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**The Feeling of In-Between: The phenomenological approach to subject/object ontology and its relevance to environmental ethics.**

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*In this paper I will explore the insights Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology can offer the debate around self/other dualism in environmental thought, arguing that his understanding of the 'body-subject' and 'flesh' imply a mutuality of self and other, rather than merger, thus leaving a 'space between.' I will go on to explore the centrality of absence in the phenomenological understanding of perception, and in the 'chiasm' of Merleau-Ponty's later work. I will argue that the seemingly esoteric phenomenological shift of focus onto the activity of perception itself, and the space between perceiving subject and perceived object, softens dualism and linear cause-and-effect in ways which may be pragmatically useful to environmental thought.*

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**Introduction – 'Reformist' and 'radical' environmental thought**

'Environmental' thinking is not a monolith, but comprises a range of approaches to addressing the problems we are currently facing in our relationship to the natural world that sustains us. Monika Langer helpfully characterises two distinct strands in environmental thought; there are the 'reformist' environmentalists who seek solutions within the current ideological structure of nature as resource, to be managed more sustainably of course, possibly through technological fixes. Most mainstream environmental discussion and policy-making would seem to fall into this category. The other strand is a more radical environmental ethics that seeks to shift

fundamental values towards more 'ecocentric' perspectives, and which integrate theory, experience and practice, linking environmental justice with social justice through, for example, advocating low-consumption lifestyles (2003:103). It is this latter strand that I will focus on for the purposes of this essay, specifically as represented by the deep ecology movement and by ecofeminist thought.

### **Self and other in deep ecology and ecofeminism**

I focus on these approaches because each of the two offers us useful alternatives to the dualistic self/other ontology we have inherited from the Cartesian worldview, which separates the thinking mind from the material world. This view has imbued all our thinking with a series of binary and hierarchical oppositions: mind/body, reason/emotion, male/female, culture/nature, subject/object, active/passive, human/nonhuman, 'I'/not 'I', and so on. In each case we can detect an implicit valuing of the first over the second of the pairing. Furthermore the boundaries between the two are strongly defined. Both deep ecologists and ecofeminists identify this characteristic of the western worldview as at the root of our culture's dysfunction, and so have sought solutions through a fundamental rethink of this self/other ontology.

But why should such an introspective and seemingly esoteric question be placed so centrally in the environmental debate? When we consider the matter carefully, we sense that the narrow ego of the prevailing, individualist view of the self has a tightness to it. Everything becomes seen in terms of what it can give me. My happiness, security and wellbeing become dependent on what I can get from

'outside': praise, love, pleasure, admiration, material wealth, status. Thus individualism breeds fear, and a deep sense of lack. The constant, uneasy *wanting* of the individualised and vulnerable self is nurtured by a consumer society that depends on economic growth; an exponential growth which in turn depends on the creation of yet more want. Cold War era economic and political thinking such as 'game theory' (Ross, 2006) and 'public choice theory' (Buchanan and Tullock, 1962), which presents us with a Hobbesian view of society as an atomised conglomerate of mistrustful, self-interested and strategically manipulative individuals, neatly summed up by Margaret Thatcher's famous 'no such thing as society' comment, continues to shape our economic and political systems, and the individuals within them.

So we see that Western consumerist lifestyles, and the environmental destruction they cause, are driven by the ontology of a separate, tightly defined self which makes us hold ourselves apart from the world and each other, and which must be protected at all costs. The implications of this for the environment are now writ large, and even so, we hear the voice of the small self, separate and defensive, failing to tackle the issues. It says, 'Why should I/we reduce CO2 emissions if they won't?', 'What difference can I make, just one insignificant individual?', 'I feel sorry for them, but I have to think of my own family/country/voters first,' We see all too starkly that, to paraphrase Einstein's famous dictum, we cannot solve the current problem with the mindset that created it. We must rethink, at a deep level, our being in the world and with each other.

Deep ecologists define their approach as 'deep' in contrast to the 'shallow' approach of mainstream reform environmentalism. Deep ecologist Arne Naess advocated a turn towards an 'ecocentric' mindset through cultivating a deeper, wider, more mature sense of self that supports an awareness of our embeddedness in the natural environment, a process he termed 'Self-realisation!'. (Naess, 2003). Duvall expands on Naess' notion, with the 'ecological self' as a mature understanding of the self as a continuous flow of interaction, where openness and vulnerability have transformational value. Duvall identifies the sharp division between self and other, or subject and object, as leaving the 'other' open to exploitation and manipulation (Duvall, 1995). Deep ecologists suggest that, by realising a broader 'ecological self', in which self is merged with other in a deep awareness of the fundamental interconnectedness of all beings, we will then be naturally inclined to 'do the right thing' by nature (and each other). There will be no need to resort to a sense of moral obligation or altruism, since self and other become indistinguishable (Naess, 2003).

Ecofeminists, on the other hand, caution against this abolition of alterity, emphasising instead relations of care and respect for other beings as related but distinct. Ecofeminist thought does not seek to abolish dualism altogether in the way deep ecologists do, but to rethink the relationship between the two halves of the pairing by questioning the implicit value bias towards reason and its associations with the masculine. This they identify as the cause of both the exploitation of nature, and the subjugation of women, which they see as intrinsically connected, and they criticise the extinguishing of difference implied by a self which extends to merge with the other (Plumwood, 1991).

Between deep ecology and ecofeminism there runs a faultline in their conceptualisation of self/other ontology which can be summarised as a tension between deep ecology's 'merger' and ecofeminist 'mutuality.' Plumwood criticises deep ecology's extended 'ecological self' as obliterating difference while providing no guarantee against exploitation. She points out that if my 'Self' is indistinguishable from the rainforest, what is to prevent me mistaking my needs for its, and so still exploiting it? (1991) Ecofeminists like Plumwood suggest that complete merger of self with other is not the only alternative to an exploitative dualism. Whereas deep ecologists seek to render altruism obsolete, ecofeminists focus on relations of care, respect and concern, rehabilitating the affective domain of moral feelings to propose an altruism based on respect for the 'other'.

Langer has put forward the case that Merleau-Ponty's thought affirms deep ecology's commitment to full 'Self-realization' though continual questioning of ourselves and the dominant worldview in our culture (1990:119-20) and indeed it does seem to deepen this in crucial ways which we will explore. However in this paper I will temper this claim by suggesting that there remains in Merleau-Ponty's thought a clear sense of 'other', albeit radically reconceptualised, in ways which bring him closer to ecofeminist thought. This is however, not a straightforward alignment, as we shall see.

## **'Intentionality'**

While not explicitly 'environmental', phenomenology anticipates the environmentalist's advocacy for the abandonment of Cartesianism. The phenomenological approach, on the face of it, seems very simple; get back inside your skin, pay attention to lived experience, stop looking at it from the outside and use a first-person perspective. What emerges from this open-ended inquiry offers ways to fundamentally rethink the hierarchical and dualistic self/other ontology which may be useful to the environmental debate.

The fundamental tenet of phenomenology is that when we examine our experience of the world as lived rather than as theorised, we soon discover that all consciousness is consciousness 'of' something. Consciousness cannot arise without correlation to an object. (Sokolowski, 2000:8) This statement seems so blindingly obvious that we usually move on swiftly, but phenomenology holds us here awhile to consider the implications of this insight.

In the Cartesian tradition we are usually asked to consider consciousness as primarily an awareness of ourselves, assuming that all we have direct access to is the contents of our own mind. Awareness is directed towards our internal thoughts and experiences only, rather than outwards directly towards the world. Once we have made this division we are then faced with the question of how internal states of consciousness can be 'about' external objects. Our thoughts might have originally been triggered by stimulus from the outside world but, according to this view, we have no direct contact, only the representations within the mind that are triggered

by stimulus of our sensory apparatus. All we can really be sure of is our own state of consciousness and therefore everything else is subject to doubt. (Sokolowski, 2000:10)

In contrast to the Cartesian view, which prises apart subject from object and then puzzles over how to put them together again, the phenomenological approach solves this dilemma by simply not pulling them apart in the first place. Intentionality means that consciousness is always directed towards something, and thus implies a connectivity which is absent from the Cartesian model. The notion of intentionality breaks open the boxed-in mind and makes of it a public entity, acting in the world and embedded in it. (Sokolowski, 2000:9-16)

Phenomenology therefore asks us to pay close attention to our lived experience and, more importantly, to trust it. 'For phenomenology, appearances are real; they belong to being. Things that had been declared to be merely psychological are now found to be ontological, part of the being of things' (Sokolowski, 2000:15) If we pay close attention to our experience we find that we are not passive receptors stimulated by discrete sensations caused by a mechanistic world, but interacting with a world imbued with meaning and value, for we cannot describe anything without referring both to the object and to our experience of it. This could be considered to be a theoretical presupposition, which is exactly what phenomenology claims to avoid. However, we are invited to establish the truth of this by testing this against our own experience. Thus it becomes clear that phenomenology can be understood as the minutely focussed examination of the nuances of our involvement with the

world as natural beings. This potentially offers us an experiential rather than purely theoretical route to developing the personal sense of our own connectedness that ecophilosophers identify as fundamental to the shift of values asked of us by the current environmental crisis.

### **Self as 'body-subject'**

Merleau-Ponty identifies the thinking and perceiving ego as rooted in the individual body-subject: 'The thinking ego can never abolish its inherence in an individual subject, which knows all things in a particular perspective' (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2003:67) Thus he locates the subject firmly in the body as it locates and orients itself in the life world. We turn, point, grasp, move away from, towards, left/right, up/down, in front/behind. This directionality always relates to our experience of embodiment, in our having two eyes, two hands, muscles that give us mobility. Merleau-Ponty argues that consciousness is rooted in a bodily 'preconscious' knowhow rather than in a mysterious mental 'unconscious', and he finds evidence of this in our embodied habits and skills, for example in a musician's 'finger memory'. (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2003:168) These experiences bring into question the notion of a conscious mind controlling the body like a puppet-master, but Merleau-Ponty does not propose the mysterious subconscious of the psychoanalysts. He suggests that phobias reveal the sedimentation of past experiences lying dormant in our *body*, until awakened by a spider in the bathtub which sends the heartbeat racing before we have time for conscious thought. According to Langer, Merleau-Ponty argues that there can be no self-sustaining sphere of pure thought, as there is no pure thinker,

only the body-subject, existing concretely in the world as experienced. (Langer, 1989:xv)

*'The world is not what I think, but what I live through. I am open to the world, I have no doubt that I am in communications with it, but I do not possess it, it is inexhaustible'.* (Merleau-Ponty, 1945:xviii)

The relationship between thought and its object is characterised here by its openness to the world, thus it is impossible to separate the 'thinking thing' from the 'extended thing', as Descartes tried to do. This might imply a strong kinship with the deep ecologists' view, as Langer has suggested (1990). However Merleau-Ponty is clear that we can never fully know the world, so there is a suggestion that humility may be appropriate, that the mystery of the world is more than we can fully grasp and in its unknowability it remains 'other'. This would seem to support the notion of a mutuality of self and other, rather than a merging of the two, in which case Merleau-Ponty may in fact be in closer kinship with the ecofeminist point of view. However, it should be noted that his rather universalist body-subject could be criticised from a feminist perspective as a-historical and phallogentric, and that bodily experience is in fact diverse, gendered, and culturally framed.

### **Start in the middle**

Toadvine (2001) suggests that if we are asking how to reach a better understanding of the subject/object relationship, the answer phenomenology offers is "I wouldn't start from here". By beginning our conceptualisation with the two poles

of subject and object we are always going to reach a more or less dualistic answer. If, however, we begin with *perception* as the primary event, which gives rise to subject and object by abstraction, a polarised reading of subject/object is no longer useful in exploring sense perception and our experience of being in the world. Subject is a node at which the world meets itself. Thus we might conclude that consciousness emerges from the sensory world itself. (Toadvine, 2001:330-331)

This approach is also developed by Abram, who points out that the recognition of the bodily basis of perception, based on Merleau-Ponty's observation that we are part of the stuff of the world and that we have to be perceivable in order to perceive, establishes a bond of kinship between ourselves and our world. According to Abram, if perception is indeed located at the confluence between the body-subject and the world, it belongs to neither. He goes on to suggest that if thought is an outgrowth of perception, then it could be argued that my thought belongs as much to the world as to me, and he follows Merleau-Ponty in claiming that the world, literally, 'thinks itself in me.' (Abram, 1996:55, 68, 82.) (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2003: 214)

This a seductive and poetic notion, and one which would seem to support a 'merged' self, but if true, then what explains our factual alienation from nature? Firstly, let us consider the role human language plays. After all, if the world is thinking itself in me, I am using words to do most of that thinking. (Of course, we also could be thinking in imagery, but the visual is still arguably a symbolic language of signs.) According to Sokolowski, the ego, the 'centre of disclosure to whom world

manifests itself' (2000:113) seems to be both a part of and apart from the world, but cannot exist independently; in phenomenological terms they are 'moments' to one another, parts as interdependent as say, a note of music and sound, or the eye and vision. We can name and thus conceptualise them separately, as 'abstracta', but if we attend to our experience, we find they are always connected to other 'moments'. However, because we have language and can therefore talk and think about moments separately, we have a tendency to solidify them, to grasp inappropriately after 'concreta', or parts which *can* be separated, as a leaf can from a tree.

This accounts for our tendency to slide into polarity and dualism, because we can name a concrete self as distinct from an unknowable other. Thus we 'introduce a separation where we should simply make a distinction' and then have to worry about how to fit them back together again. (Sokolowski, 2000:24) In phenomenological terms then, mind is a 'moment' to the world. Mind, body and being are moments to each other, and indeed the whole 'mind/body' problem can be seen as a confusion, a grasping after 'concreta' where we really have 'abstracta'. Apply this to the dualism of self versus other and the binary opposition does not vanish, but softens. Since language has arisen naturally, and language underpins our tendency to grasp after the 'thing', perhaps we can recognise our clinging to the individualised, tightly framed self as an aspect of human frailty. Not wickedly selfish, just mistaken. And so another manifestation of the false dualistic dichotomy, blame, and its inverse, guilt, begin to fall away. Given that environmental campaigning and activism can become entrenched in blame and guilt, the softening of boundaries that arises from a clearer understanding of our natural tendency to muddle distinction

and separation, may in fact be phenomenology's most valuable and potentially useful contribution.

A second explanation for our current alienation from nature is surely that our everyday existence is now thoroughly framed and mediated by technology. As Langer points out, 'we have translated our concepts into artefacts' and thus rewoven the texture of our sensory world (Langer, 1990:119). Our direct sensory contact with the natural world, and indeed, with each other, is now so limited as to stunt the development of the deep kinship bond Abram speaks of. This suggests the fundamental importance of the direct experience of natural environments in the education of our children, if they are to grow up with a sense of this bond, and indeed for adults, to maintain and refresh that bond through direct sensory experience.

### **Merleau-Ponty's notion of 'flesh'**

The focus on the activity of perception itself is central to Merleau-Ponty's thought. He sees the task of phenomenology as one of rediscovering the lived experience through which the world of other people and things is given to us. He describes this as a system of 'self-others-things', a system which is not static but rather continually coming into being. He notes that we tend to lose focus on perception itself as the *object* of perception so easily catches our attention (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2003:67). Here again we notice the human mind's tendency to grasp after concrete 'things', and our innate unease with the groundless and indistinct. He

describes the thinking ego not as 'constituted' but as 'constituting' offering an understanding of self as not so much Descartes' 'thinking thing,' but as an embodied 'thinking,' inhabiting a perceptual field of which we only ever have a partial view. (1945/2003:71) This seems to leave a space for a nature which is beyond us, which is 'wild'.

Toadvine is among those who criticise the movement in environmental thought towards an indistinguishable continuity or overly cosy kinship with the natural, perhaps on the 'rebound' from orthodox Cartesianism, as thoroughly 'wrongheaded', and as 'trimming its claws for adoption as our sibling or pet' (2003:139). Mathers too warns against a saccharine view of nature that sanitises death, destruction and degradation as unnatural and is critical of deep ecology's tendency to idealize 'untouched' nature (in Langer 2003:105). Here again, Merleau-Ponty has some useful insights. Toadvine (2003:147) and Brook (2005:355) suggest that in Merleau-Ponty's later work, left incomplete at his death, he sought an even more radically de-objectified reading of subject/object ontology. Toadvine notes that 'even Merleau-Ponty had difficulty extracting himself from an interpretation of the other as a modification of the self' (2003:148) The notion of 'flesh' which Merleau-Ponty's later work introduces could be seen as an attempt to address this.

The reading of the subject/object relationship introduced with 'flesh' is not so much a conversation between a sensor and the sensible, as an intertwining of the 'flesh' of the body with the 'flesh' of the world in a somewhat erotic 'embrace' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/1968:271). Brook notes that this idea of embrace is useful to

environmental thinking as by implicitly recognising difference it avoids the pitfall of reducing the world as we experience it to no more than our own projections, and does not allow us to slide towards an indistinguishable continuity between self and world which obliterates difference(2005:361). It is therefore not the case that we should care for the world because we care for ourselves. Embrace implies mutuality, not merger. And where there is differentiation, we find there is a *between*, a space, or gap.

### **The ‘Chiasm’**

In his later work Merleau-Ponty returns repeatedly to an examination of the very specific experience of being simultaneously toucher and touched, as when we reach out to touch an object with our right hand, and then touch that right hand with our left. (Merleau-Ponty,1964/1968:133-4) Exploring this experience for ourselves we find that we may focus on the experience of touching, or that of being touched, but that this is not strictly simultaneous: as we focus on one sensation the other recedes. Merleau-Ponty identifies this gap, split, or fold in experience, this ‘chiasm’, as emblematic. Our thinking can place us on one or other side of the experience, like flipping a coin over. We only see one side, but we know these are two sides of the same experience. The experience of being toucher touched reveals a sense of separation and at the same time inseparability (Brook, 2005:360). Thus, courtesy of ‘flesh’, we are folded into the world. In the gap of this fold there lies a sense of mystery and unknowability, a blind spot. Our view can only ever be partial and incomplete. The natural world can never be our possession. The appropriate response is one of respect, humility, and wonder.

This unknowability is different from a profoundly unknowable nature as an objectivised 'thing in itself', but according to Toadvine, accounts for our tendency to slip into this way of thinking, or conversely to react against it and subjectivize nature as a social construct. It also accounts for the resistance nature offers which makes many of us instinctively reluctant to reduce it to nothing more than our own construct. (Toadvine, 2001 :328)

In a somewhat carnivorous consideration of the body-subject and flesh, Hatley suggests the term 'plethoric' to describe the extent to which our bodies are enmeshed with other bodies. He observes that we know ourselves only through our bodies, and that through eating and other interactions these in turn are interwoven with other bodies, which are in turn interwoven with yet other bodies, in a neverending hall of mirrors. He notes that in this eternal web there is no 'first self', and certainly no self-sufficiency, or self reliance, but instead 'a continual intertwining of all entities into all other entities so that all may exist.' (Hatley, 2004:22). Humans, placing ourselves at the top of the food chain by exterminating with tremendous vigour any predators which might eat us, attempt to exclude ourselves from this intertwining, and to hold our 'selves' separate. In so doing we refuse to accept the precariousness and impermanence of being embodied, and so live under an illusion of control. Hatley suggests that phenomenology's contribution is to demonstrate the futility and dishonesty of this position, and that an acceptance of our bodily interdependence and permeability may encourage humility in our relations with other beings (2004:26). Hatley's toothsome reading of our fleshly engagement with

the world would certainly seem to confirm that Merleau-Ponty's work doesn't attempt to 'declaim' or sanitise nature as 'pet'.

### **The Absent Object**

This intertwined engagement is not confined to the physically present, but is further reflected in the field of value and symbolic meaning. According to Toadvine, Merleau-Ponty situates the meaning-making subject within the meaningful world itself, firmly embedded in a criss-crossing network of perceptual and also symbolic relationships. (Toadvine, 2001)

One of phenomenology's most original insights is to draw to our attention the centrality of absence in human experience, mind and being (Sokolowski, 2000:37). We sense this absence in the gap or 'chiasm' Merleau-Ponty finds in our experience of being the toucher touched, but absence is present in all our perceiving. If we return to the fundamental phenomenological term of 'intentionality' and consider this further, we see that intentionality is not just directed at the objects we encounter but also to concepts, memories, judgements, words, plans. My 'filled' intention of meeting a friend for lunch is framed with 'empty' intentions: plans, conversations, text messages, anticipations and remembering after the fact. Behind all these presences and absences is the single identity of the lunch meeting itself. Thus the things which we use words to name are given to us in a mixture of presences and absences. (2000:32)

Sokolowski observes how we tend to neglect absence. We imagine that we speak of objects that are not present by saying we are dealing instead with an image or conceptual representation which *is* present. But, he asks, 'how do we know that we have is 'only' a concept if we weren't aware of the absence of the thing itself?' (2000:76) We can intend an object not present to us with the help of words or mental images, but the thing is still absent. Absence is a fundamental human experience, explaining our sense of loss, grief, homesickness, longing. We do not live in the world only as given directly to our senses, but also and simultaneously in the future, the past, the distant, the underneath, the behind, the unknown, the suspected, the half-forgotten, the longed-for. The presence of any object of perception is always framed by these absences. The phenomenological 'attitude' is one in which we can become aware of the delicacy of how the world is given to us, how breathtakingly fragile and complex our experiencing really is. Our normal everyday frame of mind is too coarse-grained to fully appreciate this, and we reach after a thing-like stand-in to fill the gap, again uncomfortable with the real immateriality of our being-in-the-world (Sokolowski, 2000:76).

When we discuss environmental problems we similarly tend to focus on that which is material, forgetting the central role of the absent in making meaning and value, thus missing the importance of factors such as human values, beliefs and behaviours in an ecosystem. Merleau-Ponty describes how meaning can be understood as the invisible flipside of the visible, intertwined in vision and embedded in what Langer describes as the 'paradoxical reversibility of self-sensing flesh'. She argues that this understanding of our intertwining with the world, and the emergence of meaning within that dynamic system of self and other, deepens

ecocentric arguments for intrinsic value in nature, in which self and other form a 'dynamic, meaningful whole' (1990:129). This she identifies with deep ecology's Self-realization. However, as we have seen, this is tempered by a clear sense of the otherness of the world, which does not make a pet of nature, or wipe away mystery and wonder.

### **Perception and Causality**

This is all well and good, but can such navel-gazing wonderment make any impact on the real world? Perhaps an answer lies in a phenomenological rethink of that other bastion of the Western worldview: unidirectional linear cause and effect. Wood suggests that intentionality can be understood as a deeper level of causality, one that operates 'behind' the apparently linear causality of everyday phenomena. This causality, he suggests, underlies evolutionary processes and explains how it is that living creatures come to possess bodies so finely tuned to their environment. (2004:212) Indeed, evolutionary biologists now speak of 'coalescence', as genes group and regroup across a reticulated network of species with varying degrees of differentiation, rather than progressing down linear branchings of a 'tree' of life. (Allaby, 2004)

Wood points out that the principle of intentionality places consciousness centre stage, as active agent in the world. He notes that the relationship between an embodied being and the object of its awareness is not a physical one, but an intentional one. For example when the object of my awareness is a steep, rocky mountain, the relation between us – my seeing, fearing, admiring – is an intentional

relation. If we understand causality in a linear, mechanistic way, we will see no connection between causality and intentionality. However, Wood suggests, once we expand our understanding of causality to include the indeterminate, the reciprocal and the endlessly multiplied enmeshing of a myriad causes and effects, we can see how the embodied and intertwined understanding of the self that arises from phenomenology places the individual subject right in the midst of this endlessly complex and shifting web of relations (Wood, 2004:224). Although beyond the scope of this paper, it is interesting to note how strongly this insight is reflected in the understanding of causality arising from general systems theory, and also from Buddhist notions of 'interdependence' (Laszlo, 1973) (Macy, 1991).

Intentionality, shaped by imagination, memory, longing, love, therefore functions within a complex setting where human needs, fears and desires are meshed into the natural world, shaping it just as it shapes us. Wood describes a 'consciousness' as a 'networked awareness, a with-knowing, a knowing that, even as it is separated into different modalities, draws on those others'. (2004:224) Even where our relations with the world appear to be external, they are in fact constitutive. 'Living things eat each other, breathe and drink the elements, live in communities, while inanimate things have properties that depend on properties of other things' (224-5) This understanding of causality is one in which it is the multiple interactions of forces that produces the results, not the absolute forces themselves. In other words, human activity, including the reshaping of our thinking through philosophical introspection, inputs into this complex web in subtle ways which cannot be predicted or directed. According to this view of causality, the fruits of our labour may be imperceptible to us, but they are nonetheless part of this web. This mitigates

the perceived helplessness of the insignificant, individualised self, when faced with the seemingly insurmountable enormity of the problems we currently face.

### **Conclusion:**

What comes across from this exploration of intentionality, the body-subject and 'flesh' is a finer-grained understanding of the groundlessness of our lived, embodied experience of being in the world as it is given to us in presence and absence, in which hard definitions of self and other are understood as misconceptions. The inter-relationship of self and world which emerges isn't quite a merging of the two, as there seems to be a strong sense of the 'otherness' of the world, especially in the gap, blind spot or chiasm where we are folded sensorially into the world as flesh. Yet it isn't quite the mutuality of ecofeminists either, who would be critical of the universalism of the body-subject. Merleau-Ponty doesn't seem to contradict either deep ecologists or ecofeminists, but his thinking offers qualifications and adjustments to both.

I suggest that where phenomenology can offer real and useful insights for environmentalism is exactly where it seems most esoteric. In recognising the centrality of absence in our perception, while acknowledging our natural tendency to gravitate towards what is present and concrete, phenomenology softens entrenched polarities, including blame and guilt. In opening causality outwards into a complex nonlinear web, it affirms the validity and usefulness of philosophical work, and offers an opportunity to view activism as participation in work whose fruits may not be

directly apparent, but which contributes towards change in cumulative and nonlinear ways.

**[Word count: 5138]**

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