ABSTRACT: It is frequently remarked that Merleau-Ponty did not write about race, gender, or anti-Semitism. Overall, this is true, but the relatively recent re-publication of his Sorbonne lectures, along with some new materials, shows that his lectures did address the issues of racism, sexism, and anti-Semitism. In addition, Emily Lee’s framing of Merleau-Ponty’s theory of the human body provides a useful way to understand its relationship to race and gender. While humans are fundamentally the same biologically, “secondary biological characteristics” such as skin color (and gender), situated in various social contexts, have a significant impact on the formation of one’s personal and social identity. What I seek to do here is find in Merleau-Ponty’s work the philosophical roots of Lee’s claim. I also seek to find the moral recognition of the other in Merleau-Ponty’s treatment of time and how his treatment of time relates to the two-dimensionality of the human body. It is this treatment that allows us to recognize the sameness of the other but that also allows us to recognize and respect differences.

SOME YEARS AGO, I made an effort to deal with what might be called Merleau-Ponty’s “multiculturalism.”¹ This effort discussed the importance of rejecting one rational truth as well as the importance of taking into account different perspectives, i.e., of listening to all voices, and by implication dealt with race, gender, and religious affiliation, but it did not deal with these topics directly. I now attempt to do so.

Merleau-Ponty seems to me to be on the right side of these issues, that is to say, he is against forms of discrimination based on race, gender, or religion, but he does not address them specifically, at least in much detail.² Yet, by carefully re-visiting


²Merleau-Ponty is sometimes criticized for not dealing with the gendered body; it is said that his treatment of the body as a general or anonymous structure ignores gender differences or, worse, describes the body in general terms but does so from an assumed male point of view. See, for example, Shannon Sullivan, “Domination and Dialogue in Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology of Perception,” Hypatia 12, no. 1 (1997): 1–19, especially p. 1. I hope to show here that Merleau-Ponty’s works do indeed deal with embodied differences, as well as with general similarities. Of course, others have already achieved much along these lines, and I will address this in the next endnote immediately below.

Similar to the way Merleau-Ponty is criticized for focusing on the general/anonymous and thus un-differentiated body, he is sometimes criticized for reducing the “other to the same,” i.e., treating another human being only as a projection of the individual’s own embodied interior. See Galen Johnson, “Introduction: Alterity as Reversibility” in Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty, ed. Galen A. Johnson and Michael B. Smith (Evanston IL: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1990), pp. xvii–xxxiv. See also M. C. Dillon, “Écart: Reply to Lefort’s ‘Flesh and Otherness’” in Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty, p. 16. Dillon addresses this issue admirably and has influenced my presentation here. See also Jacques Derrida, On Touching: Jean-Luc
his work, much can be drawn from his comments and from his philosophy of the
body, especially about race and gender.3

Some of Merleau-Ponty’s most pointed (albeit brief) comments about the topic
of discrimination can be found in his lecture notes. For example, in a series of lec-
tures that came to published under the title of “The Child’s Relations with Others”
he comments on a study that has shown a relationship between “psychological
rigidity” on the one hand and racism, sexism and anti-Semitism on the other. The
study shows, for example, that some children cannot recognize that a perceptual
image slowly changes from a dog to a cat. These children continue to adhere to
the belief that the beginning image of the dog must remain a dog, even though it
has gradually changed into a cat. Their perceptions must remain categorical: the
perceived image is either a dog or a cat, with no possibility that one could change
into the other. Moreover, Merleau-Ponty notes, the rigidity that appears here in the
child’s perception shows up in other areas of the child’s life as well, for these same
children are unable to accept that they have feelings of both love and hatred for
their parents. Many aspects of their world (their perceptions and feelings) are thus
divided into distinct and rigorous categories. Moreover, the study continues, one
way the rigid subject (child or adult) deals with her or his own conflictual emotions
is to deny the negative feelings and to project them onto others, especially minori-
ty groups, but also including members of the opposite sex. Negative feelings are
conveniently attributed to “the other,”4 to individuals of a minority racial or ethnic

3Of course, much fine scholarship has already been done along the lines that I pursue here, including
in Feminist Interpretations of Maurice Merleau-Ponty just cited above. Yet, what I hope to accomplish here
is to bring a number of Merleau-Ponty texts and lectures together in one place by clearly integrating them
around the issues that surround race, gender and anti-Semitism. I also attempt to integrate the relatively recent
release of Merleau-Ponty’s Sorbonne lectures (and thus not yet widely discussed) into my presentation of
these issues, for it is in these lectures that Merleau-Ponty makes some of his most pointed comments about
them. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Child Psychology and Pedagogy: The Sorbonne Lectures 1949–1952,

4“The other,” as it is used in philosophy, typically refers to another person as different from oneself.
This difference can be treated negatively, as for example when someone is labelled an “alien other” and is
treated as less than oneself or less than one’s primary identification group. Or, it can be treated as a positive
quality that is necessary to the moral recognition of the other, that the other is a person in her or his own
right, is not just a projection of one’s own identity, and deserves to be treated with the same dignity as
oneself. The recognition of the other within the context of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy will be addressed
below and throughout this essay.
group, to members of the opposite sex, or to those affiliated with a different religion. Speaking more broadly, and in another location, Merleau-Ponty also mentions that, when socioeconomic times are difficult, some subjects tend towards the emotionally primitive. When they are frightened, frustrated, and angry, they strike out against and blame others, in the act commonly referred to as scapegoating.⁵

Addressing the study referred to immediately above, Merleau-Ponty is cautious about making claims about cause and effect relationships between personality structure (rigidity, in this case) and a dichotomous way of interpreting the social world. Specific causal relations, he says, are “not resolved by these investigations. They merely establish a correlation between the manner of perceiving and that of structuring the social world.” After all, it could be that it is because the subject displays a rigid personality that she or he divides the social world in a dichotomous way or, rather, that the subject displays a rather rigid personality because of the way her or his social relations have been organized.⁶

Moreover, Merleau-Ponty proceeds, the structure of the personality and a dichotomous way of treating the social world are not distinct regions that we must then try to bring together causally. “In reality the two orders are not distinct; they are part and parcel of a single global phenomenon. Consequently our aim has not been [to seek out a causal connection] . . . but to bring to light the profound relation of the two phenomenal orders that are part of a single global project of the individual”—a global project that does reveal certain relationships or correlations between various personality characteristics and specific ways of relating to the social world.⁷

Merleau-Ponty makes a similar point in another lecture. Commenting on Abram Kardiner’s study of the U.S. city “Plainville,” he mentions that a certain type of personality, with an “accentuated Oedipal structure: punishments, sexual taboos, [etc.],” is correlated with certain social structures and certain political views. Some people with this personality type tend to be “skeptical Republicans, hostile to the Democratic administration, ‘to the red ideas of Roosevelt,’ such as social welfare. . . .”⁸ The common thread here between the personal and the social-political appears to be (rather than a causal relationship) a relationship to power, with the individual, in childhood, trying to escape the power of the parent and, in adulthood, trying to escape the power of the government. Again, the goal here is not to search for narrow causal relationships but to identify clusters of qualities in relationships to one another. The personal, social, economic, and cultural form a whole and help

⁶CRO 107.
⁷CRO 108, and CRO in CPP 244.
define one another. This is what we must understand if we wish to understand the behavior of people within a particular social, historical situation. Again, we cannot, Merleau-Ponty says, just look at personality structure as the cause of, for example, anti-Semitism, for there is frequently some sort of negative historical treatment that triggers this sort of scapegoating. Personality structure and social-historical events must be understood as woven together as part of a whole. To repeat, we must take into account certain personality types and the specific social conditions they live within if we wish to understand the behavior of these subjects at a particular time and place in history.9 Merleau-Ponty also mentions here that this study also points

9We should perhaps recall here a National Public Radio (NPR) program in order to provide a more current example. The program aired just after the 2016 presidential election and attempted to provide an analysis of the election, an analysis, if you will, of the personality types that voted for Trump, given the social and economic conditions they found themselves within. “From Populist Wave to the White House: Deep American Divisions and the Transition Ahead” aired on The Diane Rehm Show, WAMU 88.5, November 10, 2016; Guest host Indira Lakshmanan. The panel discussion participants were Lara Brown, George Washington University; Ryan Lizza, The New Yorker; Amanda Taub, New York Times; Andra Gillespie, Emory University. Available at https://dianerehm.org/shows/2016-11-10/from-populist-wave-to-the-white-house-deep-american-divisions-and-the-transition-ahead.

The planks in Trump’s political platform (drawn largely from a previous NPR show, although I here emphasize certain aspects of the platform that were designed to appeal to the working class) can be stated as something like the following: limit free trade, to protect U.S. market and jobs; tax breaks, to expand business opportunities and expand jobs; reduce U.S. regulations, to enhance business growth for oil exploration, coal use, with fewer environmental controls, and create jobs; extreme vetting of Muslims entering the U.S., to make the country safer; limit immigration, especially from Latin America, and thus protect jobs; make countries in NATO pay more, thus reducing the tax burden for the U.S. citizens and thus enhance their income; pro-life/anti-abortion; anti-Affordable Health Care Act, which uses tax dollars from hard working citizens to pay for the healthcare for the undeserving.

Here are some of the main ideas introduced by the panelists on the NPR program. This is not a verbatim text drawn from the audio. I have edited heavily, both omitting and adding, and offer some of my own commentary: We are witnessing a “majoritarian backlash,” consisting of mostly of white, non-college educated, working class males (presumably with a world view that is not as expansive as those who are college educated). They are experiencing lots of stress about the globalization of the economy and about their perceived loss of their own earning power and financial status. They are experiencing lots of stress about changing demographics (the U.S. is less white middle/working class) and changing values (especially on the coasts, which are more multicultural, with more sexual diversity, more singles, fewer families, more pro-choice, more gun control). In times of stress, people get scared and more emotionally and rationally “primitive.” This is when they want a strong, firm, clear leader, to help protect them. This is also when people start to take greater notice of and identify with racial categories. Sometimes people will forgive a great deal (sexist comments, for example) if the political candidate supports their general ideology and political beliefs. Also, in the U.S. we tend to prioritize race over class. We have done this historically, and that is one reason why socialist ideas did not take root in this country. This has made it difficult for poor blacks and whites to identify with each other, to see what they have in common, to unite behind a common political case.

The point of the radio analysis here was not to demonize those who voted for Trump from the point of view of a liberal Democrat, but to understand what Trump’s appeal was for the conservative Republican and swing voter—largely job, health, and psychosocial security.

Even though this NPR discussion is far from a careful social scientific study, it does attempt to bring together and understand a certain voter demographic and why this population voted as it did within the context of certain economic and social conditions. If a person acts in a way that is racist or sexist (as has been claimed about Trump and some of his supporters), then this action should be condemned morally and sanctioned appropriately. Yet, rather than just condemning the other (even though this might sometimes be appropriate), we should attempt to understand the other in the circumstances they find themselves. If we understand the other’s fears and concerns, then we have a chance to address them not as demagogues, not
out that some “liberal subjects” may well recognize that all people are equal but do not recognize the sometimes dramatically different circumstances that people live in and must contend with. The truly liberal subject recognizes these differences and adjusts for them, even when making an effort to treat all equally. Thus far what Merleau-Ponty has here expressed to his students is the outline for a sound social science methodology—granted, while considering the serious topic of discrimination. He goes much further in his efforts to respect and listen to all voices, regardless of race, gender, religious affiliation, or geographic/historical tradition.

In “Everywhere and Nowhere,”10 for instance, Merleau-Ponty challenges the Western claims of rational superiority. He does agree that the West has honed the epistemological attempt to be fully aware of ourselves and our relationship to nature, but he also thinks that this effort is not unique, for other cultures and traditions have made the attempt as well. The West’s attempt must thus be regarded as relative and as far from absolute, and the West must thus continue to make the case for its rational and scientific methods, in order to justify itself to others. Moreover, we must listen to other cultures and historical traditions as well and not just the voices of the privileged white males of the Western tradition. One way that Merleau-Ponty attempts to do this is to existentialize Husserl’s more rationalist eidetic method. Merleau-Ponty insists (as does Husserl) on beginning with direct, concrete experience. We should then throw this experience in and out of focus by comparing it to other experiences and the experiences lived through by others. Yet (unlike Husserl) Merleau-Ponty is far less concerned with finding the rational essence of things or events. At best, he hopes to find what he refers to as a “lateral universal.”11 Since he begins with the body’s lived through openness upon the world, and since this experience is open, since it reveals open perceptual patterns and not ideal rational essences, what he hopes to find are experiences that are perceptually similar, not rationally identical. Thus, what we have here are experiences that are similar but also different, similar but, again, not rationally identical.

With this Merleau-Ponty is moving away from the West’s privileging of one precisely rational world. Reason must be broadened by focusing on open perceptual patterns as its origins and on different perceptual and conceptual perspectives. We must take into account all informed perspectives and attempt to move toward a recognition of both similarities and differences. Reason is not already established in some conceptual realm, or in the minds of the rationally privileged, or in nature in-itself, but remains to be established in perceptual experience and by means of open, non-coercive dialogue. Both of Merleau-Ponty’s political tracts—Humanism and

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11Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “From Mauss to Levi-Strauss” in Signs, pp. 126–58, specifically p. 120.
Terror\textsuperscript{12} and Adventures of the Dialectic\textsuperscript{13}—refine and develop these epistemological claims in a political direction. Humanism and Terror makes the claim that Liberalism presupposed a certain rational worldview, identified with the “rational man” and the “rational nature of things,” while Adventures of the Dialectic claims that the Communist state presupposed a “rational unfolding of history” in the direction of a proletarian revolution. What Merleau-Ponty calls for in both texts is an expanded notion of rationality, one that finds its basis in the body’s existential openness upon a public world, one that takes all perspectives into account, one that will listen to all voices or, ethically speaking, one that will move toward the recognition of each human being by all the others. As he puts it in Adventures of the Dialectic, we must move toward to a new liberalism, one that actually listens to and negotiates with all perspectives or voices, and toward a non-communist left, one not beholding to the top-down power structure associated with Communist party orthodoxy.

Charles Taylor, who has been deeply influenced by Merleau-Ponty’s work, recasts Merleau-Ponty’s epistemological and political claims in the language of multi-culturalism.\textsuperscript{14} Taylor claims that the liberal democracies of the West have historically moved toward a politics of universality and equality, that all people should be treated equally under the law.\textsuperscript{15} He also points out that more recently a new political framework has emerged, a politics of uniqueness and difference.\textsuperscript{16} Taylor recognizes that the political framework of the second is connected to the first, that all people deserve equal rights, even given certain differences, such as race, gender, and religious affiliation. In fact, he proceeds to make the case that some differences (like those just mentioned) should be celebrated, for they provide an important framework for the positive development of the identity of individuals within these groups, and they provide an enrichment of diversity for the entire community.\textsuperscript{17} Taylor thus appeals to both the politics of equality and the politics of difference. Difference should be respected and even supported, he says, as long as they do not infringe upon the basic universal rights of all within the society as a whole.\textsuperscript{18}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[16]MC 38–39.
\item[17]MC 56–61.
\item[18]MC 61–73. Avoiding the frequent criticism of political relativism, we must recognize that just because we recognize the insights of a variety of different social group or nations does not mean that we must be resigned to relativism, with each group or nation claiming \textit{its} truth against all the others. There is (at least) one way out of this relativism, which we have just witnessed above: the establishment of \textit{some} universal rights or principles agreed to by each different group involved. We can perhaps think of this as Merleau-Ponty’s lateral universal, expressed politically, and we can perhaps think of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations as an appropriate real-world example. Taylor also argues, against relativism, that one nation may have the ability to rationally solve the problems that have not been solved by the others. See Charles Taylor, “Rationality” in \textit{Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers 2} (Cambridge UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985), pp. 149–51. If other nations recog-
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position that is consistent with Merleau-Ponty’s insistence on listening to all voices, on taking all perspectives into account, and of discriminating against none. Yet, we can see an even more explicit connection between Merleau-Ponty’s work and the claims against racism, sexism, and anti-Semitism, and Emily Lee helps us do so.

It is thus appropriate here to mention a point made by Lee in “Merleau-Ponty and Philosophy of Race.” First of all, she mentions that an effective strategy for combating discrimination based on race (and we should add gender and religion) is to appeal to the biological sameness of all human beings. The differences that we find among large demographic groups are not biologically based but based on cultural, social, and economic differences. Yet, even though biological differences are not enough to undermine the sameness of all human beings, some biological differences (skin color and gender, for example) can be and are lived in significantly fundamental ways. As Lee points it, “Merleau-Ponty’s emphasis on the body opens the possibility for insisting that the specificities of embodiment are not secondary, but primary, to subjectivity.” After all, one primarily lives “race [and gender] through the immediacy of the body,” and, Lee continues, “although society recognizes racial [and gender] meaning as conceptually or theoretically socially constructed,” one’s everyday social interactions are lived as if racial and gender meaning were primary. One’s everyday interactions take place within specific situations, and these situations are primarily lived through one’s own body.

There is something valuable in this interpretation of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, and we should turn to his Phenomenology of Perception to show that the interpretation is accurate. We should here explore the freedom of the human body and how this freedom relates to the body’s situatedness in both natural and social settings. Merleau-Ponty’s well-known chapter on freedom in Phenomenology of Perception begins with an exposition of Sartre’s view of freedom and continues to reference this view throughout. Merleau-Ponty takes a stand against what he regards as Sartre’s view of the complete freedom of the subject and, rather, more thoroughly places the subject in the human body and the human body in natural and social situations. According to Merleau-Ponty, in Sartre’s view of freedom “even what are called obstacles to freedom are in reality deployed by it.” Yet, this precisely what Merleau-Ponty challenges. While it is true that a certain configuration

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20Dorothea Olkowski makes a similar point about bodily situatedness in Feminist Interpretations of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, pp. 3, 7. More on this below.


23PhP 436.
of large rocks takes on the quality of being climbable by the choice that one makes
to climb them, whether or not they are climbable has more to do with the structure
and limits of the human body in relationship to the world. Human freedom, then, is
conditioned and limited by the make-up of the human body and how it must nego-
tiate the actual structures of the world. Beneath the supposedly absolute freedom of
consciousness of the subject “there is, therefore, as it were a natural self which does
not budge from its terrestrial situation and which constantly adumbrates absolute
valuations.” He continues:

What is more, my projects as a thinking being are clearly modeled on the latter
[i.e., on the body’s relationship to the world]. . . Insofar as I have hands, feet, a
body, I sustain around me intentions which are not dependent upon my decisions
and which affect my surroundings in a way which I do not choose. These intentions
are general in a double sense: firstly in the sense that they constitute a system in
which all possible objects are simultaneously included; if the mountain appears
high and upright, the tree appears small and sloping; and furthermore in the sense
that they are not simply mine, they originate from other than myself, and I am not
surprised to find them in all psycho-physical subjects organized as I am. Hence, as
Gestalt psychology has shown, there are for me certain shapes which are particu-
larly favored, as they are for other men, and which are capable of giving rise to a
psychological science and rigorous laws. The grouping of dots [below] is always
perceived as six pairs of dots.

Not only is there this sort of natural tendency to perceive and act within the world in
certain ways, as the above claims, but human beings also develop certain habitual and
favored ways of being in the world. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, “we must recognize a
sort of sedimentation of our life: an attitude towards the world, when it has received
frequent confirmation, acquires a favored status for us.” If an individual has built
his or her life around an inferiority complex, he says, and has done so for twenty or
more years, then it is unlikely that this personality trait can be altered overnight.

Human freedom thus must be understood as gearing into specific situations,
both natural and social. We cannot do away with, i.e., ignore, these situations, and
the limitations they may provide, but we can take them up and attempt to move them
in a different direction. The objective world, the world in-itself, does not make me
who I am, but neither does my unconditioned will. What makes me who I am—an
African-American, a woman, a Jewish person—is not just about objective conditions
or just the result of my free will, but these conditions, including my current social
circumstances, as I live them and take them up to make them my own, in order to

24PhP 440.
25PhP 440.
26PhP 441.
27PhP 441.
negotiate with them, in order to make use of them, in order to move them and my life in a different direction.28

True, as Sartre says, I help create who I am when I take a stand in relation to my situation, but this freedom, Merleau-Ponty retorts, is not unmotivated. It comes out of the situation. My social identity, and my actions based upon it, first take form in my body’s lived through encounter with specific circumstances, and yet my freedom allows me to attempt to take these circumstances and move them, and my life, in a different direction:

I must, therefore, in the most radical reflection, apprehend around my absolute individuality a kind of halo of generality or a kind of atmosphere of “sociality.” This is necessary if subsequently the words “a bourgeois” and “a man” [or “an African-American,” “a woman,” “a Jewish person”] are to be able to assume meaning for me. I must apprehend myself from the onset as centered in a way outside myself, and my individual existence must diffuse round itself, so to speak, an existence in quality. . . . My life must have a significance which I do not constitute; there must strictly speaking be an intersubjectivity.29

By means of my body I am always already in the world with others, and my relationships to others, via my body, contributes significantly to who I am. Again, this atmosphere of sociality is general and it is something the individual exists within, yet, even more, this atmosphere and the individual cross back and forth into one another, with each giving and receiving. He writes:

We therefore recognize, around our initiatives and around that strictly individual project which is oneself, a zone of generalized existence and of projects already formed, significances which trail between ourselves and things and which confer upon us the quality of man, bourgeois or worker [or African-American, or woman, or Jewish person]. . . . The generality and individuality of the subject [then, must be regarded as] two stages of a unique structure which is the concrete subject.30

My life and my freedom, then, must be seen in this context. I am who and what I am because my body opens me out upon the world, opens me out and engages me with a variety of situations, including social situations that help define me, at least in part, by my bodily appearance. It is clear here that for Merleau-Ponty we are defined by our bodily engagement with natural and social situations. There is a general aspect to human bodily experience. Human beings tend to be limited by the environment in certain typical and general ways (a cliff face may be difficult to climb) primarily because of our bodies, and we tend to be socially and historically limited (or privileged) by certain specific bodily characteristics (such as skin color or gender). Merleau-Ponty’s claims here are very much in agreement with Lee’s claim above that race [and gender] are primarily lived through the body, for we are

28PhP 443.
29PhP 448.
30PhP 450–51.
primarily defined by our bodily engagement with specific situations of the natural and social world. The “secondary biological characteristics,” secondary because they do not affect what is fundamentally universal about what it is to be human, are nevertheless lived through as primary in social situations for they significantly influence one’s personal and social identity. Human beings are human beings, yet certain bodily characteristics (such as skin color or gender) can profoundly influence how our humanity is lived and framed.31

Let us now turn briefly to Merleau-Ponty’s comments regarding a “feminine nature” that we find in his Sorbonne lecture notes.32 In a section of these notes entitled “A Critique is to be made of those who, in defining feminine ‘nature,’ crystallize it,” Merleau-Ponty remarks that “Stendhal has shown that the traits of the feminine ‘nature’ are the result of the history and the style of education under which women have been subjected. . . . As Stendhal says, all the geniuses who are born women are lost to humanity. Although corporeal structure and the ability to procreate are important, they alone do not compose the ‘feminine’ nature.”33 A little further on in the lecture Merleau-Ponty offers the following comment regarding Freud’s theory of gender: “Freud claimed that belonging to a sex is not only physiological and anatomical, but psychological as well.”34 And finally, when summarizing some of his own lectures, Merleau-Ponty states:

regarding the analysis of Margaret Mead’s conception of masculinity and femininity, we find that the masculinity-femininity relation is an element in a total tissue of relations. . . . We have no grounds to speak of “the” masculine or “the” feminine since each civilization, according to its mode of existence, elaborates a certain type of masculinity in relation to a certain type of femininity. But within any given society, one finds sexual stereotypes . . . . Margaret Mead wishes for a “multisexual” society in which all types of “masculinity” and “femininity” would be admitted, each individual choosing his or her partner according to the masculine or feminine type that corresponds to his or her own type. This society would allow individuals to accept themselves as they are.35

It is clear from Merleau-Ponty’s agreeable presentation of these authors that he does not harbor a specific view of femininity or masculinity, that he believes these “types” are defined historically, within specific societies and cultures, and that they may be polar concepts, in the sense that they are defined in relation to one another and to a wider network of social relations. This is consistent with what we have seen immediately above: that within the context of Merleau-Ponty’s theory of the body the so-called secondary bodily characteristics (gender and race) do not affect one’s fundamental humanity (that from this point of view gender and race

31Merleau-Ponty: “I am all that I see, I am an intersubjective field, not despite my body and historical situation, but, on the contrary, by being this body and this situation, and through them, all the rest” (PhP 451).
33MCP in CPP 378.
34MCP in CPP 392.
35MCP in CPP 398.
are socially constructed) but may well play a significant role in the formation of one’s *personal* and *social* identity. In another section of his lectures, and consistent with what we have just seen, Merleau-Ponty comments that according to Lewin “scientific psychology will exist when we are able to understand the very different lives [of patients, of adults and children, of women and men, and of inhabitants of other cultures and less economically developed societies (previously referred to as “primitive” societies)] . . . as parallel systems responding to the same problem by different means. In other words, we find parallel logics.”36 Or, as Merleau-Ponty says elsewhere, we must look for and make sense of different ways of being-in-the-world. For instance, when embarking on a field study, the anthropologist first sees the community under study as a variation of the anthropologist’s own home environment. Yet, after weeks, or months, or even years of living in the “foreign” community, the anthropologist begins to see her or his own home environment as a variation of the community under study. And finally, and hopefully, the researcher sees each community as various ways of living the world and of trying to come to grips with it, both practically and “spiritually,” along with others in the community.37

Here we see that different societies (possibly including different ethnic groups), *that* adults and children, *that* women and men, *that* the healthy and those in need of help, are *all* to be treated as *variations* of the same *fundamental humanity*. Here we see that Merleau-Ponty (with Lewin) recognizes differences but that he also recognizes the humanity of all.

Merleau-Ponty certainly wants to avoid an “essence” approach when discussing the above categories, i.e., that there is a natural or objective essence of, for example, femininity or masculinity that can be grasped or abstractly defined using a detached reason. Human experience is *existential* in the sense that it lives the perceptual world as an open field, as an open system. True, there are stable patterns in human experience but they are open perceptual patterns, with shifting figures and grounds, which remain open to multiple interpretations, not fixed essences that have the characteristics of fixed abstract rational concepts. In the same way, there are patterns and regularities in human *behavior* that are existentially lived through. True, there are *patterns* and *regularities* in human behavior, but they are not fixed essences, for they are lived through not conceived, and as lived through they open upon a field of imprecise relations that are open to change. Moreover, even behaviors associated with biological impulses (sexuality, for example) can be lived and expressed in a variety of flexible ways, in ways that are not biologically predetermined or conceptually fixed. And finally, there are even biological demands, such as the demand for growth and development (puberty, for example), that are not fully determined beforehand by biological or genetic foundations. Future behavior is open; it must be achieved, and it may be achieved in a variety of ways. Again, a biological push to develop is there; it cannot be ignored. The subject cannot remain at an earlier stage

36MCP in CPP 390. The bracket addition is mine, but using mostly Merleau-Ponty’s terms or a version of them: “the patient, the primitive, the woman, the man . . . , adults, children,” along with his reference to Mead’s studies of other cultures.

of development, but the development can be brought to expression in a variety of ways, and a variety of creative ways. Also, there is both passivity and activity here. There is a conditioning as well as a taking up in order to express in a new way, a sublimation or sublation, if you will. Generally, then, this is the way we must understand gender types: we cannot speak of “the” feminine or “the” masculine, for they tend to be developed and expressed in different ways in different cultures, precluding a cross-cultural study that would seek to find some universal female or male essence below the surface of cultural variations, some abstract essential form of femininity or masculinity.

More generally yet, we should even claim that there is no essential form of what it is to be human, no essential form that is grasped and defined by a detached universal reason.

Although, as we have seen, Merleau-Ponty does recognize some universal truths about humanity, the universal natural push for biological development (yet, still, achieved by variable means), and, as we have also seen, there may well be what Merleau-Ponty refers to as lateral universals. There may be some similarities, some “family resemblances” (to use Wittgenstein’s phrase), between individuals, between people in all ethnic groups and different societies, etc., for we are all fundamentally human in the existential sense that we have seen above, in the sense that we are a composite of lived through, open-ended, embodied experiences. Moreover, this means that women and men, and subjects from all ethnic groups, must be understood as “parallel systems responding to the same problem by different means.” Women and men, as well as subjects from different ethnic groups or societies, may solve problems differently, true, but all existentially open upon the world in similar ways and resolve problems found there in ways that can at least be recognized by all, even if these resolutions are different from one’s own and from the resolutions of one’s own “group.” These different existential patterns overlap but are not identical. All people are equally human. We should all be treated with respect as a human being. There is a universality of principle here, based on a lateral universality of humanity. Yet, human beings are different, for we are individuated in our own bodies, and these differences should be respected.

Let us now turn to an ethical treatment of embodied situatedness by considering the “recognition of the other,” which should involve recognizing both that the other is similar to oneself (and thus fully human like oneself) and different (and thus not just an extension of one’s own subjective life or one’s primary reference group). Merleau-Ponty approaches the question of the recognition of the other through his embodied existential phenomenology in this way: “Whether we are concerned with my body, the natural world, the past, birth or death, the question is always how I can be open to phenomena which transcend me, and which nevertheless exist only to the extent that I take them up and live them.” How is it that I am in contact with something that runs beyond me? Merleau-Ponty turns to the nature and structure

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38As already mentioned above, some have argued that Merleau-Ponty reduces the other to the same, to the subject’s first-person experience, and thus does not genuinely recognize the other.

39PhP 363.
of time, as it merges with human subjectivity, to find an answer. Time, or rather the present moment of time, is characterized as ek-stasis, as a moving or stretching out away from itself, toward a past and future, that remains in contact with itself. When considering the past, the present remains in contact with past moments as they gradually and seamlessly slip away from and beyond the present. The present is not in full contact with them, for they do gradually slip away, but they also remain on the temporal horizon, at least for a while. Moreover, even those that gradually disappear remain available through those that are still present, through an interlocking temporal chain whose links continually bleed and blend into one another. Now, time understood in this way, as a present in contact with a past (and future) that nevertheless remain out of reach, is the model that Merleau-Ponty uses to understand our contact with the world, with others, and even with ourselves. I am in contact with the world, others and myself, but they also temporally slip away from me and gradually recede to the horizon. Moreover, it is the body’s two-dimensionality, its reflexivity, its touching or seeing from the inside that is bound up with its being touched or seen from the outside, that puts it in contact with the world but that also keeps the world at a distance, for there is a temporal spread between them. The touching and the touched occur together but there is slippage, a retardation, Merleau-Ponty says, of the touched from the touching, for the touched temporally slips away from the present touching. It is experienced as existing prior to and as running beyond the present touching.

Merleau-Ponty further claims that the two-dimensionality of the human body is part of the very structure of being, as a participant in the temporal structure of being, and even more. “Carnal being,” he says in a somewhat cryptic passage, “is a prototype of Being, of which our body, the sensible sentient, is a very remarkable variant, but whose constitutive paradox already lies in every visible. For already the cube assembles within itself incompossible visibilia as my body is at once phenomenal
body and objective body."\textsuperscript{42} The carnal body, the sensing human body, is an \textit{embodied structure} like the world, is a dimensional being that holds different aspects of being together. The human body touches from the inside of the hand, but in order to do so must be capable of being touched from the outside, touched by a world that runs beyond it and includes it. Moreover, the human body holds these different aspects of experience together, just as the world holds different aspects of the world together, because the body is merely one part of this world and manifests certain aspects of it. Moreover, it is because the touching body and the imposing structures of the world come together in perception that meaning is able to form, a meaning that is created by a whole that is greater than a mere sum of its parts.

Again, as the body and the world come together they form a \textit{perceptual whole} that is greater than a mere sum of the two parts. "It is this Visibility, this generality of the Sensible in itself, this anonymity innate to Myself" that Merleau-Ponty calls the flesh in his posthumously published \textit{The Visible and Invisible}.\textsuperscript{43} He has, however, already addressed this generality in his earlier \textit{Phenomenology of Perception}, where he states that one’s personal life rests upon the anonymous functions of the body, which open the embodied subject out upon the world whether the subject wills it or not.\textsuperscript{44} My personal perceptions open upon and participate in a world of anonymous and public perception. I am thus in contact with a public world that runs beyond me. Moreover, I am likewise in contact with other human beings just as their individual lives and experiences run beyond me. I am able to recognize the other as similar to me, for our bodies open upon and gesture in the world in similar ways, for our gestures, actions and perceptions open upon and meet within and at the world in similar ways.

Yet I also recognize the other as different from me, for the other is individuated in her or his own body. I do not literally experience the internal experience of the other, but since experience is primarily a bodily relationship to the world, a bodily opening out upon the world, our perceptual experiences can meet or overlap at its things, where they rest.

Ethically speaking, then, I can recognize other human beings as an ethical other, as similar, and thus as open to my experiences of empathy or sympathy, and as different, for the other is not just an extension of my own life but is individuated in her or his own body, in a body that is different than mine. Ethical actions thus begin with empathy for the other, then attempt to proceed by way of dialogue and non-coercive debate to an agreement and perhaps even to a principle that is fair for all, to a principle that all can agree to—even while still recognizing differences. It is thus possible for an African-American, a woman, a Jewish person, and a white male to have some insight into and empathy for the humanity of each member of the other’s group, while still respecting the differences between each group. Yet, since human beings do perceive the world according to their own situated needs and interests, and according to the needs and interests of their respective groups (including affiliations

\textsuperscript{42}VI 136.

\textsuperscript{43}VI 139.

\textsuperscript{44}PhP 215–16, 440.
of race, gender, and religion), differences will appear between groups. Also, and as is well known, this process of the recognition of the humanity of others is complicated by the history of racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, and classism in the United States (and elsewhere around the world) by the institution of certain feelings, attitudes, behavioral orientations, and social practices (institution in Merleau-Ponty’s sense of sedimentation and habituation of feelings, orientations, etc., and in the sociological sense of established social practices). Yet, if we understand that institutions of belief and behavior are in place, that they tend to resist change, that they exist in the habits of the human body and behavior (and, of course, in other ways as well, such as in legal institutions), then we have a better chance of understanding how we may bring about positive change. It is Merleau-Ponty’s attempt to work out a lateral universal around the human body that allows his philosophy to recognize differences while also uncovering family resemblances. Without this lateral universal (the recognition of the humanity of all), we retreat into a relativism of interest groups and the war of each group against all the others.

To summarize, we have seen that Merleau-Ponty does explicitly take up the issue of racism, sexism, and anti-Semitism in his lecture consideration of an academic study of psychological rigidity. The lesson that he draws from this study is that as social scientists and social critics we should seek to understand the correlations between personality structure and social/political structure. We should seek to understand how they are intertwined rather than looking for simple cause and effect relationships between personality structure and distressing social/political attitudes. We have also seen that Merleau-Ponty’s “Everywhere and Nowhere” challenges the West’s frequently presumed sense of intellectual or rational superiority. He seeks not to eliminate rationality but to broaden it, to include all voices resting on the body’s lived through openness upon the world. The word “multiculturalism” was introduced much later by other authors and commentators, but it is clear that Merleau-Ponty wishes to develop a rationality that listens to the voices of different individuals and different groups (such as classes, nations, regional traditions, ethnic groups, women, men, etc.). It is also clear that no single individual or group has exclusive claim to the truth, that truth must be formed through dialogue with all points of view, and that these points of view should try to find some common ground while respecting differences. We have seen that Emily Lee provides an extremely useful way to frame Merleau-Ponty’s theory of the body. She mentions that all human beings, biologically speaking, are basically the same, but that biological differences such as skin color (and gender) can be lived in ways that are primary when forming one’s sense of personal and social identity. We find this “framing” explicitly expressed in Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology of Perception, for he says there that we must

45Speaking personally, I know from my experience as a teacher that education can help transform beliefs and attitudes, for it exposes students and teachers alike to alternative views, to a more accurate understanding of history, to the hardships that others have experienced and continue to experience, etc. If it is done effectively it can expose us to the lives of others and to their openness upon the world. It helps place in relief our own experience and world view, to realize that our world view is not the only one, to realize that other lives and perspectives have a value and dignity fully equal to our own.
consider individuals as bodily embedded in specific natural and social situations, in situations that help define who they are both personally and socially. Moreover, we have seen that Merleau-Ponty’s Sorbonne lectures favorably discuss the works of Stendhal, Mead, and Lewin. These lectures reveal that he is against discrimination aimed at women, that women have frequently been held back by various beliefs and institutions in various societies, and that the “feminine” is defined culturally. The lectures also promote a means of understanding the patient, the racial minority, the adult, the child, women and men by treating them as variations of humanity. We are all human, but we sometimes express our humanity in different ways. And finally, we have seen that Merleau-Ponty’s existential theory of the dimension of time, and how the two-dimensionality of the body fits within it, allows us to make sense of the other ontologically and ethically. Our openness to the sameness of the other allows us to empathize with them, and yet our recognition of their differences impels us to dialogue with them in order to develop and move toward principles that are agreeable to all, toward principles that are not already “rationally” established by a few but remain to be established in an ongoing dialogue with all.

**FINAL CONSIDERATIONS**

_Feminist Interpretations of Maurice Merleau-Ponty_, edited by Dorothea Olkowski and Gail Weiss, published in 2006, remains an important book in Merleau-Ponty scholarship generally and, more specifically, in the attempt to bring together a variety of different interpretations of Merleau-Ponty’s importance for feminism.\(^{46}\) Olkowski’s introduction provides an important and helpful overview of the different interpretations provided by the collection of essays but also points out some of what is common among these different voices, among the most important of these commonalities being Merleau-Ponty’s theory of embodiment and the necessary situatedness that it implies.\(^{47}\) Yet, what is made of this intertwining of the body, world, and others by the philosophical essayists in this volume is quite varied. For brevity purposes, we must address just two of these interpretations, interpretations that tend along typical lines and typical lines of opposition to each other. Given what was presented above, we are now in a position to be able to do so in an informed manner. One of these interpretations should be resisted, and one should to be embraced. Let us first turn to the former.

Summarizing Beata Stawarska’s essay, Olkowski states that the following:

Merleau-Ponty describes the intrasubjective bodily experience of touching one’s own hand in which touching and being touched are reversible. He claims that the same principle operates between bodies, since active touching can always be reversed into passive being touched, or the seer can become the seen. The problem, according to Stawarska, is that in making the move from intracorporeality to

\(^{46}\)Olkowski and Weiss, _Feminist Interpretations of Maurice Merleau-Ponty_, cited above. Hereafter referred to as FMP.

\(^{47}\)FMP 3, 7, 22–23.
intercorporeality, the very difference between these two modes of being is erased and the sensible difference between what is mine and what is other disappears.\textsuperscript{48}

Stawarska, in fact, claims that the active/passive modes of experience involved in both touching-oneself and touching-the-other are, for Merleau-Ponty, “structurally identical.”\textsuperscript{49} In order to critically distance her position from that of Merleau-Ponty, Stawarska states:

[T]here is a form of corporeal self-referencing present when I touch the hand belonging to my sensible body and identified as mine, but that is absent when I shake hands with someone whose hand is experienced as other, as belonging to the body of the other. Now, the fact that the exercise of touch exhibits this distinction between sensible self and other is disregarded or regarded as a secondary phenomenon by Merleau-Ponty.\textsuperscript{50}

There seems to be a misinterpretation here of what Merleau-Ponty means when he discusses our touching the world, our two hands touching, and our touch of the other. As has already been observed, interpretations like this are not uncommon and therefore should be addressed. First of all, Merleau-Ponty does not identify intracorporeality with intercorporeality. My touching my own hand is similar to my touching the hand of the other, not identical, for the other remains other. I know that the other’s hand is not mine, that it runs beyond me, even though as similarly embodied subjects I know that we open upon the world in similar ways.

Furthermore, when Merleau-Ponty analyzes the two hands touching, this occurs in the more primary context of the human body touching the world, and here he stresses that the hand touches the surface of the world; he stresses the chiasm of the touching body and the touched world. He stresses that the body touches something that it crosses into but also that runs beyond it, that exists in its own right and that the touching exists within. He stresses that there is a contact with something that remains at a distance. Since my touching hand crosses into the touched world, and since the world runs beyond my touch, there is no coincidence with it. Moreover, the same is true when touching another human being. As we have seen above, I can touch the other as other, as another human being like myself, yet the other’s experience also eludes me. I can somewhat see what the other sees because I see the other seeing the same world as I do, because our perceptions meet and overlap at the object. My seeing (as a gesturing) can couple onto the seeing (as gesturing) of the other. I do not literally see what the other sees in the sense of subjectively living the other’s interior lived through experience, but I see the other gesturing out at the same things and events as I do. Again, I can experience what the other experiences in the sense that our similarly gesturing bodies open upon the same world and meet at its objects, like beams of light illuminating the same field, a field whose horizon nevertheless does run beyond us. Our experiences meet and overlap in a world that

\textsuperscript{48}FMP 12, 99–101.
\textsuperscript{49}FMP 93.
\textsuperscript{50}FMP 94.
runs beyond us, just as the other’s experiences run beyond me, even though our experiences sometimes overlap. I am in contact with the world and the experiences undergone by others as they also remain at a distance from me. Furthermore, that my “light” and the “light” of the other reveal the same world is further confirmed by the fact that I can see two or more “others” perfectly coordinating their behavior as they act in the world and manipulate it together, and by the fact that I can join this coordination. Our experiences do cross into one another as we open upon and cooperatively manipulate the same world through similarly structured bodies, yet they also remain apart, for we are also individuated in our bodies. I can move my body from place to place in a way that I cannot move the bodies of others and in a way that they cannot move mine. There is no complete coincidence with the other. Merleau-Ponty does not completely conflate intercorporeality into intracorporeality. He attempts to account for difference as well as commonality.

When Merleau-Ponty discusses the flesh in his later work, even though it expresses a more complete combination of embodied perception and the world as they come together and cross into one another, he still prioritizes the perceived over the perceiving:

It is by the flesh of the world that in the last analysis one can understand the lived body (corps propre)—The flesh of the world is of the Being-seen, i.e. is a Being that is eminently percipi [perceived], and it is by it that we can understand the percpere [perceiving]: this perceived that we call my body applying itself to the rest of the perceived, i.e. treating itself as a perceived by itself and hence as a perceiving, all this is finally possible and means something only because there is Being, not Being in itself . . . but the Being that also contains its negation, its percipi [its being perceived].

Again, for Merleau-Ponty being and being perceived must be taken together, but it is that which is seen that is more primary. The perceiver opens out to a world of which she or he is a part. It is not the case that the world is a solipsistic extension of the isolated subject’s bodily perception. In the same way, the perceiver opens out to a community of other human beings of which she or he is a part. It is not the case that the world of others is a solipsistic extension of the isolated subject’s embodied internal life.

We must thus agree with the claim made by Sonia Kruks here in Feminist Interpretations of Maurice Merleau-Ponty that Merleau-Ponty uses the human body as a means to establish some sense of universality, but that he does so in a qualified sense, for, as indicated further above, he is adamant about rejecting the abstract

51VI 141–42.
52VI 250–51. Or as Merleau-Ponty says in a passage earlier in The Visible and Invisible: “There is an experience of the visible thing as pre-existing my vision.” See above. Perceiving (percpere) and the perceived (percipi), my perceiving and the world perceived, are given together, but in the relationship between the perceiving and the perceived there is a retardation, a delaying, for the supposed simultaneity is not fully coincident, for the perceived continually slips away in time. My full coincidence with it is continually delayed.
sense of universality established by the Western philosophical tradition’s stress on a universal reason. Rather, reason should be understood as an agreement of perspectives, of mine within me as I actively and bodily open upon and interact with the world, and of mine with those of others as we actively and bodily open upon and interact with the world together. Thus, this universality must primarily be thought of as situated and, subsequently, as only partial, as “lateral,” i.e., as allowing for differences. Kruks rightfully connects this generality of experience, and the differences it allows, to the anonymous functions of the human body, and Olkowski rightfully connects the anonymous human body to Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the flesh, which he developed in his later works. The flesh of the human body connects with the flesh of the world and the flesh of others. As Olkowski says, summarizing the essay by Kruks, “it is flesh that provides human beings with a general atmosphere of intersubjective communication prior to cognition and therefore prior to social or gender stratification.”

This is an important point. There is a generality that Merleau-Ponty finds in the anonymous functions of the human body that is pre-conceptual, but, as we have seen above, and as a number of the philosophical essayists featured in Feminist Interpretations of Maurice Merleau-Ponty recognize, there is also a specificity found there, for human beings are also individuated in their bodies (even at the level of lived through experience) and, through our bodies, individuated in specific situations. It is by means of the lived through human body that we connect with others and that we are also individualized, and, further, it is by means of language and abstract thought that we bring these lived through significations to a more precise expression. This, of course, means that racism and sexism, as they are expressed conceptually in language, are rooted in the lived through experiences of daily life, but that language helps create social/historical horizons that help frame and orient future experiences as well. As we have seen above, the lived through experiences of racism and sexism are connected to how different bodies are treated in specific situations, in situations that are then expressed in language, in a language that can sediment certain ways of orienting attitudes and behavior, in ways that can orient future attitudes and behavior. Moreover, we have also seen that these linguistic/social orientations are not always fully present to those that become situated within them, and, for that very reason, they frequently persist.

54PhP xx–xxi.
55FMP 34–36.
56FMP 7.
57FMP 8, 22–23.