

# Philosophy on the Way to Ecology

A TECHNICAL INTRODUCTION TO THE INQUIRY

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## PART I: EDMUND HUSSERL AND PHENOMENOLOGY

**I**T IS NATURAL THAT WE TURN TO THE TRADITION OF PHENOMENOLOGY in order to understand the strange difference between the experienced world, or worlds, of indigenous, vernacular cultures and the world of modern European and North American civilization. For phenomenology is the Western philosophical tradition that has most forcefully called into question the modern assumption of a single, wholly determinable, objective reality.

This assumption has its source in René Descartes's well-known separation of the thinking mind, or subject, from the material world

of things, or objects. Actually, Galileo had already asserted that only those properties of matter that are directly amenable to mathematical measurement (such as size, shape, and weight) are real; the other, more "subjective" qualities such as sound, taste, and color are merely illusory impressions, since the "book of nature" is written in the language of mathematics alone. In his words:

This grand book the universe . . . is written in the language of mathematics, and its characters are triangles, circles, and other geometric figures without which it is humanly impossible to understand a single word of it; without these, one wanders about in a dark labyrinth.<sup>1</sup>

Yet it was only after the publication of Descartes's *Meditations*, in 1641, that material reality came to be commonly spoken of as a strictly mechanical realm, as a determinate structure whose laws of operation could be discerned only via mathematical analysis. By apparently purging material reality of subjective experience, Galileo cleared the ground and Descartes laid the foundation for the construction of the objective or "disinterested" sciences, which by their feverish and forceful investigations have yielded so much of the knowledge and so many of the technologies that have today become commonplace in the West. The chemical table of the elements, automobiles, smallpox vaccines, "close-up" images of the outer planets—so much that we have come to assume and depend upon has emerged from the bold experimentalization of the world by the objective sciences.

Yet these sciences consistently overlook our ordinary, everyday experience of the world around us. Our direct experience is necessarily subjective, necessarily relative to our own position or place in the midst of things, to our particular desires, tastes, and concerns. The everyday world in which we hunger and make love is hardly the mathematically determined "object" toward which the sciences direct themselves. Despite all the mechanical artifacts that now surround us, the world in which we find ourselves before we set out to calculate and measure it is not an inert or mechanical object but a living field, an open and dynamic landscape subject to its own moods and metamorphoses.

My life and the world's life are deeply intertwined; when I wake up one morning to find that a week-long illness has subsided and that my strength has returned, the world, when I step outside, fairly sparkles with energy and activity: swallows are swooping by in vivid flight; waves of heat rise from the newly paved road smelling strongly of tar; the old red barn across the field juts into the sky at an intense angle. Likewise, when a haze descends upon the valley in which I dwell, it descends upon my awareness as well, muddling my thoughts, making my muscles yearn for sleep. The world and I reciprocate one another. The landscape as I directly experience it is hardly a determinate object; it is an ambiguous realm that responds to my emotions and calls forth feelings from me in turn. Even the most detached scientist must begin and end her study in this indeterminate field of experience, where shifts of climate or mood may alter his experiment or her interpretation of "the data": the scientist, too, must take time off from his measurements and analyses to eat, to defecate, to converse with friends, to interact straightforwardly with a familiar world that is never explicitly thematized and defined. Indeed, it is precisely from his experience in this preconceptual and hence ambiguous world that an individual is first drawn to become a scientist, to adopt the ways of speaking and seeing that are acknowledged as appropriate by the scientific community, to affect the proper disinterested or objective attitude with regard to a certain range of natural events. The scientist does not randomly choose a specific discipline or specialty, but is drawn to a particular field by a complex of subjective experiences and encounters, many of which unfold far from the laboratory and its rarefied atmosphere. Further, the scientist never completely succeeds in making himself into a pure spectator of the world, for he cannot cease to live in the world as a human among other humans, or as a creature among other creatures, and his scientific concepts and theories necessarily borrow aspects of their character and texture from his untheorized, spontaneously lived experience.

Indeed, the ostensibly "value-free" results of our culture's investigations into biology, physics, and chemistry ultimately come to display themselves in the open and uncertain field of everyday life, whether embedded in social policies with which we must come to terms or embodied in new technologies with which we all must grap-

ple. Thus, the living world—this ambiguous realm that we experience in anger and joy, in grief and in love—is both the soil in which all our sciences are rooted and the rich humus into which their results ultimately return, whether as nutrients or as poisons. Our spontaneous experience of the world, charged with subjective, emotional, and intuitive content, remains the vital and dark ground of all our objectivity.

And yet this ground goes largely unnoticed or unacknowledged in scientific culture. In a society that accords priority to that which is predictable and places a premium on certainty, our spontaneous, preconceptual experience, when acknowledged at all, is referred to as “merely subjective.” The fluid realm of direct experience has come to be seen as a secondary, derivative dimension, a mere consequence of events unfolding in the “realer” world of quantifiable and measurable scientific “facts.” It is a curious inversion of the actual, demonstrable state of affairs. Subatomic quanta are now taken to be more primordial and “real” than the world we experience with our unaided senses. The living, feeling, and thinking organism is assumed to derive, somehow, from the mechanical body whose reflexes and “systems” have been measured and mapped, the living person now an epiphenomenon of the anatomized corpse. That it takes living, sensing subjects, complete with their enigmatic emotions and unpredictable passions, to conceive of those subatomic fields, or to dissect and anatomize the body, is readily overlooked, or brushed aside as inconsequential.

Nevertheless, the ambiguity of experience is already a part of any phenomenon that draws our attention. For whatever we perceive is necessarily entwined with our own subjectivity, already blended with the dynamism of life and sentience. The living pulse of subjective experience cannot finally be stripped from the things that we study (in order to expose the pure unadulterated “objects”) without the things themselves losing all existence for us. Such conundrums are commonly consigned to psychology, to that science that studies subjective awareness and perception. And so perhaps by turning to psychology we can expect to find a recognition and avowal of the pre-objective dimension that permeates and sustains every reality that we know, and hence an understanding of the manner in which subjective experience both supports and sets limits to the positive sciences.

In psychology, however, we discover nothing of the sort. Instead, we find a discipline that is itself modeled on the positivism of the “hard” sciences, a science wherein the psyche has itself been reified into an “object,” a thing to be studied like any other thing in the determinate, objective world. Much of cognitive science strives to model the computational processes that ostensibly underlie mental experience. While for Galileo and Descartes perceptual qualities like color and taste were illusory, unreal properties because of their ambiguous and indeterminate character, mathematical indices have at last been found for *these* qualities as well, or rather such qualities are now studied only to the extent that they can be rendered, by whatever process of translation, into *quantities*. Here as elsewhere, the everyday world—the world of our direct, spontaneous experience—is still assumed to derive from an impersonal, objective dimension of pure “facts” that we glimpse only through our instruments and equations.

IT WAS HIS FRUSTRATION WITH SUCH ASSUMPTIONS, AND WITH THE early discipline of psychology—which, far from directing attention toward the fluid region of direct experience, was already at the start of the twentieth century solidifying the “mind” into another “object” in the mathematized and mechanical universe—that led Edmund Husserl to inaugurate the philosophical discipline of phenomenology. Phenomenology, as he articulated it in the early 1900s, would turn toward “the things themselves,” toward the world as it is experienced in its felt immediacy. Unlike the mathematics-based sciences, phenomenology would seek not to explain the world, but to describe as closely as possible the way the world makes itself evident to awareness, the way things first arise in our direct, sensorial experience.<sup>2</sup> By thus returning to the taken-for-granted realm of subjective experience, not to explain it but simply to pay attention to its rhythms and textures, not to capture or control it but simply to become familiar with its diverse modes of appearance—and ultimately to give voice to its enigmatic and ever-shifting patterns—phenomenology would articulate the ground of the other sciences. It was Husserl’s hope that phenomenology, as a rigorous “science of experience,” would establish the other sciences at last upon a firm foot-

ing—not, perhaps, as solid as the fixed and finished “object” upon which those sciences *pretend* to stand, but the only basis possible for a knowledge that necessarily emerges from our lived experience of the things around us. In the words of the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty:

All my knowledge of the world, even my scientific knowledge, is gained from my own particular point of view, or from some experience of the world without which the symbols of science would be meaningless. The whole universe of science is built upon the world as directly experienced, and if we want to subject science itself to rigorous scrutiny and arrive at a precise assessment of its meaning and scope, we must begin by reawakening the basic experience of the world, of which science is the second-order expression. . . . To return to things themselves is to return to that world which precedes knowledge, of which knowledge always *speaks*, and in relation to which every scientific schematization is an abstract and derivative sign-language, as is geography in relation to the countryside in which we have learnt beforehand what a forest, a prairie or a river is.<sup>3</sup>

### Intersubjectivity

In the early stages of his project, Husserl spoke of the world of experience (the “phenomenal” world) as a thoroughly subjective realm. In order to explore this realm philosophically, he insisted that it be viewed as a wholly mental dimension, an immaterial field of appearances. That which experiences this dimension—the experiencing self, or subject—was similarly described by Husserl as a pure consciousness, a “transcendental” mind or ego.

Perhaps by designating subjective reality as a nonmaterial, transcendental realm, Husserl hoped to isolate this qualitative dimension from the apparently mechanical world of material “facts” that was then being constructed by the objective sciences (and thus to protect this realm from being colonized by those technological

methods of inquiry). Yet his insistence upon the mental character of phenomenal reality led critics to attack Husserl’s method as being inherently solipsistic—an approach that seals the philosopher inside his own solitary experience, rendering him ultimately unable to recognize anyone or anything outside of his own mind.

Husserl struggled long and hard to answer this important criticism. How does our subjective experience enable us to recognize the reality of other selves, other experiencing beings? The solution seemed to implicate the body—one’s own as well as that of the other—as a singularly important structure within the phenomenal field. The body is that mysterious and multifaceted phenomenon that seems always to accompany one’s awareness, and indeed to be the very location of one’s awareness within the field of appearances. Yet the phenomenal field also contains many *other* bodies, other forms that move and gesture in a fashion similar to one’s own. While one’s own body is experienced, as it were, only from within, these other bodies are experienced from outside; one can vary one’s distance from these bodies and can move around them, while this is impossible in relation to one’s own body.

Despite this difference, Husserl discerned that there was an inescapable affinity, or affiliation, between these other bodies and one’s own. The gestures and expressions of these other bodies, viewed from without, echo and resonate one’s own bodily movements and gestures, experienced from within. By an associative “empathy,” the embodied subject comes to recognize these other bodies as other centers of experience, other subjects.<sup>4</sup>

In this manner, carefully describing the ways in which the subjective field of experience, mediated by the body, opens onto other subjectivities—other selves besides one’s own self—Husserl sought to counter the charge of solipsism that had been directed against his phenomenology. The field of appearances, while still a thoroughly subjective realm, was now seen to be inhabited by *multiple* subjectivities; the phenomenal field was no longer the isolate haunt of a solitary ego, but a collective landscape, constituted by other experiencing subjects as well as by oneself.

There remain, however, many phenomena in the experiential field that are not collective or commonly shared. When daydreaming, for example, my attention is carried by phenomena whose

contours and movements I am able to alter at will, a whole phantasmagoria of images that nevertheless lack the solidity of bodies. Such forms offer very little resistance to my gaze. They are not, that is, held in place by gazes other than my own—these are entirely *my* images, *my* phantasies and fears, *my* dreamings. And so I am brought, like Husserl, to recognize at least two regions of the experiential or phenomenal field: one of phenomena that unfold entirely for me—images that arise, as it were, on this side of my body—and another region of phenomena that are, evidently, responded to and experienced by other embodied subjects as well as by myself. These latter phenomena are still subjective—they appear to me within a field of experience colored by my mood and my current concerns—and yet I cannot alter or dissipate them at will, for they seem to be buttressed by many involvements besides my own. That tree bending in the wind, this cliff wall, the cloud drifting overhead: these are not merely subjective; they are *intersubjective* phenomena—phenomena experienced by a multiplicity of sensing subjects.

HUSSERL'S NOTION OF *INTERSUBJECTIVITY* SUGGESTED A REMARKABLE new interpretation of the so-called "objective world." For the conventional contrast between "subjective" and "objective" realities could now be reframed as a contrast within the subjective field of experience itself—as the felt contrast between subjective and intersubjective phenomena.

The sciences are commonly thought to aim at clear knowledge of an objective world utterly independent of awareness or subjectivity. Considered experientially, however, the scientific method enables the achievement of greater intersubjectivity, greater knowledge of that which is or can be experienced by many different selves or subjects. The striving for objectivity is thus understood, phenomenologically, as a striving to achieve greater consensus, greater agreement or consonance among a plurality of subjects, rather than as an attempt to avoid subjectivity altogether. The pure "objective reality" commonly assumed by modern science, far from being the concrete basis underlying all experience, was, according to Husserl, a theoretical construction, an unwarranted idealization of intersubjective experience.<sup>5</sup>

The "real world" in which we find ourselves, then—the very world our sciences strive to fathom—is not a sheer "object," not a fixed and finished "datum" from which all subjects and subjective qualities could be pared away, but is rather an intertwined matrix of sensations and perceptions, a collective field of experience lived through from many different angles. The mutual inscription of others in my experience, and (as I must assume) of myself in their experiences, effects the interweaving of our individual phenomenal fields into a single, ever-shifting fabric, a single phenomenal world or "reality."

And yet, as we know from our everyday experience, the phenomenal world is remarkably stable and solid; we are able to count on it in so many ways, and we take for granted much of its structure and character. This experienced solidity is precisely sustained by the continual encounter with others, with other embodied subjects, other centers of experience. The encounter with other perceivers continually assures me that there is more to any thing, or to the world, than I myself can perceive at any moment. Besides that which I directly see of a particular oak tree or building, I know or intuit that there are also those facets of the oak or building that are visible to the other perceivers that I see. I sense that that tree is much more than what I directly see of it, since it is also what the others whom I see perceive of it; I sense that as a perceivable presence it already existed before I came to look at it, and indeed that it will not dissipate when I turn away from it, since it remains an experience for others—not just for other persons, but (as we shall see later in this chapter) for other sentient organisms, for the birds that nest in its branches and for the insects that move along its bark, and even, finally, for the sensitive cells and tissues of the oak itself, quietly drinking sunlight through its leaves. It is this informing of my perceptions by the evident perceptions and sensations of other bodily entities that establishes, for me, the relative solidity and stability of the world.

### The Life-world

Although Husserl at first wrote of the nonmaterial, mental character of experienced reality, his growing recognition of intersubjective experience, and of the body's importance for such experience, ultimately led him to recognize a more primary, corporeal dimension, midway between the transcendental "consciousness" of his earlier analyses and the utterly objective "matter" assumed by the natural sciences. This was the intersubjective world of life, the *Lebenswelt*, or "life-world."

The life-world is the world of our immediately lived experience, as we live it, prior to all our thoughts about it. It is that which is present to us in our everyday tasks and enjoyments—reality as it engages us before being analyzed by our theories and our science. The life-world is the world that we count on without necessarily paying it much attention, the world of the clouds overhead and the ground underfoot, of getting out of bed and preparing food and turning on the tap for water. Easily overlooked, this primordial world is always already there when we begin to reflect or philosophize. It is not a private, but a collective, dimension—the common field of our lives and the other lives with which ours are entwined—and yet it is profoundly ambiguous and indeterminate, since our experience of this field is always relative to our situation within it. The life-world is thus the world as we organically experience it in its enigmatic multiplicity and open-endedness, prior to conceptually freezing it into a static space of "facts"—prior, indeed, to conceptualizing it in any complete fashion. All of our concepts and representations, scientific and otherwise, necessarily draw nourishment from this indeterminate realm, as the physicist analyzing data is still nourished by the air that she is breathing, by the feel of the chair that supports her and the light flooding in through the window, without her being particularly conscious of these participations.

The life-world is thus peripherally present in any thought or activity we undertake. Yet whenever we attempt to *explain* this world conceptually, we seem to forget our active participation within it. Striving to represent the world, we inevitably forfeit its direct pres-

ence. It was Husserl's genius to realize that the assumption of objectivity had led to an almost total eclipse of the life-world in the modern era, to a nearly complete forgetting of this living dimension in which all of our endeavors are rooted. In their striving to attain a finished blueprint of the world, the sciences had become frightfully estranged from our direct human experience. Their many specialized and technical discourses had lost any obvious relevance to the sensuous world of our ordinary engagements. The consequent impoverishment of language, the loss of a common discourse tuned to the qualitative nuances of living experience, was leading, Husserl felt, to a clear crisis in European civilization. Oblivious to the quality-laden life-world upon which they themselves depend for their own meaning and existence, the Western sciences, and the technologies that accompany them, were beginning to blindly overrun the experiential world—even, in their errancy, threatening to obliterate the world-of-life entirely.<sup>6</sup>

IT SHOULD BE EVIDENT THAT THE LIFE-WORLD MAY BE QUITE different for different cultures. The world that a people experiences and comes to count on is deeply influenced by the ways they live and engage that world. The members of any given culture necessarily inhabit an experienced world very different from that of another culture with a very different language and way of life. Even the scientifically disclosed "objective universe" of contemporary Western civilization cannot genuinely be separated from the particular institutions, technologies, and ways of life endemic to this society since the seventeenth century.

If the worlds experienced by humans are so diverse, how much more diverse, still, must be the life-worlds of other animals—of wolves, or owls, or a community of bees! And yet, despite this multiplicity, it would seem that there are basic structures of the life-world that are shared, elements that are common to different cultures and even, we may suspect, to different species. Husserl's writings seem to suggest that the life-world has various layers, that underneath the layer of the diverse cultural life-worlds there reposes a deeper, more unitary life-world, always already there beneath all our cultural acquisitions, a vast and continually overlooked dimen-

sion of experience that nevertheless supports and sustains all our diverse and discontinuous worldviews.

Husserl sheds light on this most primordial, most deeply intersubjective dimension of the life-world in a series of notes written in 1934. The notes describe a set of phenomenological investigations into the contemporary understanding of *space*. Underneath the modern, scientific conception of space as a mathematically infinite and homogenous void, Husserl discloses the experienced spatiality of the *earth* itself. The encompassing earth, he suggests, provides the most immediate, bodily awareness of space, from which all later *conceptions* of space are derived.<sup>7</sup> While according to contemporary physics the earth is but one celestial body among many others "in" space, phenomenologically considered *all bodies* (including our own) are first located relative to the ground of the earth, whereas the earth itself is not "in" space, since it is earth that, from the first, *provides* space. To our most immediate sensorial experience, "bodies are given as having the sense of being earthly bodies, and space is given as having the sense of being earth-space."<sup>8</sup> Further, while contemporary science maintains that "in reality" the earth is in motion (around its own axis, and around the sun), Husserl maintains that the very concepts of "motion" and "rest" derive all their meaning from our primary, bodily experience of being in motion or at rest relative to the "absolute" rest of the "earth-basis."

Husserl's notes on these matters were found in an envelope on which he had written a few summary words: "*Overthrow of the Copernican Theory* . . . The original ark, earth, does not move."<sup>9</sup> Such a remarkable assertion illustrates well the radical nature of Husserl's thought. He suggests in these notes that there is a profound instability in the scientific worldview, resulting from the continual clash between our scientific convictions and our spontaneous experience. After the investigations of Copernicus, Kepler, and Galileo, the sun came to be conceived as the center of the phenomenal world. Yet this conception simply did not agree with our spontaneous sensory *perception*, which remained the experience of a radiant orb traversing the sky of a stable earth. A profound schism was thus brought about between our intellectual convictions and the most basic conviction of our senses, between our mental *concepts* and our bodily *percepts*. (Descartes's philosophical disjunction of

the mind from the body was surely prompted by this already existing state of affairs—it was necessary, for the maintenance of the new, Copernican worldview, that the rational intellect hold itself apart from the experiencing body.) Nevertheless, our very words have continued to betray the intellect and to prevent the clean ascendancy of the Copernican system: we still say "the sun rises" and "the sun sets" whether we are farmers or physicists. It is in this sense, writing from the perspective of the experiencing body, that Husserl is able to claim that *earth*, "the original ark," *does not move*.

Finally, Husserl seems to suggest that the earth lies at the heart of our notions of time as well as of space. He writes of the earth as our "primitive home" and our "primitive history." Every unique cultural history is but an episode in this larger story; every culturally constructed notion of time presupposes our deep history as carnal beings present to a single earth.<sup>10</sup>

The earth is thus, for Husserl, the secret depth of the life-world. It is the most unfathomable region of experience, an enigma that exceeds the structurations of any particular culture or language. In his words, the earth is the encompassing "ark of the world," the common "root basis" of all relative life-worlds. Husserl's late insights into the importance of the earth for all human cognition were, as we shall see, to have profound implications for the subsequent unfolding of phenomenological philosophy.

EDMUND HUSSERL'S WORK WAS IN NO SENSE A REJECTION OF SCIENCE. It was a plea that science, for its own integrity and meaningfulness, must acknowledge that it is rooted in the same world that we all engage in our everyday lives and with our unaided senses—that, for all its technological refinements, quantitative science remains an expression of, and hence must be guided by, the qualitative world of our common experience. The true task of phenomenology, as Husserl saw it at the end of his career, lay in the careful demonstration of the manner in which every theoretical and scientific practice grows out of and remains supported by the forgotten ground of our directly felt and lived experience, and has value and meaning only in reference to this primordial and open realm.

Originally an attempt to certify theoretical awareness by placing

it on a firm footing, Husserl's project culminated in the still ongoing attempt to rejuvenate the full-blooded world of our sensorial experience, and, consequently, in the dawning recognition of Earth as the forgotten basis of all our awareness.

I now turn to the work of the phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in order to show how Husserl's legacy was taken up and transformed in a manner that endowed this philosophy with a particular power and relevance for the ecological questions that now confront us.

## PART II: MAURICE MERLEAU-PONTY AND THE PARTICIPATORY NATURE OF PERCEPTION

Maurice Merleau-Ponty set out to radicalize Husserl's phenomenology, both by clarifying the inconsistencies lodged in this philosophy by Husserl's own ambivalences, and further, by disclosing a more eloquent way of speaking, a style of language which, by virtue of its fluidity, its carnal resonance, and its careful avoidance of abstract terms, might itself draw us into the sensuous depths of the life-world.

### *The Mindful Life of the Body*

We have seen, for instance, that the physical body came to play an increasingly important role in Husserl's philosophy. Only by acknowledging the embodied nature of the experiencing self was Husserl able to avoid the pitfalls of solipsism. It is as visible, animate bodies that other selves or subjects make themselves evident in my subjective experience, and it is only as a body that I am visible and sensible to others. The body is precisely my insertion in the common, or intersubjective, field of experience.

Nevertheless, the body remained a mere appearance, albeit a

unique and pivotal one, in Husserl's thought. The body was, to be sure, the very locus of the experiencing subject, or self, in the phenomenal world—in the manifold of appearances—but the self was still affirmed, by Husserl, as a transcendental ego, ultimately separable from the phenomena (including the body) that it posits and ponders. Despite his growing recognition of the living body's centrality in all experience, and despite his disclosure of the thoroughly incarnate, intersubjective realm of our preconceptual life, Husserl was unable to drop the transcendental, idealist aspirations of his early philosophy.

It is precisely this lingering assumption of a self-subsistent, disembodied, transcendental ego that Merleau-Ponty rejects. If this body is my very presence in the world, if it is the body that alone enables me to enter into relations with other presences, if without these eyes, this voice, or these hands I would be unable to see, to taste, and to touch things, or to be touched by them—if without this body, in other words, there would be no possibility of experience—then the body itself is the true subject of experience. Merleau-Ponty begins, then, by identifying the subject—the experiencing “self”—with the bodily organism.

It is indeed a radical move. Most of us are accustomed to consider the self, our innermost essence, as something incorporeal. Yet consider: Without this body, without this tongue or these ears, you could neither speak nor hear another's voice. Nor could you have anything to speak about, or even to reflect on, or to think, since without any contact, any encounter, without any glimmer of sensory experience, there could be nothing to question or to know. The living body is thus the very possibility of contact, not just with others but with oneself—the very possibility of reflection, of thought, of knowledge. The common notion of the experiencing self, or mind, as an immaterial phantom ultimately independent of the body can only be a mirage: Merleau-Ponty invites us to recognize, at the heart of even our most abstract cogitations, the sensuous and sentient life of the body itself.

This breathing body, as it experiences and inhabits the world, is very different from that objectified body diagrammed in physiology textbooks, with its separable “systems” (the circulatory system, the digestive system, the respiratory system, etc.) laid bare on each page.



The body I here speak of is very different from the body we have been taught to see and even to feel, very different, finally, from that complex machine whose broken parts or stuck systems are diagnosed by our medical doctors and "repaired" by our medical technologies. Underneath the anatomized and mechanical body that we have learned to conceive, prior indeed to all our conceptions, dwells the body as it actually experiences things, this poised and animate power that initiates all our projects and suffers all our passions.

The living, attentive body—which Merleau-Ponty called the "body subject"—is this very being that, pondering a moment ago, suddenly took up this pen and scribbled these thoughts. It is the very power I have to look and to see things, or to turn away and look elsewhere, the ability to cry and to laugh, or to howl at night with the wolves, to find and gather food whether in a forest or a market, the power to walk upon the ground and to imbibe the swirling air. Yet "I" do not deploy these powers like a commander piloting a ship, for I am, in my depths, indistinguishable from them, as my sadness is indistinguishable from a certain heaviness of my bodily limbs, or as my delight is only artificially separable from the widening of my eyes, from the bounce in my step and the heightened sensitivity of my skin. Indeed, facial expressions, gestures, and spontaneous utterances like sighs and cries seem to immediately incarnate feelings, moods, and desires without "my" being able to say which came first—the corporeal gesture or its purportedly "immaterial" counterpart.

To acknowledge that "I am this body" is not to reduce the mystery of my yearnings and fluid thoughts to a set of mechanisms, or my "self" to a determinate robot. Rather it is to affirm the uncanniness of this physical form. It is not to lock up awareness within the density of a closed and bounded object, for as we shall see, the boundaries of a living body are open and indeterminate; more like membranes than barriers, they define a surface of metamorphosis and exchange. The breathing, sensing body draws its sustenance and its very substance from the soils, plants, and elements that surround it; it continually contributes itself, in turn, to the air, to the composting earth, to the nourishment of insects and oak trees and squirrels, ceaselessly spreading out of itself as well as breathing the world into itself, so that it is very difficult to discern, at any moment,

precisely where this living body begins and where it ends. Considered phenomenologically—that is, as we actually experience and *live* it—the body is a creative, shape-shifting entity. Certainly, it has its finite character and style, its unique textures and temperaments that distinguish it from other bodies; yet these mortal limits in no way close me off from the things around me or render my relations to them wholly predictable and determinate. On the contrary, my finite bodily presence alone is what enables me to freely engage the things around me, to choose to affiliate with certain persons or places, to insinuate myself in other lives. Far from restricting my access to things and to the world, the body is my very means of entering into relation with all things.

To be sure, by disclosing the body itself as the very subject of awareness, Merleau-Ponty demolishes any hope that philosophy might eventually provide a complete picture of reality (for any such total account of "what is" requires a mind or consciousness that stands somehow *outside* of existence, whether to compile the account or, finally, to receive and comprehend it). Yet by this same move he opens, at last, the possibility of a truly authentic phenomenology, a philosophy which would strive, not to explain the world as if from outside, but to give voice to the world from our experienced situation *within* it, recalling us to our participation in the here-and-now, rejuvenating our sense of wonder at the fathomless things, events and powers that surround us on every hand.<sup>11</sup>

ULTIMATELY, TO ACKNOWLEDGE THE LIFE OF THE BODY, AND TO affirm our solidarity with this physical form, is to acknowledge our existence as one of the earth's animals, and so to remember and rejuvenate the organic basis of our thoughts and our intelligence. According to the central current of the Western philosophical tradition, from its source in ancient Athens up until the present moment, human beings alone are possessed of an incorporeal intellect, a "rational soul" or mind which, by virtue of its affinity with an eternal or divine dimension outside the bodily world, sets us radically apart from, or above, all other forms of life. In Aristotle's writings, for instance, while plants are endowed with a *vegetal soul* (which enables nourishment, growth, and reproduction), and while animals possess,

in addition to the vegetal soul, an *animal soul* (which provides sensation and locomotion), these souls remain inseparable from the earthly world of generation and decay. Humans, however, possess along with these other souls a *rational soul*, or intellect, which alone provides access to the less corruptible spheres and has affinities with the divine "Unmoved Mover" himself. In Descartes's hands, two thousand years later, this hierarchical continuum of living forms, commonly called "the Great Chain of Being," was polarized into a thorough dichotomy between mechanical, unthinking matter (including all minerals, plants, and animals, as well as the human body) and pure, thinking mind (the exclusive province of humans and God). Since humans alone are a mixture of extended matter and thinking mind, we alone are able to feel and to experience our body's mechanical sensations. Meanwhile, all other organisms, consisting solely of extended matter, are in truth nothing more than automata, incapable of actual experience, unable to feel pleasure or suffer pain. Hence, we humans need have no scruples about manipulating, exploiting, or experimenting upon other animals in any manner we see fit.

Curiously, such arguments for human specialness have regularly been utilized by human groups to justify the exploitation not just of other organisms, but of other *humans* as well (other nations, other races, or simply the "other" sex); armed with such arguments, one had only to demonstrate that these others were not *fully* human, or were "closer to the animals," in order to establish one's right of dominion. According to Aristotle, for example, women are deficient in the rational soul, and hence "the relation of male to female is naturally that of the superior to the inferior—of the ruling to the ruled."<sup>12</sup> Such justifications for social exploitation draw their force from the prior hierarchicalization of the natural landscape, from that hierarchical ordering that locates "humans," by virtue of our incorporeal intellect, above and apart from all other, "merely corporeal," entities.

Such hierarchies are wrecked by any phenomenology that takes seriously our immediate sensory experience. For our senses disclose to us a wild-flowering proliferation of entities and elements, in which humans are thoroughly immersed. While this diversity of sensuous forms certainly displays some sort of reckless order, we

find ourselves in the midst of, rather than on top of, this order. We may cast our gaze downward to watch the field mice and the insects that creep along the bending grasses, or to glimpse the snakes that slither into hollows deep underfoot, yet, at the same moment, hawks soaring on great winds gaze down upon *our* endeavors. Melodious feathered beings flit like phantoms among the high branches of the trees, while other animate powers, known only by their traces, move within the hidden depths of the forest. In the waters that surge in waves against the distant edge of the land, still stranger powers, multihued and silent, move in crowds among alien forests of coral and stone. . . . Does the human intellect, or "reason," really spring us free from our inherence in the depths of this wild proliferation of forms? *Or on the contrary, is the human intellect rooted in, and secretly borne by, our forgotten contact with the multiple nonhuman shapes that surround us?*

### *The Body's Silent Conversation with Things*

For Merleau-Ponty, all of the creativity and free-ranging mobility that we have come to associate with the human intellect is, in truth, an elaboration, or recapitulation, of a profound creativity already underway at the most immediate level of sensory perception. The sensing body is not a programmed machine but an active and open form, continually improvising its relation to things and to the world. The body's actions and engagements are never wholly determinate, since they must ceaselessly adjust themselves to a world and a terrain that is itself continually shifting. If the body were truly a set of closed or predetermined mechanisms, it could never come into genuine contact with anything outside of itself, could never perceive anything really new, could never be genuinely startled or surprised. All of its experiences, and all its responses, would already have been anticipated from the beginning, already programmed, as it were, into the machine. But could we even, then, call them experiences? For is not experience, or more precisely, *perception*, the constant thwarting of such closure?

Consider a spider weaving its web, for instance, and the assumption still held by many scientists that the behavior of such a diminutive creature is thoroughly "programmed in its genes." Certainly, the spider has received a rich genetic inheritance from its parents and its predecessors. Whatever "instructions," however, are enfolded within the living genome, they can hardly predict the specifics of the microterrain within which the spider may find itself at any particular moment. They could hardly have determined in advance the exact distances between the cave wall and the branch that the spider is now employing as an anchorage point for her current web, or the exact strength of the monsoon rains that make web-spinning a bit more difficult on this evening. And so the genome could not explicitly have commanded the order of every flexion and extension of her various limbs as she weaves this web into its place. However complex are the inherited "programs," patterns, or predispositions, they must still be adapted to the immediate situation in which the spider finds itself. However determinate one's genetic inheritance, it must still, as it were, be woven into the present, an activity that necessarily involves both a receptivity to the specific shapes and textures of that present and a spontaneous creativity in adjusting oneself (and one's inheritance) to those contours. It is this open activity, this dynamic blend of receptivity and creativity by which every animate organism necessarily orients itself to the world (and orients the world around itself), that we speak of by the term "perception."

BUT LET US NOW PONDER THE EVENT OF PERCEPTION AS WE OURSELVES EXPERIENCE AND LIVE IT. The human body with its various predilections is, to be sure, our *own* inheritance, our own rootedness in an evolutionary history and a particular ancestry. Yet it is also our insertion in a world that exceeds our grasp in every direction, our means of contact with things and lives that are still unfolding, open and indeterminate, all around us. Indeed, from the perspective of my bodily senses, there is no thing that appears as a completely determinate or finished object. Each thing, each entity that my body sees, presents some face or facet of itself to my gaze while withholding other aspects from view.

The clay bowl resting on the table in front of me meets my eyes with its curved and grainy surface. Yet I can only see one side of that surface—the other side of the bowl is invisible, hidden by the side that faces me. In order to view that other side, I must pick up the bowl and turn it around in my hands, or else walk around the wooden table. Yet, having done so, I can no longer see the first side of the bowl. Surely I know that it still exists; I can even *feel* the presence of that aspect which the bowl now presents to the lamp on the far side of the table. Yet I myself am simply unable to see the whole of this bowl all at once.

Moreover, while examining its outer surface I have caught only a glimpse of the smooth and finely glazed *inside* of the bowl. When I stand up to look down into that interior, which gleams with curved reflections from the skylight overhead, I can no longer see the unglazed outer surface. This earthen vessel thus reveals aspects of its presence to me only by withholding other aspects of itself for further exploration. There can be no question of ever totally exhausting the presence of the bowl with my perception; its very existence as a bowl ensures that there are dimensions wholly inaccessible to me—most obviously the patterns hidden *between* its glazed and unglazed surfaces, the interior density of its clay body. If I break it into pieces, in hopes of discovering these interior patterns or the delicate structure of its molecular dimensions, I will have destroyed its integrity as a bowl; far from coming to know it completely, I will simply have wrecked any possibility of coming to know it further, having traded the relation between myself and the bowl for a relation to a collection of fragments.

Even a single facet of this bowl resists being plumbed by my gaze once and for all. For, like myself, the bowl is a temporal being, an entity shifting and changing in time, although the rhythm of its changes may be far slower than my own. Each time that I return to gaze at the outward surface of the bowl, my eyes and my mood have shifted, however slightly; informed by my previous encounters with the bowl, my senses now more attuned to its substance, I continually discover new and unexpected aspects. But this is in part because the bowl has changed as well, as a result perhaps of shifts in the light pouring through the window, of dust and of wear—as a result, even, of my own earlier explorations. When I look now at its unglazed

outer surface, where before I had seen a homogeneous expanse of bright grey, I now see various faint smudges, some of them ancient and some of them recent—the record of the many hands that have held it through the seasons. Each spot invites me to peer at it more closely, to distinguish that smudge from the others, to try to discern which are the traces of my own hands, and which are of hands larger, or more delicate, and which may be the trace even of those hands that first threw this fine and useful bowl on some potter's wheel years ago.

As this bowl awaits the further involvement of my eyes and my hands, so also every other object in this room invites the participation of my senses—the wooden dresser with its stuffed drawers, the plants on the windowsill quietly turning toward the sun, the individual glasses and dishes stashed above the old sink with its hidden and clattering pipes, and the ancient pinewood table that I now write upon, its coffee stains and countless knife scratches cutting across the curving grain of the wood, and those pens and pencils that beckon to my fingers, and the books that call to me from the shelves, one always asking to be read more deeply, another chanting to me of my childhood, another merely waiting, coldly it seems, to be returned to the library. Like the bowl, each presence presents some facet that catches my eye while the rest of it lies hidden behind the horizon of my current position, each one inviting me to focus my senses upon it, to let the other objects fall into the background as I enter into its particular depth. When my body thus responds to the mute solicitation of another being, that being responds in turn, disclosing to my senses some new aspect or dimension that in turn invites further exploration. By this process my sensing body gradually attunes itself to the style of this other presence—to the *way* of this stone, or tree, or table—as the other seems to adjust itself to my own style and sensitivity. In this manner the simplest thing may become a world for me, as, conversely, the thing or being comes to take its place more deeply in *my* world.

Perception, in Merleau-Ponty's work, is precisely this reciprocity, the ongoing interchange between my body and the entities that surround it. It is a sort of silent conversation that I carry on with things, a continuous dialogue that unfolds far below my verbal awareness—and often, even, *independent* of my verbal awareness, as when my

hand readily navigates the space between these scribed pages and the coffee cup across the table without my having to think about it, or when my legs, hiking, continually attune and adjust themselves to the varying steepness of the mountain slopes behind this house without my verbal consciousness needing to direct those adjustments. Whenever I quiet the persistent chatter of words within my head, I find this silent or wordless dance always already going on—this improvised duet between my animal body and the fluid, breathing landscape that it inhabits.

### *The Animateness of the Perceptual World*

Where does perception originate? I cannot say truthfully that my perception of a particular wildflower, with its color and its fragrance, is determined or “caused” entirely by the flower—since other persons may experience a somewhat different fragrance, as even I, in a different moment or mood, may see the color differently, and indeed since any bumblebee that alights on that blossom will surely have a very different perception of it than I do. But neither can I say truthfully that my perception is “caused” solely by myself—by my physiological or neural organization—or that it exists entirely “in my head.” For without the actual existence of this other entity, of this flower rooted not in my brain but in the soil of the earth, there would be no fragrant and colorful perception at all, neither for myself nor for any others, whether human or insect.

Neither the perceiver nor the perceived, then, is wholly passive in the event of perception:

[M]y gaze pairs off with colour, and my hand with hardness and softness, and in this transaction between the subject of sensation and the sensible it cannot be held that one acts while the other suffers the action, or that one confers significance on the other. Apart from the probing of my eye or my hand, and before my body synchronizes with it, the sensible is nothing but a vague beckoning.<sup>13</sup>

There is thus a solicitation of my body by the sensible, and a questioning of the sensible by my body, a reciprocal encroachment:

... [a sensible quality, like the color blue,] which is on the point of being felt sets a kind of muddled problem for my body to solve. I must find the attitude which will provide it with the means of becoming determinate, of showing up as blue; I must find the reply to a question which is obscurely expressed. And yet I do so only when I am invited by it; my attitude is never sufficient to make me really see blue or really touch a hard surface. The sensible gives back to me what I lent to it, but this is only what I took from it in the first place. As I contemplate the blue of the sky . . . I abandon myself to it and plunge into this mystery, it 'thinks itself within me,' I am the sky itself as it is drawn together and unified, and as it begins to exist for itself; my consciousness is saturated with this limitless blue. . . .<sup>14</sup>

In the act of perception, in other words, I enter into a sympathetic relation with the perceived, which is possible only because neither my body nor the sensible exists outside the flux of time, and so each has its own dynamism, its own pulsation and style. Perception, in this sense, is an attunement or synchronization between my own rhythms and the rhythms of the things themselves, their own tones and textures:

... in so far as my hand knows hardness and softness, and my gaze knows the moon's light, it is as a certain way of linking up with the phenomenon and communicating with it. Hardness and softness, roughness and smoothness, moonlight and sunlight, present themselves in our recollection not pre-eminently as sensory contents but as certain kinds of symbioses, certain ways the outside has of invading us and certain ways we have of meeting this invasion. . . .<sup>15</sup>

In this ceaseless dance between the carnal subject and its world, at one moment the body leads, at another the things. In one luminous passage, which suggests the profound intimacy of the body's

preconceptual relation to the sensible things or powers that surround it, Merleau-Ponty writes of perception in terms of an almost magical invocation enacted by the body, and the body's subsequent "possession" by the perceived:

The relations of sentient to sensible are comparable with those of the sleeper to his slumber: sleep suddenly comes when a certain voluntary attitude suddenly receives from outside the confirmation for which it was waiting. I am breathing deeply and slowly in order to summon sleep, and suddenly it is as if my mouth were connected to some great lung outside myself which alternately calls forth and forces back my breath. A certain rhythm of respiration, which a moment ago I voluntarily maintained, now becomes my very being, and sleep, until now aimed at . . . , suddenly becomes my situation. In the same way I give ear, or look, in the expectation of a sensation, and suddenly the sensible takes possession of my ear or my gaze, and I surrender a part of my body, even my whole body, to this particular manner of vibrating and filling space known as blue or red. . . .<sup>16</sup>

What are we to make of these strange ways of speaking? In these and other passages throughout Merleau-Ponty's major work, *Phenomenology of Perception*, the sensible thing, commonly considered by our philosophical tradition to be passive and inert, is consistently described in the active voice: the sensible "beckons to me," "sets a problem for my body to solve," "responds" to my summons and "takes possession of my senses," and even "thinks itself within me." The sensible world, in other words, is described as active, animate, and, in some curious manner, alive: it is not I, when asleep, who breathes, but "some great lung outside myself which alternately calls forth and forces back my breath"; a color is "a manner of vibrating and filling space"; a thing is an "entity," an "Other" which at one moment "holds itself aloof from us" and at another moment actively "expresses itself" directly to our senses, so that we may ultimately describe perception as a mutual interaction, an intercourse, "a coition, so to speak, of my body with things."<sup>17</sup>

Are such animistic turns of phrase to be attributed simply to some sort of poetic license that Merleau-Ponty has introduced into

his philosophy? Are they evidence, that is, merely of an idiosyncratic style of writing, as some critics have asserted? I think not. Merleau-Ponty writes of the perceived things as entities, of sensible qualities as powers, and of the sensible itself as a field of animate presences, in order to acknowledge and underscore their active, dynamic contribution to perceptual experience. To describe the animate life of particular things is simply the most precise and parsimonious way to articulate the things *as we spontaneously experience them*, prior to all our conceptualizations and definitions.

Our most immediate experience of things, according to Merleau-Ponty, is necessarily an experience of reciprocal encounter—of tension, communication, and commingling. From within the depths of this encounter, we know the thing or phenomenon only as our interlocutor—as a dynamic presence that confronts us and draws us into relation. We conceptually immobilize or objectify the phenomenon only by mentally absenting ourselves from this relation, by forgetting or repressing our sensuous involvement. To define another being as an inert or passive object is to deny its ability to actively engage us and to provoke our senses; *we thus block our perceptual reciprocity with that being*. By linguistically defining the surrounding world as a determinate set of objects, we cut our conscious, speaking selves off from the spontaneous life of our sensing bodies.

If, on the other hand, we wish to describe a particular phenomenon without repressing our direct experience, then we cannot avoid speaking of the phenomenon as an active, animate entity with which we find ourselves engaged. It is for this reason that Merleau-Ponty so consistently uses the active voice to describe things, qualities, and even the enveloping world itself. To the sensing body, *no* thing presents itself as utterly passive or inert. *Only by affirming the animateness of perceived things do we allow our words to emerge directly from the depths of our ongoing reciprocity with the world.*

### Perception as Participation

If we wish to choose a single term to characterize the event of perception, as it is disclosed by phenomenological attention, we may borrow the term "participation," used by the early French anthropologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl. The brilliant forerunner of today's "cognitive" and "symbolic" schools of anthropology, Lévy-Bruhl used the word "participation" to characterize the animistic logic of indigenous, oral peoples—for whom ostensibly "inanimate" objects like stones or mountains are often thought to be alive, for whom certain names, spoken aloud, may be felt to influence at a distance the things or beings that they name, for whom particular plants, particular animals, particular places and persons and powers may all be felt to *participate* in one another's existence, influencing each other and being influenced in turn.<sup>18</sup>

For Lévy-Bruhl participation was thus a perceived relation between diverse phenomena; Merleau-Ponty's work, however, suggests that participation is a defining attribute of perception itself. By asserting that perception, phenomenologically considered, is inherently participatory, we mean that perception always involves, at its most intimate level, the experience of an active interplay, or coupling, between the perceiving body and that which it perceives. Prior to all our verbal reflections, at the level of our spontaneous, sensorial engagement with the world around us, we are *all* animists.

SOME INSIGHT INTO THE PARTICIPATORY NATURE OF PERCEPTION may be gleaned by considering the craft of the sleight-of-hand magician. For the conjuror depends upon this active participation between the body and the world for the creation of his magic. Working, for instance, with a silver dollar, he uses his sleights to enhance the animation of the object, generating ambiguous gaps and lacunae in the visible trajectory of the coin. The spectators' eyes, already drawn by the coin's fluid dance across the magician's fingers, spontaneously fill in those gaps with impossible events, and it is this spontaneous involvement of the spectators' own senses that enables the

coin to vanish and reappear, or to pass through the magician's hand.

After flourishing a silver dollar in my right hand, for example, spinning it a few times to catch the audience's attention, I may suddenly hide that coin behind the hand, clipping it between two fingers so that it is no longer visible to their gaze. If, an instant later, I reach into the air on the other side of my body with my left hand, and bring into view *another* silver dollar that had been clipped behind *that* hand, the audience will commonly perceive something quite wondrous. They will *not* perceive that one coin has been momentarily hidden while a wholly different coin, in another place, has been brought out of hiding, although this would surely be the most obvious and rational interpretation. Rather, they will perceive that a single coin, having vanished from my right hand, has traveled invisibly through the air and reappeared in my left hand! For the perceiving body does not calculate logical probabilities; it gregariously participates in the activity of the world, lending its imagination to things in order to see them more fully. The invisible journey of the coin is contributed, quite spontaneously, by the promiscuous creativity of the senses. The magician induces us to assist in the metamorphosis of his objects, and then startles us with what we ourselves have created!

From the magician's, or the phenomenologist's, perspective, that which we call *imagination* is from the first an attribute of the senses themselves; imagination is not a separate mental faculty (as we so often assume) but is rather the way the senses themselves have of throwing themselves beyond what is immediately given, in order to make tentative contact with the other sides of things that we do not sense directly, with the hidden or invisible aspects of the sensible. And yet such sensory anticipations and projections are not arbitrary; they regularly respond to suggestions offered by the sensible itself. The magician, for instance, may make the magic palpable for the audience by following the invisible coin's journey with the focus of his own eyes, and by imaginatively "feeling" the coin depart from the one hand and arrive in the palm of the other; the audience's senses, responding to subtle shifts in the magician's body as well as to the coin, will then find the effect irresistible. In other words, it is when the magician lets *himself* be captured by the magic that his audience will be most willing to join him.

Of course, there are those few who simply will not see any magic,

either at a performance or in the world at large; armored with countless explanations and analyses, they "see" only how the trick must have been accomplished. Commonly, they will claim to have "caught sight of the wires," or to have seen me clandestinely "throw the coin into the other hand" although I myself have done no such thing. Encouraged by a cultural discourse that disdains the unpredictable and puts a premium on detached objectivity, such persons attempt to halt the participation of their senses in the phenomenon. Yet they can do so only by imaginatively projecting other phenomena (wires, or threads, or mirrors), or by looking away.

In truth, since the act of perception is always open-ended and unfinished, we are never wholly locked into any particular instance of participation. As the spectator can turn away from the magician's magic, we are always somewhat free to break our participation with any particular phenomenon. It is thus that, caught up in contemplation of a blade of grass, I may nevertheless shift my attention to the grove of trees nearby, or my focus may suddenly be usurped by a fly that lands upon my nose. Similarly, we may readily break our fascination with a television commercial in order to notice how it plays upon our emotions and our desires. But we suspend this participation only on behalf of other participations already going on—with the other persons in the room, with the hard and uncomfortable chair on which we sit, with our own thoughts and analyses. We always retain the ability to alter or suspend any particular instance of participation. Yet we can never suspend the flux of participation itself.

### *Synaesthesia—The Fusion of the Senses*

Until now we have spoken of perception in primarily visual terms. Yet perception involves touching as well, and hearing and smelling and tasting. By the term "perception" we mean the concerted activity of *all* the body's senses as they function and flourish together. Indeed, if I attend closely to my nonverbal experience of the shifting

landscape that surrounds me, I must acknowledge that the so-called separate senses are thoroughly blended with one another, and it is only after the fact that I am able to step back and isolate the specific contributions of my eyes, my ears, and my skin. As soon as I attempt to distinguish the share of any one sense from that of the others, I inevitably sever the full participation of my sensing body with the sensuous terrain.

When, for instance, I perceive the wind surging through the branches of an aspen tree, I am unable, at first, to distinguish the sight of those trembling leaves from their delicate whispering. My muscles, too, feel the torsion as those branches bend, ever so slightly, in the surge, and this imbues the encounter with a certain tactile tension. The encounter is influenced, as well, by the fresh smell of the autumn wind, and even by the taste of an apple that still lingers on my tongue.

Yet already, in this brief attempt to acknowledge the contribution of the various senses, I have had to remove myself from that "primary layer of sense experience that precedes its division among the separate senses."<sup>19</sup> Although contemporary neuroscientists study "synaesthesia"—the overlap and blending of the senses—as though it were a rare or pathological experience to which only certain persons are prone (those who report "seeing sounds," "hearing colors," and the like), our primordial, preconceptual experience, as Merleau-Ponty makes evident, is *inherently* synaesthetic. The intertwining of sensory modalities seems unusual to us only to the extent that we have become estranged from our direct experience (and hence from our primordial contact with the entities and elements that surround us):

... Synaesthetic perception is the rule, and we are unaware of it only because scientific knowledge shifts the center of gravity of experience, so that we have unlearned how to see, hear, and generally speaking, feel, in order to deduce, from our bodily organization and the world as the *physicist* conceives it, what we are to see, hear, and feel.<sup>20</sup>

Nevertheless, we still speak of "cool" or "warm" colors, of "loud" clothing, of "hard" or "brittle" sounds. The speaking body readily

transposes qualities from one sensory domain into another, according to a logic we easily understand but cannot easily explain.

Many Westerners become conscious of this overlapping of the senses only when their allegiance to the presumably impartial, analytic logic of their culture temporarily breaks down. Merleau-Ponty discusses the effect upon European researchers of mescaline, the psychoactive component of the peyote cactus, a plant traditionally used in ceremonial practice by indigenous tribes in Mexico and North America:

The influence of mescaline, by weakening the attitude of impartiality and surrendering the subject to his vitality, should [if we are correct] favor forms of synaesthetic experience. And indeed, under mescaline, the sound of a flute gives a bluish-green colour, [and] the tick of a metronome, in darkness, is translated as grey patches, the spatial intervals between them corresponding to the intervals of time between the ticks, the size of the patch to the loudness of the tick, and its height to the pitch of the sound. A subject under mescaline finds a piece of iron, strikes the window-sill with it and exclaims: "This is magic"; the trees are growing greener. . . . Seen in the perspective of the objective [Cartesian] world, with its opaque qualities, the phenomenon of synaesthetic experience is paradoxical. . . .<sup>21</sup>

Seen, however, from the perspective of the life-world—from the perspective, that is, of our pretheoretical awareness—such experiences are recognized as amplifications or intensifications of quite ordinary phenomena that are always going on.

This is not to deny that the senses are distinct modalities. It is to assert that they are divergent modalities of a single and unitary living body, that they are complementary powers evolved in complex interdependence with one another. Each sense is a unique modality of this body's existence, yet in the activity of perception these divergent modalities necessarily intercommunicate and overlap. It is thus that a raven soaring in the distance is not, for me, a mere visual image; as I follow it with my eyes, I inevitably feel the stretch and flex of its wings with my own muscles, and its sudden swoop toward the nearby trees is a visceral as well as a visual experience for me.



The raven's loud, guttural cry, as it swerves overhead, is not circumscribed within a strictly audible field—it echoes *through* the visible, immediately animating the visible landscape with the reckless style or mood proper to that jet black shape. My various senses, diverging as they do from a single, coherent body, coherently *converge*, as well, in the perceived thing, just as the separate perspectives of my two eyes converge upon the raven and convene there into a single focus. My senses connect up with each other in the things I perceive, or rather each perceived thing gathers my senses together in a coherent way, and it is this that enables me to experience the thing itself as a center of forces, as another nexus of experience, as an Other.

Hence, just as we have described perception as a dynamic participation between my body and things, so we now discern, within the act of perception, a participation between the various sensory systems of the body itself. Indeed, these events are not separable, for the intertwining of my body with the things it perceives is effected only through the interweaving of my senses, and vice versa. The relative divergence of my bodily senses (eyes in the front of the head, ears toward the back, etc.) and their curious bifurcation (not one but *two* eyes, one on each side, and similarly two ears, two nostrils, etc.), indicates that this body is a form destined to the world; it ensures that my body is a sort of open circuit that completes itself only in things, in others, in the encompassing earth.

### *The Recuperation of the Sensuous Is the Rediscovery of the Earth*

In the autumn of 1985, a strong hurricane ripped across suburban Long Island, where I was then living as a student. For several days afterward much of the populace was without electricity; power lines were down, telephone lines broken, and the roads were strewn with toppled trees. People had to walk to their jobs, and to whatever shops were still open. We began encountering each other on the streets, "in person" instead of by telephone. In the absence of automobiles and their loud engines, the rhythms of crickets and birdsong became clearly audible. Flocks were migrating south for the winter, and

many of us found ourselves simply listening, with new and childlike curiosity, to the ripples of song in the still-standing trees and the fields. And at night the sky was studded with stars! Many children, their eyes no longer blocked by the glare of houselights and street-lamps, saw the Milky Way for the first time, and were astonished. For those few days and nights our town became a community aware of its place in an encompassing cosmos. Even our noses seemed to come awake, the fresh smells from the ocean somehow more vibrant and salty. The breakdown of our technologies had forced a return to our senses, and hence to the natural landscape in which those senses are so profoundly embedded. We suddenly found ourselves inhabiting a sensuous world that had been waiting, for years, at the very fringe of our awareness, an intimate terrain infused by birdsong, salt spray, and the light of stars.

AS WE REACQUAINT OURSELVES WITH OUR BREATHING BODIES, then the perceived world itself begins to shift and transform. When we begin to consciously frequent the wordless dimension of our sensory participations, certain phenomena that have habitually commanded our focus begin to lose their distinctive fascination and to slip toward the background, while hitherto unnoticed or overlooked presences begin to stand forth from the periphery and to engage our awareness. The countless human artifacts with which we are commonly involved—the asphalt roads, chain-link fences, telephone wires, buildings, lightbulbs, ballpoint pens, automobiles, street signs, plastic containers, newspapers, radios, television screens—all begin to exhibit a common style, and so to lose some of their distinctiveness; meanwhile, organic entities—crows, squirrels, the trees and wild weeds that surround our house, humming insects, streambeds, clouds and rainfalls—all these begin to display a new vitality, each coaxing the breathing body into a unique dance. Even boulders and rocks seem to speak their own uncanny languages of gesture and shadow, inviting the body and its bones into silent communication. In contact with the native forms of the earth, one's senses are slowly energized and awakened, combining and recombining in ever-shifting patterns.

For these other shapes and species have coevolved, like ourselves,

with the rest of the shifting earth; their rhythms and forms are composed of layers upon layers of earlier rhythms, and in engaging them our senses are led into an inexhaustible depth that echoes that of our own flesh. The patterns on the stream's surface as it ripples over the rocks, or on the bark of an elm tree, or in a cluster of weeds, are all composed of repetitive figures that *never exactly repeat themselves*, of iterated shapes to which our senses may attune themselves even while the gradual drift and metamorphosis of those shapes draws our awareness in unexpected and unpredictable directions.

In contrast, the mass-produced artifacts of civilization, from milk cartons to washing machines to computers, draw our senses into a dance that endlessly reiterates itself *without variation*. To the sensing body these artifacts are, like all phenomena, animate and even alive, but their life is profoundly constrained by the specific "functions" for which they were built. Once our bodies master these functions, the machine-made objects commonly teach our senses nothing further; they are unable to surprise us, and so we must continually acquire *new* built objects, new technologies, the latest model of this or that if we wish to stimulate ourselves.

Of course, our human-made artifacts inevitably retain an element of more-than-human otherness. This unknowability, this otherness, resides most often in the materials from which the object is made. The tree trunk of the telephone pole, the clay of the bricks from which the building is fashioned, the smooth metal alloy of the car door we lean against—all these still carry, like our bodies, the textures and rhythms of a pattern that we ourselves did not devise, and their quiet dynamism responds directly to our senses. Too often, however, this dynamism is stifled within mass-produced structures closed off from the rest of the earth, imprisoned within technologies that plunder the living land. The superstraight lines and right angles of our office architecture, for instance, make our animal senses wither even as they support the abstract intellect; the wild, earth-born nature of the materials—the woods, clays, metals, and stones that went into the building—are readily forgotten behind the abstract and calculable form.<sup>22</sup>

It is thus that so much of our built environment, and so many of the artifacts that populate it, seem sadly superfluous and dull when we identify with our bodies and taste the world with our animal

senses. (Of course, this is not to say that these artifacts are innocuous: many of them are exceedingly loud, even blaring, for what they lack in variation and nuance they must make up in clamorous insistence, monopolizing the perceptual field.) Whenever we assume the position and poise of the human animal—Merleau-Ponty's body-subject—then the entire material world itself seems to come awake and to speak, yet organic, earth-born entities speak far more eloquently than the rest. Like suburbanites after a hurricane, we find ourselves alive in a living field of powers far more expressive and diverse than the strictly human sphere to which we are accustomed.

SO THE RECUPERATION OF THE INCARNATE, SENSORIAL DIMENSION of experience brings with it a recuperation of the living landscape in which we are corporeally embedded. As we return to our senses, we gradually discover our sensory perceptions to be simply our part of a vast, interpenetrating webwork of perceptions and sensations borne by countless other bodies—supported, that is, not just by ourselves, but by icy streams tumbling down granitic slopes, by owl wings and lichens, and by the unseen, imperturbable wind.

This intertwined web of experience is, of course, the "life-world" to which Husserl alluded in his final writings, yet now the life-world has been disclosed as a profoundly *carnal* field, as this very dimension of smells and tastes and chirping rhythms warmed by the sun and shivering with seeds. It is, indeed, nothing other than the biosphere—the matrix of earthly life in which we ourselves are embedded. Yet this is not the biosphere as it is conceived by an abstract and objectifying science, not that complex assemblage of planetary mechanisms presumably being mapped and measured by our remote-sensing satellites; it is, rather, the biosphere as it is experienced and *lived from within* by the intelligent body—by the attentive human animal who is entirely a part of the world that he, or she, experiences.

*Matter as Flesh*

In his final work, *The Visible and the Invisible* (a work interrupted by his sudden death in 1961), Merleau-Ponty was striving for a new way of speaking that would express this consanguinity of the human animal and the world it inhabits. Here he writes less about "the body" (which in his earlier work had signified primarily the *human* body) and begins to write instead of the collective "Flesh," which signifies both *our* flesh and "the flesh of the world."<sup>23</sup> By "the Flesh" Merleau-Ponty means to indicate an elemental power that has had no name in the entire history of Western philosophy. The Flesh is the mysterious tissue or matrix that underlies and gives rise to both the perceiver and the perceived as interdependent aspects of its own spontaneous activity. It is the reciprocal presence of the sentient in the sensible and of the sensible in the sentient, a mystery of which we have always, at least tacitly, been aware, since we have never been able to affirm one of these phenomena, the perceivable world or the perceiving self, without implicitly affirming the existence of the other. We are unable even to *imagine* a sensible landscape that would not at the same time be sensed (since in imagining any landscape we inevitably envisage it from a particular perspective, and thus implicate our own senses, and indeed our own sentience, in that landscape), and are similarly unable to fully imagine a sensing self, or sentience, that would not be situated in some field of sensed phenomena.

Nevertheless, conventional scientific discourse privileges the sensible field in abstraction from sensory experience, and commonly maintains that subjective experience is "caused" by an objectifiable set of processes in the mechanically determined field of the sensible. Meanwhile, New Age spiritualism regularly privileges pure sentience, or subjectivity, in abstraction from sensible matter, and often maintains that material reality is itself an illusory effect caused by an immaterial mind or spirit. Although commonly seen as opposed world-views, both of these positions assume a qualitative difference between the sentient and the sensed; by prioritizing one or the other, both of these views perpetuate the distinction between human

"subjects" and natural "objects," and hence neither threatens the common conception of sensible nature as a purely passive dimension suitable for human manipulation and use. While both of these views are unstable, each bolsters the other; by bouncing from one to the other—from scientific determinism to spiritual idealism and back again—contemporary discourse easily avoids the possibility that both the perceiving being and the perceived being are *of the same stuff*, that the perceiver and the perceived are interdependent and in some sense even reversible aspects of a common animate element, or Flesh, that is *at once both sensible and sensitive*.

We readily experience this paradox in relation to other persons; this stranger who stands before me and is an object for my gaze suddenly opens his mouth and speaks to me, forcing me to acknowledge that he is a sentient subject like myself, and that I, too, am an object for his gaze. Each of us, in relation to the other, is both subject and object, sensible and sentient. Why, then, might this not also be the case in relation to another, nonhuman entity—a mountain lion, for instance, that I unexpectedly encounter in the northern forest? Indeed, such a meeting brings home to me even more forcefully that I am not just a sentient subject but also a sensible object, even an *edible* object, in the eyes (and nose) of the other. Even an ant crawling along my arm, visible to my eyes and tactile to my skin, displays at the same time its own sentience, responding immediately to my movements, even to the chemical changes of my mood. In relation to the ant I feel myself as a dense and material object, as capricious in my actions as the undulating earth itself. Finally, then, why might not this "reversibility" of subject and object extend to every entity that I experience? Once I acknowledge that my own sentience, or subjectivity, does not preclude my visible, tactile, objective existence or others, I find myself forced to acknowledge that *any* visible, tangible form that meets my gaze may also be an experiencing subject, sensitive and responsive to the beings around it, and to me.

*Touching and Being Touched: The Reciprocity of the Sensuous*

In order to demonstrate, empirically, his notion of the Flesh, Merleau-Ponty provides what may be the most direct illustration of that which we have termed "participation." He calls attention to the obvious but easily overlooked fact that my hand is able to touch things only because my hand is itself a touchable thing, and thus is entirely a part of the tactile world that it explores. Similarly, the eyes, with which I see things, are themselves visible. With their gleaming surfaces, their colors and hues, they are included *within* the visible field that they see—they are themselves part of the visible, like the bark of a cedar, or a piece of sandstone, or the blue sky.

To touch the coarse skin of a tree is thus, at the same time, to experience one's own tactility, to feel oneself touched *by* the tree. And to see the world is also, at the same time, to experience oneself as visible, to feel oneself *seen*. Clearly, a wholly immaterial mind could neither see things nor touch things—indeed, could not experience anything at all. *We* can experience things—can touch, hear, and taste things—only because, as bodies, we are ourselves included in the sensible field, and have our own textures, sounds, and tastes. We can perceive things at all only because we ourselves are entirely a part of the sensible world that we perceive! We might as well say that we are organs of this world, flesh of its flesh, and that the world is perceiving itself *through* us.

Walking in a forest, we peer into its green and shadowed depths, listening to the silence of the leaves, tasting the cool and fragrant air. Yet such is the transitivity of perception, the reversibility of the flesh, that we may suddenly feel that the trees are looking at us—we feel ourselves exposed, watched, observed from all sides. If we dwell in this forest for many months, or years, then our experience may shift yet again—we may come to feel that we are a part of this forest, consanguineous with it, and that our experience of the forest is nothing other than the forest experiencing itself.

Such are the exchanges and metamorphoses that arise from the simple fact that our sentient bodies are entirely continuous with the

vast body of the land, that "the presence of the world is precisely the presence of its flesh to my flesh."<sup>24</sup>

MERLEAU-PONTY'S NOTION OF THE FLESH OF THE WORLD, ALONG with his related discoveries regarding the reciprocity of perception, bring his work into startling consonance with the worldviews of many indigenous, oral cultures. According to cultural anthropologist Richard Nelson, in his exhaustive study of the ecology of the Koyukon Indians of north central Alaska:

[t]raditional Koyukon people live in a world that watches, in a forest of eyes. A person moving through nature—however wild, remote, even desolate the place may be—is never truly alone. The surroundings are aware, sensate, personified. They feel. They can be offended. And they must, at every moment, be treated with the proper respect.<sup>25</sup>

Such a mode of experience, which seems so strange and confused to our civilized ways of thinking, becomes understandable as soon as we acknowledge, underneath our conventional assumptions, the reciprocal nature of direct perception—the fact that to touch is also to feel oneself being touched, that to see is also to feel oneself seen. Nelson's description suggests, as well, that such perceptual reciprocity, when consciously acknowledged, may profoundly influence one's behavior. If the surroundings are experienced as sensate, attentive, and watchful, then I must take care that my actions are mindful and respectful, even when I am far from other humans, lest I offend the watchful land itself.

It may be that the new "environmental ethic" toward which so many environmental philosophers aspire—an ethic that would lead us to respect and heed not only the lives of our fellow humans but also the life and well-being of the rest of nature—will come into existence not primarily through the logical elucidation of new philosophical principles and legislative strictures, but through a renewed attentiveness to this perceptual dimension that underlies all our logics, through a rejuvenation of our carnal, sensorial empathy with the living land that sustains us.

Such a recuperation is, perhaps, already underway. Many individuals today experience a profound anguish that only deepens with each report of more ancient forests cleared, of new oil spills, of the ever-accelerating loss of species. It is an anguish that seems to come from the earth itself, from this vast Flesh in which our own sentient flesh is embedded. In the words of a Koyukon elder: "The country knows. If you do wrong things to it, the whole country knows. It feels what's happening to it."<sup>26</sup>

THE INFLUENCE OF A KIND OF PERCEPTUAL RECIPROCITY UPON oneself and one's actions is evident as well in these words spoken by Old Torlino, a Navajo elder, before telling part of the creation story:

*I am ashamed before the earth;  
I am ashamed before the heavens;  
I am ashamed before the dawn;  
I am ashamed before the evening twilight;  
I am ashamed before the blue sky;  
I am ashamed before the sun.  
I am ashamed before that standing within me which speaks with me.  
Some of these things are always looking at me.  
I am never out of sight.  
Therefore I must tell the truth.  
I hold my word tight to my breast.<sup>27</sup>*

The final lines of this prayer/incantation call our attention to speaking itself as a form of behavior that can be mindful or callous, truthful or dishonest, in the face of a sentient cosmos. Spoken words here are real presences, entities that may be cherished—"held tight to my breast"—or flung carelessly into the world. These phrases from the Navajo, like the Koyukon words before them, provide evidence not only of a different way of seeing, but also of a way of speaking very different from that to which so many of us are accustomed. The practice of language among indigenous peoples would seem to carry a very different significance than it does in the modern West. Enacted primarily in song, prayer, and story, among oral peoples language functions not simply to dialogue with other humans but also

to converse with the more-than-human cosmos, to renew reciprocity with the surrounding powers of earth and sky, to invoke kinship even with those entities which, to the civilized mind, are utterly insentient and inert. Hence, a Lakota medicine person may address a stone as "Tunkashila"—"Grandfather." Likewise, among the Omaha, a rock may be addressed with the respect and reverence that one pays to an ancient elder:

unmoved  
from time without  
end  
you rest  
there in the midst of the paths  
in the midst of the winds  
you rest  
covered with the droppings of birds  
grass growing from your feet  
your head decked with the down of birds  
you rest  
in the midst of the winds  
you wait  
Aged one.<sup>28</sup>

Here words do not speak *about* the world; rather they speak *to* the world, and to the expressive presences that, with us, inhabit the world. In multiple and diverse ways, taking (as we shall see) a unique form in each indigenous culture, spoken language seems to give voice to, and thus to enhance and accentuate, the sensorial affinity between humans and the environing earth.

This would appear, at least at first, to be in direct contradiction to the character of linguistic discourse in the "developed" or "civilized" world, where language functions largely to *deny* reciprocity with nature—by defining the rest of nature as inert, mechanical, and determinate—and where, in consequence, our sensorial participation with the land around us must remain mute, inchoate, and in most cases wholly unconscious. In indigenous, oral cultures, in other words, language seems to encourage and augment the participatory life of the senses, while in Western civilization language seems to

deny or deaden that life, promoting a massive distrust of sensorial experience while valorizing an abstract realm of ideas hidden behind or beyond the sensory appearances.

How can we account for this divergence? In what manner can we make sense of this difference in the character of language, and in the relation between language and perception? Before attempting a precise answer to this question, we must come to a clearer understanding of just what is meant, in this context, by "language."

## The Flesh of Language

The rain surrounded the cabin . . . with a whole world of meaning, of secrecy, of rumor. Think of it: all that speech pouring down, selling nothing, judging nobody, drenching the thick mulch of dead leaves, soaking the trees, filling the gullies and crannies of the wood with water, washing out the places where men have stripped the hillside. . . . Nobody started it, nobody is going to stop it. It will talk as long as it wants, the rain. As long as it talks I am going to listen.

—THOMAS MERTON

**E**VERY ATTEMPT TO DEFINITELY SAY *WHAT LANGUAGE IS* is subject to a curious limitation. For the only medium with which we can define language is language itself. We are therefore unable to circumscribe the whole of language within our definition. It may be best, then, to leave language undefined, and to thus acknowledge its open-endedness, its mysteriousness. Nevertheless, by paying attention to this mystery we may develop a conscious familiarity with it, a sense of its texture, its habits, its sources of sustenance.

Merleau-Ponty, as we have seen, spent much of his life demonstrating that the event of perception unfolds as a reciprocal exchange between the living body and the animate world that surrounds it. He showed, as well, that this exchange, for all its openness and indeter-