

# Dancing as Self-Othering - 3: Merleau-Ponty's "Flesh Ontology"

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I'm going to devote this lecture to the philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and then in the following lecture I'll show its importance to the way we understand dancing. His work on human perception and gesture have already been considered, yet there is another contribution of his that I need now to consider and, since it is sophisticated and rich, it needs some time for an adequate development. The advantage it provides us to understanding dancing is significant.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty was a French existential phenomenologist whose efforts to understand human perception led him to develop a philosophy of body. He denied the body-mind split that has for centuries shaped the way we understand not only perception and body, but also what it means to be human. His conjunctive constructions of the lived-body and the minded-body seek acknowledgment of the traditional distinction without the radical separation.<sup>1</sup> He defined the mind as "the *other* side of the body" holding that "we have no idea of a mind that would not be *doubled* with a body. . . . The 'other side' means that the body, inasmuch as it has this other side, is not describable in *objective* terms, in terms of the in-itself—that this other side is really the other side of *the body*, *overflows* into it (*Ueberschreiten*), encroaches upon it, is hidden in it—and at the same time needs it, terminates in it, is *anchored* in it."<sup>2</sup> There can be no mind without body. At the time of Merleau-Ponty's death, in 1961, he was working on a manuscript that was to broadly expand his earlier ideas, specifically through his development of what has come to be termed "ontology of flesh." The manuscript was edited and published posthumously as *The Visible and the Invisible* and the ontology of flesh is developed most fully in the essay entitled "The Intertwining—The Chiasm."<sup>3</sup>

Merleau-Ponty does not limit his understanding of flesh to skin and meat, nor are these its primary reference, yet his most enduring and inspiring analogy and example of what he termed flesh<sup>4</sup> is

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1In very general ways these ideas are explored in terms of dancing by Sandra Fraleigh in her book *Dance and the Lived Body* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1987).

2Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 259. "In-itself" or "being-in-itself" is a Sartrean term referring to nonconscious being. See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1966), especially the glossary by translator Hazel E. Barnes.

3Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), pp. 130 - 155. The predecessors to this theory are found in "The Philosopher and his Shadow," trans. Richard C. McCleary, in *Signs* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964).

4I believe this example provides the "flesh" terminology Merleau-Ponty adopted. The difficulty with this terminology lies in its inevitable identity with substantive banal flesh, an identity we have constantly to deny even though it is the basic bodied experience we must always depend on as the basis for our understanding. There is a certain irony in the need to disembodied, even dematerialize Flesh, in order that it help us more fully understand our being lived-bodies. Some more philosophically focused discussion of this, at least more than what I want to do anyway, would be interesting.

developed in his reflections on our experience of one hand touching the other.

If my hand, while it is felt from within, is also accessible from without, itself tangible, for my other hand, for example, if it takes its place among things it touches, is in a sense one of them, opens finally upon a tangible being of which it is also a part. Through this crisscrossing within it of the touching and the tangible, its own movements incorporate themselves into the universe they interrogate, are recorded on the same map as it; the two systems are applied upon one another, as the two halves of an orange.<sup>5</sup>

There are at least two things here: a hand touching an object and a sentient object being touched, but in this case the object touched is the other hand of the person doing the touching. There is a complexity here, as Merleau-Ponty shows, that denies the simple division between object and subject, between the perceived and perceiver. What is doing the touching is also being touched and vice versa. Merleau-Ponty points out the “crisscrossing” in which the touching and the tangible are but two sides of the same thing, “as the two halves of an orange.” The unifying structure of two hands touching is the inarguable singularity of the human body. As Merleau-Ponty writes, “My two hands touch the same things because they are the hands of one same body.”<sup>6</sup> “The body unites us directly with the things through its own ontogenesis, by welding to one another the two outlines of which it is made, its two laps: the sensible mass it is and the mass of the sensible within it is born by segregation and upon which, as seer, it remains open.”<sup>7</sup> “Our body is a being of two leaves, from one side a thing among things and otherwise what sees them and touches them; we say, because it is evident, that it unites these two properties within itself, and its double belongingness to the order of the ‘object’ and to the order of the ‘subject’ reveals to us quite unexpected relations between the two orders.”<sup>8</sup> This image of the body that is two yet one is clarified with Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of the chiasm (a cross piece, crossing place, or to mark with the letter *chi*), that is, a crisscrossing, intertwining, folding that he calls “flesh.” Flesh is not stagnant or inanimate matter, but rather it is on the order of an element (in the same sense as fire, air, earth and water) in the sense of being constitutive of reality.<sup>9</sup> It is a texture (a woven fabric) that expresses the fundamental unity and continuity, yet allowing diversity, division, and opposition, that permeates all interrelated and interwoven pairings. It is no thing, but the formative medium of the subject and object. As a skin or fabric, flesh is two-sided—the sensitive and the sensed—yet where the two are not entirely separable from one another. The hand being touched is also capable of touching. The sides are reversible as are the insides and outsides of a jacket or glove, or, to suggest a metaphor

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5Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 133.

6*ibid.*, 141.

7*ibid.*, 136.

8*ibid.*, 137. The leaves metaphor is interesting. Leaves, as of a tree, are all different yet all connected to the same species (we know a tree by the shape of its leaves) and even of one entity. Leaves of a book carry on the structurality and include a sense of the two sides, as in turning over a new leaf, meaning I suppose in the behavioral analogy that one side of a leaf differs from the other while still being the same.

9The shift of flesh from the gross matter of the inspiring analogy, that is, two hands, to the elemental is a difficult one largely because of the gross physicality, the bloodiness, that is almost inseparable from the word “flesh.”

Dancing, I’ll suggest, is an important alternative.

Merleau-Ponty did not use the windings of a Möbius strip. A Möbius strip is a single-sided geometrical structure. It can be modeled by taking a thin strip of paper, twisting it a half turn, and joining the ends together. Though it appears to have an inside and an outside or a front side and a back side, as is seemingly an obvious condition of any flat surface, when traced along the length of one side, the inside and outside are found to be continuous, inseparable, identical. At any point on the strip one can turn it over to confirm that it has a second side. By holding the paper between one's finger and thumb it is clear that the finger is on one side, the thumb on the other. Yet, when one traces the extent of one side, say by marking a line along the length of the strip, it is continuous and single, the line meets itself without any break to move from one side to the other. The endless conjunction and continuity of inside and outside is also captured by the infinity sign this form takes as a three dimensional object.<sup>10</sup>

For Merleau-Ponty, the essential feature of flesh is its reversibility, the exchange between the inside and outside, the subjective and objective, the touching and the touched, the seeing and the seen, and so on. Which hand is touching; which is being touched? Which side of the Möbius strip is the outside? It is in the reversibility of flesh, its capacity to fold in on itself, its reflexivity, its fundamental gap or dehiscence that is also continuity and connection of being that Merleau-Ponty shows is the operative principle that makes possible perception, language, thought. It is in the separation and division that perception, language, thought are needed; but were there not also a unity or interdependence among the parts, there would be no connection, no passage, no access from one part of a duality to the other. It is the reversibility of flesh—"a texture that returns to itself and conforms to itself"<sup>11</sup>—that offers separation, yet continuity and therefore makes life possible.

As perception is the intertwining of percipient and perceptibles, Merleau-Ponty extends his notion beyond the boundaries of the human body in his understanding of the "flesh of the world." Merleau-Ponty attacks the self-other distinction that usually survives even those philosophies of body that interrelate or identify mind and body. Merleau-Ponty sees that to continue to allow this radical separation, this dichotomy, would be to stop too soon. "Is my body a thing, is it an idea? It is neither, being the measurant of the things. We will therefore have to recognize an ideality that is not alien to the flesh that gives it its axes, its depth, its dimensions."<sup>12</sup> Merleau-Ponty expands the understanding of body to extend beyond that space displaced by the physical body. The flesh of the world extends perception beyond the physical body, but, as importantly, it re-conceptualizes the body as extending into the world. As the inner and outer are continuous—that is, separable, but unified—as the body and

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<sup>10</sup>Merleau-Ponty did not refer to the Möbius as a model. Elizabeth Grosz did apply it to his work. See *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994, p. 36. Merleau-Ponty used an analogy that was quite close, "If one wants metaphors, it would be better to say that the body sensed and the body sentient are as the obverse and the reverse, or again, as two segments of one sole circular course which goes above from left to right and below from right to left, but which is but one sole movement in its two phases. And everything is said about the sensed body pertains to the whole of the sensible of which it is a part, and to the world." *Visible and Invisible*, p. 138. His reference to one sole circular course is but a half twist from being a Möbius and clearly the Möbius would have served him as a better metaphor.

<sup>11</sup>*Visible and Invisible*, p. 146.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 152.

mind, subject and object fit the same pattern, so too do the physical body and the world beyond it.

This development is fundamental to Merleau-Ponty's understanding of perception. Perception, as usually understood, bifurcates the perceiver and thing perceived, yet, for Merleau-Ponty, they are of the same fabric, they are both of the flesh of the world. He writes, "If the body is one sole body in its two phases, it incorporates into itself the whole of the sensible and with the same movement incorporates itself into a 'Sensible in itself.' We have to reject the age-old assumptions that put the body in the world and the seer in the body, or, conversely, the world and the body in the seer as in a box. Where are we to put the limit between the body and the world, since the world is flesh?"<sup>13</sup> Otherwise, Merleau-Ponty argues, we would be in a world he finds impossible, a world divided into discontinuous isolated paired members. The flesh of the world is the fabric that at once divides us and unites us with the world in which we live, the world beyond the bounds of our physical bodies, the world that we perceive and experience. Here our sentient bodies are understood by Merleau-Ponty as belonging to the same flesh as non-self-sentient sensibility, as those things outside the body that we perceive as objects sensed. Merleau-Ponty argues that we are able to perceive that which is beyond us because our bodies share the same fabric, a fabric he calls the flesh of the world.<sup>14</sup>

Merleau-Ponty investigates the bond between the flesh and the idea, the issue addressed by the title given his book, the bond between the visible and the invisible. He writes, ideas "could not be given to us *as ideas* except in the carnal experience. It is not only that we would find in that carnal experience the *occasion* to think them [that is, ideas]; it is that they owe their authority, their fascinating, indestructible power, precisely to the fact that they are in transparency behind the sensible, or in its heart."<sup>15</sup> He says further, "The idea is this level, this dimension. It is therefore not a *de facto* invisible, like an object hidden behind another, and not an absolute invisible, which would have nothing to do with the visible. Rather it is the invisible *of* this world, that which inhabits the world, sustains it, and renders it visible, its own and interior possibility, the Being of this being."<sup>16</sup>

Merleau-Ponty's flesh ontology addresses the current most engaging cultural and intellectual problem: is there intrinsic order in the world. Merleau-Ponty articulates his understanding of this intrinsic order in the terms of this doubling, this intertwining, this reversibility, this reciprocity, this flesh that makes possible, that grounds, that both distinguishes and unifies self and other. For Merleau-Ponty the reversibility of flesh constitutes "the ultimate truth."<sup>17</sup>

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13Ibid., 138.

14This understanding of the body as extending beyond the skin into the world is not unknown beyond Merleau-Ponty. One thinks of Edward T. Hall's work *The Hidden Dimension* (New York: Anchor Books Doubleday, 1966) with proxemics, which explores how our physical bodies are surrounded by domains (bubbles) that can be characterized differently that extend us into the world seemingly outside of ourselves. However, Merleau-Ponty's work is far more radical. Rather than our bodies extending into the world beyond our physical boundaries, Merleau-Ponty argues that we are continuous with the world, of the same fabric, yet still distinct from it.

15Visible and Invisible, p. 150.

16Ibid., p. 151.

17Ibid., p. 155.

