



Environment & Society



White Horse Press

Full citation:

Brook, Isis. "Can Merleau-Ponty's Notion of 'Flesh' Inform or even Transform Environmental Thinking?"

Environmental Values 14, no. 3, (2005): 353-362.

<http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/5942>

Rights:

All rights reserved. © The White Horse Press 2005. Except for the quotation of short passages for the purpose of criticism or review, no part of this article may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical or other means, including photocopying or recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission from the publisher. For further information please see <http://www.whpress.co.uk/>

Can Merleau-Ponty's Notion of 'Flesh' Inform or even Transform Environmental Thinking?

ISIS BROOK

*Institute for Environment, Philosophy and Public Policy
Furness College
Lancaster University
Lancaster LA1 4YG, UK
Email: i.brook@lancaster.ac.uk*

ABSTRACT

Reference to Merleau-Ponty's ideas surfaces in environmental thinking from time to time. This paper examines whether, and in what way, his ideas could be helpful to that thinking. In order to arrive at a conclusion I examine in detail and attempt to clarify the notions of 'Flesh' and 'Earth' in order to see if they can carry the meanings that commentators sometimes attribute to them. With a clearer outline of what he was saying in place, I suggest that the new ontology that Merleau-Ponty introduces could help to transform environmental thinking, but that careful argumentation is required to show this.

KEYWORDS

Merleau-Ponty, Flesh, subject-object, eco-phenomenology

INTRODUCTION

The question of whether Merleau-Ponty's notion of 'flesh' has something to say to contemporary environmental thinking arises primarily, for me, because there seems to be something going on in his writing when he speaks of 'flesh' that is suggestive of a very real engagement with the world and with oneself as a fully immersed bodily being. But also it arises because some commentators have made a connection between flesh and environmental thinking and even more commentators to a usefulness of Merleau-Ponty's idea of the body-subject to environmental thinking.

An early and influential example of making this connection between environmental thinking and Merleau-Ponty's work is Neil Evernden's *The Natural Alien*. Here he integrates Merleau-Ponty's insights about our lived experience

Environmental Values **14** (2005): 353–62

© 2005 The White Horse Press

into his notion of seeing ourselves as 'fields of care' (Evernden 1985: 47), as opposed to objects in an objectified environment. For Evernden this shift will bring about a realisation of our actual situation and a change in our response to the world. Another careful and explicit bringing together of environmental thinking and this figure from phenomenology is Monika Langer's paper 'Merleau-Ponty and Deep Ecology' where she follows through the emphasis of Merleau-Ponty's distinctly new ontology as suggesting the means to solve the environmental crisis (Langer 1990). The more common connection to phenomenology that has been made by environmental philosophers is to the work of Heidegger (for example, Zimmerman 1990, Mugerauer 1994), and indeed other disciplines, such as geography, environment behaviour, and architecture, have found here rich seams of thought about our way of being-in-the-world. More recently some of this thinking has been brought together under the name Eco-Phenomenology. The label is perhaps as snappy and suggestive as any name containing the term phenomenology can be, and it clearly suggests the bringing together of environmental thinking (what might be termed a blend of natural history and a systematic concern for nature)¹ and this branch of continental philosophy. The edited collection *Eco-Phenomenology: Back to the Earth Itself* (Toadvine and Brown 2003) presents the cutting edge of this thinking and here, along with Husserl and Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty's possibly contribution to environmental thinking is developed and assessed. In a number of the papers Merleau-Ponty's notion of 'Flesh' is put to work largely to articulate a different way of understanding our relationship to/in/with the world. But does this notion of flesh actually work to engage us in some new way with the environment and, if it does, how does that work exactly?

TWO PROBLEMS

We can swiftly identify two major problems that could stand in the way of a detailed explication. The first is the inadequate explanation of flesh given by Merleau-Ponty. The main treatment of the idea is given in the text *The Visible and the Invisible*, which was pieced together from notes and drafts of chapters after Merleau-Ponty's death in 1961. We can see from projected chapters and the working notes that flesh was not a passing aberrant thought but one that would permeate the whole of a long book. The situation we have is that of a suggestive idea, but no definitive interpretation to use for testing the usefulness of the idea. That said, what we do have is a range of commentaries and interpretations and some attempts to use this idea within environmental thinking so, although there will no more elucidation from the man himself, there is already a body of work that could assist us.

The second problem is the radical nature of the idea of flesh. What Merleau-Ponty is proposing here is such a complete change from our normal way

MERLEAU-PONTY'S NOTION OF 'FLESH'

of conceptualising both ourselves and the world that it is necessarily going to be hard to explain it using language that has been honed by centuries of that normal conceptualisation. This means that not only is it going to be hard to even put into words, but also it is unlikely to be the kind of idea that we can slot into a ready formed set of ideas about, for example, what an environment is, what an environmental problem might be, and what kind of thing would count as a solution. This inevitable ambiguity, I suggest, has been the key problem, aided and abetted by the first problem of the circumstantial ambiguity that arises from any unfinished work.

THE POTENTIAL PROMISE

Obviously the first task is to set about explaining this powerfully suggestive idea, but before attempting that it will be helpful, both as background and to sustain us for this task, to make a few preliminary suggestions about what we might get from it.

If we take some of the questions that currently vex environmental thinking – whether inanimate things can have intrinsic value, whether all valuing is damagingly anthropocentric, whether nature is a social construct, whether local grassroots action leads to greater environmental protection than national or international legislation, whether sciences like ecology are too tainted by an instrumental approach – we can see that a great many suggested solutions hinge on understanding our relationship to the world.

This idea, flesh, arises from an attempt to picture reality in a way that reflects how it is; not just for us, as experiencing subjects seen as somehow separate from an objective world, but also for the world. This is a bold, and many would say impossible, task. And what you then do with the picture attained is another matter. The important point is that it gives us a new way of conceptualising the human-world relationship, and if, at the very least, it increases our ability to wonder, or legitimises wonder as a virtue, then even this will go some way to bringing the human-world relationship home.

WHAT DOES MERLEAU-PONTY MEAN BY 'FLESH'?

In *Phenomenology of Perception (PP)* Merleau-Ponty presents an explanation of how we are in-the-world that helps to shift the focus onto our situatedness and also emphasises the importance of our being embodied. This is a big improvement on forms of dualism that represented us as minds reflecting on objects, but was not, for the later Merleau-Ponty, radical enough. He senses that in that work there remains a residual objectification of the world. The explanation given in *PP* still seems to involve a kind of movement between me and the world and

it is an odd kind of world. Subject and object are dependent on each other, two parts of a single system, and within *PP* the world remains dependent on the subject even though the subject is also dependent on the world, but it is still a world as intended by the subject. One way of putting this would be to say that although in *PP* we are in the world, the world is the one we intend (the one we have consciousness of) – at least, that is the only one we can be sure of. In the later work Merleau-Ponty wants to bring about an even more radical breaking of the subject-object dichotomy. The notion of flesh is part of how he does this.

If we wanted to trace the genesis of the term within phenomenological thinking, we would need to refer to Sartre and to Husserl, who both use this term for very different purposes. For a full exploration of the connections between these thinkers on this point I refer the reader to a useful paper on exactly this by Ted Toadvine (2003); for my purposes a working simplification will suffice. It could be said that Merleau-Ponty's resistance to Sartre's use of the 'flesh of the world' (Sartre 1943: 392) – as a limit experience that shows the impossibility of any merging between the for-itself (consciousness as separate from that of which it is conscious) and the in-itself (an object that is filled only with its thingness) – lodged the word 'flesh' in his mind (like grit in an oyster). In 'The Philosopher and his Shadow' Merleau-Ponty uses Husserl's indication of things being grasped 'in the flesh' and takes this, as he says, 'literally' (Merleau-Ponty 1960/1964: 167). This indication is then used to create a new way of dissolving the residual division in our thinking of the relationship of subject-object. What seems to take place in Merleau-Ponty's thought is a way of reconfiguring the joining of subject and object such that they are not joined because they are the held and the holding in our consciousness, but because both are grounded, prior to any conceptual division, in the same stuff. What we think of as subject and what we think of as object have the same source.

THE STUFF OF EARTH

Before jumping to the conclusion that this stuff is what he means by flesh, I want to bring in another term that Merleau-Ponty also takes from Husserl, and again it is a term that does not mean what it normally means, but nevertheless, like 'flesh', carries a truck full of resonances and symbolic baggage. This is the term 'Earth'. Why does Merleau-Ponty use these words rather than coin a new one to avoid any misunderstanding? Here I think the answer lies in the way something of the resonances and symbolic baggage does strike a chord. However, for our purposes of trying to get at what he means it would be best to put all of that to one side and treat these terms, for the moment, as if new. Earth (this term you have never heard of before, unless you have read the later Husserl or Merleau-Ponty) is the 'ground of experience'. Gary Brent Madison pulls together some quotations from various papers to put this point succinctly.

MERLEAU-PONTY'S NOTION OF 'FLESH'

The Earth, Merleau-Ponty says, in interpreting Husserl, is the 'ground of experience,' 'the stock from which objects are engendered.' The Earth is in a way prior to all experience and encompasses in advance 'all further possibilities of experience.' It is, he says, 'something initial, a possibility of reality, the cradle, the base, and the ground of all experience.' The Earth is therefore not an object confronting a subject, correlative to him, but is rather a 'pre-object.' It is not contained in space but is rather the possibility of space; 'it is not a place in the sense that worldly objects have a place. The Earth is our source [*souche*], our *Urheimat*. It is the root of our spatiality, our common homeland'. (Madison 1981: 212)

It is probably worth me underlining what he says Earth is with my interpretation of what it is not. I would add that this does not mean that Earth is some kind of primeval slime or anything that causes things or did so in the past. If we want to make a connection to the Earth (the planet that is our home) or to earth (which we dig and is the medium that provides us our sustenance) then we need to say that, for the purpose of understanding Earth within the Merleau-Ponty schema, it is these common uses of the term that are metaphorical rather than the other way round. The earth beneath our feet and the stuff we manipulate when we earth up potatoes are instances that share a style with and draw our attention to this other Earth. This is, I think, why the word is used. With flesh we have a similar piggy-backing on resonances and symbols whilst at the same time we need to establish that this flesh, in the Merleau-Ponty schema, is not flesh in any of the usual uses of the term.

How is it that we have any kind of relationship with this newly identified realm Earth? The picture so far is that we have subject-object plus something else which makes the subject and the object possible, but is neither subject nor object. Prior to this new notion of Earth the hyphenated form, subject-object, is assumed to be achieved by phenomenological reduction, where the two are known to be conjoined by their being part of the same experiencing. The quasi-object in this inseparable pairing is the correlate of the experiencing of it.

Now we have a new understanding that somehow grounds both the quasi-object and the quasi-subject as aspects of something else and so *necessarily* intertwined. Thus we say can still use the 'subject hyphen object' formula but for a new reason.

The thing we need to avoid at this point is picturing this as three things: subject, object and new stuff, because the point is that it is all one. However, the one that it is is not all objectness or all subjectness as envisaged before the realisation that there is this, conceptually new, pre-stuff of which quasi-objects and quasi-subjects are just a particular style of manifestation. Indeed if we dig deeper into either manifestation as it is, rather than as we previously conceptualised it, what emerges is the total embrace in which what we think of as us and what we think of as the world are held.

BACK TO FLESH

I have spoken about Earth and characterised this as a new pre-stuff, by which we should not be thinking of 'pre' as in historically preceding (like the bronze age preceding the iron age); but where does flesh come into this? It is when Merleau-Ponty gets on to how we have experience of this intertwining of the subject-object and how it has to be the case that he draws out a further elaboration of this pre-stuff Earth through the articulation of the notion of Flesh. Again, it is a word which doesn't mean what we usually mean and yet some of the resonances carry across. If he had called it 'special variant pre-stuff' I am not sure it would have been picked up and misused to the same extent, but then it would probably not have been picked up at all. If we do the same as we did with Earth and reverse the direction of metaphors then the usual connotations of sensuality and 'incarnation of something extraordinary' can be left in place as springing from this Merleau-Pontian Flesh, rather than the latter being seen as the same as the material stuff that lies between bone and skin. There is a relationship here, and it comes out when Merleau-Ponty describes the body as 'the vinculum' (1960/1964: 166), thus drawing an analogy with a line in algebra drawn above things to show that they have a common relation to what precedes or follows.

MERLEAU-PONTY'S EXPERIENTIAL EXAMPLE

There is something about the body of sentient things which gives us a window into what Melissa Clarke helpfully calls this 'originary connectedness' (Clarke 2002). Merleau-Ponty takes up a particular experience that we can have as indicative of our real situation as sentient/sensible aspects of this Flesh. This particular experience is one he returns to again and again in his writings and it sometimes seems like a metaphor, but he all the time brings it back to a real experience; it is just that it is an experience that is emblematic.

The experience is that of us being both toucher and touched. The reader can test this out now. A good way to do it is to touch something with your right hand, a pencil, paper anything to hand. You can feel the texture, the resilience, the coolness or warmth of the thing, but now, whilst still touching the thing with your right hand, use your left hand to touch your right hand. Again we can feel those qualities of the thing touched, but something else is going on as well and this can best be explored by now (without moving your hands) noticing that the right hand can also feel the left hand touching. With the right hand, or indeed any part of your skin surface we can perform this doubling up of being a perceiving/perceived.

Merleau-Ponty consolidates the term Flesh when he starts to unravel the implications of this, on the face of it, quite mundane observation. He says:

MERLEAU-PONTY'S NOTION OF 'FLESH'

That which looks at all things can also look at itself and recognise, in what it sees, the 'other side' of its power of looking. It sees itself seeing; it touches itself touching; it is visible and sensitive for itself. ...This initial paradox cannot but produce others. Visible and mobile, my body is a thing among things; it is one of them. It is caught in the fabric of the world, and its cohesion is that of a thing. But because it moves itself and sees, it holds things in a circle around itself. Things are an annex or a prolongation of itself; they are encrusted in its flesh, they are part of its full definition; the world is made of the very stuff of the body. (1961/1993: 124)

TWO POTENTIAL MISUNDERSTANDINGS OF FLESH

The immediate suggestion that springs to mind is that Merleau-Ponty is saying that we and the world are basically made of the same stuff, but is that what he is really saying? It sounds a bit too much like what the empiricists were saying all along, or perhaps even what the idealists were saying depending on what kind of stuff it is. As Merleau-Ponty spent a lifetime criticising those views, this stuff, flesh, must be very different from matter as understood empirically and very different from the world being made of our concepts. The kind of conceptualisations of matter and mind that would be informing Merleau-Ponty's resistance are monistic conceptualisations that derive their models of matter and mind respectively from a rejection of the other half of a dualist notion. Thus mind is unextended and has no understandable relationship with matter; it is everything that matter is not. And likewise the view of matter inherited from dualism is the matter of lifeless physical entities. To elucidate what Merleau-Ponty does not mean by flesh, let us take the material substance of those whom he called the empiricists and the mental substance of those whom he called the intellectualists (idealists), and try them out as interpretations of flesh in order to see what possibilities remain.

Merleau-Ponty describes flesh as not like matter (1964/1968: 146) and I would elaborate this as not like matter as described by the dualist, i.e., clunky stuff. To get around this, he describes it as an element, by this he means to suggest an element like earth, fire or water. The element 'flesh' is both me and the world – 'a texture' - and it is our ability to both see and be seen, to touch and be touched that both gives us that direct experience of the enfolded nature of flesh and presents us with an emblem of that enfolding. So here flesh is the fabric of the world, but not matter as stripped of (what from a dualist perspective are) subjective aspects.

Having that subjective side of the equation rejoined to the world opens up the second possible misunderstanding of flesh: the idealist one. Again Merleau-Ponty is clear on this; he says:

When we speak of the flesh of the visible, we do not mean to do anthropology, to describe the world covered over with all our own projections leaving aside what it can be under the human mask. (1964/1968: 136)

What Merleau-Ponty is getting at is that I experience a thing and in the experiencing have to acknowledge my own thingness, my taking part in the flesh of the world; I only experience because I am part of the sensible world. However, this does not mean that every part of the sensible world is sentient in the way in which I am sentient or even in some minimal rocky or teapotty kind of way of being sentient. To treat rocks and teapots in that way is to project my kind of expression of the flesh of the world to all of it. If I am going to do that, then I might as well stick with any kind of projections I choose, whether they be animate mountains or, conversely, dogs that cannot feel. The point of all this talk of earth and flesh is to get to an explanation of how it is, not how I would like it to be.

The sentient/sensible is, as Merleau-Ponty says, a ‘remarkable variant’ (1964/1968: 136) of the stuff of the world, so it cannot all be like that. Which beings share this particular manner of being with us he does not say; my guess is that we are not the only beings capable of hyper-reflection, and of course sentience, as in the ability to feel, is very widely spread out in the flesh of the world. However, that the flesh of the world has these particular styles of ‘thickenings’ within its matrix does not mean that any particular part that we might single out will be sentient.

GLIMPSING THE FLESH

Going back to the experience of touching and being touched Merleau-Ponty also draws attention to the difficulty of attending to both at once. When I focus my attention on feeling the left hand touching the right hand, the left hand as feeler, rather than that which is felt, recedes. This experience of switching points to a gap, split, fission or fold in the flesh and it is this that, for Merleau-Ponty, is emblematic in our experience. Not only do we have to be touchable or seeable in order to touch or to see but we also, in this dual aspect, experience the reversibility (rather than circularity) of experience. The gap is most fully glimpsed in what he calls hyper-reflection. When we think about something, our thinking places us the other side of the fold in our experience such that we are closed off from the unthought experience, but only because we are the other side of the same thing. In the same way, not being able to view the head and the tail of a coin at the same time brings home to us that the head and the tail are parts of the same coin; likewise, the reversibility of touch and touching brings home the same sense of separation that at the same time demonstrates an inseparability. And this experience is brought to us courtesy of flesh – the flesh of the world

MERLEAU-PONTY'S NOTION OF 'FLESH'

through the flesh of our bodies – and of course thinking is expressed by the Earth courtesy of our particular and possibly other styles of expressing that flesh.

THE VALUE OF FLESH FOR ENVIRONMENTAL THINKING

So how might this notion of flesh transform our thinking about environmental questions? It doesn't make me into a thing like a mountain and it doesn't make a mountain into a thing like me, but it does seem to be pointing to a relationship of some sort, a sharing that breaks down a solitary self-enclosedness, both between me and other humans and between me and non-humans, and even between me and the inanimate. From a working note of December 1960 we find a statement that the relation between body and world is one of 'embrace' (1964/1968: 271).

This notion of embrace does, I think, avoid the idea of immersion, of losing oneself in the world to the point of extinction of difference. We are not one with everything in a straightforward way that makes everything the same as, or equal to, or part of ourselves. Therefore, neither is it the case that we should care for the world because we care for ourselves or alternatively (and perhaps more in accord with the evidence) that we do not have to care for the world in the same way that we do not have to care for ourselves. Difference can also be extinguished by taking the world to be, or the only knowable world to be, one made out of our own projections; this too is avoided; the world is not our creation.

In fact, it seems from these intimations of 'Earth' and 'Flesh' that the germ of perceptual faith that was ours all along gives us a glimpse of that with which we are intertwined. Flesh articulates our style of engagement and shows that the world we engage when working with material substance or in contemplative wonder or in sensitive experimental investigation is the kind of world there is. At the very least it reveals the things in the world: the strata of a cliff face, the rustle of a blackbird, the gesture of an unfurling leaf in a way that does not invoke a mystery beyond their presencing, but gives them back in their full richness.

Moreover, the kind of perceptual shift necessary to grasp the concept of flesh also suggests a rejection of the kind of thinking that sees *the* solution to environmental problems as a matter of better resource allocation, albeit one that works towards greater global equality for humans. Such views have surely missed the point of a good deal of environmental thinking over the past forty years; we are not just units of consumption and the world is not just a resource pool for humans. Environment is not the inanimate background object against which we as subjects can act as separate beings. The reality of our situation is being envired, being engaged in an embrace, not as an optional extra - a lifestyle choice – but just how it is.

We are a part of the world that thinks, but if the best we can think is always an 'all or nothing' dichotomy then we need help. I think we need to resist both the

intellectually indefensible notion that the world and us are an indistinguishable whole and the morally indefensible notion that the world is entirely separate from us and there for us to use, even if that use is 'sustainable'. The first step to avoiding those dual traps is surely to recognise the reality of our situation and it is this that Merleau-Ponty's concept of 'flesh' helps us to do.

NOTE

¹Following Evernden's central argument, the 'Eco' part of the term should presumably not be seen as derived directly from the science of ecology, which he sees as having at its core an interpretation of the world as not just separated from its meaning for us but also, paradoxically, embedded in an understanding of nature as resource.

REFERENCES

- Clarke, M. 2002. 'Ontology, Ethics, and *Sentir*: Properly Situating Merleau-Ponty' *Environmental Values* 11: 211–25
- Evernden, Neil. 1985. *The Natural Alien*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press
- Langer, Monika. 1990. 'Merleau-Ponty and Deep Ecology', in G.A. Johnson and M.B. Smith (eds), *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Madison, G. 1981. *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty*, Athens: Ohio University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. 1945/1992. *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. C. Smith. London: Routledge.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. 1960/1964. 'The Philosopher and His Shadow', *Signs* trans. R. McCleary. Northwestern University Press
- Merleau-Ponty, M. 1961/1993. 'Eye and Mind', in G. Johnson (ed.), *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*. Illinois: Northwestern University Press
- Merleau-Ponty, M. 1964/1968. *The Visible and The Invisible*, ed. C. Lefort, trans. A. Lingus. Evanston: Northwestern University Press
- Mugerauer, Robert. 1994. *Interpretations on Behalf of Place*. New York: SUNY Press
- Sartre, J-P. 1943. *Being and Nothingness*, trans. H. Barnes, 1996. London: Routledge
- Toadvine, Ted. 2003. 'The Primacy of Desire and its Ecological Consequences', in T. Toadvine and C. Brown (eds.), *Eco-Phenomenology: Back to the Earth Itself*. New York: SUNY Press, pp. 139–53.
- Toadvine, T. and C. Brown (eds.) 2003. *Eco-Phenomenology: Back to the Earth Itself*. New York: SUNY Press.
- Zimmerman, Michael. 1990. *Heidegger's Confrontation With Modernity*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.