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Ontology, Ethics, and *Sentir*: Properly Situating Merleau-Ponty

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ABSTRACT

Maurice Merleau-Ponty did not author an ethic, and yet it is possible to extend his ontological descriptions to an ethic similar to that espoused by post modern thinkers. It is even possible to distill an environmental ethic, or at least, one of consideration of the more-than-human, from his work. This paper attempts to do some preliminary work in light of this, and lays some groundwork for the future direction of an environmental ethic inspired by a Merleau-Pontian ontology. At the same time, it challenges the popularised view of Merleau-Ponty espoused by David Abram – viz., of Merleau-Ponty as an animist – and properly situates Merleau Ponty.

KEY WORDS

Merleau-Ponty, David Abram, Peter Singer, ontology, environmental ethics, moral pluralism

A philosophy must be able to consider questions that arise in connection with it, and questions frequently arise as to the relationship between ontology and ethics. This is no less the case when one attempts to uncover possible bases for moral consideration for either nonhuman individuals or the whole of the nonhuman world.

In general, one of the important areas of philosophy is this connection, and I do not think the two can reasonably be separated. After all, how can we make normative claims without some reasonable understanding of what kind of beings we are? We need to understand that (and how) moral behaviour is possible.

Before I pursue the relation of ontology and ethics in this regard, however, I must admit I am also intrigued by arguments such of those of Emmanuel Levinas that we cannot have both an ethics and an ontology, or John Caputo in *Against Ethics* that there *is* no ground for an ethic.¹ Levinas' concern is that ontological descriptions tend toward sameness and discovering what is common to being. This can facilitate the appropriation, i.e. the silencing or 'totalisation', of the unique difference of others and so cannot produce an ethic or a genuine attitude of respect for the other. His general point is that the ethical relation is primary and ontological projects inevitably interfere with the ethical relation. Although this insight is intriguing, the questions which still arise as to an ontology cannot be completely dismissed, despite Levinas' invaluable words of caution.

John Caputo, whose work is well known in the field of deconstructive ethics, is motivated by a concern that is similar to my own. In an attempt to situate his thought between Levinas' perspective and Nietzsche's famous attack on ethics, Caputo maintains that there is no metaphysical ground for an ethic, no comforting universal rule, reason, or explanation for events that can render them either good or evil. And there is no universal rule grounding any normative response. He says further that an attempt to organise events around such a ground is a project that is bound to fail. He attempts to place his alternative to ethics (or what he calls a 'poetics of obligation') among the many ambiguities of life by advocating continual acknowledgement of the plurality of differences and events 'happening' without basing them on a firm metaphysical ground. Thus his is a highly nuanced version of the traditional orientation around 'ethics'.

Yet Caputo also considers that Levinas went too far in completely dismissing any descriptions of being. So despite his own concerns about the traditional ethics and ontology, he ultimately concludes that:

To follow the way of obligation means to be stirred by the appeals, to answer the call of ... what is laid low.... Without [pausing to reflect on] why. Because flesh is flesh, because flesh [immediately] calls to flesh.... Flesh calls and makes its needs felt, and the needs of the flesh are all you need for obligation.²

Here, at quite literally the end of Caputo's book, the reader discovers that the lure of the question of ontology and ethics (this time in more cautious terms of 'obligation') remains. The question persists as to 'what is' this 'flesh' that makes its needs felt.

Although this is only one among various specific examples of contemporary polemics, I use it to illustrate my point that ultimately we cannot escape consideration of the connection between ontology and ethics. Fortunately, however, there is a particular way of thinking out of their delimitation, which is an ambiguous, flexible way of understanding (and a more nuanced description of being than perhaps we are traditionally accustomed to) that can bridge the gap between them. An example of this way of understanding the interrelations

between ontology and ethics can be found by considering the works of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in which he offers ontological descriptions that involve an ambiguity of identity and a constant openness toward the surrounding world. Caputo dismisses Merleau-Ponty's ontology as transcendent. But I would like to reconsider Merleau-Ponty's notion of flesh for its immanence and its ability to explicate originary connectedness with others. Whatever ethic extends from his ontological descriptions arises from an originary intersubjectivity or interaction between beings and the world, since our very being is contingent on this relation, and the normative, however contingent and flexible it may be, will stem from this manner of being.

In the rest of this paper, then, I will discuss this kind of ontology. I will also suggest that it lends itself not only to understanding ethical relations between humans, but also to extension of moral consideration to other sensing beings. In order to accomplish this, first, I will briefly outline Merleau-Ponty's ontology, and then I will describe a misinterpretation of it by David Abram in his well-known *The Spell of the Sensuous*.³ It is critical, I think, to consider Abram's extension of Merleau-Ponty's ontology to an environmental ethic. In part, this is because Abram's interpretation is so widely known. In addition, it is generally important for Merleau-Ponty's philosophy to be understood and extended in the most reasonable way. Because Abram's interpretation, as I will show, is essentially a misinterpretation and because it is so widely read, the present undertaking is an important one.

Finally I will return to Merleau-Ponty's ontology as a basis for broadening moral consideration by briefly presenting an interpretation of his view which is different from Abram's. Thus I will show how Merleau-Ponty's ontology begins to reveal the way to base moral consideration for nonhumans. All of this notwithstanding, it is not my overarching goal to advocate moral consideration only for sentient beings; I am merely tracing the possibility of the value of Merleau-Ponty's work for discussions of ethics, animals, and nature (including humans) while defending his work from Abram's animistic interpretations. In the end I will try to reconnect to the spirit of Abram's non-anthropocentrism through emphasising the part of his interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's work which is not a misappropriation.

I.

Merleau-Ponty's later works, notably 'Themes From the Lectures at the College de France, 1952–1960', 'Eye and Mind', and *The Visible and the Invisible*, offer ontological descriptions that rethink our 'originary connection' as both what can be differentiated as mind and body, and what can be differentiated as self and world. He claims that although mind and body, and self and world, are discernible through cognitive reflection, they are not immediately experienced

as separate. Yet he does not claim that mind and body, or self and world, are indistinguishable. Rather, the originary connections at each level are distinctly characterised by the notion of ‘flesh’ which is a particular and peculiar fundamental ‘reversibility’. Flesh can be construed as the fundamental element of being which can be understood through analysing perception. But it is better understood as a manner of being, and not as a substance with thingly properties.⁴

In the first instance, from the perspective of mind/body reversibility, understanding the flesh is facilitated by understanding the reversibility of perceiving and being perceptible. Mind and body are mutually referential and can neither be considered nor exist in isolation. We could not perceive, let alone think, without a body; yet we could not be embodied without the ability to sense and perceive, abilities on which thinking is contingent. Merleau-Ponty concentrates on the way in which we, as bodied subjects, embody perceptible reversibility. This reversibility is evidenced by our reflexive ability to touch and be touched, or to see and be seen. We just *are* the locus of sensed and sensing. Merleau-Ponty says that:

[O]ur body is a thing of two leaves, from one side a thing among things and otherwise what sees and touches them ... it unites these two properties within itself, and its double belongingness to the order of the ‘object’ ... and the ‘subject’ reveals to us ... that each calls for the other. It cannot be by incomprehensible accident that the body has this double reference; it teaches us that each calls for the other.⁵

In addition to describing our embodiment, the reversibility of the ‘flesh’ also allows our perceptions of objects to connect us to the objects in a move that avoids solipsism. We can understand how we are originally connected to the world, again, through analysing perception. We perceive only to the extent that we are also perceptible – we realise that we are perceptible from within as well as from without. That is, we can hear ourselves from within as well as from without, we can see our body as we also see the world, and we can touch ourselves as we are touching objects. This double reversibility of perceiving ourselves sensing and being sensible marks the originary point of being. We perceive objects in precisely the same way as we can also perceive ourselves ‘from without’. In that sense we are not isolable or disconnected from the world.

Flesh also allows for the world to be knowable. Merleau-Ponty says that:

If I was able to understand ... how the visible which is yonder is also my landscape, I can understand a fortiori that elsewhere it also closes in upon itself and that there are other landscapes besides my own.⁶

So flesh is the natural world, or the ‘field of Being’, and finally, it also facilitates recognition of other (perceiving) perspectives on the world – ‘other landscapes’ are co-disclosed by other perceivers.

At the same time, reversible flesh is *not* a melding of sensing and sensible; it is a peculiarly characterised reversibility. That *sensing* and *being sensed* remain reversible as, in Merleau-Ponty's terms, 'fissioned' rather than 'fused' is an important point. Merleau-Ponty insists in this respect that the reversible perceptibility/perception of the senses is 'always imminent and never realised'.⁷ It is *never* simultaneous:

[T]his incessant escaping ... is precisely because my two hands are part of the same body, because it moves itself in the world, and it is only as though the hinge between them, solid, unshakeable, remained irremediably hidden from me. ... But this ... is not an ontological void...: it is spanned by the total being of my body, and by that of the world; it is the zero of pressure between two solids that makes them adhere to one another.⁸

Evidence of this same theme has continued from his earlier works, in his phenomenological descriptions of perception, where he says that:

Two hands are never simultaneously in the relationship of touched and touching to each other. ... The body catches itself from the outside engaged in a cognitive process; it tries to touch itself while being touched, and initiates a kind of reflection which is sufficient to distinguish it from objects.⁹

Merleau-Ponty's observation about the incessant escaping, or fission, of sensing/sensible serves to underscore two points. First, there is a reversibility between human and nonhuman which is like that of our experience as fundamentally embodied consciousness, in the sense that the existence of each implies and reveals that of the other.¹⁰ But moreover, what lies 'between', in the point of escaping, marks flesh, or being – ours, and that of the world. Secondly, the perceiving being is the unique locus of sensibility. Subject and object do not merge; rather, they are peculiarly reversible, they are intertwined, they are mutually referential. He says this to distinguish humans from objects in the nonhuman world. The fact that perceiving and being perceptible do not occur simultaneously marks a fundamental *asymmetry* between the being that can both sense and be sensed, and that which is only (to use Merleau-Ponty's term) 'insentient', or sensible. It is not the case that *sensing* directly corresponds to 'human' while *sensible* corresponds to 'world', since human is both sensing and sensible. Separation of self from the world is still contingent upon reflective division of this original reversible connection, because we are fundamentally perceiving, sensible, embodied beings who are capable of reflection. However, this reversibility is like a pregnancy or a birth. The relationship of a sensing being to the natural world is a generative one; the sensing being emerges from the natural world, but, once born the child cannot crawl back into the womb.¹¹ The sensing being is not symmetrically reversible with the natural world.

II.

Now let me consider David Abram's interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's ontology, since it is an extension of Merleau-Ponty's ontology into ethics. In light of its notoriety, Abram's is an important interpretation to consider, precisely because it is misleading. In *The Spell of the Sensuous*, Abram presents an application of Merleau-Ponty's ontological reversibility to human interrelation with the natural world.¹² His intent is to develop a nonanthropocentric basis for an ethic, one that considers all of the natural world as having value apart from humans. In order to develop this, he generally emphasises the way that language functions to acknowledge or deny the fundamental reversibility between the human and nonhuman world, and he urges a renewed focus on acknowledging our reversible manner of being through utilising more careful linguistic practices.

Abram's account does reflect Merleau-Ponty's grounding of our lived experience in ontological reciprocity with the nonhuman world up to a point. In particular, Abram points out that indeterminate embodiment, and pre-reflective perception 'independent of verbal awareness' as emphasised by Merleau-Ponty does situate us as being always interactive with our surroundings. He also echoes Merleau-Ponty in linking language to the negotiation of meaning in the world.

But Abram argues further that Merleau-Ponty's ontological notion of the flesh locates intrinsic value in the nonhuman world. In pointing this out, I want to acknowledge that Abram does not argue explicitly as an environmental ethicist over the locus of value, since his work is meant to be interdisciplinary and moving away from the confines of strictly philosophical polemics. However, he is trying to de-centre humans as the only valuable entities and in order to do this, he argues that humans are not the only 'valuing' (i.e. perceptive, knowing, sentient) entities, not the only 'active, dynamic' entities.¹³

I am empathetic to this project in general. However, Abram's thought soon makes a turn in which he erroneously construes Merleau-Ponty's work as yielding similar implications. In arguing for the intrinsic value of nature Abram treats all of it as animate – as capable of perceiving. He makes claims such as: 'Only by affirming the animateness of the perceived things do we allow our words to emerge from ... our ongoing reciprocity with the world',¹⁴ and 'Prior to all our verbal reflections, ... we are all animists'.¹⁵ He also says:

If the surroundings are animate and watchful, then I must take care that my actions are mindful and respectful ... lest they offend the watchful land itself... [A]n ethic that would lead us to respect ... the rest of nature will come into existence ... [only] through a rejuvenation of our carnal, sensorial empathy with the living land...¹⁶

This in and of itself may not be problematic or unreasonable. However, in order to elucidate his claims, Abram draws on Merleau-Ponty's notions of reversibility of human and world to conclude that the surroundings may actually

be perceiving us, which is a very different claim from Merleau-Ponty's claim that *we* perceive ourselves from within as well as from without, and that it is on this basis that we conclude that we are in a reversible relationship with the world. This may seem at first to be a trivial point, but it marks the difference between a general understanding of our connection with nature and an animism. I would grant Abram that for Merleau-Ponty reversibility of the flesh does not prohibit certain multiple possible meanings from being latent in the world itself, but this is not the same as affirming the animateness (whether potential or otherwise) of perceived things, particularly those that are insentient.

Abram does not cite enough of Merleau-Ponty's work in these passages, which may be a consequence of the book's style. Nonetheless, inasmuch as his claims are exaggerated, support is needed. For example, he claims that:

We may very briefly summarise the general results of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological investigations as follows: ... 2) perceived things are encountered by the perceiving body as animate, living powers that actively draw us into relation. Our ... pre-conceptual experience yields no evidence for a dualistic division between animate and 'inanimate' phenomena, only for relative distinctions between diverse forms of animateness.¹⁷

Depending on which way we emphasise the terms in this passage, we may or may not believe that Merleau-Ponty actually supports an animism. The passage as a whole, however, conveys that sense. I take issue with the claim that Merleau-Ponty's work implies that there is no evidence in our perceptions that there is *any* distinction between animate and inanimate phenomena. There may be relative distinctions between them which precludes definite distinctions in some cases, and yet in others there will be a distinction, even pre-reflectively, and at the level of perception.

Abram essentially fails to acknowledge the difference between the sensing being and the merely sensed object, which is emphasised time and time again by Merleau-Ponty. As I discussed in the previous section, Merleau-Ponty has a general understanding of the phenomenology of perception in which a fundamental asymmetry inheres. Recall, for instance, the 'incessant escaping' which characterises any sensing/sensed event. This is not perceived reflectively, but pre-reflectively and immediately in perception. His later ontology continues this trajectory by conveying a particular understanding of flesh which precisely precludes some parts of nature (especially the 'objects' of the natural world) from being flesh in the same way that humans are particularly flesh. He says that: 'the eminent being [of things] can be understood only by him who enters into their perception'.¹⁸ And again:

The flesh of the world is not self-sensing ... as is my flesh. It is sensible and not sentient. I call it flesh nonetheless ... in order to say that it is a pregnancy of possibles.¹⁹

Although we are reversible with the world, we do not bring the same characteristics to the interaction as every other part of the world does. We are beings with the double relation of sensing and being sensible. The world is reversible precisely in the sense that it is reversible with humans, who are in that qualified sense part of the world's ability to sense and be sensed. The rest of the world does not have the ability to sense apart from embodied, perceiving beings (who are admittedly still part of the world). The reversibility of perception, recall, for Merleau-Ponty, is described throughout all his work as asymmetrical.

Although Merleau-Ponty describes the world as 'flesh' in the sense that it contains and reversibly interacts with humans (because we are embodied), it is not the case that he thereby implies that all of the world has the ability to sense humans. Abram, on the other hand, draws on Merleau-Ponty's notion of flesh to conclude just that. As we saw above, he describes objects in the world as 'animate'. And he goes a bit too far when he says that:

Once I acknowledge that my own sentience ... does not preclude my ... objective existence for others, I find myself forced to acknowledge that *any* visible, tangible form that meets my gaze may also be an experiencing subject, sensitive and responsible to the beings around it, and to me.²⁰

Abram is referring to non-sensing entities, claiming that any perceptible 'form' or object is potentially a being which has the ability to sense, and on this basis to have intrinsic value. He is careful with his choice of wording, but his implication is that insentient entities 'might' very well be animate. And Merleau-Ponty's work just doesn't imply this.

Merleau-Ponty provided an excellent basis for understanding our interrelation with the world, which avoids the problems of dualism, or of epistemological extremes of empiricism or rationalism. He does work to describe our originary interrelatedness with the world. However, although Abram provides an explanation of how that generally can be interpreted environmentally, his interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's work is inaccurate. While Merleau-Ponty does provide a basis for understanding that we are fundamentally interrelated with the world, he would not allow a determinate understanding of the 'living land' as that which definitively 'has' active perceiving or valuing capabilities. And therein lies the difference between those who perceptively 'understand the eminent being of things' and those things.

Elsewhere, I have argued that Merleau-Ponty's descriptions imply an ethic of respect for nature and do not have the space to outline that argument here.²¹ At minimum, however, I cannot support an extrapolation of Merleau-Ponty's ontological descriptions to an ethic of moral consideration for all individual non-human entities as some *animistic* valuing entities. And although Abram does use terms like 'respect' and 'empathy' – terms that *would* characterise an ethic drawn from Merleau-Ponty's work, Abram also claims animism. It is not my intent at this particular point to analyse Abram's understanding any further than to say

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that insofar as he claims Merleau-Ponty's notion of reversibility extends to positing an *inanimate perception*, it is based on a misreading of Merleau-Ponty.

III.

Having argued thus far that Merleau-Ponty's work does not support an animism, I will now argue that cases *can* be made for extending moral consideration beyond the strictly human sphere using his work as a basis and, to a limited degree, I may be in agreement with Abram on this point. In this respect, ethics can arise from an ontology that reveals a fundamental intersubjectivity – something that, as we saw earlier, Caputo's deconstructive ethics calls for, and which Merleau-Ponty's work provides. Moreover, because Merleau-Ponty based his notion of intersubjectivity on perception, and intersubjectivity is a basis from which his ethic would arise, Merleau-Ponty can provide a basis for extending moral consideration to other perceiving beings – albeit this will be a different basis from the case proffered by Abram's interpretation.

Merleau-Ponty never actually provided a worked-out ethics. Yet as I discussed above, Abram has taken the lead in working to disclose a basis within Merleau-Ponty's work that would extend beyond the usual (non-environmental, short-sighted) anthropocentric basis for ethics. In addition, work has been done, for example by William S. Hamrick, on Merleau-Ponty's ethics generally.²² Hamrick has rightly said that a Merleau-Pontian ethic would be quite a different ethic from one that founds a Kantian subject making moral decisions from a position of reasoned remove from the world. Ethical implications can be drawn from Merleau-Ponty's work by extending his notions of embodied reversibility to an ethic founded on interaction with others through perception. Merleau-Ponty's ethics would have to arise from an analysis of the reversibility of interactive perception and consequently from understanding our fundamental relationality with 'others'.

As a phenomenologist, and in the shadow of Husserl, Merleau-Ponty maintains that we are primarily and always open, bodily, to the world. In addition, he makes statements throughout his work such as that 'to feel one's body is also to feel its aspect for the Other'.²³ This means that we develop all of our understanding through an exchange with others and never pre-exist the cultural in any sense. We have no pre-interactive body and we have no pre-social understanding or way of apprehending the world (or even ourselves). We are aware of our own body both as lived and as experienced by others – we who are both perceivers and perceptible. We come to understand the world, and even ourselves, through this reversibility, which comes from a primary attitude of empathy or attunement with others. Our understanding of ourselves arises together with understanding ourselves for others, and understanding others.

Our embodied reversibility with the world means that we have no privileged access to understanding our own behaviour. There is no primacy of interiority over exteriority or of introspection over the meaning explicit in our behaviour, for him. Because we are primarily embodied being-in-the-world, we rely on our intersubjectivity and interactions with the world in order to interpret our own behaviour. Merleau-Ponty maintains that we do not have a unique access to our own 'inner' motives, but rather understand ourselves through reflection on our own (pre-reflective) behaviour. He says that:

Each time I find something worth saying, it is because ... I have managed to think about it as I would think about the behaviour of another person whom I happened to witness. In fact, young children understand gestures and facial expressions long before they can reproduce them on their own; the meaning must, so to speak, adhere to the behaviour.²⁴

He says that 'the phantoms of "internal experience" are possible only as things borrowed from external experience. Therefore consciousness has no private life'.²⁵

Consequently, not only do we disclose meaning in the world, but others can disclose or interpret the meaning of our own behaviour. This manoeuvre serves to further underscore our basic intersubjectivity. The meaning of our own behaviour can be interpreted by us but it can also be interpreted by others, and from their perspective. Subjectivity is already always intersubjectivity, and social (or, in poststructuralist terms, the production of subjects is possible because we 'are' in some ways, already always open to the social world in order to 'be produced'). Our originary openness on the world and interconnection with others then becomes the basis for both the political and the ethical realms.

Ultimately, embodied, perceiving, sentient, others are co-validaters of meaning, and co-attributers of value, although for Merleau-Ponty, value and meaning are always multiple and ambiguous. Our fundamental relationality provides reciprocal understanding, and communication. There is no position of objectivity from which to evaluate and determine meaning, value, and by extension ethical or political decisions.²⁶ These decisions thus arise from a linkage of ourselves always already with others. Accordingly, what we should or ought to do is inseparable from those with whom we are co-disclosers of the world – those with whom our own meaning is co-founded along with our position as co-founders of theirs. This means, among other things, that meaning and value are socio-historically based. All of this is knowable, is 'based' on, our fundamental reversibility of perception. Merleau-Ponty lays the groundwork for this by his detailing of the fact that we cannot know or understand in isolation from our ability to sense. And that ability necessarily is intersubjective.

Having established this, let us reconsider his words emphasising the difference between 'sensing flesh' and 'insentient flesh': 'The flesh of the world is not self-sensing ... as is my flesh. It is sensible and not sentient.'²⁷ Here Merleau-

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Ponty is presenting a distinction between beings that are sentient and beings that are insentient. He does not intend a sharp distinction here; rather his point is a general one. The emphasis on this distinction is, as I have argued above, at least in part, a way of avoiding an animism. It also distinguishes humans as the beings who interpret or give meaning to the world. However, on closer inspection, other sentient beings besides humans are included in his descriptions of beings interactive with one another in a way that co-discloses meaning and value through perception.

Merleau-Ponty bases 'consciousness' on the ability to perceive. His use of the verb 'sentir' throughout his work to describe sentience should make it plain that this ability applies to animals. Self-sensing applies to any being that has the ability to perceive. And any potential epistemological problems as to how we know animals are sentient are undercut the same way as he undercuts solipsism throughout his work. We know others are sentient because our knowledge is a reflection on our basic pre-cognitive intersubjectivity, our basic interconnection through perception.

Of course, in the spirit of Merleau-Ponty's constant awareness of the dangers of definite demarcations between subject and object, mind and world, etc., one would need to be cautious here. Whatever kind of ethical characterising that is common to the philosophical tradition would need to be reconsidered for overlaps, subtle nuances, and in light of the circumstances of particular situations, much like suggestions in the contemporary work of philosophers writing in the aftermath of Merleau-Ponty's work. Caputo, for instance, is one such example.²⁸

For the moment, then, let us grant the difference, however ambiguous and indistinct, between the interaction of self-sensing beings among themselves on the one hand and the interaction of self-sensing beings with the 'insentient' on the other, in order to consider the first set of relations. From Merleau-Ponty's discussion of the primacy of intersubjectivity we know that all others who are also self-sensing are co-disclosers of being. They extend one's understanding of the world. So, let's consider how co-disclosers of meaning and value might extend beyond the human realm. He says:

[W]hile each monocular vision ... has its own visible, each is bound to every other vision...; it is bound in such a way as to make up with them the experience of one sole body before one sole world, through the possibility of reversion.... The handshake too is reversible... [This synergy exists] among different organisms if it is possible within each. Their landscapes interweave.... This is possible as soon as we understand [consciousness] as ... a *carnal* adherence of the sentient to the sensed and of the sensed to the sentient.²⁹

We need to consider carefully his wording here. He says that 'consciousness' is the '*carnal* adherence of the sentient to the sensed' and vice versa. This is a particular understanding of consciousness. It is to say that perceptible aware-

ness, or the pre-reflective ability to sense and be sensed, is consciousness. This is rather distinct from the reflective cognitive, rational consciousness understood in traditional terms.

While Merleau-Ponty ostensibly applied his descriptions to relations between humans and was moot on the point of other sensing beings, he nevertheless founds his entire discussion of intersubjectivity on sense perception and on embodiment. It follows from this that any being that is sentient would count as a member of the self-sensing type of flesh, as opposed to the reversible insentient 'flesh' of the world.

And if this is the case, Abram's observations about intrinsic value and dynamism *would* extend to other sentient beings. That is, that because we are self-sensing flesh and are co-disclosers of the world with others who are also self-sensing, that sentience (and not reflection or 'rational ability') becomes a locus of intrinsic value. So, following Abram on Merleau-Ponty, we *might* need to be 'mindful not to offend' our fellow sentient beings. Of course, the details of what constitutes 'offence' may need to be qualified and worked out. And yet, we are going to have to resist the temptation to create hard and fast rules to guide our moral behaviour. At least, however, we should be able to acknowledge that humans are not the only self-sensing beings and these beings cannot be wholly dismissed from membership in the community of moral relations.

IV.

Given this ontological background one is tempted to consider what counts as extending moral consideration to other sentient beings. I am prepared to say a few words, and only a very few words, offered merely as suggested directions in which we might take this discussion in the future. At first glance, extending moral consideration to all sensing beings might look something like the suggestions of Peter Singer³⁰ (consideration with an understanding that different beings have different interests), or at least would be based on acknowledging that different beings have different needs (at least, the needs to be free from suffering). I say this mainly because Singer's view allows the kind of flexible response to each situation that I believe an ethic extended from Merleau-Ponty's work would allow. This is not to say that Merleau-Ponty would become a utilitarian, since he is much closer to the tradition stemming from Nietzsche and passing into contemporary post structuralism and deconstructive descriptions that emphasise ambiguity in ethics. In any event, we could consider ways of being open to the way sentient beings co-disclose meaning in the world, although this is something we likely already do. Observing, say, the effect of eating a plant on an animal can suggest to us whether we should eat that plant. Or, more importantly, observing an animal's reaction in pain to a chemical will likely

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cause us to hesitate in using the same chemical casually ourselves. To be moral, we might begin by being more mindful that we do this and consider what we may owe to these co-disclosers of meaning. My point is merely that there is an element of an ethical relation already in place in the observation that perceiving beings co-disclose meanings.

These are obviously inadequate as implications of Merleau-Ponty's work, however, and I reluctantly leave this question temporarily unanswered. What I hope to have established herein is much more meagre than providing a detailed ethical extension of Merleau-Ponty's ontology, and is essentially twofold. First, Merleau-Ponty was no animist. And yet, his ontology easily extends to include sensing beings, and more than merely humans, as ontologically categorisable with humans. Thus all sensing beings would merit moral consideration. This is as much as I hope to have established. Questions concerning our responsibility to nature as holistic systems or to other individual living things or elements of nature may very well also be answered through Merleau-Ponty's ontological reversibility, and I am quite sure they would be answered in favour of nature whatever the basis.

As a final comment, I would like to situate the present discussion of a basis for moral consideration for sensing beings in a broader ethical context. There have been interesting discussions of moral pluralism in environmental ethics. Moral pluralism, roughly, is defined by Kelly Parker as:

the view that no single moral principle, or overarching theory of what is right, can be appropriately applied in all ethically problematic situations ... [T]here are genuine differences among moral situations, because there are many different kinds of entities and possible relations among them.³¹

Within the context of moral pluralism, perhaps we would consider individual sentient beings, whereas we might view plants, rocks, or ecosystems holistically. Or even more flexibly, we might use different ethics for different situations or kinds of situation.

Again, this sort of approach is closer to the spirit of Merleau-Ponty's work. Although it is sometimes uncomfortable for the rational mind of the philosopher to accept ambiguity, if our very identities come from an ambiguous relationship with our world, then an ethic that is highly situational may be the most reasonable form of ethics we can formulate. And the consideration of other beings and maybe even nature itself in our moral deliberations is an important step toward both broadening our moral understanding and attaining an environmental ethic.

With this, we return to the question of Abram's work, since there should be a place for the kind of ontology and ethical extension he is advocating as well as room for a discussion of ontology within moral pluralism. Abram has proffered interesting suggestions as to an attitude of respect toward nature. In that sense, I embrace Abram's perspective. I merely insist that we are careful with our

understanding of Merleau-Ponty's work. If Abram had been just a bit more cautious in his descriptions of animism, but more especially, in his attributing them to Merleau-Ponty's work, I believe our views find much common ground in the ambiguous play of ontology, ethics, and pluralism.

NOTES

¹ See Levinas 1969 and Caputo 1993.

² Caputo 1993, p. 237.

³ Abram 1996.

⁴ Dillon 1990, p. 25.

⁵ Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 137.

⁶ Ibid. p. 141.

⁷ Ibid. p. 147.

⁸ Ibid. p. 148.

⁹ Merleau-Ponty 1995, p. 93.

¹⁰ This is in keeping with his original goal in *Phenomenology of Perception* of avoiding the paradoxes associated with the extremes of empiricism and rationalism.

¹¹ This was a helpful metaphor Ted Stolze provided for an earlier draft of this paper.

¹² For a brief summary of the points of his discussion, see Abram 1996, p. 89–90.

¹³ It does occur to me that Abram may be stressing this animistic way of speaking as a political move. Perhaps he is suggesting that we speak of objects in the world *as if* they were animate in order to restore connection to the environment and achieve environmental goals. If so, he could be characterised as an environmental pragmatist or a moral pluralist. I might then still disagree with his methodology, and his interpretation of Merleau-Ponty, but I would embrace the pragmatism of attempting to reach our (political, environmental) goals through whatever means is effective. In any case, Abram is still misinterpreting Merleau-Ponty to make his point.

¹⁴ Abram 1996, p. 56.

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 57.

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 69.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 89–90.

¹⁸ Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 220.

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 250.

²⁰ Abram 1996, p. 67, emphasis in original.

²¹ I have explored this topic in an unpublished paper.

²² Hamrick (forthcoming)

²³ Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 245.

²⁴ Merleau-Ponty 1964, p. 52.

²⁵ Merleau-Ponty 1995, p. 27.

²⁶ Note again the similarity here with the view briefly outlined as that of Caputo, above.

²⁷ Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 250.

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²⁸ Others writing on the ethical relation from this perspective include Luc Boltanski (1999); Simon Critchley (1999) and Jacques Derrida (1995).

²⁹ Ibid. p. 142, emphasis added.

³⁰ Singer 1975.

³¹ Parker 1996, p. 31.

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