

# **The Interwoven Fabric Of Humanity: A Merleau-Pontian Ethics**

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## Introduction

Jean-Paul Sartre famously writes, “hell is other people,”<sup>1</sup> and his clever phrase seems a powerful and intuitive characterization of the human experience. Upon closer examination of Sartre’s initially disheartening claim, however, we discover that he is correct *not* because other people are so incredibly hellish. Instead, he is correct because other people are so inextricably linked to one another that virtually *every* meaningful experience relies on those connections. Human beings are inherently, essentially social, and it is this very nature that ensures that hell as well as heaven, pain as well as pleasure, and sadness as well as happiness are created by our interactions with others. To be human is to be interactive with other humans, and so ethical questions (how we ought to act towards others) become quickly entangled with metaphysical questions (how we exist, in this case, inextricably with others). These are big questions that demand careful analysis, which I will return to as this paper progresses. For now, however, it seems clear that metaphysical pursuits have little value—save for entertainment in the ivory tower<sup>2</sup>—unless they may be applied to existence in what we may casually call the “real” world.<sup>3</sup> To push beyond the questions of metaphysics and into the world of ethics is to make the field of philosophy meaningful in actual human existence. This push takes seriously the notion that the “ought” must be tied to the “is,” and that ethical principles cannot exist as mere musings plucked from nowhere by those locked securely in the ivory tower; They must instead be derived from the metaphysical actuality of human existence. These pursuits must be connected not only to ensure philosophy’s relevance to human existence, but also in order

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *No Exit and Three Other Plays* (New York: Vintage International, 1989), 45.

<sup>2</sup> It ought to be noted that my desire to push philosophy away from impractical abstraction does not necessarily indicate that it can be so pushed. However, I hope that my reader will forgive my lack of explication of this point, and instead, accept for the sake of argument that philosophy is only worthwhile if it is extended to life as life is experienced by a more broadly conceived humanity than the privileged and disconnected few of the ivory tower. I am also not alone in this desire (Golumbia: 1997, Rice: 1952, Ferguson: 1994, Nelson: 1995).

<sup>3</sup> If I ruffle the feathers of metaphysicians with such an assertion, it is only because it seems evident to me that theirs are highly impractical, though colorful, feathers that need ruffling.

to ensure that either a metaphysical or an ethical pursuit will be a fruitful one. Put simply, what humans are obligated to do must be based on the nature of humans and the world in which we exist.

I find myself in awe of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* and its phenomenological account of humanity, particularly the way in which it seems to capture the complex and, at times, paradoxical nature of such existence. Merleau-Ponty describes the process of phenomenology in the following passage from the preface of *Phenomenology of Perception*:

Because we are through and through related to the world, the only way for us to catch sight of ourselves is by suspending this movement, by refusing to be complicit with it (or as Husserl often says, to see it *ohne mitzumachen* [without taking part]), or again, to put it out of play. This is not because we renounce the certainties of common sense and of the natural attitude – on the contrary, these are the constant theme of philosophy – but rather because, precisely as the presuppositions of every thought, they are "taken for granted" and they pass by unnoticed, and because we must abstain from them for a moment in order to awaken them and *to make them appear*. Perhaps the best formulation of the reduction is the one offered by Husserl's assistant Eugene Fink when he spoke of a "wonder" before the world. Reflection does not withdraw from the world toward the unity of consciousness as the foundation of the world; rather, it steps back in order to see transcendences spring forth and it loosens the intentional threads that connect us to the world *in order to make them appear*; it alone is conscious of the world because it reveals the world as strange and paradoxical<sup>4</sup>

In this quote, Merleau-Ponty describes what is meant by the term "phenomenology" both as a field and as a process. He begins by asserting that our relation to the world is complete and, at some level, inescapable; we cannot exist as humans without experiencing the world around us, and thus cannot say anything about this world without experiencing it. Therefore, an attempt to understand or examine ourselves demands that we acknowledge this subjective engagement with the world, setting it aside as we seek to describe what and, more importantly, *how* things are. It is this tension between objective and subjective engagement in the world that makes phenomenology uniquely

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<sup>4</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald Landes (New York: Routledge, 2012), lxxvii, emphasis mine.

productive in metaphysical pursuits, seeking universal truths that are intensely connected to our engagement with the world.

It is important to distinguish here between *casting away* and *setting aside*. For, Merleau-Ponty is clear that the phenomenological process is not a disregard for what many may think of as common sense, what we may think of as unreflective engagement with the world. Consider the act of writing a brief note to another person in your house, to please, for the last time, take out the garbage. In its simplest form, we see a pen and paper, we pick up the pen, write our message, and we move on, without engaging in any substantial metaphysical thought about the essence or the existence of the pen, the paper, or ourselves. It is not the aim of phenomenology to cast away this common, normal, and easy method of observing or understanding our world (what Merleau-Ponty refers to as the “natural attitude”). Instead, phenomenology intends to illuminate just how seemingly automatic these thoughts, observations, and actions are, to set aside their intuitive nature, and consider them without any preconceived notions, that they might “appear” to us. By escaping the automatic and pre-reflective “natural attitude,” we make the world more vibrant and visible, metaphysically speaking, than it has ever been, and can (attempt to) journey back to a new reality of our lived experience.

Given this phenomenological approach to metaphysics, we return to the overriding question of this paper: Based on Merleau-Ponty’s account of humanity, how are human beings obligated to act towards one another? I will move slowly, cautiously towards an answer to this question. In the first section, I will explore the reality of the world that emerges from Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology. Once I have sketched this account, I will move toward a critically important metaphysical account of the Other in the second section. In section three, I will explore a route by which we might link this particular metaphysical account to an ethical one. Finally, in the fourth and fifth sections of the paper, I will explore precisely what sort of ethical system Merleau-Ponty’s

phenomenology demands. Ultimately, I will assert that humanity's complex and dynamic existence as described by Merleau-Ponty demands an ethics to match; that which is right is no more static than that which is real, so our ethical principles must be flexible enough to adapt to the changing conditions of humanity while remaining stringent enough to be valuable in the search for what is moral.

## I. Being-in-the-World

If we are to derive the way we ought to be from a metaphysical account of how we are, we must first investigate that latter question. We must explore the very nature of human existence. We might begin with Descartes's *cogito*; this powerfully intuitive foundation of philosophy—that I think, therefore I am—is an attractive starting point. We feel as though we know this to be true. How can it be the case that we *think* if we do not exist as thinking *things*, and who can question that we are in fact thinking? However, the *cogito*—even if accepted as true in the face of proposed malevolent deceivers and experience machines—remains a thoroughly unhelpful basis for epistemology and metaphysics. Necessarily leaving us in an inescapable mind-body dualism—trapped within our own minds, as it were—the *cogito* gives us no information as to how it is that we exist, only that we do. If I exist in the way the *cogito* suggests, then I am alone, with no hope of understanding the metaphysical nature of the Other, or, for that matter, anything external to my strangely isolated mind. Merleau-Ponty describes this phenomenon of the pure, unworldly, and disembodied mind as *kosmotheoros*, an existence that is “primitively the power to contemplate” or “a ray of knowing that would have to arise from nowhere.”<sup>5</sup> This is particularly problematic for the ethicist since, without

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<sup>5</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, ed. Claude Lefort (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 113.

an understanding of the Other and our interactions with her, a vast majority of ethical exploration is devoid of meaning. Without interaction, there can be no ethics.<sup>6</sup>

I propose that the *cogito* is simply not an acceptable account of the nature of human existence. Certainly the *cogito* remains a powerfully intuitive concept because we find it impossible to question our experience of thinking. Indeed, we cannot ask such a question, save by *thinking* about it. But consider the following. Attempt to think in such a way that relies on nothing external to you. Cast aside all sensory inputs, all that you have ever seen, touched, smelled, heard, tasted, and the language (both verbal and nonverbal) that you learned from these inputs. Then think. It is an impossibility. Our mind is only operative, only able to think if it has access to these externalities, and it only has access to them through our body. Thus, the supposed “unbridgeable chasm” represented by *kosmotheoros*—by a Cartesian dualism of mind and body—is, as Evan Thompson suggests, a mere “philosophical construction built on sedimented and problematic ways of thinking.”<sup>7</sup> Descartes himself “reject[s] the metaphor of the soul as a pilot of its ship” making clear that it must be the case that our mind is related to our body in an at least mildly connected manner.<sup>8</sup> Even our dreams, which seem initially to be our own, rely on the piecing together (often badly or at least strangely) of past sensory inputs.

I propose that we must radically re-understand the *cogito*, or, perhaps more appropriately, we must re-understand the fundamental quality of human existence. As Merleau-Ponty suggests, the

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<sup>6</sup> -It should be noted here that I am consciously setting aside ethical duties to oneself, as might be considered in a Kantian account. We will return to the role of self in ethics, but for now, I hope that my reader will permit a setting aside of a fully self-contained ethical obligation to oneself. I hope to problematize the very notion of self-containment as we progress.

- I also set aside ethical obligations to non-human Others, such as might be explored in environmental ethics. These are not uninteresting considerations, nor would it be accurate to assert that a Merleau-Pontian ethics has nothing to say about them. Instead, this paper sets them aside out of a desire to focus first upon ethics at the inter-human level.

<sup>7</sup> Evan Thompson, “Life Beyond the Gap,” in *Mind in Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 225, 227-229.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 228-229



philosopher is a “perpetual beginner,”<sup>9</sup> and I propose that this is and ought to be the driving ethos behind philosophy. I take seriously Merleau-Ponty’s assertion that even “philosophy itself must not take itself as established in the truths it has managed to utter, that philosophy is an ever-renewed experiment of its own beginning,”<sup>10</sup> and thus that this new starting point is critical. Not only is such a reexamination a potentially more useful tool for connecting philosophy back to everyday life through a comprehensive and comprehensible ethical system, but it also represents the philosophically responsible process of taking nothing for granted.<sup>11</sup>

We are then able to return to the *cogito* through its reformulation. No longer do we accept the *cogito*’s suggestion that we exist as pure, unworldly, disembodied minds. Sartre writes, “my consciousness sticks to my acts, it *is* my acts.”<sup>12</sup> I am not *kosmotheoros*; a consciousness that arises “from nowhere.”<sup>13</sup> Instead I clearly arise from *somewhere*, specifically my body. Thus, our existence is not one of pure thought, but of expression and action. Our existence is characterized “not [as] an ‘I think that,’ but rather as an ‘I can.’”<sup>14</sup>

The *cogito* reinterpreted through the lens of phenomenology thus leads us to a “body-centered epistemology.”<sup>15</sup> Insofar as we exist and think, we do so through a body. Even the most Cartesian among us, in the face of modern neurological science, will have a hard time denying that there can exist a mind without also having an embodied brain. The very notion of a brain in a vat suggests not only a physical brain but also true embodiment as suggested by Evan Thompson when he writes:

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<sup>9</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *PhP*, lxxviii.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, lxxvii.

<sup>11</sup> Including Descartes.

<sup>12</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1992), 348.

<sup>13</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Visible and Invisible*, 113.

<sup>14</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *PhP*, 139.

<sup>15</sup> Maurice Hamington, *Embodied Care: Jane Addams, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Feminist Ethics* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 46.

Notice that the vat setup would have to be capable of (1) keeping the brain alive and up and running, (2) duplicating all exogenous stimulation, and (3) compensating in exactly the right way for all endogenous (and self-organizing) activity. Such a setup would almost certainly have to duplicate many of the chemical, biomechanical, and sensorimotor properties of the body, probably even the body's sensorimotor coupling with the world. In other words, the null hypothesis is that any vat that meets the requirements of this scenario will be a surrogate body.<sup>16</sup>

Note that my purpose in eliciting this argument is *not* to quarrel with the skeptic about the possibility of a successful perceptual deception—though it is absolutely Thompson's point and not an unconvincing one at that. My purpose is to elucidate the notion that our body is, as Merleau-Ponty claims, "ceaselessly present prior to all determining thought," and the vehicle "by which there are objects."<sup>17</sup> In other words, there can be, for me, nothing—no world, i.e.—if there is not first my body, and my body cannot exist unless there is also a world. Instead, as Merleau-Ponty points out, "I can never fully justify the permanent thesis of my life that 'there is a world,' or rather, 'there is the world.'"<sup>18</sup> Simone de Beauvoir puts it another way when she writes, "My project is never founded; it finds itself."<sup>19</sup> More simply put, the world is shaped and changed by me as the world simultaneously shapes and changes me and this constant interplay of an embodied existence means the question of whether we are brains in vats is simply the wrong question. The real question is whether we are able to experience our own existence without conceiving of ourselves as embodied and *in* the world. The answer, of course, is that we are not.

The mind and body thus do not exist independently of each other as suggested by a traditional interpretation of the *cogito*. Instead, the mind is necessarily tied to its embodied existence *in the world*. Our "means of communication with [the world],"<sup>20</sup> our body emerges as the fundamental requirement for an existence such as we experience ourselves to have. For humans, it

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<sup>16</sup> Thompson, "Life Beyond the Gap," 240-41, emphasis mine.

<sup>17</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *PbP*, 95.

<sup>18</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *PbP* lxxxii.

<sup>19</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman, (New York: Citadel, 1976), 26.

<sup>20</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *PbP*, 95.

happens to be the case that we need eyes to receive visual inputs, skin for touch, a nose and tongue for taste, ears to hear. To understand the very concept of space, we must reach out<sup>21</sup> toward that which we desire, feeling the surge of joy when we discover—*through our body*—its closeness or the despair of the realization that it is beyond our grasp. Merleau-Ponty puts it simply; “to exist is to be *in the world*.”<sup>22</sup> If we are in the world, it is the case that we must be so through our body.

Let us take an example. As I walk through a peaceful and crisp autumn Saturday morning I am, in fact, changed by the humorous antics of the squirrels chasing each other from branch to branch; I chuckle to myself and begin whistling a cheerful tune as their whimsy—the *world's* cheerfulness—becomes my own. But suppose I was to try to join their game, to step towards their frenetic game of hide and seek. They would most certainly scatter, clambering up their trees and chattering angrily at me. I have shaped the world and it has shaped me.<sup>23</sup> I constitute and am constituted by the world.<sup>24</sup> Even the fallen leaves crunching under my feet demonstrate the truth of this notion. Before I even have the chance to consider, in the contemplative nature of a philosopher, what is happening around me, I am filled with a sort of quiet satisfaction prior to my understanding *why*. As I leave behind a path of crushed and swirled leaves, it may (though it likely will not) become evident that this quiet satisfaction comes from the sound of autumn; the leaves crunching under my feet hurl me subconsciously into a world of associative feelings and memories, a comfortable sweater or playing in leaf piles with my parents as a small child. Yet on the surface I feel only the slight uptake of a quiet satisfaction. It is the quiet satisfaction of *being in the world*. I am neither prior to the world nor is the world prior to me. I and the world are simultaneous, separate

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<sup>21</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *PbP*, 104.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, lxxvii, 378, emphasis mine.

<sup>23</sup> All of this is to say nothing of the people across the street that have noticed my strange interaction with the squirrels and have begun pointing and laughing. We will return them when we come to the problem of the Other.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 365.

entities with inseparable essences. Thus, that which is “real”—or more accurately, that which is the world—is not a static concept but a notion constantly changing and being changed.

The world emerges, then, not as a mere physical reality of squirrels and leaves, but instead as the rich physical, emotional, and cultural whole that I inhabit. Merleau-Ponty writes, “the world is not what I think but what I live; I am open to the world, I unquestionably communicate with it, but I do not possess it...”<sup>25</sup> I do not merely perceive the world, taking it in as raw sense data, but exist simultaneously with the world. My “open[ness]” to the world suggests that it flows<sup>26</sup> through me, and I through it. I and the world are radically intertwined, yet neither do I exert perfect control over the world nor does the world fully determine the course of my life. The world understood in this dynamic fashion “is what establishes the *Weltlichkeit der Welt* [worldliness of the world].”<sup>27</sup> It is this active and expressive existence that permits us to flow with and through the world, and, and to which we will now turn, with and through the Other.

## II. “On”: An Interwoven Humanity

Our exploration of the Other appropriately begins with her most readily accessible characteristics. First and foremost, she exists in the world, in that which I live, and so she must be, at least, an object<sup>28</sup> in the same way that trees and leaves are objects. That is to say, that which I will attempt to describe as another person exists in the phenomenological world, a world that constitutes and is constituted by me. Simply and obviously put, the Other affects me. This claim, in its simplest form is made clear by our previous discussion of what it is to exist in the world populated by objects. The question that we must ask as we approach the goal of developing a consideration of interactional ethics, is what, if anything, exists that separates the Other as somehow special or

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<sup>25</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *PhP*, lxxx, lxxxi.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, lxxviii.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, lxxxi.

<sup>28</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 340.

different from the other objects in our world, from the crunching leaves or the swaying trees; Sartre asks, “What do I mean when I assert that this object *is a man*?”<sup>29</sup> The answer seems clear. The Other is something like me, or, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, “a second myself.”<sup>30</sup> The evidence of such a claim is yet to be laid, but in its simplest formulation, this is what we mean when we speak of the Other. She is another human, another embodied, active existence that constitutes the world and is constituted by it.

It is at this point that the problem of the Other emerges. If I play such an active role in constituting the world in which I live, how is it possible that there is even *one* other being playing that same role? Merleau-Ponty puts it this way:

The existence of others is a difficulty for and an affront to objective thought... If I constitute the world, then I cannot conceive of another consciousness, for it too would have to have constituted the world and so, at least with regard to this other view upon the world, I would not be constituting. Even if I succeeded in conceiving of this other consciousness as constituting the world, it is again I who would constitute it as such, and once again I would be the only constituting consciousness.<sup>31</sup>

The key to this objection, which Merleau-Ponty quickly refutes,<sup>32</sup> is a bias toward objective thought, or, rather, to a purely objectivity. To grasp the phenomenological account of the world we must be willing to set purely objective thought to the side, after having explicated “an experience with the body and of the world beneath scientific representations of the world and the body that these representations fail to embrace.”<sup>33</sup> Merleau-Ponty argues, “But in fact, the other’s gaze does not transform me into an object, and my gaze does not transform [her] into an object.”<sup>34</sup> In other words, we cannot help but confront the Other-as-subject, because the gaze that constructs her as a

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<sup>29</sup> Or a woman, to update Sartre to be a bit more enlightened on the topic of gender. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 341.

<sup>30</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *PhP*, 370.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 364, 365.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 365, 366.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 365.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 378.

mere object is inconsistent with the nature of the necessarily interactive manner in which we encounter her. All that is required is that she “utter a word, or merely make an impatient gesture,” or even make the slightest of facial expressions and her thoughts—and thus her subject-hood—become apparent to me.<sup>35</sup> Thus, the paradox of a plurality of constituting consciousnesses is no objection, but is instead the full power of phenomenology as we as “learn...to call objective thought into doubt.”<sup>36</sup>

However, *that* this plurality of consciousnesses might possibly exist is clearly not synonymous with an understanding of how we might be aware of our fellow constituting consciousnesses; it merely permits us to inquire further. With the help of Kym Maclaren’s excellent paper, “Intercorporeality, Intersubjectivity, and the Problem of ‘Letting Others Be,’” we can explore two distinct experiences between myself and the Other to demonstrate how we are aware of *and may be confident in the existence of* her. First, we will examine *intercorporeality*, which we may understand as a “*bodily* perception of another body.”<sup>37</sup> Next we will examine *intersubjectivity*,<sup>38</sup> which we may understand as the manner in which we are “situated by Others.”<sup>39</sup> Let us take these individually and in greater detail.

We begin with *intercorporeality*. Critical to our understanding of human existence is its embodied nature, and so for us to be confident that the Other is a being *like me*, we must also find some confidence that she experiences her existence as necessarily embodied in a similar manner to my own. *Intercorporeality* is the route through which we might do just that, as it is the process by which we experience the embodied existence of the Other not as merely *similar* to our own, but indeed as a *shared experience*. In other words, when I perceive the Other, I perceive her not as a mere

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<sup>35</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *PbP*, 378.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 365

<sup>37</sup> Kym Maclaren, “Intercorporeality, Intersubjectivity and the Problem of ‘Letting Others Be,’” *Chiasmi International* 4 (2002): 190.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 193. Merleau-Ponty, *PbP*, lxxxiv.

<sup>39</sup> Maclaren, “Intercorporeality,” 193.

object for my observation but as a consciousness living *through* a body. In short, I understand the Other because I understand what it is to have a body. It is the reason that a group of individuals watching a boxing match cringe and even *dodge* as the vicious knockout punch lands, making contact with one boxer's face and sending him falling to the mat. It is the reason those same individuals clutch their noses and sharply gasp when they realize that the punch has broken the defeated boxer's nose, and may even feel a sort of ache in their own noses. Merleau-Ponty describes this experience of a shared bodily phenomenon when he writes, "In perceiving the other, my body and his are coupled, resulting in a sort of action which pairs them [*action à deux*]."<sup>40</sup> It is important to point out that this is not an assertion that we share bodies with the other, but rather that we share the experience of having a body; we are not fully enveloped in the pain of the boxer, and we will not be requiring the same medical attention that he will soon be receiving. But we cannot shake that lingering uneasiness resting in our own nose as "our body's gaze...is rather swept onwards, *towards* that with which the other body is engaged."<sup>41</sup> Merleau-Ponty describes this phenomenon in the following passage:

The other person's *cogito* strips my own *cogito* of all value and shatters the confidence I enjoyed in the solitude of having access to the only being conceivable for me, that is, being such as it is intended and constituted by me. But we have learned in individual perception not to conceive of our perspectival views as independent of each other; we know that *they slip into each other* and are gathered together in the thing. Similarly, we must learn to find the communication of consciousnesses in a single world.<sup>42</sup>

The experience of *intercorporeality* is not only visible through feelings of sympathetic pain. In fact, I am able to experience the world, to be constituted by it, through the body of the Other. Consider the following. A friend approaches me, carrying a cardboard box. His gait is slow and staggered. He is bent back, with both his arms wrapped tightly around the box and his face is strained and

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<sup>40</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, trans. Arleen B. Dallery, ed. James M. Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 118.

<sup>41</sup> Maclaren, "Intercorporeality," 190, emphasis original.

<sup>42</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *PbP*, 369, emphasis mine.

reddened. Beads of sweat cover his forehead and he is breathing heavily. As he hands the box to me, I “can see in the other’s grip [and in the strain of his body]...just how heavy the [box] is.” I bend my knees and prepare appropriately for the weight of the box.<sup>43</sup> In a second situation, the same friend approaches me with precisely the same sized cardboard box. This time, however, his face is relaxed and he carries the box on one hand, raised above his head. As he hands me the box, I take it, relaxed and confident that it will be light. My understanding of what is to have a body, the experience of *intercorporeality* between my friend and I, “bring into existence for me, features of the surrounding world of which, until now, I have been entirely ignorant.”<sup>44</sup> Thus, my consciousness which constitutes and is constituted by the world has done so, in this case, *through* the body of the Other, a process which could only happen if we shared this sort of embodied and constituting existence.

We turn now to *intersubjectivity*, which is perhaps the most critical concept in understanding the transition between “Other-as-object” and “Other-as-subject.”<sup>45</sup> In other words, to acknowledge the Other as something, some subject like myself, we must be able to experience the other not merely as an object in our world but as a fellow subject, a fellow consciousness that participates in the constitution of the world. Thus we must explore the accessibility of our knowledge of the other as a perceiving and constituting subject.

Let us consider an example. Sartre writes of the jealous individual—for convenience’s sake, I shall play the role—alone in a hallway and peering through a keyhole at that which I desire.<sup>46</sup> Because I am alone and desperately absorbed in my own vanity, I am incapable of conceiving of myself as an object for I am necessarily the subject by which there are objects, the embodied consciousness by which there is the world.

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<sup>43</sup> Maclaren, “Intercorporeality,” 191.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 191, emphasis original.

<sup>45</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 344.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 348.



However, as I sneakily try for a better view, I hear footsteps in the hallway behind me, realize that there is *someone* there, and am suddenly overwhelmed by a wave of shame not previously felt.<sup>47</sup> I am seen; I have become an object “in the midst of a world which flows toward the Other as subject.”<sup>48</sup> Sartre writes, “It is shame... which reveals to me the Other’s look and myself at the end of that look. It is shame... which makes me *live*, not *know* the situation of being looked at.”<sup>49</sup> I feel shame because I have been seen, crouching over the keyhole, and have been constituted as a shameful thing. If there were no Other-as-subject, I would not have felt this shame; certainly I did not when I first put my eye to the keyhole. Only because of the Other do I *become* this shame. Thus, we see just one example of the manner in which the Other is, in fact, a constituting consciousness, for he *has constituted me*. In this moment, “I exist for the *Other*” as an object and “I *am* this jealousy.”<sup>50</sup> Who I am, *how I exist*, has become the product of the Other as subject, and it becomes apparent that she in fact exists as a fellow subject.

But the relationships between myself and the Other are not always so heavily one-sided as Sartre’s account—and indeed Sartre himself—would suggest. Merleau-Ponty’s account does not require the binary circumstance of the Other as purely object or as purely subject. Instead these extreme examples borrowed from Sartre make clear the possibility of subjectivity on both sides of the equation. As we have seen and will see, in fact, much of our existence is experienced as a *shared* subjectivity, an *intersubjectivity* of varying, sometimes equal levels of subject-hood, if you will.

We understand what it is to slip into the Other. We feel grief when our friends face obstacles, happiness when our lover accomplishes something great, even tiredness when we see a stranger yawn. In this exchange between myself and the other, where I experience her emotions, her desires, or her affective states as my own, we find, as Merleau-Ponty illustrates, “a surface of

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<sup>47</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 347-350.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 350.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 350.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 350, emphasis mine.

separation between me and the other which is also the place of our union...It is the invisible hinge upon which my life and the life of the others turn to rock into one another.”<sup>51</sup> Through these two metaphorical descriptions of intersubjectivity we see that I am not the Other, nor is she me. We are separate but our consciousnesses overlap, flowing in and through each other, and becoming involved with each other in an “inextricable knot.”<sup>52</sup> Consider first the metaphor of the “surface of separation.” We can fully grasp the meaning encapsulated in this notion by thinking of the surface of a lake. This surface unquestionably creates a separation between two distinct things, specifically water and air, below and above water. Yet as the air blows ripples across the tense surface or as a fish jumps briefly out of the water before plunging back below the surface, we see the way in which these two sides of the surface of the lake flow in and through one another. They are, at once, separate and united. Similarly, Merleau-Ponty’s metaphor of a hinge suggests a unity in which two distinct pieces move *individually* to accomplish the functional purpose of the hinge *as a whole*.<sup>53</sup> Merleau-Ponty calls this surface of separation “the flesh,”<sup>54</sup> and it becomes something like (but not merely) a concept of the incredible closeness between myself and the Other that remains ultimately and importantly separate.

It is with this intertwining of humanity that we finally come to the realization that our language of Self and Other as two distinct and separate things is problematic to say the least. Dan Zahavi explains this problem when he writes, “rather, the three regions ‘self,’ ‘others,’ and ‘world’ belong together; they reciprocally *illuminate* one another, and *can only be understood in their interconnection*.”<sup>55</sup> For we cannot conceive of ourselves without considering the Other’s influence

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<sup>51</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Visible and Invisible*, 234.

<sup>52</sup> Florentien Verhage, handout.

<sup>53</sup> The initial ideas behind the explication of these two metaphors (especially the water surface analogy) are the result of suggestions by Florentien Verhage on a prior draft.

<sup>54</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Visible and Invisible*, 139, 234.

<sup>55</sup> Dan Zahavi, “Beyond Empathy: Phenomenological Approaches to Intersubjectivity,” *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 8 (2001), 166, emphasis mine.

upon us, her flowing in and through us, and our shared flow through a world that flows through us. Instead of a distinct, “I,” or “she,” then, we turn to a “primordial ‘*On*’”<sup>56</sup> This French indeterminate plural for ‘we’ has no equally powerful English analogue, and encapsulates fully Merleau-Ponty’s conception of humanity as consisting of radically intersubjective beings, not wholly encompassed by one another, but nevertheless comprising a human whole. It is through this unification that we may consider a move out of metaphysics and into ethics.

### III. The Phenomenological Connection to Ethics

If we are to derive a useful ethics, returning to our question of how we ought to be, from such a dynamic metaphysical realization, we must accept two things. First, a useful ethics must match our metaphysics. It must match the complexity and lack of constancy of the world (or of the “real”). Second, we must draw out anything in this dynamic metaphysics that does, in fact remain constant. Let us consider each of these requirements.

I have proposed that the way we ought to be can, and indeed should, be based upon the way we are. Taking seriously Merleau-Ponty’s assertion that the philosopher *must* be a “perpetual beginner,”<sup>57</sup> we must first agree to take nothing for granted, resisting a justification based on anything other than a sturdy metaphysical foundation, even if that metaphysics is the dynamic one Merleau-Ponty suggests. The phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty provides us with a metaphysical account of the world that is appropriately tied to our embodied existence, and thus, to what we might indeed be able to know (as opposed to what we might merely choose to believe) about the world. So, if an ethical standard is to be derived from such a metaphysical account, that ethical standard must be traceable to the world described by that metaphysical account. If the “real” is a

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<sup>56</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, trans. Richard Calverton McCleary (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 175.

<sup>57</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *PbP*, lxxviii.

dynamic condition, if the world is constantly shaping and being shaped by its participants (I and the Other), then our ethical standard must be formulated such that it can keep up with the world. But the goal is not to construct an ethics so complex and convoluted that it becomes incomprehensible and thus impossible to adhere to. Our ethics must match the complexity of the world without being overly complicated, explicated in such a way that we (philosophers, humans, even politicians, if my reader will permit me to dream) might be able to put it into practice. Otherwise, our attempts at making philosophy relevant through the applications of metaphysics to ethics have fallen again into the trap of existing as the follies of the ivory tower academic.

How might we do this? How might we design an ethical standard that matches an unceasingly dynamic world, envelops the whole of that world's complexity, avoids relativity, and remains simple enough that it might be applied to everyday life? It seems that one route to answering this question might be to find something in the world that remains constant, something that remains static in the face of dynamism. It is a challenging question.

But, if we are to contain that question to the human world, not an inappropriate limitation given the goal of ethics,<sup>58</sup> we begin to see a few constants. The first of these is that humans exist as *embodied* consciousnesses. In other words, no matter how the world evolves through the constant interplay between the world, myself, and the Other, the whole of human existence remains essentially as embodied. This, in turn, is connected to what Thomas Busch refers to as “the thesis of *Phenomenology of Perception*,” specifically “that there is no thought without expression.”<sup>59</sup> In other words, because human existence is primarily characterized by its embodied essence, it is impossible to imagine a world in which human beings are isolated from one another. Necessarily expressive

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<sup>58</sup> Remember that I am intentionally setting aside a debate surrounding ethical obligations to nonhuman others.

<sup>59</sup> Thomas W. Busch, “Phenomenology and Communicative Ethics: Husserl, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty” in *The Ethics of Postmodernity: Current Trends in Continental Thought*, ed. Gary B. Maison et al. (Illinois: Northwestern university Press, 1999), 170.

thought cannot be so if there is no one to whom it is expressed; expression demands an audience, demands communication with another. Merleau-Ponty writes, “Thought is a relationship with oneself and with the world as well as a relationship with the other.”<sup>60</sup> Human existence emerges, then, as fundamentally embodied *and* interactive. Thus, we begin to see the true power of the metaphysical account of a collective human whole, the *On*.

*A Digression: A Phenomenological Deconstruction of Aristotelian Ethical Theory*

As we progress steadily towards the ethical account linked to phenomenological metaphysics, it strikes me as informative to consider the argument thus far in the light of a more renowned and authoritative ethical thinker than Merleau-Ponty. Specifically, I consider the phenomenological account through a traditionally Aristotelian lens. I do this for three reasons. First, placing this argument briefly in a context in which the philosophical community might be more widely conversant helps to reveal the importance of approaching ethics in this unconventional phenomenological manner to that same wider audience, especially since phenomenology has been previously regarded as a field “not particularly known for its ethical practicality.”<sup>61</sup> Second, we will see that Aristotle’s work, arguably more than the work of other prominent ethicists in the canon, is closely—though certainly not explicitly—tied to the phenomenological notion that human ethics must be derived from the nature of humans. This common ground allows for a more complex objection than would an ethical account more susceptible to the critique of proposing an ethics of absolutes external to humans and human nature. Finally, though the required brevity of this paper prevents me from actually proving it to be the case, I suggest that a similar phenomenological deconstruction might be rightly undertaken for other prominent ethical traditions, especially those that are less clearly derived from the nature of humanity than Aristotle’s.

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<sup>60</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 145

<sup>61</sup> Hamington, *Embodied Care*, 41.

A consideration of the Aristotelian account is appropriate because of the distinctly human meta-ethical nature of his argument. Central to Aristotle's account is his argument that, "The end of every activity is being in accordance with its state...the character of everything is determined by its end."<sup>62</sup> In other words, as expressed by Richard Kraut, "The good of a human being must have something to do with being human."<sup>63</sup> This notion is consistent with the phenomenological account thus far, pushing for an ethics derived from human nature as opposed to external objective goods. Appropriately, and as I have similarly tried to do through an explication of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological metaphysics, Aristotle turns his attention to a consideration of the nature of humanity, that he might discover that defining or distinctive function of humanity. He asserts that this distinctively human function is *rationality*.<sup>64</sup> Ethical action, then, consists of that which might help us achieve or perform our function excellently. For Aristotle, *virtue* served this purpose, a way of living that ensured excellent performance of our distinctive rational function.<sup>65</sup> Aristotle further describes "an understanding of happiness [*eudaimonia*] in that happiness results from the activity of 'total virtue.'"<sup>66</sup> Note that Aristotle's eudaimonic happiness is not a merely pleasant or joyful affective state, nor is it a pleasant result virtuous activity, but rather, it *is* the life lived in a virtuously rational manner, "a life of rational activity in accordance with virtues, such as courage, moderation, justice, etc."<sup>67</sup>

It is true that Aristotle's account possesses a great deal of intuitive strength. At first pass, it seems reasonable to suggest that humans set themselves apart from other objects by their distinct ability to reason, and of course it seems similarly reasonable to suggest that the virtuous subject will

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<sup>62</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Roger Crisp, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000), 50.

<sup>63</sup> Richard Kraut, "Aristotle's Ethics", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2012 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2012/entries/aristotle-ethics/>>.

<sup>64</sup> Angela Smith, interviewed by Nate Reisinger, Washington and Lee University, March 1, 2013.

<sup>65</sup> Smith, interview.

<sup>66</sup> Aristide Tessitore, *Reading Aristotle's Ethics: Virtue, Rhetoric, and Political Philosophy*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996), 10.

<sup>67</sup> Angela Smith, personal correspondence, March 19, 2013.

be one who is more rational than her less virtuous peers. The courageous subject, for instance, will not be swayed by fear when she considers the right course of action.<sup>68</sup>

But Aristotle's account of humanity leaves us with questions that the phenomenological process cannot allow to stand unanswered. The very notion of rationality is a culturally constructed one, answerable only to the prevailing standards of rationality in a temporally constrained and local community. Virtue, one step removed from this constructed notion of rationality, similarly lacks meta-ethical justification once we approach the level of specificity. J.L. Ackrill's objection, in line with such frustration, is illustrated in the following passage:

The root problem, as Ackrill sees it, is a fundamental lack of clarity in Aristotle's understanding of human nature. Aristotle's failure to present one consistent view of human nature means that his teaching on the best life for human beings is inevitably "broken-backed," that is, "incapable of clear specification, even in principle."<sup>69</sup>

In other words, upon pushing past Aristotle's intuitively strong account, we see that we need something a bit more concrete. Otherwise, as cultural notions of that which is rational change, so too will cultural notions of what is virtuous under an Aristotelian account, leaving Aristotelian ethics vulnerable to critiques of at least cultural relativism, if not an individual or solipsistic relativism. Virtues derived from this vaguely conceptualized rationality will thus fail to find themselves solidly rooted in a concrete and defensible metaphysical account.

We turn then, to see if any of Aristotle's meta-ethical account might remain, if he provides us any answer to the question of what it is to be human that is not vulnerable to the critique of temporal and societally interpretive relativism. Martha Nussbaum anticipates this objection of relativism in her article entitled "Non-Relative Virtues" when she points out "remoteness is now

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<sup>68</sup> Smith, personal correspondence.

<sup>69</sup> Tessitore, *Reading Aristotle*, 11.

being seen by an increasing number of moral philosophers as a defect in an approach to ethical questions.”<sup>70</sup> She responds to the critique in the following passage:

As we pursue these possibilities, the basic spheres of experience identified in the Aristotelian approach will no longer, we have said, be seen as spheres of *uninterpreted* experience. But we have also insisted that there is much family relatedness and much overlap among societies...Not without a sensitive awareness that we are speaking of something that is experienced differently in different contexts, we can nonetheless identify certain features of our common humanity, closely related to Aristotle’s original list, from which our debate might proceed.<sup>71</sup>

Nussbaum suggests, then, that there might yet be something universal to humanity that lies beneath Aristotle’s arguably relative rational virtues. If this is the case, then the overriding argument contained within an Aristotelian meta-ethical account that the human good has something to do with the function of being human might still stand. Nussbaum then suggests a list of these “features of our common humanity,”<sup>72</sup> including “mortality,” “the body,” “pleasure and pain,” “cognitive capability,” “practical reason,” and “affiliation.”<sup>73</sup>

It is at this point that we begin to see the incredible importance of the phenomenological metaphysical account. Recall that the phenomenological account of humanity shows that we exist fundamentally as embodied consciousnesses. In other words, we share the condition of having a *mortal body* that experiences *pleasure and pain*. The phenomenological existence is one of necessarily expressive *thought*; Nussbaum defends her notion of “cognitive capability” with “Aristotle’s famous claim that ‘all human beings by nature *reach out* for understanding’” and closely aligns it with her notion of “practical reason” which she argues is demonstrated by “the asking and answering [of]

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<sup>70</sup> Martha Nussbaum, “Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach,” in *Moral Philosophy: Selected Readings*, ed. George Sher, (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1996), 493.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 512, emphasis mine.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> Note that Nussbaum also includes *early infant development* and *humor* in her list of “features of our common humanity.” I set them to the side, because, although early infant development is closely tied to certain aspects of phenomenological understanding of humanity, and though I share Nussbaum’s intuition that “the space for humor and play [is]... a shared feature...of any life that is going to be counted as fully human,” these remain outside the scope of this particular paper. *Ibid.*, 512-514.



questions about how one should live and act,”<sup>74</sup> two claims not dissimilar to one another. Note that these two aspects are fundamentally different from a rational ideal, and instead speak more to the *being-in-the-world* we discussed earlier, as evidenced by the interplay with the world inherent in both notions. Finally, the phenomenological account of existence is one in which we radically intertwined—or “affiliated”—with one another as single threads interwoven into a “single fabric.”<sup>75</sup> In other words, it seems as though Aristotle walked in the right direction but down the wrong path. Nussbaum has suggested those same universals from a neo-Aristotelian account that we should rightly pull from Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological account. Nussbaum’s universals similarly constrain the possibilities for a quasi-Aristotelian meta-ethical account by providing an answer of what it is *to be human*. Note, that Nussbaum’s attempt to find the “uninterpreted experience” shared by humanity is not only similar but synonymous with the phenomenological process of *setting aside* that I discussed in the very beginning of this paper.

Accordingly, if we accept Nussbaum’s adjustment of the Aristotelian meta-ethical account, we must seek an ethics that defines a universalized good appropriately reflective of the radical intersubjectivity of the phenomenological account. We will explore what such a universalized good might look like in the fourth section of this paper, but for now, the salient point of our analysis of the Aristotelian example is that phenomenology’s ability to provide solidly grounded universal concepts of human existence actually provides a more clearly defined path to an explication of the good. In this case, that conception of the human good does indeed have *everything* to do with what it is to be human. The phenomenological good, then, is one in accordance with the “best and most

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<sup>74</sup> Nussbaum, “Non-Relative Virtues,” 513, emphasis mine.

<sup>75</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *PbP*, 370.

complete virtue”<sup>76</sup> insofar as that virtue is reflective of an end in accordance with the state of existing within the collective human *On*.

I come now to end of my digression with two lingering questions. The first returns to my third reason for engaging in this deconstruction, namely, the possibility of similar deconstructions of other ethical traditions. This suggestion, though not proven in the relatively brief format of this paper, nevertheless seems a tenable one. Absent such deconstructions, however, it is worth noting that this connection between metaphysics and ethics we are exploring is highly specific to Merleau-Ponty’s account. The nature of human existence as contemplated by Merleau-Ponty is one that is heavily enveloped in a relational intersubjectivity. Separated only by a thin “flesh,” we cannot conceive of our ‘self’ without the ‘Other,’ nor vice versa, and by accepting this primordial *On*, and thus a metaphysical account that problematizes notions of distinct individuality, we are able to approach this question in a unique manner. As Sara Heinämaa suggests, the intertwining of the body and the world—the same world in which the Other exists and also inhabits—allows us to set aside the distinction between self and Other, “abolishing...the opposition between the subject and the object [including the Other].”<sup>77</sup> This obliteration of the sharp distinction between of subject and object—self and other—is critical, since “one can develop a genuine ethics only by taking the phenomenological understanding of the subject-object relations as the basis.”<sup>78</sup> That is to say, the link between metaphysics and ethics discussed here could not necessarily map easily onto other metaphysical accounts of the world. Perhaps this is because it is Merleau-Ponty’s account that stands alone as an accurate and well-defended portrayal of what it is to exist as a human. As inclined toward such a position as I am, for the purposes of this paper, and given the lack of actual deconstructions of Kant or Mill, I will constrain myself to a more moderate claim. Namely, this link

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<sup>76</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Joe Sachs, (Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 2002), 12, emphasis mine.

<sup>77</sup> Sara Heinämaa, “Simone de Beauvoir’s Phenomenology of Sexual Difference,” *Hypatia* 14 (1999): 118.

<sup>78</sup> Heinämaa, “Sexual Difference,” 118.

between metaphysics and ethics is particular to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology because of the unique radical intertwining of subjects that such an account suggests.

The second, and perhaps more troubling question, is whether a quasi-Aristotelian teleological end could rightly emerge from a phenomenological account. Certainly, Nussbaum's adjustment preserves the possibility of *eudaimonia*, and I have made no argument that to do so was inappropriate, even as I attempted to co-opt her neo-Aristotelian argument as a phenomenological one. We rightly ought to question whether such a teleological end could possibly exist in the dynamic real the phenomenological account suggests. This question requires our attention, as it has a great deal of potential, I think, to throw a wrench into the cogs of my argument. This objection reflects a full-bodied understanding of the metaphysical account I have outlined thus far, and it ought not be taken lightly. A traditionally teleological end would indeed have no place in a world consisting of seven billion constituting consciousnesses that are being simultaneously constituted by both the world and by one another. The real, we recall, is not static, so neither can an ethical end be static.

One way to approach this objection is to consider what a fully realized teleological end might look like, perhaps according to more static metaphysical conceptions of the world. It seems that, if the ultimate human end were truly realized, such a realization would result in a utopic state of affairs. Supposing this is the case, we can reframe the objection to a teleological end as a question about the possibility of a phenomenologically ethical utopia. Note that this is a theoretical and not a practical end; we are concerned with whether, in theory, a phenomenological utopia is possible, despite the practical challenges of implementation, which would surely be daunting.<sup>79</sup> Interestingly, though perhaps expectedly, the answer to this question also seems paradoxical: the path is both feasible and

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<sup>79</sup> Consider, for instance, that the *On* is global, and could not survive practical implications unless we seriously reconsidered our obligations to noncitizens.

infeasible. There can be no utopia insofar as a “there are no final solutions.”<sup>80</sup> So long as an ethical utopia represents “a fixed horizon” or “static vision toward which we are moving,”<sup>81</sup> it is the case that a Merleau-Pontian ethical standard cannot help but move in a “nonutopian direction.”<sup>82</sup>

However, it is clear that Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology is anything but conventional, so why would we expect his utopia to be? Greg Johnson argues that Merleau-Ponty actually clears the way for a “non-conventionally utopian” state.<sup>83</sup> Merleau-Ponty makes clear that “the utopian does not have to be a future realization of something that is or can be wholly determined,”<sup>84</sup> but rather, “the utopian is always on the move, always becoming; transitory and never complete.”<sup>85</sup> Our embodied existence that necessitates that we interact with the world is also that which “empowers us to alter the situation”<sup>86</sup> and gives us access to “the utopian demand that things be different.”<sup>87</sup> Thus the phenomenological utopia is indeed realizable, though not as a static existence, for such an existence is not possible for embodied lives. Instead the teleological end of the phenomenological ethics must be comprised of persistence toward an ideal that will never be closer than just in front of us. The end is conceptual and the ethical agent approaches it as a curve approaches an asymptote. Therefore, suggesting an end in accordance with the state of existence within the *On* need not be inconsistent with the dynamic account of the real suggested by Merleau-Ponty’s work. We are thus able to return to the question of the nature of such an end.

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<sup>80</sup> Busch, “Communicative Ethics,” 173.

<sup>81</sup> Greg Johnson, “Merleau-Pontian Phenomenology as Non-Conventionally Utopian,” *Human Studies* 26 (2003): 386.

<sup>82</sup> Busch, “Communicative Ethics,” 173.

<sup>83</sup> Johnson, “Non-Conventionally Utopian.”

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 390.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 391.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 395.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 397.

#### IV. Freedom: An Open Future

To begin to answer the question of the appropriate end for humanity in accordance with the state of existence with the *On*, it may be helpful to co-opt some of Aristotle's language. Recall the way that Nussbaum's neo-Aristotelian account (which I argued is truly a phenomenological one) nevertheless followed an Aristotelian meta-ethical argumentative structure. For the moment, I will continue to utilize this structure, that we may engage an unconventional (or at least a mildly uncanonical) approach to ethics with nonetheless conventional language.

Recall that Aristotle's virtues emerged from an answering of the question of a human being's function. If our "function" as human beings is not, as I have argued, one of rationality, then, in order to determine what sorts of "virtues" emerge from the phenomenological account, we must first discover what, if any, "function" emerges from the same account. At this point, it is worth pointing out that our function, under a phenomenological account, need not and in fact will not be one of instrumentality. That is, the function I assert will not be one that manifests itself as an *in order to* but more appropriately as an *in and of itself*. The function of humanity—that which humanity does, generally speaking—emerges from humanity's very nature.<sup>88</sup> This function of course, is existence.

This is simultaneously a disappointingly small and heftily significant claim, and it requires some unpacking. First, let us set aside a potential objection to the robustness of such a claim. Specifically, I have already demonstrated that from phenomenology we are able to draw a great deal of confidence that we indeed do, from a metaphysical standpoint, exist. As a result, the objection of the skeptic regarding our existence is better targeted at the phenomenological metaphysical account (in the first section) as opposed to the extension of phenomenological metaphysics into ethics, the latter of which requires an acceptance of the metaphysical premises and in which, in this section, I am currently engaged. Second, my reader may be concerned at the fairly disappointing and

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<sup>88</sup> Note that this is not inconsistent with an Aristotelian account.

indefinite nature of the claim that the function of humanity is merely existence. Do the trees and squirrels and rocks not also exist? After all this talk of interactive constituting consciousnesses and interplay with an evolving and dynamic world, mere existence seems anticlimactic, the less than comedic punch line at the end of a lengthy joke. This objection is a serious one, and it requires a serious response before we might move forward.

Simply put, we have seen that *human* existence is not the mere characteristic of being here or there or being such a way or some other way. Instead, human existence is one of robust and active *being in the world*. Existing in a world that constitutes us, but that we nevertheless help to constitute means that human existence is not a passive one, but an active, creative (or destructive), and thoroughly involved one. Human existence as *On* is *indeed* dynamic, interactive, and emerges as the *thing we do* as humans. In short, as Karl Marx wrote, “As individuals express life, *so they are*.”<sup>89</sup> To be human is to interact, to put a mark on the world, to manipulate nature and change the world that we inhabit. Existence in this interactive, collaborative, and creative way is our unavoidable function; we cannot, as Simone de Beauvoir writes, “keep [ourselves] from existing.”<sup>90</sup> Thus, the phenomenological account calls for a reclamation of the term ‘existence,’ from its common definition of a vague being here or there, choosing instead to define it as a robust “*collaborative work in progress*.”<sup>91</sup>

It is here, when we come to realize that *each* constituent element of *On* exists in the *same way*, and thus, shares the ability to constitute the world around her, including constituting (at least in part) the Other, that we see the problem of relational ethics emerge. An account of interpersonal ethics demands persons, and would not exist without them. Ethics are thus a result of human existence,

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<sup>89</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “The German Ideology,” in *Classical Sociological Theory*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, ed. Craig Calhoun, et al. (United Kingdom: Wiley-Blackwell 2012), 143, emphasis mine.

<sup>90</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman, (New York: Citadel, 1976), 45.

<sup>91</sup> Gail Weiss, “The Silent Communion of Self and Others,” lecture, International Merleau-Ponty Circle, Fordham University, September 2012, emphasis mine.

only valuable because they are derived *from humans*. Simone de Beauvoir makes this argument in her existentialist approach to ethics, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.

The genuine man will not agree to recognize any foreign absolute. When a man projects into an ideal heaven that impossible synthesis of the for-itself and the in-itself that is called God, it is because he wishes the regard of this existing Being to *change his existence into being*; but *if he agrees not to be in order to exist genuinely*, he will abandon the dream of an inhuman objectivity. He will understand that it is not a matter of being right in the eyes of a God, but of being right in his own eyes.<sup>92</sup>

We can see in this beautiful passage some the constituent elements of the argument I have made so far. For example, when she speaks of the difference between being and existence, we think of the difference between a static condition of being some such way or in some such place and a robustly interactive *existence*. Similarly, her rejection of transcendent and absolute principles external to humanity matches with the phenomenological necessity that ethics emerge specifically for and from humans. Thus, ethical questions for a moral agent operating within a Merleau-Pontian and Beauvoirian framework do not revolve around abstract and universal principles existing independent of humans, but instead around concrete principles derived from the interactive landscape of the *On*.

The fact that each of us, as individual threads in the single tapestry of humanity, contributes to the constitution of the world and of the Others around us is the critical link from our collaborative, active existence to the key element of such an ethical principle. Indeed, as Beauvoir argues, “This privilege...of being a sovereign and unique subject amidst a universe of objects, is what he shares with all his fellow men.”<sup>93</sup> Thus, we must seek a virtue, a principle that allows for a robust, interactive, and constituting existence in a world in which the subject “is nothing more than an individual in the collectivity on which he depends.”<sup>94</sup> We must ensure that each individual within

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<sup>92</sup> Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 14, emphasis mine.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

the *On* is able to exist in the robust way that I have argued is possible for humans. Thus our ethical obligation finally emerges:

*That which is right, and thus that which we are obligated to do, is that which ensures that each member of the On, and thus, the On as a whole, is free to robustly exist, engaging in the collaborative work in progress that is the On.*

There are a few things to draw out from this ethical principle. First, having already deeply explored out the interactive, collaborative, and active meaning of the term existence, I owe a similar explication of what I precisely mean by ‘the freedom to exist.’ Indeed, the term, especially in this context, though I would argue in many others, is inextricably linked to the reclaimed existence we have discovered as the quasi-teleological end of the collective human whole. Simone de Beauvoir captures the essence of this existential freedom when she writes, “To be free is not to have the power to do anything you like; it is to be able to surpass the given toward *an open future*.”<sup>95</sup> When we are “cut off from this future,” Beauvoir argues that we are transformed into mere “thing[s].”<sup>96</sup> In other words, a loss of freedom is a loss of the robust existence I have described; freedom is a necessity to existing in such a way. Beauvoir puts it simply: “To want existence...and to want men to be free are *one and the same will*.”<sup>97</sup> Thus, the freedom of the ethical standard I have proposed is actually the *capacity* to participate in the “collaborative work in progress”<sup>98</sup> of the *On*. A true and ethical commitment to freedom is one that not only permits but also ensures that “constructive activity would be possible for all; each one would be able to aim positively at his own future.”<sup>99</sup> This

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<sup>95</sup> Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 91.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>98</sup> Weiss, “Silent Communion.”

<sup>99</sup> Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 81.



ethical commitment grants equal legitimacy to the constitutive activities of each and every member of collective humanity.

Next, it is important to note that this ethical principle does not call for a *maximization* of the *On's* freedom; it is not subject to critiques of utilitarian-esque calculus. This principle is only fully satisfied if the freedom to exist is present for the *entirety* of the collective human whole. This of course suggests limits to *individual* freedom at least at the point at which such a freedom would infringe on the freedom of another individual, in pursuit of purely positive contributions to a collective human freedom. Of course, when we return to the true nature of humanity, we see that concerns for *individual* freedom are misguided for, as Beauvoir argues, “it is not true that the recognition of the freedom of others limits my own freedom...the existence of others as a freedom defines my situation and is even the condition of *my own freedom*.”<sup>100</sup> Again, we turn to the collective human whole, seeing that our ethical pursuits recognize the metaphysical fact that “we’ is legion and not an individual; each one depends upon others...”<sup>101</sup> Additionally, recall that the ethics implied by a phenomenological metaphysics is non-conventionally utopian, and thus will exist as an ideal toward which we strive through the dynamism of the world. Therefore, even if, theoretically, it is the case that *On* cannot be completely free—and such an objection would have to be very well formulated, I think, to convince us that such freedom is not theoretically possible or imaginable—decisions made in a pursuit of universal freedom (that do in fact tend toward a realization of such freedom) will still map on to this ethical standard. Simone de Beauvoir confronts the infinite nature of the pursuit of these ethics when she argues, “It is not a matter of approaching a fixed limit...[otherwise] all human effort would then be doomed to failure...for with each step forward the horizon recedes a step.”<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 91.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

Keep in mind also that this principle will rightly reject objections that concern themselves with conflicting freedoms to exist, given that humanity exists as the collective *On*. Beauvoir writes, “To will oneself free is also to will others free.”<sup>103</sup> Recall the *collaborative* nature of the newly defined existence suggested by this account. My freedom and the Other’s are united; if she is less free than me, or I than her, we both suffer of a lack of freedom. Indeed, “we see that no existence can be validly fulfilled if it is limited to itself. It appeals to the existence of others.”<sup>104</sup> To ensure that others are free to exist *is* to ensure that I am free to exist, because it is to ensure that the *On* is free to exist. Thus, to exist in a world simultaneously with oppression, as we in fact do, even if I am neither the directly oppressed nor the direct oppressor, necessarily means that my freedom is limited. I become the oppressed, and though I may not share the immediate pain of the directly oppressed, some part of my freedom is stripped from me, for it is stripped from the *On*. And, similarly, if I take no action against this oppression, I become the oppressor. I am morally complicit in the oppression, “guilty,” as Voltaire suggests, “of all the good I didn’t do.” Beauvoir mirrors this argument in the following passage:

In any case, we can assert that the oppressed is more totally engaged in the struggle than those who, though at one with him in rejecting his servitude, do not experience it; but also that, on the other hand, every man is affected by this struggle in so essential a way that he cannot fulfill himself morally without taking part in it.<sup>105</sup>

This effectively teases out the tension represented by the indeterminately plural nature of the *On*. Again, we remember that I am not the Other nor is she me; I am not the oppressed, despite my connection to her. However, my very existence is so radically intertwined with hers—meaning so too are my ethical obligations—that I cannot behave fully morally unless I struggle against the oppression which is not fully my own, but mine nonetheless.

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<sup>103</sup> Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 73.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 88-9.

Now, none of this is to suggest that all individuals not actively standing in opposition to an African warlord or to an American sex trafficker are equally *responsible* for these unquestionable evils; this account does not prevent us from approaching the question of degrees of responsibility. What I am asserting, however, is that we all share responsibility for the freedom to exist, or lack thereof, in our global and collective existence. The way we spend our time and money, the way we cast our vote, and the way we act within our communities and towards our fellow human beings all have the potential to move either towards or away from an *On* with the freedom to robustly exist. It is this manner of living that fulfills our ethical obligations; the ethical person wills the *On* free, dedicating the collaborative and interactive nature of her existence to this overarching goal.

## **V. Applications: The Phenomenological Ethical Standard in Practice**

At this point, I ask that my reader permit me a brief moment of wishful thinking. Suppose that this argument, to this point, has been perfectly constructed. Suppose that the phenomenological metaphysical account is truly unimpeachable, that it is, in fact, traceable to an ethical account, and that the ethical account I have explicated is truly the best possible ethical account for humanity and for our pursuit of the good life. Even if this were the case—and as I return from the clouds, I concede that it is likely to the point of certainty that at least some philosophers will *not* agree with my account so heartily—one question still would remain. What does the pursuit of a globally realized freedom to participate in the constructive project of existence look like in practice? More simply put, if this ethical account indeed instructs us regarding how we should live and what we should do, how do we do it?

I propose that the practice of this complex and difficult ethics may nevertheless be stated fairly simply: we must *act with empathetic and compassionate care for Others*. This notion seems intuitive and universal; this is arguably the broadly stated claim of *all* ethicists, and so, I expect, my reader will

wonder why we have done all this phenomenological work to come to this fairly basic, intuitive notion that we could have gotten from more established ethical thinkers than a French phenomenologist who himself never actually wrote an ethics. The answer is twofold. First, remember from the very beginning of this paper that the phenomenological process is one that sets aside those notions we take for granted, that we might explore their underlying foundations, causing them to re-appear as philosophically interesting and supported concepts. We feel, in most cases quite strongly, that we are of course supposed to care for others, but the phenomenological account allows us to *know* that this is in fact our obligation. Second, and more importantly, the phenomenological account allows us to understand the full meaning of what it is to care for others.

Consider Maurice Hamington's operational definition of phenomenological care. He writes, "Care is committed to the flourishing and growth of individuals *yet acknowledges our interconnectedness and interdependence.*"<sup>106</sup> This "ethics of mutual recognition and respect in the communicative situation,"<sup>107</sup> is the inevitable end of Merleau-Ponty's intersubjectivity, the "incontestable link[age]"<sup>108</sup> of the subject and object, of oneself to the Other. I love the Other, I *care* for the Other, and I treat the Other with respect and dignity because to do so is to love, care, and respect myself. This is not to say that this ethical system is based entirely on self-interestedness—or selfishness. Instead, it is based on the realization that the very concept of *self* is problematic; to be selfish at the expense of the Other, into whom I will inevitably slip, is to harm *myself*, for I am (at least partially) constituted by and of the Other.

This language should be troubling, both to the phenomenologist and to the ethicist. At first pass, it seems that personal identity is being eroded, perhaps even eliminated in this account, the *On* replacing the notions of the 'I' and the Other. This is at once true and false. It is true that the

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<sup>106</sup> Hamington, *Embodied Care*, 42, emphasis mine.

<sup>107</sup> Busch, "Communicative Ethics," 172.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

phenomenological account problematizes the notion of distinct or isolated individuality, and certainly a Western ideal of hyper-individuality and self-sufficiency, by demonstrating the complex interweaving of self and other into the single but collective *On*. But it is a misunderstanding of the phenomenological account to suggest that the *On* eliminates the individual entirely. Instead, what emerges from the deeply interwoven *On* is a great capacity for *empathetic* compassion, given our interrelation with one another.

We can understand more precisely the nature of phenomenological empathy by considering Max Scheler's distinction between the concepts of *emfühhlung* and *einsfühhlung*, again deferring to the greater power of languages other than English to capture the meaning we seek. We may understand *emfühhlung* as a more traditionally understood empathy, "in which we entertain the experiences of other people as if they were our own."<sup>109</sup> This is a familiar process to us, especially in the instruction of children, when we ask the child who has pinched her sibling, "How would you feel if that had happened to you?" We can see that this traditional empathy, this *emfühhlung* is not actually fully appreciative of the phenomenological account. I have not suggested merely that we are able to *imagine* the condition of the Other, but rather that we share her condition, at least in part. For this reason, we turn instead to *einsfühhlung*, which stretches further than a more traditionally understood notion of empathy into "a sense of unity [and] identification."<sup>110</sup> We might translate *einsfühhlung*, then, into 'feeling one.' However, this too is problematic, since this sort of "emotional identification" involves a "fellow-feeling [with the Other]...to such an extent that my self disappears *entirely* into her self."<sup>111</sup> When we remember Merleau-Ponty's "flesh," the infinitely thin "surface of *separation*

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<sup>109</sup> Max Scheler, *The Nature of Sympathy*, trans. Peter Heath, (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2008), 247.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, liii

<sup>111</sup> Sandra Lee Bartky, "Sympathy and Solidarity," in "*Sympathy and Solidarity*" and *Other Essays*, (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), 76.

between me and the other which is also the place of our *union*,”<sup>112</sup> we know that the total emotional identification of Scheler’s *einsfühlung* cannot be consistent with the phenomenological account of humanity either. Remember, however, that the true nature of the *On* means that an experience of ‘feeling one’ need not suggest that we actually exist solely as a singular collective; it need not preclude our existence as individual threads in the single tapestry. Both the separation and the union are of critical importance. The former allows for the allocation of moral responsibility and blame, an arguably necessary component of any tenable ethical standard, while the latter allows for the intersubjective nature of humanity suggested by the phenomenological account. Sandra Lee Bartky captures this tension well when she writes the following:

While there are points of similarity between a feeling and that feeling commiserated with...nonetheless, *the two are not identical*. I commiserate with your sufferings and take joy in your joys (how odd that we have no verb for this in English!) but I experience neither your suffering nor your joy; they are *yours*...we fear that were we to open ourselves fully to the miseries of others, we would be plunged headlong into the very depths of this misery. Scheler’s cautionary phenomenology of genuine feeling-with assures that this need not happen.<sup>113</sup>

Thus, Bartky’s account provides for us a route for an adjustment of *einsfühlung*, and thus the route towards performing our ethical responsibilities well, in this passage. Instead of a ‘feeling one,’ we may adjust Scheler’s notion of *einsfühlung*—and to be very clear, this is a divergence from Scheler’s account—into a more phenomenologically appropriate ‘feeling *On*.’

Still, this notion of an empathetic condition of ‘feeling *On*’ remains ambiguous. Let us consider an often-pondered ethical thought experiment. Suppose I am walking along a bridge when I see a child drowning in the water below. What must I do? With an ambiguous and dynamic ethics focused on open freedom and discovered through my empathetic understanding of the situation, there seems to be no static answer for all of humanity. What if I cannot swim, and thus, by diving in, I will certainly drown, while also failing to save the child? What if I am a single parent who will

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<sup>112</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Visible and Invisible*, 139, 234

<sup>113</sup> Bartky, “Sympathy,” 81, emphasis original

leave three children to starve at home if I die in my attempt to rescue this child? Many questions such as these will and *must* play into such a decision, and we begin to see that this ethics is truly something that must be determined on an individual basis. Here we see that we have come upon the ethics that we were searching for, one that matches the complex and paradoxical nature of humanity. If we exist as embodied selves that constitute the Other who simultaneously constitutes us, our ethics too shares this collective individuality. What is ethically right for me (i.e., what is most in line with caring, as I have defined it, for the Other) may be a different act, choice, or thought from what is ethically right for another, but it is the *same* insofar as it manifests in maximum care for the Other. Because of our embodied existence, we are not without universalizable claims. I know, as we all do, at least at some level, what it is to fear imminent death, what it is to be trapped in a terrifying situation, what it is to swallow water instead of oxygen; because we have a body, we understand the suffering of this child, and our interconnectedness with this Other demands that we attempt to end such suffering. By teaching myself to understand the metaphysical reality of the world as described by Merleau-Ponty and the intersubjectivity that he asserts, I know that the decision to walk past the child screaming for help will become *part of me* and torture *my own* consciousness forever. Thus, an ethics based on empathetic compassion demands that I do *something* to try and save this child, preserving the child's ongoing freedom to robustly participate in the collaborative work in progress of the *On*. I must attempt to find something for the child to grab on to and float, I must fashion a sort of rope to lower down to him, I must run to find help, or I must dive in. I must act with *care* for this suffering member of a globally connected humanity.

What we discover, then, is that a phenomenological ethics, while normative, is far from explicitly prescriptive. Given the evolving and intersubjective nature of the world, the rule of caring for the Other is no static, universal, or easily applied principle. Under such a standard, similar ethical dilemmas may be handled with equal ethical merit but in very different ways. As a result,

traditional philosophical thought experiments meant to force the moral agent into one of two challenging choices will usually not be appropriately cognizant of the extensive scope of this phenomenological ethics. This becomes evident in Simone de Beauvoir's incredibly challenging example of her severely addicted friend suffering from painful symptoms of withdrawal that requests money for more drugs.<sup>114</sup> Beauvoir's—and, now, my—commitment to freedom puts her (me) in a tough spot; shouldn't the addict be permitted to fulfill his addiction? Our complex ethics gives an unsatisfying answer: yes and no. Beauvoir rightly points out that the first response is to seek more robust freedom, specifically freedom from this devastating addiction by “urg[ing] him to get cured, I take him to a doctor, I try to help in live; insofar as there is a chance of my being successful, I am acting correctly in refusing him the sum he asks for.”<sup>115</sup> But as anyone who has ever interacted with a person suffering from addiction knows, the obstacles to success in these endeavors are powerful, and Beauvoir is confronted with the challenging reality of the messiness of life outside the world of the philosophical thought experiment. She is forced to consider his resistance—indeed his refusal—of these other courses of action, and she is forced to consider that “he may have recourse to extreme means to get what I do not give him.”<sup>116</sup> Ultimately, unless she is able “to create a situation of such a kind that...the deluded individual [the addict] might again find about him reasons for hoping,” she concludes, “All I can do is give in.”<sup>117</sup>

I choose to focus on this painful and seemingly hopelessly complicated example for several reasons. First, it allows us to consider the addict open to change—unlike the addict in this case—and see that there are many ethical paths to assisting him, none of which is necessarily better than the others at the level of abstraction; taking him to the doctor, supporting him in his desire for abstinence, or connecting him with a support group all seem to be noble acts consistent with the

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<sup>114</sup> Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 143.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.* 143.



ethics I have proposed. Second, this example reveals the messiness of real world ethical dilemmas and suggests that there are times when, given evils already present in the world, we will simply be left with dirty hands. We did not inject this man with heroin; he injected himself. So it is not our fault that this man is addicted to drugs, though one might argue that failures of education, parenting, communities, and even flaws in the criminal justice system and law enforcement have created a situation where we share some responsibility for that addiction. Nevertheless, once we are thrust into a situation with this man, confronted with the immediacy of his request for money (and supposing those other routes are genuinely closed to us) we are trapped between causing suffering and restricting freedom in the short term by saying no or doing the same thing in the long term by saying yes. It is for this reason that an empathetic and compassionate care for the Other is the only way for us to realize our ethical obligation; in short, because many times we have to do the best we can with the cards we are dealt, and our best will be determined by the fullness of our understanding of the human condition.

My third and final reason for this particular thought experiment is to show the more important direction that this ethical account calls us towards. The true focus of this ethical standard is not one of individualized and challenging decisions, though it serves us in these as well, but instead is a standard for improvement on a global scale. This ethical system pushes us to eliminate social, political, economic, educational, medical, and all other sorts of obstacles to a robustly interactive and constructive human existence for *everyone*. It pushes us to act in such a way that it is much less likely that Simone de Beauvoir's friend will ever take drugs in the first place, since he now lives in a safe community with adequate food and healthcare, went (or goes) to excellent schools, is not oppressed by his government, is not financially prohibited from living a life of dignity, and is fully afforded the opportunity to participate in the collaborative work in progress of the *On*. Thus, just as our world is a dynamic experience, ethics may also be dynamic without devolving into

solipsism, and instead emerging as a standard that encompasses human life while remaining cognizant of the reality of our existence. The metaphysical exploration provided by phenomenology finally grants us access to an understanding of ethics that is both philosophically legitimate *and* relevant to the real world, revealing not only what it is to be human, but also what such an existence demands of us.

### **Never Allowed to Conclude**

A philosopher's life is no longer than any other individual's and, having died unexpectedly in 1961 at the age of fifty-three, Merleau-Ponty lived a tragically short one.<sup>118</sup> His friend and ferocious intellectual opponent, Jean-Paul Sartre, wrote a poignant eulogy shortly after Merleau-Ponty's death in which he said the following of the man he often referred to as simply 'Merleau':

Merleau's view... accepts thesis and antithesis. It is synthesis which he rejects, reproaching it for changing dialectic into a building game. Spirals, on the contrary, are never allowed to conclude. Instead, each one manifests in its own way, the merry-go-round of being and existence... Thus, the philosopher never stops going around in circles, nor stops the treadmill from turning.<sup>119</sup>

We see here that the story that Merleau-Ponty was telling is, in many ways, unfinished. Certainly, only "One hundred and fifty pages of his future book [*The Visible and the Invisible*] are saved from oblivion,"<sup>120</sup> but the unfinished nature of Merleau-Ponty's account stems from more than his untimely death. Indeed it is his embrace of the ambiguity of the human condition, of the unending cycle of our constituting and being constituted by the world we live, that makes his account necessarily unfinished.

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<sup>118</sup> Ted Toadvine and Leonard Lawlor, "Editor's Introduction" in *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*, ed. Ted Toadvine et al. (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2007), xiii.

<sup>119</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, "Merleau-Ponty *vivant*," trans. Benita Eisher, in *The Debate Between Sartre and Merleau Ponty*, ed. Jon Stewart, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 613.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 621.

I concede that my account remains similarly unfinished. Both in theory (given the nature of phenomenology) and in practice (given the limited scope of a paper such as this), it would be impossible to fully and finally prove the argument for the phenomenological ethics I have made here. But I genuinely believe that this paper and the tradition it joins represent an important first step to an exciting new world of philosophy. Specifically, we must engage in a significant (re?)consideration of the nature of human existence, taking seriously the notion that we are individual threads in single tapestry, individual but inseparable, a humanity existing as the beautiful and interwoven whole. To pull a thread, to attempt to separate it as its own, is to damage the tapestry, and we have pulled so many threads at this point that it is no wonder the tangled ball of yarn lying at the foot of our loom is one of discord, pain, poverty, and struggle. It is my hope that phenomenology might demonstrate how we might begin again. It is my hope that phenomenology might lead us to discover how this tapestry might be rewoven into the most beautiful and intricate pattern that is possible with the truly incredible threads of humanity.

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