Re-situating the Body in Merleau-Ponty: A Feminist Critique of the Treatment of Sexuality in the Phenomenology of Perception

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Abstract:

I perform a critique Merleau-Ponty's characterization of sexuality in *Phenomenology of Perception* by arguing that his reification of misogynistic sexual objectification and heteronormativity is contrary to the very core of his own thought. Namely, it contradicts his conception of intersubjectivity and "encroachment" as fundamental pre-existing structures of existence. For Merleau-Ponty, every so-called individual subject emerges from a pre-existing social dimension. Sexuality uniquely highlights this intersubjective phenomenon and the ambiguity between what other thinkers might call the "subject" and "object." By promoting a disembodied account of "normal" sexuality as sexist objectification, Merleau-Ponty undermines his very argument by failing to do his own definition of sexuality justice. Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty's appeal to an "essence" of femininity reinforces biological essentialism that justifies gender-based oppression. I first offer a critical analysis of Merleau-Ponty's key structural features of the lived body in *Phenomenology of Perception* such as the body schema and habit body, the intentional arc, and sexuality. Next, I follow critical phenomenology and psychoanalytic feminist methodologies to argue that Merleau-Ponty's thought, particularly his conception of sexuality, can and should be amended to properly account for sexual difference, sexual variation, and difference in general. I explore a survey of more recent contributions to phenomenological thought to show the possibilities for re-appropriation of his work, including Iris Marion Young's essay "Throwing Like a Girl," as an early feminist intervention highlighting the limits of the intentional arc in accounting for gender differences. However, I argue that Young's article nevertheless remains trapped in patriarchal norms. I then argue that Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* acts as a positive contribution towards appropriating Merleau-

Ponty's thought in new directions, considering how his thought can be applied to queer orientations.

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Introduction:

Sexuality in Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, I argue, acts as a fundamental structure of perception that is imbued in all experience. Sexuality, for Merleau-Ponty, can be understood as a fundamental bodily dimension of experience that structures our perception. As such, it highlights a deeper general insight that our experience is essentially intersubjective and intercorporeal–that is, subjectivity for Merleau-Ponty is always inherently bodily because it necessarily involves the communication and interdependence of incarnate subjects through their physical bodies. I will elucidate the role of sexuality in Merleau-Ponty's work to develop a critique of it, arguing that its failure to address neither its own biases nor sexual difference adequately constitutes a major blind spot in his thought, one that undermines his very own claim to intersubjective dependence. Sexual difference, according to Luce Irigaray, is not an essential biological difference, but rather a psychoanalytical conception of the different cultural positions of male and female subjects (Irigaray 1982). This is significant because Merleau-Ponty's methods assign subjectivity to male heterosexual perspectives exclusively and marginalize and pathologize sexual variation, thereby relegating all other identities to the realm of the irrational, deviant, or ill, and robbing them of their status as human subjects. Merleau-Ponty does this by discussing the male heterosexual sexual experience as the default and ignoring variation. Following Luce Irigaray's critique I argue that Merleau-Ponty's conception of intersubjective difference is inadequate, especially in terms of sexual difference. To amend this narrow definition of subjectivity and intersubjectivity, I examine a 1980 feminist intervention in Merleau-Ponty's thought, in Iris Marion Young's "Throwing Like a Girl," and propose a new

direction for Merleau-Pontian phenomenology in alignment with critical and queer phenomenologies, following Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology*.

Several of Merleau-Ponty's contributions to phenomenology are compatible with and applicable to feminist philosophies, such as his rejection of dualisms, his focus on embodiment and situated relations, and his privileging of first-person testimonial knowledge. Broadly speaking, feminist philosophies problematize under-theorized and undervalued issues in philosophy, either relating to gender and sex, or they employ a critical feminist lens to discuss traditional philosophical topics. Feminist philosophers have compared the dualisms of mind and body and intellectualism and empiricism to the masculine/feminine binary, as the feminine has been historically tethered to the body and reproductive function whereas the masculine isassociated with reason. In challenging the mind-body dichotomy, Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of ambiguity can be harnessed to challenge patriarchy's strict understandings of sexual difference. Testimonial knowledge and first-person experience highlight forms of knowledge that have otherwise been marginalized and repressed throughout Western philosophical history. First-person description is one of the key distinguishing features of phenomenology, one of the first schools of thought to value testimonial knowledge as a form of true knowledge.

Furthermore, the European philosophical canon has historically neglected the body in lieu of the mind, taking the former to be unworthy of contemplation due to its association with femininity and nature. Merleau-Ponty, however, gives serious consideration to the body as one of the fundamental philosophical issues. For these reasons, it is important to address the major biases in order to overcome the blind spots in Merleau-Ponty's thought, namely sexual

difference, misogyny, and heteronormativity, as his work is invaluable to feminist thought despite these problems.

Sexual difference is a term widely thematized by Jacques Lacan and taken up by feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray to denote the different positions taken by men and women, not biologically, but culturally (Irigaray 1982). Misogyny is defined as the hatred of women, whether conscious or not, and is displayed through sexual objectification, for example. Heteronormativity, as the term suggests, is the understanding of heterosexuality as normative both ethically and culturally. Ultimately, I argue that Merleau-Ponty's thought can be transformed towards future directions of a feminist critical methodology to expand his thought towards a theory that adequately accounts for alterity instead of a view that centers the male heterosexual view exclusively under the guise of the "universal" or "general." This expansion of Merleau-Ponty's thought would counter a transcendental solipsistic interpretation of phenomenology, offering a new direction to account for Merleau-Ponty's methodological blin spots. Namely, a model that would account for sexual difference and variation in sexuality, as well as other socio-historical horizons of experience, such as race and class.

I develop a feminist critique of Merleau-Ponty's conception of sexuality, drawing on the concepts I establish in the first section–the habit body and body schema, being-in-the-world, and intentionality. I employ a feminist method to argue that the characterization of the body as universal, pre-personal, and anonymous is centered around an androcentric, ahistorical perspective that eradicates difference. This centers the masculine point of view as the only beacon of rationality and implicitly marginalizes other experiences, perpetuating patriarchal hegemony by failing to recognize the subjectivity of non-male subjects. Further, following

Butler, I argue that Merleau-Ponty's description of sexuality reifies and naturalizes a hierarchical and misogynistic heteronormativity. Namely, it normalizes a sexuality grounded in specific cultural assumptions–namely, Western conceptions of gender roles and heteronormativity–without acknowledging these biases, thereby perpetuating the current oppressive Symbolic Order. I work to return to the conceptual points explored in the first section above (body schema, habit, and intentionality) to preserve these and open up points missed by Sullivan and Butler's ungenerous critiques. Namely, I argue that the addition of intercorporeality to the key structures of the lived body in Merleau-Ponty allows for a potential non-normative and plural orientation by and to others in a way that complements Sara Ahmed's queering of orientation. Yet, this plurality of sexual orientation is one of Merleau-Ponty's blind spots.

My goal is to make this problematic aspect of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy clear and to show how it can be critiqued and then successfully rectified to such an extent that it can support feminist philosophy using Sara Ahmed's Queer Phenomenology methodology. To accomplish this, I will perform 2 main steps: I will first reconstruct Merleau-Ponty's conception of the living body in its relation to sexuality in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, and second, I will develop a critique of his theory of sexuality drawing upon this foundation. I will perform this second step by providing analyses of his concepts of the body schema, habit body, intentional arc, and sexuality. I do this to establish a ground for Merleau-Ponty's conception of sexuality, as sexuality, like all other dimensions of human life, is fundamentally bodily and intentional for Merleau-Ponty. Expressly, sexuality primarily involves the direction of one embodied subject towards another, and one must first establish Merleau-Ponty's theory of embodiment to understand it. As in other sections of the text, in "The Body as a Sexed Being," Merleau-Ponty

introduces psychological case studies to substantiate his claims. Schneider, a brain-injured patient incapable of comprehending sexual significance, proves for Merleau-Ponty that sexuality is neither purely psychic nor purely physical. Namely, Schneider can achieve orgasm when his genitals are manipulated in a seemingly autonomous response, but he does not seek it out; it has no meaning or value for him.

To clarify my first step, I draw from Merleau-Ponty's own findings. I later explore Merleau-Ponty's treatment of the patient Schneider in "The Body as a Sexed Being" in detail (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 157). This case study disproves mechanistic physiological accounts of sexuality for Merleau-Ponty. It demonstrates that sexuality cannot be understood as purely physical anatomical matter nor as a reflex; if this were the case, Schneider would be a sexual being since his genitals are intact. Namely, if the mechanistic accounts of empiricism and intellectualism were correct that sexuality is a reflex from genital stimulation, then Schneider's sexuality would not be affected. Furthermore, Schneider's experience cannot be accounted for by a representationalist understanding of sexuality that conceives of it as an abstraction and psychological association. While Schneider is able to represent the sexuality conceptually, this does not arouse desire in him; he lacks the necessary "physical aura" present in sexuality. For Merleau-Ponty, neither the reductionist psychologist nor physiologist approaches speak to Schneider's condition, therefore sexuality must be defined otherwise.

Another case study used to support Merleau-Ponty's position is a young woman who has lost the ability to speak (aphonia) after her parents forbid her from seeing her lover. Since speech occurs within the mouth, Freudian psychonanalyst Ludwig Binswanger locates her condition in an unresolved oral phase of sexual development (Mooney 2020, 203). In their essay "Sexuality and meaning in Freud and Merleau-Ponty," Moya and Larrain write that for Freud "...adult

behavior is based on the childhood prehistory that survives in the unconscious, and this infantile unconsciousness is of a sexual nature" (Moya and Larrain 2015, 742). Merleau-Ponty, however, takes this explanation to be reductionist and inadequate. Again, neither intellectualist nor empiricist accounts can capture her condition, as sexuality is so entwined with existence that due to her heartbreak, she is refusing a basic function of existence–the world of others.

The second half of my thesis is devoted to a critique of Merleau-Ponty's theory of sexuality. I draw upon the concepts developed in the first half to argue that the treatment of sexuality in the *Phenomenology* contradicts a major conceptual and methodological ground of Merleau-Ponty's understanding of intersubjectivity and intercorporeality. This is problematic as Merleau-Ponty's contributions, including the body schema and intentional arc, are otherwise invaluable for feminist philosophy in their rejection of strict binaries and focus on lived embodiment. I argue that if these blind spots and problems are addressed and combatted by using a phenomenological method that discloses its sociohistorical prejudices and particularities, Merleau-Pontian thought can overcome its patriarchal biases and contain possibilities for enriching feminist and critical phenomenology projects.

In "Domination and Dialogue in Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception," Shannon Sullivan charges Merleau-Ponty with ignoring the particularities of bodies in a form of domination under the guise of an intersubjective dialogue. Namely, Sullivan critiques the so-called "neutral" anonymous body in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, claiming that the neglect of gender leads to the assumption of sameness through a projection of one's own bodily intentionality onto others (Sullivan 1997, 4). However, unlike Sullivan, I will argue that Merleau-Ponty's thought is not fundamentally solipsistic, but is, on the contrary, an inherently

intersubjective ontology. This makes Merleau-Ponty's sexist and heterosexist treatment of sexuality especially egregious, as it compromises and contradicts his very own insights.

Shannon Sullivan argues that Merleau-Ponty's conception of the neutral body can be reduced to a theory of domination. In neglecting to account for differences in body-subjects, Forfor Sullivan, Merleau-Ponty's claim that the anonymous and pre-personal are primary and universal is reductive. For Merleau-Ponty, the anonymous body is the pre-personal existence that characterizes unreflective experience. Namely, Sullivan argues it is an original shared bodily structure and existence that precedes any differentiation between individual body-subjects, despite conflicting scholarship that suggests otherwise (Rae 2020). In other words, Sullivan argues, "...my bodily identity is unknown in that it is not uniquely mine; in some sense it is that of anyone and thus of everyone" (Sullivan 1997, 5). This originary wholeness is what allows for any differentiation and communication between individuals to emerge. Yet, culturally-determined norms of gender and sexual orientation are overlaid onto this neutral body. I argue that Sullivan misinterprets the pre-personal as excluding the possibility of the personal in Merleau-Ponty. The anonymous body in Merleau-Ponty does not suggest the erasure of differences, but rather an interdependent shared being that not one individual is wholly in control of,; a dialectic between active and passive perception (Landes 2013, 86).

I will offer a feminist critique of his conception of (1) sexual difference and natural heterosexuality as intrinsic to perception, (2) his neutral, de-particularized notion of the "anonymous body" that assumes a phallocentric position, and (3) his failure to challenge his own historical, misogynistic biases. As such, I will challenge Merleau-Ponty's appeal to a natural

"essence" of womanhood, his biological essentialist understanding of heterosexuality, and his upholding of sexual objectification by failing to challenge the testing in a pathological case study that he invokes. Namely, the "healthy" sexuality by which he contrasts the brain-damaged patient Schneider is not merely human sexuality, but a male heterosexual that is not only unhealthy but also an expression of sexual objectification and degradation.

Section 1: Key Concepts in Merleau-Ponty's*Phenomenology of Perception*

1.1. The body schema and habit body:

To develop Merleau-Ponty's conception of sexuality, I will first elucidate the meanings of the fundamental concepts that ground this theory, beginning with the body schema. Sexuality along with all dimensions of experience, is essentially bodily for Merleau-Ponty, as it involves affective states (such as pain and pleasure) and intercorporeality. For Merleau-Ponty, sexuality involves bodily intentionality, an incarnate orientation towards our world that structures it in meaning, shaping how we project our bodies toward our projects. Accordingly, the chapter devoted to a fully developed account of sexuality in *Phenomenology of Perception* is titled "The Body as a Sexed Being," exploring the embodied character of sexuality. To provide a ground for this theory of sexuality to then critique its blind spots, I argue that Merleau-Ponty's conception of embodiment must be addressed first; hence, I develop a detailed exposition of his notions of the body schema and the habit body.

Merleau-Ponty first explores the rejection of Cartesian dualism with his theory of embodiment in his first book *The Structure of Behaviour*, proposing that the relation between subjectivity and objectivity is that of a pre-conscious unity: "The soul remains coextensive with nature" (Merleau-Ponty 1963, 153). In this work, Merleau-Ponty suggests that nature and consciousness are inseparably intertwined as mind is a product emerging from the natural world. This anticipates his conception of the living body in *Phenomenology*, where the body is conceived as an ambiguous unity between the perceiver and the perceived world. As in *Phenomenology of Perception*, Cartesian mind-body dualism and psychological accounts of reflex are challenged, opting instead for a dynamic account of the ambiguous dialectic between consciousness and body. This early rejection of dualisms and focus on the body as a locus of subjectivity already demonstrates Merleau-Ponty's usefulness for feminist projects, as challenging binaries is a key methodology in feminist philosophy.

Similarly, in *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty primarily aims to disprove the dominant traditional schools of thought: idealism (or intellectualism as he deems it) and empiricism. This goal is first introduced in the introductory sections entitled "Association" and "The Projection of Memories" and "Attention" and "Judgement," where both "classical prejudices" are the targets of a detailed critique. Both of these prejudices are one-sided and dogmatic, failing to capture the ambiguous dialectic between the incarnate subject and their surroundings and "keep their distance" from true perception. Instead, both approaches locate the source of experience in a single dimension, either pure interiority or pure exteriority. In response to both intellectualist and empiricist prejudices, Merleau-Ponty asserts that the body is neither a purely material object nor is it a mere vehicle for consciousness. Rather, to Merleau-Ponty, the

body is synonymous with the subject or, put simply, “I am my body” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 203).

To Merleau-Ponty, we do not perceive ourselves as “in front of” or “in” our own bodies, but rather our bodies are our subjectivity. This body-subject is involved in an ambiguous dialectic with its environment, muddying the traditional boundaries between subject and object: “...to be a body is to be tied to a certain world, and our body is not primarily in space, but is rather of space” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 149). Yet, mind-body dualism argues that the substances of mind and body or extended matter are of a fundamentally separate nature. That is, mind is thinking and non-extended, and body is non-thinking and extended. Substance dualism is first introduced in Ancient Greek thought through Plato and again adopted by early Christian philosophers such as Augustine (Cottingham 1992). However, Merleau-Ponty’s primary target is Descartes and his contemporary followers in empiricism and intellectualism. The mind-body problem that arises is that if one grants that mind and body are fundamentally distinct, then how can it be that they act upon each other causally in us. As an alternative to dualism, Merleau-Ponty claims that mind and body are distinct, but nevertheless a union; one I would argue is akin to “two sides of the same coin” in an ambiguous relation. Merleau-Ponty’s claim that “I am my body” does not mean the promotion of reductionist materialism or empiricism, but rather that consciousness and subjectivity are not separate from the body, they are one in the body-subject: a body that is simultaneously a subject, and a subject that is simultaneously a body.

Merleau-Ponty claims that embodied subjectivity is best captured by the term "being-in-the-world," or être au monde an inseparable unity that eschews the Cartesian mind-body split for a subject that is fundamentally worlded and a world that both outstrips consciousness and is nevertheless essentially intertwined with it. Regarding Cartesian dualism, in *Merleau-Ponty and Nancy on Sense and Being*, Marie-Eve Morin claims that for Merleau-Ponty "The answer lies in the relation of interdependence between reflection and the domain of the unreflected, from which reflection itself emerges" (Morin 2022, 31). That is, for Merleau-Ponty, the union of mind and body is found in a primary unreflective living immersion between the two from which any deliberate intellectual reflection can be made possible.

For Merleau-Ponty, there is a primordial state of being that presupposes our ability to consciously reflect. In the act of reflecting, we lose this original state and then prejudge what we will find, altering our perception (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 139). For this reason, scientific reflection cannot adequately capture perception as it is originally experienced. Accordingly, a thorough philosophical account must acknowledge the pre-reflective structure from which it is born. Where Descartes's foundationalism purports to construct a self-contained epistemology based in abstract principles and an independent rational agent standing over and above its environment, Merleau-Ponty upholds an embodied ambiguity between self and world, and active reflection and passivity. The Cartesian meditator neglects to account for the unreflective perception that underlies its reflection: "For intellectualism, reflection involves putting sensation at a distance or objectifying it and causing an empty subject to appear across from sensation who can survey this

multiplicity and for whom it can exist" (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 250). In other words, unlike the Cartesian Method, Merleau-Ponty claims there can be no self-sustained or purely independent thought, but rather all thought is a dialectic between passive and active reflection/engagement that owes itself to the environment it is "intertwined" with. In putting oneself "at a distance" from experience, the intellectualist ignores their own rootedness in experience (Langer 1989). In *Merleau-Ponty's Developmental Ontology,* David Morris calls Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of nature and response to this intellectualist prejudice "radical reflection," which "...means that philosophy must reflect on its own roots in being…This also means that reflection is not solely or purely an activity of philosophers but is an operation of the being in which reflection arises" (Morris 2018, 4).

Being -in-the- world is a term introduced by Heidegger in *Being and Time* and adopted by Merleau-Ponty as *être au monde*, signifying a pre-reflective ambiguous relation between the perceiving subject and the world perceived. Merleau-Ponty argues that this concept provides an alternative to the mind-body problem and "will be able to establish the junction of the 'psychical' and the 'physiological'" (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 82). Their relation is characterized by an inseparable unity where both dimensions encroach upon the other, yet they are not interchangeable. Namely, the embodied subject is simultaneously capable of perceiving the world, while also necessarily being part of the world as a body. Without this embodied presence, one could not gain access to the world outside oneself, hence the body-subject is always inhabiting a concrete situation. Rationalist or intellectualist thinkers attempt to adopt a detached and disembodied perspective to achieve a scientific objectivism. Yet, Merleau-Ponty counters that this very ability to adopt a supposed "God's-eye-view" is itself a result of being an incarnate subject engaged in one's world: "Consciousness only begins to exist by determining an object,

and the phantoms of an 'internal experience' are only themselves possible by borrowing from external experience" (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 30). Or, as Donald Landes puts it in the introduction to his 2012 translation of *Phenomenology of Perception*: "Our body is our perspective on the world, and the incomplete intentional and horizontal structure of perception is not a limitation to our access to the world and truth; it is the very possibility of this access" (Landes 2012, xxxvi). Furthermore, this "view-from-nowhere," the scientifically neutral and objective perspective that intellectualists aim to achieve, would not be a perspective at all, as in order to have a view, one must necessarily be situated in space first. As a response to one-sided representationalist accounts of body and world relations, Merleau-Ponty instead proposes that "the body is our general means of having a world," (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 147) meaning that it is only through one's own body that one gains access to the external world and consequently, the only way for this world to be structured in a meaningful way. This is significant for feminist purposes, as in the traditional mind-body dichotomy where mind represents reason and body irrationality and instinct, women have been trapped in their association with corporeality. Dissolving these interrelated dualisms in hopes of dissolving patriarchal domination in language has been a goal of feminist philosophy.

In Merleau-Ponty's last unfinished work, *The Visible and the Invisible*, he introduces new language to discuss the relation of mind and body–chiasm. The term "chiasm" comes from the Greek for "crossing-over" or the letter "X," used in anatomy to discuss the criss-crossing of nerves or tendons, and "chiasmus" denotes a literary device in which grammatical structures are reversed (Landes 2013, 240). For Merleau-Ponty's purposes, chiasm is the ambiguous "crossing-over" between dimensions of experience, including that between vision and touch, the primary

structure of the chiasm. The “crossing-over” is an ambiguous dialectic between the subjective and objective realms, two elements of the same structure. For instance, when I envelop the world, the world simultaneously envelops me: “A human body is present when, between the see-er and the visible, between touching and touched, between one eye and the other, between hand and hand a kind of crossover occurs, when the spark of the sensing/sensible is lit" (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 125). The senses are an intertwined unity. Vision, like touch, envelops its objects in a reversible closeness. According to feminist phenomenologist Shannon Hoff, flesh is “...the “thickness” between body and world renders ambiguous the relation between materiality and meaning, self and other, self and world” (Hoff 2023, 200). This “crossing-over” is apparent in human sexuality, where binaries are made ambiguous and intertwined.

Merleau-Ponty radically claims that one’s own body is one’s point of view on the world, not that “I am in my body” but rather that “I am my body” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 151). Defying the reductive conceptions of the body from empiricism and idealism, Merleau-Ponty instead highlights the reality of the lived body as an incarnate subject. That is to say, in order to have a particular perspective and perceive the objects in one’s environment, one must occupy space from a particular position. The scientific attitude attempts to “overcome” this embodied perspective as an obstacle, but Merleau-Ponty argues that it is the very condition that allows us to perceive, and that neglecting this is dishonest and/or inaccurate to experience. The question then arises of how one can transcend or change one’s limited perspective , and Merleau-Ponty solves this through the notion of the habit body; in repeating actions over time, a dialectic forms between the present body and habit body, and we can form new habits.

Previous conceptions of the body have characterized it as a mechanism or a sum of distinct parts. Merleau-Ponty charges classical psychology with conceiving of the body as the "body image," a purely mental representation of one's own body through image associations. In "The Body as Object and Mechanistic Physiology," Merleau-Ponty repudiates these views, turning to medical studies of phantom limb and *aphonia*/*anosognosia* to illustrate the limitations of a reductionist or causal understanding of the body, showing both intellectualism and empiricism to be inadequately equipped to account for reality's complexities. As an alternative to this, Merleau-Ponty proposes the body schema–a living yet pre-conscious and non-thetic awareness of one's own body in relation to its surroundings. When one engages in a task, one's body gathers and directs itself towards its goal. For instance, in incorporating a tool such as a cane, it becomes part of one's body schema and one need not consciously consider its objective location in space, it simply assimilates itself into one's body schema.

Merleau-Ponty uses the case of the phantom limb both to describe our "typical" mode of being, as a sedimentation of habits manifested in an unreflective immersion in our tasks that he calls the "habit body," and to further demonstrate the inadequacy/blind spots of the intellectualism-empiricism schools of thought. The phantom limb patient has lost a limb (in this case an arm), yet feels "phantom" sensations as if the limb were still present. Attempts to explain this phenomenon from mechanistic physiology fail, for if the sensation of one's limbs were a matter of autonomous reflex, then the severing of the nerves that connect to the limb would make the sensations cease. Yet, psychologism too fails, as there is nevertheless an undeniably physical element of this syndrome, it is inherently corporeal. For the patient to continue feeling the missing limb demonstrates what Merleau-Ponty names being-toward-the-world, to "remain open to all those actions of which the arm alone is capable; it is to keep the practical field that one had

prior to the mutilation" (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 84). In other words, no matter what differences in ability the body undergoes, one continues to project oneself into one's goals and environment.

Similarly, Merleau-Ponty examines an instance of an insect with an injured leg, examining how it alters its behaviour to accommodate the injury and continues its "being-toward-the-world." To have a body is to be inherently immersed in one's tasks and to have it gather and project towards these goals, adapting to new possibilities. To this extent, Merleau-Ponty claims "The body is the vehicle of being in the world and, for a living being, having a body means being united with a definite milieu, merging with certain projects, and being perpetually engaged therein" (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 84).

With these examples, Merleau-Ponty demonstrates the reality of "being-in-the-world" and "being-toward-the-world" as the only way of understanding the body in its rich paradox and ambiguity. Being-toward-the-world is the attitude that we take towards our tasks and projects, a sense of potentiality for action while immersed in our milieus. Through a dialectic between the present body and the habit body, we project the body towards our goals. Consequently, Merleau-Ponty transforms the Cartesian *cogito* by claiming that the primary foundation of our experience is not an "I think" but rather an "I can," a lived projection toward our goals, a motor intentionality.

In "The Experience of the Body and Classical Psychology," Merleau-Ponty aims to challenge the psychological attitude towards the body as *partes extra partes*, separate anatomical parts alongside one another. This reduction of the body to an object among other objects ignores the evidence to the contrary that the body is inseparable from subjective consciousness. The body has a dual reflexive capacity to both touch and be touched or sense and be sensed simultaneously. In later works, Merleau-Ponty will deem this power "flesh," the continuity

between “subject” and “object” that makes their interactions possible. The example used to demonstrate this point is the act of holding one hand with one’s other hand, feeling both touching and being touched, activity and passivity at once. This ability cannot be found in determinate static objects, as it requires life, an ambiguity between subjectivity and materiality. Further,

I draw on Merleau-Ponty’s description of intercorporeality using his description of the lived body to highlight how it can open up non-normative and multiplicitous accounts of sexuality (such as Ahmed’s queering of phenomenology) that address the blind spots of Merleau-Ponty’s method. Bodily perception for Merleau-Ponty is characterized as pre-personal, anonymous, and general. With these terms, Merleau-Ponty indicates that perception occurs at a primordial, pre-conscious level that precedes any individual distinctions. Particularly, the anonymous body is a universally shared bodily structure that makes possible any and all conscious and deliberate acts that distinguish individual subjects.

1.2. The intentional arc:

Next, I develop an account of intentionality to argue that for Merleau-Ponty, sexuality is a key dimension of what he calls our “intentional arc,” a phenomenon structuring our relations with our environment and, more specifically, other subjects and their bodies. For Merleau-Ponty, every bodily gesture and act is underpinned by an intentional arc, an implicit meaningful orientation towards our surroundings. To define the intentional arc, Merleau-Ponty writes: “The normal subject sustains the meaningful world thanks to a non-thetic “intentional arc” that “projects around us our past, our future, our human milieu, our physical situation, our ideological

situation, and our moral situation; or rather, that ensures that we are situated within all of these relationships" (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 137). In other words, in every conscious or thetic act, the body-subject unconsciously orients itself in a meaningful way towards its embodied situation, influenced by several dimensions, including one's past experiences, sociohistorical situation, and physical conditions. To be oriented towards one's world in a meaningful way is to adapt to the demands of one's environment in a dialectic of activity and passivity. The body schema is closely intertwined with this intentional arc, as one's body brings sedimented habits along with it in its activity, rendering the past a present lived reality, akin to Bergson's notion of *durée* or lived time. Sexuality is a key dimension of the intentional arc, as it is not a matter of reflex or genital manipulation, nor is it a psychological association; it is a "current of life" that permeates all experience (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 162). Namely, Merleau-Ponty follows psychoanalysis's key claim that sexuality underpins all our conscious activity.

1.3. Sexuality

Sexuality implicates the living body and its bodily intentional arc as it necessarily involves intercorporeal communication, illuminating how our experience is structured by and dependent on other embodied subjects. To Merleau-Ponty, sexuality and existence are mutually-constitutive and interconnected. Sexuality illuminates for us a deeper significance for perception generally, showing how our worlds become meaningfully structured and how we appropriate the objects in our environment. Following Freudian psychoanalysis, Merleau-Ponty contends that sexuality is imbued in every act, but unlike Freud, claims that no act can be wholly reduced to pure sexuality (Landes 2013, 228). To ground Merleau-Ponty's theory of sexuality, I introduce key arguments

and concepts first instituted in earlier chapters of *Phenomenology of Perception*, including the body schema and intentional arc, and present pathological case studies applied by Merleau-Ponty in "The Body as a Sexed Being" in his account of sexuality, including that of a brain-damaged veteran named Schneider, and an unnamed young woman who has lost the ability to speak.

The chapter of *Phenomenology of Perception* dedicated to a detailed discussion of sexuality is named "The Body as a Sexed Being." This chapter of *Phenomenology of Perception* draws upon previous ones, incorporating the key notions of the habit body, body schema, intentional arc, and, as in former chapters, opens with a discussion of the inadequacy of intellectualism and empiricism. For Merleau-Ponty, the intentional arc is a pre-reflective awareness and orientation towards our environment as a meaningful situation. Sexuality highlights the intentional arc, as it is not a matter of reflex or genital manipulation, nor is it a psychological association; it is a "current of life" that permeates all experience (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 162). Underneath every act is the intentional arc, of which sexuality is a key dimension. Merleau-Ponty writes that the goal of this section is "to elucidate the primary function whereby we bring into existence, for ourselves, or take a hold upon, space, the object or the instrument, and to describe the body as the place of this appropriation" (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 156). That is to say, he aims to explain how embodied subjects come to perceive the objects of their intentionality and their world through sexual life.

Merleau-Ponty claims that through sexuality, we can understand "the genesis of being," or how the world comes to be for us as a meaningful structure (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 156). When we are attracted to or directed towards another person, their meaning to us is not pre-constituted or given, but occurring in an ongoing dialectic process as a communication between one's own embodied subjectivity and the other subject's (Langer 1989, 50). By communication, I mean an

embodied relation and expression between body-subjects based in structuralist conceptions of language as a repository of established meanings conveying information. When one is attracted to someone, it is not because it is an objective fact or attribute of this person, but a personal and unique meaning that emerges over time through an intercorporeal, carnal dialogue. Further, someone with this meaningfulness for us does not necessarily have the same meaning as desirable for someone else, showing that the objects of our perception are never pre-constituted, but always an incomplete becoming through a dynamic dialectic with the embodied subject, which is an ambiguous reality. To be a being for whom sexual meaning structures their world, means to both see and be seen, touch and be touched, illuminating the fact that bodily perception always points to a world beyond ourselves, a world not of one's own making, and this world is always intrinsically linked to a perceiving subject. The constitution of the world and the subject occur in a basic dialectic wherein the subject is formed by its engagement with the world, and the world is not pre-given but comes to be meaningful through this bodily flow towards it. The body is always both capable of sensing and being sensed. To this end, Merleau-Ponty writes, "We will, all at once, discover sexual life as an original intentionality as well as the vital roots of perception, motricity, and representation" (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 160). For Merleau-Ponty, sexuality illuminates how we generally live and how we typically move in and occupy space as beings for whom life is existentially meaningful. In arguing for the originary character of sexuality, Merleau-Ponty offers a theory that sexuality is a function of expression and haunts every experience as an existential dimension (Landes 2013, 156).

For Merleau-Ponty, sexuality is a primary and basic expression of existence reflected in all human acts. Following classical psychoanalysis, Merleau-Ponty understands sexuality as an

underlying current of every gesture. As such, it highlights how meaningfulness is co-constituted between self and world as a dialectic. According to Merleau-Ponty, sexuality expresses existence as "speech expresses thought…because existence accomplishes itself in the body" (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 169). In other words, the originary ambiguity of the body and subjectivity is especially clearly reflected in the domain of sexuality. For Merleau-Ponty scholar Donald Landes "...sexuality is a manner of being in the world through an intentional arc that sketches out sexual possibilities, a manner of being *sexually situated*" (Landes 2013, 89). In other words, we understand our worlds as motivated and meaningfully -structured by sexual significance and possibilities. Yet, unlike psychoanalysis, for Merleau-Ponty unconscious drives do not act on us causally, but rather motivates us along with the other dimensions of the intentional arc. Monika Langer argues that to Merleau-Ponty sexuality is a "living dialogue" in which my incarnate subjectivity is involved with another. One's body becomes oriented towards another body, but at the same time one is an object of the other's gaze.

In "The Body as a Sexed Being," Merleau-Ponty contends that Freudian psychoanalysis is correct in its assertion that sexuality is key to understanding how human existence is experienced in general because it underlies every conscious act, shapes and structures our worlds and relations with other body-subjects. However, for Merleau-Ponty, it is through the intentional arc rather than an unconscious biological drive that sexuality is projected onto the world: "If the sexual history of a man gives the key to his life, this is because his manner of being toward the world – that is, toward time and toward others – is projected in his sexuality" (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 161). For Merleau-Ponty, sexuality offers the "key" to a person's life because it demonstrates the intentional arc–how one's perceptual experience is

unconsciously and non-thetically shaped by multiple dimensions that orient one's experience in a meaningful way, offering possibilities for action. Merleau-Ponty deems these possibilities for action "motor intentionality," the body's lived capabilities and potential. Sexuality is a key layer, but not the sole layer, of this "I can" that structures one's experience. One's "manner of being toward the world" is projected in sexuality as one's past actions and future possibilities are culminated as a living present through sedimented habit. Furthermore, one's spatiality, cultural and ideological situation are also projected around oneself in this schema. Rather than unconscious sexual drives causally acting on one's behaviour, a multiplicity of existential dimensions are underpinning one's actions through the intentional arc, and none are reducible to or take precedence over the other (Landes 2013, 114). In other words, through our sedimented past, our habits that take on an autonomous character and other embodied subjects engage in a fundamental dialectic to structure our perception (Toadvine 2009). The goal of this section of my thesis is to establish how it is that we can have a world– how it is that one can come to perceive objects, and Merleau-Ponty claims that the body is the site of this process. To explain this, Merleau-Ponty will illuminate the embedded and inseparable relation between the body and its environment, or the "phenomenal field," the ambiguity between the psychic and physical, the embodied subject and their world (Landes 2013, 147). When the body opens itself to the world, it imbues meaning onto its objects. Merleau-Ponty examines the process of desiring a person's body sexually, in order to demonstrate how it is that the body can perceive objects in the first place.

Merleau-Ponty draws upon Freud's account of *libido* and the *unconscious* to argue that sexual meaning underpins all our lived experience. However, the psychoanalytic view of libido as drive or instinct falls into the traditional dichotomous empiricist and intellectualist prejudices that

Merleau-Ponty intends to avoid. As in earlier sections, Merleau-Ponty introduces the chapter by critiquing both the "intellectualist" and empiricist approaches towards sexuality. The intellectualist proposes that all phenomena stem from our constituting consciousness projecting upon the world. In a similarly one-sided view, empiricism accounts for phenomena through sensation exclusively, privileging an exterior and mechanistic explanation of experience. These classic prejudices share a common one-sidedness, with intellectualism promoting pure interiority and empiricism pure exteriority. In like fashion to these "classical prejudices," Freud's method reduces all human motivation to resolved or unresolved childhood sexual development, failing to take other dimensions of the intentional arc into consideration. Freudian psychoanalysis suggests that through the *unconscious*, sexuality mechanistically causes all human activity, reducing sexuality to an empiricist prejudice. Throughout the chapter, Merleau-Ponty both draws upon traditional psychoanalysis for its insight that sexuality structures our everyday existence and develops a critique of its one-sided biases.

Neither of these traditional methodologies sufficiently accounts for the ambiguity and reflexivity inherent in human sexuality. Merleau-Ponty likens sexuality to affect, emotions felt through bodily states. According to phenomenologist Suzanne Cataldi's *Emotion, Depth, and Flesh*, affect in Merleau-Ponty's work is defined as "the creation and (secreted) conveyance of 'lived' meanings, which emerge 'in' the expressive space of a body's purposive movements" (Cataldi 1993, 100). That is, through our repetitive bodily movements, we come to imbue our space with personal affective meanings over time. Space and material objects are not experienced as mathematical measurement, but as bodily and emotional significance. To this end, Merleau-Ponty writes "...an object appears to be attractive or repulsive before it appears to be black or blue, circular or square" (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 26). For Merleau-Ponty, affective life,

the emotional and physical states of pleasure and pain, are “shot through with intelligence” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 71). Affectivity imbues bodily intentionality with lived meanings, that is, not psychological representation, but meanings experienced directly through feeling. Accordingly, it is not simply a matter of reflex or mechanism, nor a matter of representation, but an ambiguity between these dimensions that makes sexuality possible: “Pathology brings to light, somewhere between automatic response and representation, a vital zone in which the sexual possibilities of the patient are elaborated” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 158). In other words, neither physical nor psychical accounts alone can accurately capture sexuality; instead, it is an inseparable ambiguity between these dimensions. Merleau-Ponty discusses sexuality and affect interchangeably because he aims to share a more general insight using sexuality as one such example of an existential dimension where we experience lived meaning. Through affect, the ambiguity of world and self and mind and body are highlighted. Further, intercorporeal ambiguity occurs where one body directed towards another is both subject and object in the eyes of the other.

To refute the traditional mechanistic and intellectualist accounts of affect and sexuality, Merleau-Ponty introduces a psychological case study of a World War 1 veteran named Johann Schneider, a man with a brain injury from a shell splinter (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 157). In 1915, Schneider was hit by these shell splinters or shrapnel during front-line service. He was treated by the noted Kurt Goldstein and Adhemar Gelber, a neurologist and a Gestalt psychologist, respectively (Mooney 2023, 131). Schneider displayed what psychologists at the time called psychic blindness, but Timothy Mooney argues that today we would diagnose him as having “associative visual agnosia, the selective impairment of the ability to recognize visual objects” (Mooney 2022, 131). Schneider’s example is used throughout the whole of *Phenomenology of*

Perception, but is significant in the case of sexed being as Goldstein and Gelb note that he no longer shows any interest in sexual activity nor displays any sexual desire. To test Schneider, the psychologists showed him pornographic images and films, discussed sexual topics, and pointed out women in the street. Kissing is no longer meaningful to him, and he never initiates sexual intercourse. If sexual activity is interrupted, he does not continue to seek satisfaction.

Merleau-Ponty argues that if sexual desire were merely a matter of reflex, as the empiricists argue, then Schneider's sexual life would not be affected by his injury, as he still possesses the physical capacity to become erect or orgasm as a basic bodily function. If sexuality were a mere matter of genital stimulation, as the empiricist attitude implies, then the brain injury Schneider suffered should have increased his sexual activity and desires, not diminished them, since the intellectual "constraints" on his activity have been lifted. Nor would Schneider be affected if sexuality were a mere matter of representation, as "If this conception were correct, then every sexual incapacity would have to be reduced either to the loss of certain representations or to a weakening of pleasure." (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 179). Yet, Schneider experiences a decrease in nocturnal emissions, which cannot be explained in terms of ideas or representations, demonstrating that sexuality must still necessarily involve the physical as well as the psychical. Schneider does not possess the ability to see someone sexually or romantically; he can only judge them by their character. Schneider has the basic capability to orgasm, akin to that of a reflex, and additionally can represent other people as meaningful, but he cannot connect these two realms, therefore his life cannot have an erotic dimension: "Perception has lost its erotic structure both spatially and temporally" (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 158). In other words, his perception is not imbued with sexuality and he never "launches" his own sexual agency; his life

no longer possesses sexual meaning. Past sexual experiences do not shape his intentional arc, they are simply forgotten. According to Merleau-Ponty commentator Gavin Rae, Schneider "...has lost erotic perception, instead being confined to the emotional neutrality of objective perception, with the consequence that his sexuality is not based on an organic, spontaneous bond with another body but "from a decision made in the abstract" (Rae 2020, 170). In response to the results of Scheider's case, Merleau-Ponty then declares that sexuality must involve a "physical aura," a necessarily bodily significance, but maintains that it cannot simply be reduced to this element either. Accordingly, the state of sexual arousal can only be understood as a dialectic between representation and stimuli, and as a unified yet dynamic process within the entire lived body and its phenomenal field.

What Schneider has lost can neither be accounted for by representation nor reflex, as he has lost the capacity to form sexual significance, and further, to experience his environment as affectively-charged in general. Schneider can manipulate his body or the body of another person, he can achieve orgasm, but he cannot see these processes as meaningful elements of his life. In other words, sexuality no longer shapes his experience in a meaningful way, it does not factor into his "intentional arc." Sexuality does not motivate Schneider's actions as he can no longer see the world in an erotically-charged manner. Neither can he experience his environmental situation as imbued with any form of affect: "The sun and the rain are neither joyful nor sad; his mood depends only upon elementary organic functions; the world is affectively neutral" (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 194). For Schneider, space is experienced as void of emotional signification, highlighting how for the "normal" patient, space is experienced as lived and imbued with personal meanings, varying from milieu to milieu.

Additionally, sexual desire is not directed towards a static object, but towards another living, incarnate subject. While one experiences oneself as a subject, one is made object in the eyes of the Other. Merleau-Ponty briefly invokes the Hegelian master-slave dialectic to elucidate his conception of intersubjectivity in sexuality. To receive the recognition we seek, we need to first recognize another subject as an agent just as we are, not just a body but a body possessing a consciousness akin to one's own:

Insofar as I have a body, I can be reduced to an objectbeneath the gaze of another person and no longer count for him as aperson…But this mastery is a dead end, since, at the moment my value is recognized by the other's desire, the other person is no longer the person by whom I wanted to be recognized (Merleau-Ponty, 170).

That is, if one attempts to master the Other as a mere object, their pursuit will be fruitless, as one desires a body-subject "animated by a consciousness," not simply a body as object (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 170). If we conceived of sexuality as mere reflex, as Schneider experiences it, it would no longer be sexuality, argues Merleau-Ponty.

The majority of *Phenomenology*'s section on sexuality is devoted to a critique of Freudian psychoanalysis's empiricist and intellectualist prejudices. While Merleau-Ponty grants that Freud does argue that the sexual and the genital are not synonymous, he nevertheless argues that he falls into the same mechanistic physiology that Merleau-Ponty disputes, as the libido is grounded in a biological drive similar to the empiricist prejudices (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 164). Further, psychoanalysis reduces all existence to the sexual motivations of the unconscious, ignoring other key elements. For Freud, the unconscious motivates our behaviour, our drives act on our bodies

mechanistically to cause our actions. This is first discussed at length in the 1905 work *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, where stages of sexual development in childhood are analyzed as the roots of adult neuroses in the essay "Infantile Sexuality." Later, this theory of the drive is developed further to discuss political motivations in *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Merleau-Ponty contends that while sexuality is imbued in all activity, it is not the sole factor of our intentional arc. Put differently, for Merleau-Ponty every human act is sexual, but it is never entirely reducible to sexuality alone, and we can never experience pure sexuality, we are always enmeshed in our world in a concrete situation.

Merleau-Ponty introduces another medical study to develop his critique of psychoanalysis, a young woman who has lost her ability to speak, a condition called *aphonia*/*anosognosia*, due to being forbidden from seeing the man she loves. Merleau-Ponty sources this example from psychologist Ludwig Binswanger, who primarily explains her condition as an unresolved oral phase of development (Mooney 2022, 203). Like Schneider, this patient's condition cannot be explained away in terms of mechanism or representation. The girl has not lost the physical capacity to speak, she still possesses vocal chords, teeth, a tongue, and the parts of the brain necessary to communicate. On a Freudian view, her condition can be wholly reduced to a stunted oral phase of sexual development rooted in the unconscious. For Merleau-Ponty, however, the world of the girl has changed, and accordingly so has her bodily intentionality. By unconsciously closing herself off to the world of language, the object of her affections in effect "disappears." She then withdraws from her world and loses a "field of possibilities" (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 165). Classical psychoanalysis does not capture the embodied element of her situation, nor does it address how the body is an expressive power of coexistence and communication with others. As in the Schneider example, neither intellectualism nor empiricism is adequate; only an

ambiguous dialectic between the physical and psychic can sufficiently explain her condition. Sexuality expresses basic intersubjective coexistence, and in refusing speech, she refuses the entire sphere of others. To this end, Merleau-Ponty writes "...speech is, among all bodily functions, the most tightly linked to communal existence, or, as we will say, to coexistence. Aphonia, then, represents a refusal of coexistence…The patient breaks with the relational life of the familial milieu. More generally, she tends to break with life itself" (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 163). Here, Merleau-Ponty rejects the Freudian reductionist explanation, arguing instead that the young woman's condition reflects a more general existential significance, namely, a pre-conscious refusal of the realm of communication with the external world. The girl does not consciously or deliberately decide to refrain from speaking, but neither is she physically incapable of speech, her vocal chords and mouth are intact. This indeterminate state follows Merleau-Ponty's theory of ambiguity, as her condition cannot be reduced to a pure physical nor a pure psychic concern.

The treatment of sexuality in "The Body as Sexed Being" anticipates the following section on language by discussing the body as a form of fundamental expression with others. Namely, sexuality reveals how the body expresses "intentionality and the power of signification" (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 179). Sexuality expresses our existence with others, akin to a form of language, as it involves an intercorporeal and intersubjective communication expressing one's feelings and motivations.

Section 2: Feminist Critiques of Misogyny and Heteronormativity in “The Body as a Sexed Being”

2.1. Misogynistic sexual objectification in Merleau-Ponty’s account of sexuality

I argue that Merleau-Ponty’s conception of sexuality is rooted in an androcentric perspective that legitimates misogynistic sexual objectification as a natural and universal characteristic of perception. I contend that the chapter “The Body as a Sexed Being” and its treatment of pathological cases, particularly of the patient Schneider, reinforces the notion that only the masculine perspective is afforded subjectivity, while the feminine is relegated to an objectified body devoid of agency.

According to Merleau-Ponty’s very own account of sexuality, it necessarily involves intersubjective and intercorporeal communication: “We do not attempt, then, to possess a body, but rather a body animated by a consciousness” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 170). Yet, the tests conducted in the Schneider case are accepted uncritically by Merleau-Ponty as sufficient methods of determining “normal” sexuality. According to this paradigm, the criteria for normal and healthy means exclusively male, heterosexual, and disembodied voyeur.

Despite his critique of psychoanalysis as naturalistic and biologically deterministic, he nevertheless falls into the very same assumptions that it does. Merleau-Ponty makes assumptions that promote the conceptions of sexuality that he critiques (natural, biological, ahistorical) as normative. According to Merleau-Ponty the body is "always something other than what it is: always sexuality at the same time as freedom, always rooted in nature at the very moment it is transformed by culture" (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 205). Yet, Merleau-Ponty does not thoroughly

analyze social and historical conventions of sexuality, and sees sexual objectification of women as a normal expression of sexuality rather than a symptom of patriarchal exploitation, or, as Butler declares, he sees "misogyny as an intrinsic structure of perception" (Butler 1989, 181). Similarly, according to Butler, Irigaray argues that for Merleau-Ponty, so-called universal and general language is not "neutral or indifferent to the question of sex; it is masculinist, not in the sense that it represents the contingent interests of men, but in the sense that it consistently disavows the identification of the universal with the masculine that it nevertheless performs" (Butler 1989, 335). In other words, Merleau-Ponty claims to be taking a historical and intersubjective approach while simultaneously identifying the universal with the masculine, and I argue that this is made most apparent in "The Body as a Sexed Being."

Lacan's Four Fundamentals of Psychoanalysis Seminar XI includes a commentary and critique of Merleau-Ponty's *The Visible and the Invisible* and its conception of "the gaze." Lacan argues that the gaze is a "scopic drive," rather than a matter of perception. Further, Lacan prioritizes the gaze as the point at which one is looked at by the Other. Rather than an unified intertwining or ambiguity between the seer and the seen, for Lacan, the Other's gaze is constituted as a fundamental lack or gap (Lacan 1998). Lacan's conception of the gaze allows for an insurpassable difference that cannot be absorbed into a unified system.

As Luce Irigiray raises in her essay "The Invisible of the Flesh," Merleau-Ponty privileges the visual sense in *Phenomenology*, and I argue that he does so whilst legitimating and reifying patriarchy as normative through the male gaze. In the analysis of Schneider, the normative and healthy sexuality is assumed to be a male one who sexually objectifies his object of desire, a feminine body. In this dynamic, the subject is the active voyeur, while the feminine object is trapped in his gaze as a patient. To this end, Luce Irigaray writes that Merleau-Ponty's "...whole

analysis is marked by this labyrinthine solipsism. Without the other, and above all the other of sexual difference, isn't it impossible to find a way out of this description of the visible?" (Irigaray 2006, 183). Put differently, Merleau-Ponty's account of perception is characterized by a male-centric and vision-centric first-person description that fails to account for sexual difference and the other senses, including the tactile and its importance to the maternal. According to Elizabeth Grosz, visual relations in Merleau-Ponty's thought "in overpowering and acting as the model for all other perceptual relations, submits them to a phallic economy in which the feminine has always figured as a lack or a blind spot" (Grosz 1999, 155).

2.2. Heteronormativity in Merleau-Ponty's account of sexuality

I argue that Merleau-Ponty's conception of sexuality also codifies heterosexuality as the normative "healthy" and normal sexuality, implicitly marginalizing variation in sexual orientation as pathological. This is closely connected to my previous critique that the normal sexual subject in "The Body as a Sexed Being" is invariably male, as heteronormativity is entrenched in the strict gender roles that support it.

Merleau-Ponty's conception of sexuality "at once liberates and forecloses the cultural possibility of benign sexual variation" (Butler 1989, 176). In other words, his philosophy seems to hold potential for sexual variation due to his rejection of binaries and understandings of sexuality. However, at the same time, his conception of sexual desire is exclusively natural, biological, and ahistorical, marginalizing variance in sexuality. In their early reading of Merleau-Ponty, Judith Butler writes: "The appeal to a natural desire and, as a corollary, a natural form of

human sexual relationships is thus invariably normative, for those forms of desire and sexuality which fall outside the parameters of the natural model are understood as unnatural and, hence, without the legitimation that a natural and normative model confers" (Butler 1989, 175). In neglecting to address the heterosexual bias present in the Schneider case, Merleau-Ponty promotes androcentrism and hierarchical heteronormativity. That is, not only does Merleau-Ponty take heterosexuality to be normative, but also tacitly conceives of this model in terms of patriarchal dominance and sexual objectification. Androcentrism is defined as the centering and privileging of a universal male perspective, and interrelated but differently, heteronormativity is the perpetuation of heterosexuality as normative, thereby relegating all sexual and gender variance that does not conform to its norms as deviant and pathological. Heteronormativity and andro/phallocentrism are interrelated, as the normative model of heterosexuality is based upon gender norms upholding patriarchal domination and the nuclear family. When examining Schneider's condition, Merleau-Ponty takes for granted that the masculine heterosexual body-subject is the default:

> ...the visible body is underpinned by a strictly individual sexual schema that accentuates erogenous zones, sketches out a sexual physiognomy, and calls forth the gestures of the masculine body, which is itself integrated into this affective totality. For Schneider, however, a feminine body has no particular essence (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 158).

In this passage, it is made apparent that the "normal" sexual subject for Merleau-Ponty is necessarily a male heterosexual one, reinforcing patriarchy and the notion that divergence in sexual orientation is unnatural or pathological. The notion of a "feminine bodily essence is

rooted in bioessentialist sexism–the theory that men and women are fundamentally different based on their innate natural sex characteristics. Merleau-Ponty's invocation of the "natural" body in his analysis of sexuality further reinforces this, contradicting his very own claim to a historically-informed conception of the body. In Butler's *Bodies That Matter*, they outline the oppressive structure of heteronormativity as "This exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed thus requires the simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings, those who are not yet "subjects," but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject" (Butler 1993, 3). In order for "normal" sexuality to define itself, it must relegate queer people to the abject and rob them of their status of subjectivity.

3. New Directions in Merleau-Pontian Thought - Critical and Queer Phenomenologies:

There have been several attempts to perform feminist re-conceptions of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. I argue that through appropriating Merleau-Ponty's concepts, the problematic aspects of Merleau-Ponty's own conception of sexuality in *Phenomenology of Perception* can be amended.

Iris Marion Young implicitly critiques Merleau-Ponty's conception of embodiment by drawing attention to the gaps in his theory, namely, how bodily intentionality is experienced differently by those with feminine social bodily expectations. Young describes the motion of the woman's body as "an ambiguous transcendence, an inhibited intentionality, and a discontinuous unity with its surroundings" (Young 1980, 35). By "ambiguous transcendence," Young suggests that in contrast to the traditional conception of reason as pure transcendence, women experience themselves in terms of a transcendence "laden with immanence" meaning they experience their own bodies as a burden and cannot overcome them to imagine bodily possibilities. The general

experience of intentionality discussed by Merleau-Ponty as a being-towards-the-world does not apply to feminized bodies, as they experience their own bodies as limitations and burdens. Further, they experience a discontinuity with both their own bodies and environment. Rather than experiencing their bodies as a continuous flow of motion, women conceive of their bodies as isolated and immobile parts disengaged with their surroundings, leading to a limiting of bodily capacities and possibilities. While an important intervention in Merleau-Pontian thought, Young nevertheless promotes an instrumentalist bias in evaluating what a body can accomplish according to patriarchal standards.

Sara Ahmed's work *Queer Phenomenology* appropriates a Merleau-Pontian methodology to highlight its relevance for queer philosophy. Ahmed analyzes the role of orientation in phenomenology as the inherent directedness-towards objects that characterizes consciousness, and applies this to the notion of queer sexual orientation as a phenomenological structure that shapes one's intentionality. Further, she explores the orientation of philosophy itself, and the undervalued perspectives and history that allows philosophy to be possible. In other words, the hidden views from "behind the table" are brought to the fore, thereby "queering" orientation and putting our everyday assumptions to question. (Ahmed 2006). Unlike Young's intervention, Ahmed addresses queer studies and critical race theory, making it a more intersectional and holistic approach accounting for the blind spots of early waves of feminism. This re-appropriation of Merleau-Ponty's thought is just one example of the rich potential for new directions in phenomenology.

The concepts I explore in Section 1 all anchor Ahmed's text, as body schema, habit, and intentional arc are all interrelated with the theme of orientation. The possibilities of motor intentionality shape one's orientation to objects and other bodies, or as Ahmed puts it "It is not

simply that we act in space, spatial relations between subjects and others are produced through actions, which make some things available to be reached" (Ahmed 2006, 52). In other words, one is oriented to the object of their perception insofar as they can "reach" it or project their "being-towards" it. Ahmed opens up Merleau-Ponty's thought in ways hitherto unexplored by illuminating how a theory with a seemingly heteronormative methodology can be harnessed for thematizing queer orientation.

Conclusion:

Despite the blind spots in Merleau-Ponty's method, including his reification of heteronormativity and misogynistic objectification, his prepersonal and ahistorical conception of the body, and his failure to account for inhibited intentionality in feminine socialized people, his insights into situated and embodied subjectivity and his alternatives to binary thought are nevertheless helpful for feminist philosophy. By recognizing and critically assessing the cultural and historical prejudices present in his work, particularly his legitimizing of sexual oppression, feminists may harness his thought for future, transformative thought. While Merleau-Ponty's treatment of sexuality contains assumptions that reinforce and naturalize misogyny and heteronormativity, it nevertheless offers feminist and critical phenomenology a framework to form methodologies free from these prejudices. Merleau-Ponty's thought combats strict

substance dualism and grounds itself in a theory of embodiment, providing the tools to address the very feminist concerns that it seemingly reinforces.

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