably anchors one in the world.

It is not the case, then, that the girl makes a choice to give up speaking and eating, but that her body takes up the givens of her existence at the time - that of having had her desire denied her – and transforms or translates this into the painful meaning it has for her. Ultimately this meaning is that of the refusal of others through the literal impossibility of speaking and that of life itself through the literal impossibility of eating: 'The patient is literally unable "to swallow" the prohibition that has been imposed upon her.'⁶⁹⁰ Unable to 'digest' the world, she retreats into herself, into her body, as when one retreats to sleep to escape an overwhelming sadness. Whilst Merleau-Ponty's description of the ways in which social situations translate into bodily attitudes is phenomenologically orientated, scientific research spanning the last thirty years supports his analyses. In *The Physiology of Sexist and Racist Oppression*, Shannon Sullivan cites a 1990 study which found that almost half of all women with chronic gastrointestinal problems have experienced childhood sexual abuse, and that irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) disproportionately affects women on a two to one scale.⁶⁹¹ From this, Sullivan concludes:

[W]omen's guts often have difficulty digesting and absorbing components of a sexist world that tends to be hostile to them, and this difficulty is as much a biological matter as it is a psychological one. "Digestion" and "absorption" are not metaphors in this claim. (Neither is "a sexist world.") The type of gut in question literally will not digest and absorb its food without abdominal pain, diarrhoea, and/or constipation, indicating that it does not want to be constituted by a world that includes its (her) sexual abuse.'⁶⁹²

These facts and analyses suggest that the movement of transcendence through which bodies take up 'sexual' elements – such as sexual violence or the prohibition of desire – and translate these into something that has existential significance (IBS, aphonia, or anorexia imply a refusal of the world through the refusal of food or a refusal of others through the refusal to speak), happens not only at a cognitive but also at a bodily level.

⁶⁸⁹ Ibid., 167.

⁶⁹⁰ Ibid., 163.

⁶⁹¹ Drossman, et. al., 'Sexual and Physical Abuse in Women with Functional or Organic Gastrointestinal Disorders,' 228–833, cited in Sullivan, *On the Physiology of Sexist and Racist Oppression*, 70.

⁶⁹² Sullivan, *On the Physiology of Sexist and Racist Oppression*, 71-2.

Whilst the prohibition and the sexual assault literally sediment in a changed form in the materiality of the body, as IBS, aphonia, or anorexia, these bodily traces of the event in turn structure anew how the body senses itself, the world, and others. The sensible and existential expression of the prohibition or abuse, in these cases, is the literal closing off of the body to the world and other bodies. Designating a restriction of the movements *within* the body, this closing off is the 'internal' analogy to the contradictory bodily motility described by Young and analysed in chapter five.⁶⁹³ These bodies turn inwards in a protective or defiant posture, a refusal to let the world and others in so as not to have to suffer the prohibition or the assault again. Yet this protective or defiant bodily attitude is not only a shield against others; it is at the same time felt as painful or restrictive for the body itself. Insofar as the gut rejects the world through which it is inevitably and continuously constituted, this is a contradictory bodily attitude in which the body is at once, qua body, open to and dependent on its world and others, and at the same time closed off from it. The body's refusal of the world and of others is thus at the same time a refusal or an inhibition of itself, a closing off from itself, too.

These movements of transcendence, then, are cases of the body seeking to protect itself from an outside hostility. But how does the movement of transcendence as the taking up of existence operate, not only in a protective response to concrete experiences of prohibition or violence, but also in an appropriative response to historical structures such as patriarchy and heteronormativity? In *Gender Trouble*, Butler famously argues that gender is performative, that is, that gender norms are reiterated and perpetuated through the ways in which bodies 'take up' and repeat these norms in their acts, gestures, and styles of moving and desiring. These norms, which do not have existence in themselves outside of their bodily repetition, then, sediment in bodily postures and take on the appearance of being 'natural,' or, as Butler writes, 'substantial': 'Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being.'⁶⁹⁴ Moreover, Butler argues, performing a gender is integral to and indistinguishable from the constitution of subjectivity itself. There is no subjectivity that is not always already gendered, and a

⁶⁹³ See pp. 141-2 of this thesis.

⁶⁹⁴ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 45.

coherent or, in their words, 'intelligible' gender and hence an 'intelligible' subject is one in which there is an internal coherence between sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire, that is, a heterosexual subject.⁶⁹⁵ Heteronormativity, then, is upheld only through the constitutive exclusion of bodies whose sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire do not follow easily from one another; this constitutive exclusion effectively leaves nonconforming gendered bodies outside the realm of intelligible subjectivity itself.⁶⁹⁶ My aim is not to engage critically with Butler's analyses but rather to emphasise their notion that subjectivity itself is at stake in the taking up of the 'right' kind of gender, and that gender as a social demand is not a contingent bodily dimension or attribute that could be bracketed or reduced; rather, the gender norms that one unknowingly takes up constitutively structure, permeate, and infiltrate one's most intimate bodily interactions and relations.

This bodily 'taking up' of gender, then, cannot be explained solely through the ways in which children take on an idiosyncratic body schematic style of moving by imitating their parents and close relations. This kind of imitation can explain how children often come to adopt an uncannily similar air of moving to that of their close relations. Yet it does not really explain how bodies take on a gender specific style of moving that transcends concrete relations between bodies and that are not strictly idiosyncratic but are generally shared by bodies of the same gender. The body schematic style of moving that bodies develop, then, comes not only from the actual meetings with other bodies 'in the flesh,' but also from wider social, historical, and cultural frameworks. Yet how do normative ideas about how bodies should move come to structure how bodies actually move? Is it that the bodies one imitates embody not only an idiosyncratic style of moving but also a historically specific commonality, a certain ideality? If so, then the sensibility through which bodies take up a gender normative style of moving is not 'merely' material, but contains, as its own immanent excess, a certain ideality that is 'embodied' (though not in an exhaustive way) in the body schematic style of moving itself.

The notion of an embodied ideality in relation to gender can be explained by the sense in which the phenomenological sensing of *being* a body that moves in the world⁶⁹⁷ itself points

⁶⁹⁵ Ibid., 30-1. Butler terms this assumption of a linear and stable relation between sex and gender which is upheld through the practice of heterosexuality 'the heterosexual matrix.' See *ibid.*, 208.

⁶⁹⁶ Ibid., 23.

⁶⁹⁷ For analyses of the sensing of *being* a body that moves, see pp. 40-1; 56-8 of this thesis.

towards the quasi-transcendental structure of patriarchy which, whilst it is not 'given' in experience, yet 'breathes' through or expresses itself in the concrete movements and behaviours of bodies. The notion of sensibility, then, whilst accounting for the empirical ways in which bodies move, is not reducible to such empiricism; rather, the notion of sensibility at the same time designates the ways in which normative structures that do not, strictly speaking, have bodily existence, are continuously taken up, imitated, and appropriated by bodies. In the sensible taking up of a gender normative style of moving, it is appropriate to speak of a sensible imitation which is integral to the formation and sedimentation of an always already gendered body schema, rather than the bodily response of protection from prohibition and sexual violence analysed above.

How, then, does gender- and heteronormativity structure, impact, or inhibit the erotic lives of bodies? Two phenomena which can help us to address this question,⁶⁹⁸ as I will argue in the remainder of this chapter, are i) a lack of or a low level of desire to engage in erotic encounters at all which is the most common sexual 'problem' reported by women partnered with men⁶⁹⁹ and ii) the cultural sexualisation and objectification of women's bodies. The pervasiveness of the reported 'problem' of low desire may, of course, as Rosemary Basson argues in her influential article 'The Female Sexual Response,' reflect a misunderstood conception of female sexual desire as spontaneous and as pre-existing sexual arousal. Rather than spontaneous desire, Basson writes, women's desire is generally responsive: women may not desire sex prior to the act itself but may be responsive to a partner's initiation, and may, for non-sexual reasons such as intimacy or bonding, 'choose' to engage in sex.⁷⁰⁰

Arousal is then experienced only after the woman has 'decided' to engage in sex; following arousal, desire may form. According to this model, sexual desire develops *after* sexual arousal, not the other way around, and arousal and desire then interact non-linearly in a

⁶⁹⁸ In the following analysis, I focus on the example of bodies that live their eroticism in a 'heterosexual' way. It would be interesting and important to investigate how eroticism expresses itself in bodies that do not live their sexual lives 'heterosexually.'

⁶⁹⁹ See, for example, van Anders, et al. 'The Heteronormativity Theory of Low Sexual Desire in Women Partnered with Men,' 393. See also Hayfield and Clarke, "'I'd Be Just as Happy with a Cup of Tea'"; Julia R. Heiman, et al. 'Sexual Desire, Sexual Arousal and Hormonal Differences in Premenopausal US and Dutch Women with and without Low Sexual Desire,' *Hormones and Behaviour* 59, no. 5 (May 2011): 772-779.

⁷⁰⁰ Rosemary Basson, 'The Female Sexual Response: A Different Model,' *Journal of Sex and Marital Therapy* 26, no. 1 (January – February 2000): 51-65, 53-4.

positive or a negative feedback loop, depending on the context of the situation (the relationship dynamics, level of stress, etc.). Although pleasure is required for desire to develop and for women to be likely to engage in sex again, resulting in what Angel calls a 'virtuous circle'⁷⁰¹ of desire – arousal, the responsive model of female sexual desire argues that women generally have sex for nonsexual reasons, and thus that female sexuality has less to do with a physical or biological need than a cognitive weighing up of non-sexual rewards. Indeed, Basson writes: '[t]he rewards of emotional closeness (...) together with an appreciation of the subsequent well-being of the partner all serve as the motivational factors that will activate the cycle next time.'⁷⁰²

Whilst the responsive model of female sexual desire helps to elucidate the intertwining of arousal, desire, and the context of the relationship, Angel identifies two problems with it. First, the notion that women engage in sex for nonsexual reasons but that they may enjoy it once it is underway and therefore should be open to it, Angel writes, 'risks turning sexual desire into something towards which women must strive – even when they don't want to,'⁷⁰³ effectively turning sex into a duty. This, in turn, makes it difficult to establish the line 'between reasonable effort in a relationship and unacceptable pressure into sex.'⁷⁰⁴ Second, Angel argues, the responsive model effectively reinforces a normative understanding which takes male sexuality for granted as a biological drive whilst women must be persuaded or convinced to engage in sex: 'This is a scenario in which men want and push, and women have to calculate, decide, and resist; one entirely exploited and exploitable by men who already see their desire as biological entitlement, and women as persuadable accessories to it.'⁷⁰⁵

The way in which women's lack of desire is conceived in both popular and scientific discourse, then, at once reflects and reinforces the cliché according to which a low level of desire is a more or less natural trait of female sexuality compared to male sexuality which is, in Basson's words, '[t]o some degree (...) independent of context.'⁷⁰⁶ Arguably, the fact that so many women partnered with men report a 'low' level of desire to some extent reflects

⁷⁰¹ Angel, *Tomorrow Sex Will Be Good Again*, 56.

⁷⁰² Basson, 'The Female Sexual Response: A Different Model,' 54.

⁷⁰³ Angel, *Tomorrow Sex Will Be Good Again*, 61.

⁷⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁰⁵ Ibid., 65.

⁷⁰⁶ Basson, 'The Female Sexual Response: A Different Model,' 52.

the common understanding of their male partners' typically higher level of sexual desire as the norm against which their own (lack of) desire stands out.⁷⁰⁷ Whilst Basson's responsive model is valuable in that it emphasises the circularity, rather than the linearity, of sexual arousal, desire, and the context of the relationship, then, it falls short in its neglect of the wider historical contexts which underlie and structure the internal dynamic of the model itself. Given that, as Angel argues, 'desire is rarely *not* responsive – it's just that we forget to think of certain conditions as context,'⁷⁰⁸ we need to ask whether the contexts of patriarchy and heteronormativity might be uncondusive to the elicitation of female sexual desire. Is there something inherently unsexy about the heteronormative gender roles which women partnered with men inevitably and unknowingly, in one way or another, take up? I ask this question neither to argue that a 'low' level or a lack of sexual desire is a problem in itself, nor to argue that the emancipation of female sexual desire entails its meeting the level of male sexual desire (not least given that male sexual desire is no less contextually structured than female sexual desire). Rather, I ask this question to develop a better understanding of the ways in which bodies take up their historically specific existential situation, and how this comes to structure their erotic lives.

Whilst I am interested in the ways in which desire is lived at the level of the body, I do not rely on the scientific approach which seeks to explain desire through an essentialist approach to the biological body.⁷⁰⁹ The continued and widespread attempts to 'measure' sexual arousal through devices such as vaginal plethysmographs bear witness to a positivism which considers measurable dimensions of the biological body as one-to-one representations of sexual desire, where such measurements do not necessarily reflect the

⁷⁰⁷ In a small psychological study into low desire in women partnered with men, the women's statements reflect the common presumption that men 'need' sex and if women lack a desire to engage in sex, the problem lies with the woman rather than the man: 'Heather said: "I do it because I know a man needs it." Clare commented: "[h]e's a man, and I think that's a man's thing.'" Hayfield and Clarke, "'I'd Be Just as Happy with a Cup of Tea,'" 67-74, 71.

⁷⁰⁸ Angel, *Tomorrow Sex Will Be Good Again*, 57.

⁷⁰⁹ Essentialist scientific discourses largely assume a linear causality between the level of testosterone and the level of sexual desire, thus proposing a 'naturalist' explanation for women's lower level of desire. Yet according to social neuroendocrinologist Sari M. van Anders, whilst testosterone is complexly linked to desire, the presupposition that there is a linear causality between the two is simplistic and has no empirical evidence. Sari M. van Anders, 'Testosterone and Sexual Desire in Healthy Women and Men,' *Archives of Sexual Behaviour* 41, no. 6 (December 2012): 1471-1484.

degree of desire or arousal actually experienced.⁷¹⁰ Furthermore, as Angel argues, the measurement of arousal in a clinical setting removed from the everyday lives of bodies 'reveals a stubborn reluctance to think about how bodies and physiological processes unfold in a ceaselessly cultural context.'⁷¹¹ Thus, whilst the body, as Angel argues, 'is no arbiter, should be no arbiter,'⁷¹² for sexual arousal or desire, this does not preclude, as I will argue, a non-essentialist approach to desire such as it is lived at the level of the body. Rather than a positivist approach, I will argue that sexual desire is better investigated through an existential phenomenological approach which, rather than attempting to objectively 'determine' or 'define' the 'causes' for a high or low sexual desire, conceptualises eroticism in relation to the concrete existential situation and the ways in which bodies *live* desire. A critical phenomenological investigation, then, appreciates the fluidity and the contextual dependency of erotic desire, and argues that the 'explanation' for a low or high level of desire must be found not in an essentialist approach to the biological body but rather in the ways in which bodies interact with one another and their world at the level of sensibility.

Within a critical phenomenological framework, then, a lack of or a low level of desire should be understood as the bodily closing off from the possibility for erotic encounters, a certain erotic disinterestedness. Whilst low desire is not a problem in itself, and whilst it may reflect anxieties about pain or an unsatisfactory level of pleasure experienced if sex does happen, might this erotic disinterestedness reflect something more than the context of the relationship? In a recent paper, an interdisciplinary team of researchers working in fields spanning neuroscience, gender studies, psychology, public health, and gynaecology propose what they call the 'heteronormativity theory' to 'show how low desire in women partnered with men may not be a problem itself and, instead, reflects one – namely, heteronormativity.'⁷¹³ The authors list four historically specific areas which prove uncondusive to the elicitation of female sexual desire, these being 'inequitable gendered divisions of household labour, having to be a partner's mother, the objectification of

⁷¹⁰ Such devices are still widely used in clinical trials to ascertain women's sexual desire. See, for example, Heiman et al., 'Sexual Desire, Sexual Arousal and Hormonal Differences in Premenopausal US and Dutch Women with and without Low Sexual Desire,' 772-779.

⁷¹¹ Angel, *Tomorrow Sex Will Be Good Again*, 82.

⁷¹² *Ibid.*, 83.

⁷¹³ van Anders, et al. 'The Heteronormativity Theory of Low Sexual Desire in Women Partnered with Men,' 398.

women, and gender norms surrounding sexual initiation.⁷¹⁴ I will investigate two of these, focusing ultimately on the ways in which they play out at a bodily level: i) the maternal gender role many women take on in relation to their male partners and the non-sexual nurturing bodily attitude this may call forth and ii) the focus on appearing desirable rather than experiencing pleasure, that is, as I will argue, the dominance of the body image over the body schema.

Women have historically invested a disproportionate amount of non-sexual erotic energy into the emotional and physical well-being of others (children, the elderly), resulting in a forgetting or a de-prioritisation of their own desire or well-being. This is arguably still true; women still take on a disproportionate amount of childcare, housework, and emotional labour compared to their male partners, and, as van Anders et al. write, it often falls on the woman to remind their male partner of social gatherings and so on: 'Women end up doing many of the same things for their men partners as mothers do for their children, e.g., reminding them of chores, organising social events (or playdates), buying clothes, ensuring there is food for snacks and meals and that these are made available.'⁷¹⁵ It is not, the authors emphasise, that the maternal body is essentially de-eroticised but that the relationship between mother and child is not one of erotic sex or desire. Taking on a parental role in relation to one's partner, then, whilst affective and caring, is essentially unsexy. If women take on a parental role in relation to their male partners in their everyday lives, this arguably translates into their erotic relations, too, reflecting the normative idea that it is women's responsibility to satisfy their male partners' need for sex. In a small psychological study into women's lack of desire in heterosexual relationships, the authors asked the participants why they would sometimes engage in sex despite not desiring it: 'When asked whether she ever said no to her husband's "throwing himself at her," Madge commented that if she did: "we have a sulk and he's tossing and turning all night and y'know, it's not worth it to be honest."⁷¹⁶ The very way in which Madge talks about having to satisfy her partner's need is suggestive of the way in which a parent would give in to a petulant child to avoid the child screaming or kicking up a fuss, which would be worse than giving in to their desires in the first place.

⁷¹⁴ Ibid.

⁷¹⁵ Ibid., 400.

⁷¹⁶ Hayfield and Clarke, "'I'd Be Just as Happy with a Cup of Tea,'" 72.

For many women, then, sex becomes a responsibility or obligation rather than something joyfully engaged in. Whilst caring for one another is essential in a relationship and sometimes involves sacrifice and compromise, a responsibility to engage in sex felt as a burden is not conducive to an erotic encounter which should precisely be mutually desired. When women engage in sex despite their lack of desire, they do it for the sake of their partners or the relationship, not for the sake of their own pleasure. This, then, takes the form, not of an erotic encounter at all, but of a one-way provision of satisfaction or relief which not only does not take the woman's pleasure into account but also generates a vicious circle through which women are less likely to desire sex in the future. Whilst women are generally happy to be non-sexually intimate with their partners as they would with their child, erotic sex, then, often becomes yet another duty women feel obliged to engage in, thus adding to the general stress of being a woman in patriarchal society. At what level does this resistance to or disinterest in erotic sex develop? Is it purely psychological or cognitive or does it also translate at the level of the body?

Whilst the essentialist approach to the biological body cannot, qua essentialist, account for the ways in which the body is culturally (trans)formed, the novel field of social neuroendocrinology, which investigates the interaction between hormones and social behaviour, can perhaps shed a light on the contextual structuring of physiology itself. The general situation of being a woman in patriarchal society is, at least for younger women, largely characterised by stress and anxiety about living up to impossible and contradictory ideals and having to negotiate the constant threat of sexual violence and objectification. Whilst stress usually has negative connotations, its clinical definition describes it as 'a value-neutral process whereby bodies respond to changes in the internal or external environment.'⁷¹⁷ Sexual arousal is an acute stressor which increases the level of cortisol released from the adrenal gland, and which is usually associated with pleasure. A chronically stressed body, however, means chronically high levels of cortisol which leads the adrenal glands to shut down from overstimulation. The chronically stressed body, then, no longer responds to acute stressors, of which sexual arousal is one. Whilst chronic stress negatively impacts sexual desire in bodies of all sexes and genders, given that women report

⁷¹⁷ van Anders, et al., 'The Heteronormativity Theory of Low Sexual Desire in Women Partnered with Men,' 403.

disproportionately higher levels of stress and anxiety compared to men,⁷¹⁸ van Anders concludes that 'it perhaps makes sense that the chronic stress of women's heteronormative roles could be responsible for low desire – for example, because this chronic stress could blunt the acute cortisol responses that would more typically accompany sexual stimuli in ways that contribute to low desire.'⁷¹⁹

Whilst the degree to which bodies are (in)capable of the kind of abandon required for the erotic encounter is surely influenced by psychological factors (as the feminist emphasis on the 'internalisation' of patriarchal structures suggests), social neuroendocrinology perhaps shows that this resistance to abandon also happens at the level of physiology. The closing off from the possibility of erotic encounters, then, is not merely a cognitive or psychic resistance, but arguably also a bodily resistance which is *lived* at the level of sensibility. Whilst I cannot feel my hormones fluctuating, my body nonetheless senses whether it is stressed and wants to be left alone, or whether it is curious and open to being touched and moved by its own or the other's desire. Not unlike Schneider, for whom 'tactile stimuli themselves, which the patient adeptly uses elsewhere, have lost their sexual signification (...) because they have, so to speak, ceased speaking to his body,'⁷²⁰ the sexual advances by a partner, for many women, no longer speak to their body. Rather, their erotic energy is channelled into caring responsibilities or simply shuts off due to the stress of navigating the contradictory ideals imposed by patriarchal society so that there is little, if any, left for the seeking of sexual pleasure. Consequently, a partner's advance is felt as an intrusion or an obligation rather than an invitation to mutual pleasure. Recoiling from an otherwise beloved partner's touch, then, is not only a psychical but also a sensible response, a bodily resistance to being moved by the other. Given that patriarchy imposes impossible and contradictory demands on women in all areas and stages of their lives, it is perhaps not surprising that women are more stressed and have a contradictory relationship to their own desire and their bodies.

⁷¹⁸ Olivia Remes, et al., 'A Systematic Review of Reviews on the Prevalence of Anxiety Disorders in Adult Populations,' *Brain and Behavior* 6, no. 7 (2016).

⁷¹⁹ van Anders, et al., 'The Heteronormativity Theory of Low Sexual Desire in Women Partnered with Men,' 404.

⁷²⁰ PhP, 159.

This leads us to the second phenomenon, namely, the sexualisation and objectification of women's bodies and the dominance of the body image over the body schema. If the gender normative role of the mother figure taken up by women in relation to their male partners is essentially unsexy, then, the figure of the erotically desiring woman is historically one associated with promiscuity or shamefulness. Whilst women's bodies are highly sexualised in society, the erotically desiring woman is often deemed *undesirable*, cheap, promiscuous, terms which do not square easily with the caregiving figure it often falls to women to take on in long-term heterosexual relationships. The figure of the erotically desiring woman in a heterosexual relationship, then, was and arguably still is a bit of an oxymoron. The cultural objectification and sexualisation of women's bodies which 'focuses on women's sexual appearance over their pleasure, socialising women to be sexy rather than sexual,'⁷²¹ means that whilst women are deemed desirable based on their appearance, they are deemed undesirable if they enjoy sex too much or in the 'wrong' way. Although public perception is certainly changing, to what extent does this normative conception still structure the ways in which women engage in sex and relate to their own bodies and desire?

This contradictory attitude arguably translates into a contradictory way of engaging in sex. Indeed, many women report a feeling of disconnect from their own experience of pleasure during sex and a focusing on whether they appear desirable rather than whether they feel desire. In her book *Girls and Sex*, journalist Peggy Orenstein interviews a range of US female college students about their relations to sex. She finds that they focus more on how they appear rather than on how they actually feel: 'The girls I met sometimes disconnected from their bodies during sex, watching and evaluating their encounters like spectators.'⁷²² One student recounted whilst having sex thinking: "'This is me performing. This is me acting. It's like, *How well am I doing?* (...) And I'm thinking, *What should 'she' do? 'She' would go down on him.* And I don't even know who it is I'm playing, who that 'she' actually is. It's some fantasy girl, I guess, maybe the girl from porn.'⁷²³ My focus is not so much on the unattainability of beauty ideals (not least mediated through the rise of internet porn) but rather on the impact that focusing on one's appearance – one's body image – has on one's

⁷²¹ van Anders, et al., 'The Heteronormativity Theory of Low Sexual Desire in Women Partnered with Men,' 401.

⁷²² Peggy Orenstein, *Girls and Sex: Navigating the Complicated New Landscape* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2016), 37.

⁷²³ *Ibid.*, 37-8.

body schematic experience of pleasure and desire. In the same way in which focusing perceptually on one's style of gesturing makes that gesture look and feel forced, I will argue that perceiving oneself as if from the outside, focusing on one's body image as culturally mediated, and on whether or not one's body image meets normative beauty ideals, inhibits one's body schematic sense of pleasure. In this way, an overly dominant body image can come to inhibit the body schematic movement through which the sensible body experiences pleasure. Whilst this is of course true for all bodies, women's bodies are disproportionately structured by their body image, not only in their general movements in the world but also in their erotic encounters.

If a cognitive or perceptual monitoring or evaluation of one's appearance – women assessing 'whether they think they are desirable'⁷²⁴ – inhibits pleasure and desire, what may elicit pleasure and desire is, as I will argue, whether they *feel* desirable, yet not from an outside point of view but from the inside out: whether they feel their own body's sensuousness as a source of pleasure. van Anders et al. emphasise that not all preoccupation with appearance inhibits desire: 'Some women enjoy or take pride in their appearance in ways that reclaim their bodies from those who would desexualise or pathologize them,'⁷²⁵ such as for example 'fat women learning to take pleasure in their fatness in a fatphobic world.'⁷²⁶ Yet this is precisely not a self-objectification, a perceiving oneself from the outside through one's body image but rather, precisely, a confidence in one's body schematic style of taking up space in the world that results in *feeling* sensual, desiring, desirable. Yet the patriarchal context in which women's bodies are objectified, sexualised, and punished for being too sexual whilst at the same time being required to be in touch with their own desire is not conducive to the development of a confidence and trust in one's body schematic mode of desiring.

If, as Angel writes, 'context is everything'⁷²⁷ in the elicitation of sexual desire, it is not the case that women have a 'naturally' lower level of desire, but that the context of patriarchy and heteronormativity is generally not conducive to the elicitation of female desire. One of

⁷²⁴ van Anders, et al., 'The Heteronormativity Theory of Low Sexual Desire in Women Partnered with Men,' 401.

⁷²⁵ Ibid.

⁷²⁶ Ibid.

⁷²⁷ Angel, *Tomorrow Sex Will Be Good Again*, 56.

the ways in which women's bodies take up their existential situation thus translates into an erotic indifference similar but not reducible to Schneider's affective flattening. The two gender normative ways of inhabiting one's body analysed above, in the role of parent or as sexualised/objectified, then, cast woman, as Beauvoir teaches us, as 'Other,' yet not only as other to man but as other to the erotic itself. Given that women are either de-eroticised as mothers/caregivers or objectified, it is perhaps not surprising that women's bodies may be more closed off to the erotic, that they may have a contradictory relationship to their own desire. It is not, then, that women have a 'naturally' lower desire to engage in erotic sex, but that the situation of being a woman in patriarchal society is fraught with contradictory ideals and norms according to which giving in to one's erotic desire is either misplaced (in the case of mothering) or fraught with danger of social punishment and sexual violence (in the case of the erotically desiring woman).

The question of how bodies take up patriarchy is not asked in order to encourage women to 'work' on their desire in order to meet that of their male partners. Certainly, if it really is the case that women are generally more stressed and that this inhibits their sexual desire on a physiological level, 'working' to desire more will surely only add to the stress women already experience, thus only inhibiting desire more. Thus, it seems, women will not desire 'more' until gender dynamics and societal structures become more egalitarian (which may, in turn, result in men desiring a bit less). Desiring more is not and should not be an aim in itself, yet the contradictory posture women unknowingly adopt at the level of the body schema surely deprives them of a certain enjoyment and pleasure, not only in their erotic encounters, but in other areas of their lives. Insofar as the structures of patriarchy and heteronormativity are taken up and perpetuated at a bodily level, perhaps there is something bodies can do to step into this process of structuring. Perhaps it is not so much a case of striving to desire more but of desiring differently; the opening up of other ways of desiring is, perhaps, connected with the desire for and curiosity about life itself. Daring, in other non-sexual areas of life, to be vulnerable, to lose control a little, may allow the erotic energy that essentially binds bodies to the world and other bodies to form new, unexpected, and non-conforming ways of desiring. Daring to *be* a body without judgement, a need to control, or fear, may elicit new forms of erotic desire and a reopening to others and oneself. In Merleau-Ponty's words:

‘The patient will rediscover her voice, not through an intellectual effort or through an abstract decree of the will, but through a conversion that gathers her entire body together, through a genuine gesture, as we seek and find a forgotten name not “in our mind” but “in our head” or “on the tip of our tongue.” Memory or voice are rediscovered when the body again opens to others or to the past, when it allows itself to be shot through by coexistence and when it again signifies (in the active sense) beyond itself.’⁷²⁸

Conclusion

In this final part of the thesis, I have argued, contra Merleau-Ponty’s claim that perception is primary, that his appropriation of the existentialist notion of transcendence as the taking up of existence works most basically at the level of sensibility rather than perception. Whilst the feminist literature has critiqued Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the anonymous body for being abstracted from all historical specificity and difference, I argued that it is precisely this notion of the pre-personal, when thought as the sensory life of the body, which can account for the material and historical structuring of the ways in which bodies come to move, perceive, and feel. Whilst chapter five focused on the contextual structuring of the global movements of the body in dialogue with Young, chapter six investigated the contextual structuring of the movement of desire. Contra the popular and scientific presumption that female sexual desire is naturally low, I argued that the ways in which the socio-historical structure of patriarchy is taken up at the level of the body negatively impacts the erotic life force of women in both the sexual and the non-sexual domain. Chapter six thus further reiterated the blurring of the line between the phenomenological and the ontological dimensions of Merleau-Ponty’s work that was at play in chapter five. Whilst sensibility and eroticism are experienceable as the sensing of *being* a body, I argued that this bodily experience is not transparent to itself but is ontologically shaped in interaction with historical structures that are not themselves ‘given’ in experience. Effectively contextualising Merleau-Ponty’s notion that bodily experience has a ‘historical thickness,’⁷²⁹ I showed how the context of patriarchy imperceptibly structures the ways in which bodies live desire. In this sense, the two senses of transcendence as defined in the introduction – as

⁷²⁸ PhP, 168.

⁷²⁹ Ibid., 248.

movement and as the alterity of time⁷³⁰ – were shown once again to collide at the level of sensibility and to push Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology in a critical direction.

⁷³⁰ See pp. 5-6 of this thesis for a definition of the two senses of transcendence.

Conclusion

[T]he ultimate task of phenomenology as philosophy of consciousness is to understand its relationship to non-phenomenology. What resists phenomenology within us – natural being, the “barbarous source” Schelling spoke of – cannot remain outside phenomenology and should have its place within it. The philosopher must bear his shadow, which is not simply the factual absence of future light.⁷³¹

Such writes Merleau-Ponty in a late text in which he seeks to uncover an ‘unthought-of’ element in Husserl’s thinking that goes against the idealism of an absolute consciousness that constitutes all transcendencies. This ‘unthought-of’ element resides, Merleau-Ponty writes, in Husserl’s references to a pre-theoretical layer of constitution – ultimately material nature from which the world and all bodies are formed – that precedes the constitutive powers of the transcendental ego. In this sense, Merleau-Ponty argues, Husserl’s phenomenology, explicitly intended as a self-sufficient science, inadvertently reveals its dependency upon an element that is not constituted by a transcendental subject and that is not ‘given’ in experience: ‘Originally a project to gain intellectual possession of the world, constitution becomes increasingly, as Husserl’s thought matures, the means of unveiling a back side of things that we have not constituted.’⁷³² The innovation and originality of Merleau-Ponty resides in his insistence that an appreciation of this non-phenomenological element does not transcend but rather transforms phenomenology as a philosophical approach to experience. After Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology can no longer be thought as a science of absolute consciousness removed from a concrete world; rather, phenomenology must consider those non-phenomenological elements – nature, history, culture – that structure, influence, and transform phenomenological experience itself. Through an immanent critique, Merleau-Ponty thus opens a new path for phenomenology which is nascently present in the long shadow cast by the work and figure of Edmund Husserl.

It is through a similar immanent critique that this thesis has also progressed. The thesis began from an interest in rethinking the phenomenological notion of transcendence as the very driving force for change and transformation within and of phenomenology itself. Since

⁷³¹ Merleau-Ponty, ‘The Philosopher and His Shadow,’ 178.

⁷³² *Ibid.*, 180.

the conception of phenomenology, the concept of transcendence has been employed to break with the idealism for which phenomenology has been, and continues to be, critiqued. Yet as long as this notion of transcendence is thought at the level of consciousness and perception, the issue of idealism is not really resolved. Consciousness and perception operate according to a tacit subject-object correlation where, from a phenomenological perspective, the conscious or perceiving subject ultimately has privilege over the object thought or perceived. Whilst classical phenomenology does not ignore the fact that a subject is solicited by and can be surprised by the world, the conscious or perceiving subject in the end always assimilates the object that is thought or perceived in the process of making sense of the world. A more concrete conceptualisation of transcendence, then, was needed to push phenomenology in a critical direction, one that is not anchored in the epistemological powers of consciousness or perception but rather in the ontological status of the living (human) body as constitutively dependent upon and open to the world and other bodies.

A notion of sensibility was thus developed in order to account for this level of bodily existence and experience. More concretely than the concepts of consciousness and perception, the notion of sensibility designates the material implication of the body in the world and thus finally breaks with any charge of solipsism and idealism. This move from a purely phenomenological approach to bodily experience to an ontological consideration of the connectivity of bodies and the world at the same time facilitated not only an immanent critique of phenomenology but also a critical approach to factors 'outside' phenomenology. An ontological conceptualisation of the body as constitutively linked with the world and other bodies opened the possibility for accounting for the ways in which bodily experience is itself structured in interaction with material, social, and historical factors which are not themselves given in experience. The thesis thus operated at a double level throughout: from a phenomenological perspective, sensibility was argued to be experienceable as the sensing of *being* a body that moves in the world; from an ontological perspective, it was possible to account for the contextual structuring of this sensible experience itself. The collision of the two senses of transcendence through which this notion of sensibility was developed – designating the movements within/of bodies and the alterity of time within the body itself – thus at the same time embodies the collision of the phenomenological and the ontological

perspectives; and it is precisely this double phenomenological-ontological approach that qualifies the notion of sensibility developed here as critical rather than classical or ahistorical.

The three themes analysed in the thesis – movement and temporality in Husserl, life in Levinas, and eroticism in Merleau-Ponty – are three instantiations or lenses through which to consider the sensory life of the body. The notion of sensibility describes the movement of life that qualifies the body as a living body; this movement at the same time points towards the fact of having been born, that is, an intergenerational intercorporeality; and this sensible connectivity and openness of bodies to one another and to the world is in turn characterised by a certain eroticism. The reconceptualization of Levinas's notion of the oneself as an original intercorporeality through the fact of having been born marked a move from the abstract concept of the subject – a subject who is, in a certain sense, not born – to a concrete conceptualisation of the sensible body that vibrates, pulsates, and breathes only thanks to an immemorial other who once breathed for it. The ontological notion of the oneself as an original intercorporeality was then effectively given its phenomenological elaboration with the notion of a sensible eroticism operating according to the rhythm of binding and separation. Eroticism was conceptualised as the reverberation of the living body through which it is conceived as not simply alive but as intimately bound to others and desiring of life itself. This sensible eroticism at once characterises, on the one hand, the earliest childhood bonds to others and the world which continue to operate throughout life, and which is not specifically sexual, and, on other hand, the sexual domain in adult life. Whilst the thesis investigated the contextual structuring of this sensible eroticism from a narrow feminist perspective, a further complexification and pluralisation of the concept of sensibility is needed for further studies. Particularly important would be an investigation of how this sensible eroticism expresses itself in bodies that do not live their eroticism in a 'heterosexual'⁷³³ way, as well as the impact of factors such as race and disability.

Whilst the philosophical conceptualisation of bodily life has, as a materialisation of the critique of the sovereign subject, perhaps often emphasised the vulnerability of the body over its creativity, it was important for us to recognise the empowering and regenerative

⁷³³ This should not be understood in an essentialist way but as bodies that do not live their sexuality according to the heterosexual matrix. See pp. 174-5 of this thesis.

dimension of sensibility, the capacity for the body to experience pleasure, wellbeing, to recalibrate itself from within. The aim was thus not only to expose the ways in which oppressive forces inhibit free movement and desire, but also to indicate a possibility for transformation from within the sensible body itself, thus moving from a descriptive to a partly prescriptive phenomenology. If the ways in which bodies come to move and desire is to a certain extent structured at the level of sensibility, it is also at this level that change is possible. Unlearning restrictive gender normative ways of moving and desiring, it was argued, requires that one tunes in to the possibilities and capabilities of one's body such as these are apart from social norms and demands. Such a process requires that one *becomes* once again a body prior to any categorisation into subject and object, prior to any struggle of master and slave. Whilst this is, as we have seen, easier for some bodies than others, *becoming* a body in this sense constitutes an act of resistance which defies the subject/object binary with which oppression operates, thus opening up for new ways of moving and desiring.

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