



Cultivating Ethos through the Body

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Abstract. The paper lays the groundwork for understanding Heidegger's original ethics in the context of embodiment. I draw upon Merleau-Ponty's account of the flesh to develop a new ontology of embodiment as the basis for ethics. This ontology is formulated by integrating three unique accounts of the embodiment, namely, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, Yuasa Yasuo's Eastern-based phenomenology of the body, and the emerging science of Psycho-neuroimmunology (PNI). In each of these accounts of embodiment, the flesh is revealed as simultaneously consisting of presence and absence, incarnation and transcendence, being and consciousness. As a result, the Heideggerian approach to ethics, which is based upon the relationship we have with being, can be realized on many levels of embodiment. This makes the cultivation of a holistic ethos more feasible. Such an ethos overcomes the shortcomings in Heidegger's ethics and, in particular, those revealed by Levinas, Levin, Krell, and Caputo.

For Martin Heidegger, "original ethics" requires the cultivation of a proper *ethos* (i.e., basic stance of dwelling in the world), which can only be found in relation with the event (*Ereignis*) of Being.¹ Heidegger's interest in our relationship with the event of Being is an attempt to recover *das Heilen* (the hale, wholeness, well-being, holiness) which, he feels, has been fragmented and eclipsed by traditional metaphysics. To recover a sense of the hale, Heidegger retraces an intellectual history of the question of Being and articulates an original ethics as an inherent and essential part of his own fundamental ontology.²

Of the many critiques of Heidegger's ontology and the ethics it entails, perhaps the most poignant comes from Emmanuel Levinas, who argues that ontology is inherently unethical because it seeks a comprehension of Being before acknowledging or caring for the other whom I encounter face to face.³ This is a justifiable critique of Heidegger and its implications have been developed in numerous works.⁴ The focus of this paper is to uncover and overcome one of the underlying reasons that Heidegger's ethics is vulnerable to the Levinasian critique, namely, his abbreviated account of human embodiment.

Heidegger did not ignore the body. In fact, he is concerned with corporeal life throughout his career. In his early writings and lectures, prior to *Being and Time*, Heidegger attributes "world" not only to human beings, but to all

living things, occasionally meditating on the corporeal life of plants and animals. “We miss the essential thing here if we don’t see that the animal has a world. . . . All life is there [ist da] in such a way that a world is there for it” (Heidegger, 1999).⁵ In *Being and Time*, Heidegger privileges *human* Dasein’s relation to being as he meditates on Dasein’s corporeal abilities such as touching, handling, speaking, listening, seeing, etc. Following *Being and Time*, Heidegger’s abiding interest in the body is exemplified in his 1929–1930 biology lectures, *Letter on Humanism*, and 1966–1967 seminar on Heraclitus where he reveals that the phenomenon of the body is the most difficult problem in formulating an account of existence (Krell, 1992, p. 26). Despite his enduring concern with corporeal life, however, Heidegger failed to formulate an explicit treatment of the body that would make it possible to appropriate into everyday life his intellectual insights concerning the question of being.

I have examined the critiques of Heidegger’s treatment of the body elsewhere.⁶ This paper will appropriate the themes of Heidegger’s ethics into a new ontological understanding of the body. Beginning with Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of the body, we find that the body-subject is the site through which perception takes place. As such, it is the primordial, pre-rational basis of meaning in the world. In his monumental work, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty reveals that the body is a living center of intentionality upon which rational reflection depends. The body-subject cannot be understood solely from an idealistic or materialistic perspective because the body is simultaneously presence *and* absence, incarnation *and* transcendence, being *and* consciousness. Merleau-Ponty retains and deepens this irreducible ambiguity of the *flesh* in his abbreviated work, published posthumously as *The Visible and the Invisible*. In this text we get a glimpse of an ontology of the flesh that effectively overcomes the dualisms of traditional metaphysics (e.g., subject and object, mind and body), which have prevented the cultivation of a healthy and holistically based *ethos*. By navigating between these dualisms, Merleau-Ponty opens the door to understanding our capacities of the body as ethical tasks. That is, understood ontologically, the body is a means for overcoming egoism and opening to the ontological depth of others.

To move through this door Merleau-Ponty opens, his account of the flesh will be supplemented by two innovative accounts of how the body functions. One of these accounts is an Eastern-based phenomenology of the body which focuses upon Qi (life force) and the anatomy of the meridian system through which Qi flows. In *The Body, Self-Cultivation and Ki-Energy*, Yuasa Yasuo draws upon the non-dualistic ontologies of Taoist and Buddhist thought to articulate an ontology of the body. This ontology makes the distinctions between traditional Western and traditional Eastern approaches to embodiment explicit.

The second supplement to Merleau-Ponty is an appropriation of recent research in neuroscience. In particular, the emerging field of psycho-

neuroimmunology (PNI) details the intertwining of the major systems of the body. In doing so, it forcefully undermines the traditional Cartesian distinction between mind and body, while suggesting a scientific description of Merleau-Ponty's account of the flesh. The similarities between Merleau-Ponty's non-traditional account of the flesh and these supplemental descriptions of embodiment make it possible to cultivate and embody the *ethos* required to appropriate Heidegger's sense of original ethics. The ontology of the body formulated from these accounts of embodiment lays the groundwork for ontological fulfillment while satisfying Caputo's (1993) concern for the afflicted flesh of the other by revealing the underlying unification of all beings in the flesh of the world.

The Ethics in Heidegger's Ontology

The cultivation of a healthy *ethos* is a process of self-development which requires a shift from everyday, ego-driven or self-interested consciousness to a more open and receptive mode of being that searches out an experience of the ontological depth of one's own experience and that of others. In everyday consciousness people tend to attach and lose themselves to the things of the external world by seeing them only as objects to satisfy egoistic desire. Heidegger describes this mode of existence as *fallen* wherein the authentic self is eclipsed by the 'they' (Heidegger, 1962, p. 210). As a 'they-self' we are usually relating to the world with fear; fear that my self or my identity as it has been shaped by my environment may not be real. I resist questioning myself or searching for my authentic self because I harbor an unconscious fear of what I might find if I look behind my everyday self. According to Heidegger, what individuals will find through sincere self-exploration is the incessant approach of my own death. Fearing my own annihilation, I pursue as many diversions as possible. Living in a world of diversions postpones the need to question the meaning of my own existence and that of the world in which I live. This cycle of responding to the fear of annihilation with more and more diversions deepens one's fallenness in the everyday world of the 'they'. Yet, it can never eliminate the inevitability of one's own death. Knowing that there is something not being addressed, Dasein is never fully comfortable with a life of diversions. Heidegger calls the they-self's lack of comfort in the everyday world *uncanniness* and every once in a while the experience of *uncanniness* gives rise to the call of conscience (Heidegger, 1962, pp. 232f). The call of conscience temporarily breaks through the noisy chatter and diversions of *dasman* to recognize Dasein's inevitable fate. Only by facing up to one's own death and anticipating it resolutely, can one begin to take hold of one's own possibilities by properly prioritizing and taking responsibility for them (Heidegger, 1962, p. 343). This transition from inauthenticity to

authenticity in *Being and Time* is an early indication of Heidegger's approach to ethics.

Following *Being and Time*, Heidegger shifts his focus away from the self to meditate on the question of Being directly. While the essential elements of his ethics remain the same, he no longer focuses on the shift from inauthenticity to authenticity. Instead, his later thought concentrates on the shift from calculative thinking to meditative thinking, wherein human beings become co-participants in the event of Being (*Ereignis*). Full participation in this event requires one to be open to others in their ontological depth. That is, we must allow others to reveal themselves fully without imposing our prejudiced ideas of who or what they are, or what they will say, upon them.

Heidegger describes the revealing of the other in its ontological depth as *es gibt* (there is/it gives). Understood in its most general sense, this *es gibt* gives the historical shapes of the "fourfold" of "earth, sky, gods, and mortals,"⁷ i.e., the historical worlds in which human beings dwell with each other and with the more-than-human world.⁸ In this historical-temporal giving, the other reveals only a part of itself while concealing most of itself. In this process of simultaneous revealing and concealing, Heidegger points to an abiding sense of mystery that pervades all beings. Unfortunately, this element of mystery is often masked by our persistent attempts to define, conceptualize, and totalize others. The tendency of individuals in everyday life to reduce others to a concept or a form, to interpret their words before they are uttered, seems an inevitable outcome of our philosophical tradition. From Plato's forms to Descartes' *cogito* and Husserl's transcendental consciousness, philosophy has reduced Being (and beings) to static, atemporal Being – a thing. These attempts to understand Being, according to Heidegger, have culminated in the modern epoch of technology wherein the emergence of the Being of others is interpreted as a challenging-forth. That is, the world and all of its participants are revealed to us as a challenge that we must overcome and dominate to satisfy self-interest and need. Seeing others – whether nature or human beings – as a challenge, compels us to respond with force and violence. For example, the unabashed development of large-scale technology, which is the primary justification, promise, and driving force behind the globalization of capitalism, succeeds by transforming all beings from living participants in a dynamic ecosystem into raw material with no inherent value of its own. Heidegger points out, however, that in this relationship of power and domination, human beings, along with Being in its many individual manifestations, are themselves reduced to "standing-reserve," i.e., things whose only purpose is to be used as a material to satisfy human needs. As long as we see others, human and more-than-human, as standing-reserve and, therefore, immune to the effects of violence, domination, and power, human beings and more-than-human-beings will be caught in the process of what Heidegger calls enframing (*Gestell*). We enframe ourselves by limiting our experience to relationships

of power and control and by fostering habits of thought and behavior which render us mere instruments of an economic system. Heidegger fears that this self-enclosing pattern is precisely where the integrity of life is threatened and the possibility for ethics destroyed.

In contrast to this relationship of enframing, Heidegger argues that a deeper, more authentic human experience can be found in preserving the “truth of being” which is accomplished by letting others emerge as they are in themselves, i.e., in their ontological depth (Heidegger, 1993, pp. 246f). For example, rather than looking at rainforests only from an ontic perspective which sees timber as a resource to make paper or build houses, we could see the rainforest ontologically, as a dynamic ecosystem in which millions of species including plants, animals, and indigenous peoples, dwell with each other. From a Heideggerian perspective we can say that the rainforest is a good example of the ontological event at play, revealing and concealing the event of being.⁹ The intricate interrelations and codependency among the millions of life-forms that dwell in the rainforest manifest a world full of meaning and ancient intelligence that precedes and exceeds the narrow confines of rational logic. To clear-cut the forests for the narrow pursuit of financial gain is to impose a limited understanding of the world upon the vast mystery of life, permanently destroying and concealing deep meaning and stunting the play of Being.

Because we are co-participants in the fourfold of being, these practices not only deprive plants, animals and indigenous peoples of life and freedom, they also threaten and diminish our own existence. The texture and richness of human existence is a function of the way in which we relate to Being. In our unwillingness or inability to listen to the voice of nature, to hear the animals communicate through song and sound, or the ancient wisdom of an indigenous community, we greatly diminish the texture of our own lives. We confine the range of possible experience to our particular socio-economic and cultural tradition. This detachment from our natural environment, from the more-than-human world, is an example of enframing. Enframing ends up making human experience self-referential, confined to its own horizon of understanding, and leaves us no standard against which we can measure the quality, dignity, or ethics of our actions.

For Heidegger, enframing is experienced primarily in the way we think. By looking upon the rainforest as raw material or standing-reserve and a source of financial gain, we close ourselves off from the ontological event that is the rainforest. In order to open ourselves to the ontological event, to the life or event of Being, whether in the rainforest, the rivers, or one’s relationships with other human beings, we need to shift our mode of thinking from calculative and representational to meditative. This shift entails the development of a disposition characterized by *Gelassenheit* (letting be) which allows us to experience the irreducible mystery pervading all beings. Through *Gelassenheit* we silence habitual and calculative modes of thinking and open ourselves to

the promptings that come from the ontological depth of other beings. This openness clears a space for the Being of the other to emerge as it is in itself. In preserving the other's irreducible otherness, we preserve our own integrity and deepen our experience of self and other.

On the other hand, as long as our ontological nature as "shepherds of Being" is covered over, all other ontic disciplines such as anthropology, history, psychology, and ethics will lead us further from our proper *ethos* (Heidegger, 1962, pp. 31–38). According to Heidegger, as long as we fail to think the meaning of the *question* of Being, and make that the context of all inquiry, we will find no release from the nihilism of the modern technological world. Without this context, our inquiries are based upon rationality, which is abstracted out of the wholeness of human existence. This fragmentation makes it impossible to find adequate meaning and purpose in human life. The lack of meaning and purpose is at the root of our nihilistic culture of self-indulgence, hyper-consumerism, and apathy. For Heidegger, a healthy *ethos* is primordial or originary because it is developed in relationship with the ontological emergence of other beings and their emergence is perpetual. Because the emergence of others is perpetually underway, the development of the *ethos* that is required to welcome that emergence is also perpetual. Hence, there is deep ontological meaning in our attempt to maintain ourselves in the *ethos* that welcomes the ontological emergence of the other. Furthermore, since our ability to respond to the needs of others depends upon our ability to see others in their ontological depth, the need to develop our *capacity* to respond is central to the *ethos* of original ethics. This is why Heidegger's notion of *ethos* is not only *originary* but it is also *ethics*.

In revealing the difference between relating to others from the everyday, ontic perspective as compared to the authentic or ontological level, Heidegger's contribution to twentieth century philosophy is immeasurable. Yet, in rejuvenating meaning within the question of Being, Heidegger does not go far enough in connecting the intellectual history of that question with corporeal existence, i.e., with our own developmental history as embodied beings (Levin, 1985, p. 116). This is a major impediment to working out an "original" ethics because the body holds deep meaning for human existence as well as great potential for ethical understanding, both of which are compromised, if not eliminated, when the body is not understood in the depth of its ontological being. But what does it mean to understand the body in "depth of its ontological being?"

David Levin points out that the problem that Heidegger faces in trying to understand the body is that his thought seems fixated in an irresolvable dilemma. For Heidegger, "thinking is confronted by an objectification of the body that takes place both in science and in common sense (and equally so in other debates of thought, i.e., empiricism and idealism, spiritualism and materialism, physicalism and transcendentalism), or we ask the 'ontological' question about the 'essence' of "the human body" (Levin, 1985, p. 57). While

the first option is clearly unacceptable to ontological thinking, the second is an example of essentializing thinking which reduces others to concepts and definitions. This is the type of thinking Heidegger was trying to overcome in raising the *question* of the meaning of Being. The problem with framing the question of 'essence' in thinking about the body is that in order to arrive at an answer we must "stand opposite the body, secretly detaching ourselves from 'the body' in a move that only perpetuates the conflict already inherent in dualism" (Levin, 1985, p. 60). This separation of consciousness from the body is precisely that which Merleau-Ponty denies. He spent his entire philosophical career demonstrating the naiveté of such a position.

Merleau-Ponty's Ontology of the Body

In contrast to traditional accounts of human nature which separate the mind from the body, and usually give dominion to the mind *over* the body, the guiding assumption for Merleau-Ponty is that consciousness is incarnated. The lived body, the body as we actually experience it, is simultaneously matter *and* spirit, presence *and* absence, incarnation *and* transcendence. As such, it is not an object in space along side other objects. The self is corporeal, a body-subject, existing as a third genus of being beneath and prior to subject-object dichotomies. Only a being with eyes to see and ears to hear can perceive the visible or hear the audible. Before the rational mind can dissect the world into concepts and definitions, the capacities of the body are already engaged with the world in the activity of perception. Hence, the body-subject is the basis upon which cognition and reflection take place.

This primordial, pre-rational body, while usually taken for granted, is responsible for accomplishing most of our everyday tasks. In fact, were reason called upon while doing some everyday tasks, they would become extremely cumbersome, if not impossible. For example, I do not reflect upon the spacing of the keys on my keyboard as I type. Through repetition, my fingers have learned to find the keys without rationally processing the location of each key individually. The relationship between my fingers and the keyboard is a complex one that involves the words that I am typing, the arrangement of the keyboard, the size of my fingers, etc. All of these variables constitute a situation that I understand prior to reflection. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, typing is not

to know the place of each letter among the keys, nor even to have acquired a conditioned reflex for each one, which is set in motion by the letter as it comes before our eye. If habit is neither a form of knowledge nor an involuntary action, what is it then? It is knowledge in the hands, which is forthcoming only when bodily effort is made, and cannot be formulated in detachment from that effort. (Merleau-Ponty 1962, p. 114)

Like walking or driving a car, typing is an example of the body's primordial operational abilities in everyday life. These capacities reveal the ability of the primordial body to provide a preliminary orientation toward the world upon which the reflective, calculative life of reason (and science) depends.

Although the body *can* be viewed as an object and experienced as a subject, Merleau-Ponty's analysis of the primordial body-subject demonstrates that it is never reducible to either object or subject. The primordial body is engaged in a *reciprocal* relationship with the entities that surround it. David Abram describes this reciprocity in the following way.

In the act of perception I enter into a sympathetic relation with the perceived, which is possible only because neither my body nor the sensible exists outside the flux of time, and so each has its own dynamism, its own pulsation and style. Perception in this sense, is an attunement or synchronization between my own rhythms and the rhythms of the things themselves, their own tones and textures. (Abram, 1996, p. 54)

Merleau-Ponty brings to light the fact that what we first perceive of the world is not a static, inanimate conglomeration of things in mathematical space. Our pre-reflective perception of the world is meaningful because the world projects its own pulsation and rhythm, which creates a reciprocal, animated play of perception between self and world:

. . . in so far as my hand knows hardness and softness, and my gaze knows the moon's light, it is as a certain way of linking up with the phenomenon and communicating with it. Hardness and softness, roughness and smoothness, moonlight and sunlight, present themselves in our recollection not pre-eminently as sensory contents but as certain kinds of symbioses, certain ways the outside has of invading us and certain ways we have of meeting this invasion. . . .(Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 214).

As a symbiotic meeting between self and world, the act of perception occurs across openings in each which make them mutually accessible. These openings permeate the ontological make up of self and world. As a mixture of openings and closings, the ontological makeup of entities in the world precludes them from being fully present. That is, perception cannot fully contain an entity in one complete vision because entities do not exist as complete beings. Entities consist of openings and closings in process, and in relationship with others. In this groundbreaking phenomenology of perception, Merleau-Ponty brings to light the pervasive element of ambiguity in the symbiosis between self and world. This ambiguity cannot be captured in definitions or conceptualizations, but is the ground upon which they are possible.

Just as Heidegger's thought undergoes a shift away from what he feels is an overly subjective analysis of Dasein in *Being and Time* to a more contemplative and direct approach to (the play of) Being in his later work,

Merleau-Ponty (probably under the influence of the later Heidegger) makes a similar shift away from the analysis of the body-subject in the *Phenomenology of Perception* to the concept of the *flesh* in *The Visible and the Invisible*. In this abbreviated text (a compilation of notes for a major work interrupted by his untimely death), Merleau-Ponty penetrates into the ontological depths of embodiment by shifting his attention away from the body-subject's everyday mode of perception to focus on the ontological underpinning of self and the world: the flesh. The flesh refers not only to the human body-subject, but equally, to the corporeal world in which it exists. Because the world and all of its constituents are variations of the flesh, the boundaries between beings presupposed by the mathematical model of the universe are deconstructed. "When we speak of the flesh of the visible . . . we mean that carnal being, a being of depths, of several leaves or several faces, a being in latency, and a presentation of a certain absence . . . (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 136)."

In describing the flesh as "a being in latency" and "a presentation of absence," we hear echoes of Heidegger's meditations on *es gibt* (there is, it gives). Applying the notion of *es gibt* to items such as a water jug, Heidegger shows that nothing is fully present to us. For example, in order to understand a jug ontologically, Heidegger suggests that we look beyond its physical properties to examine the jug as a whole. As a whole, the jug also consists of the inner space formed by the shape of its physical properties. This inner space enables the jug to be "a container" and "a giver." When we consider the functions of the jug rather than its mere physical appearances, we begin to uncover its ontological significance. As a "container" and a "giver," the jug has a two-fold purpose: that of holding the water that is poured into it and that of dispensing the water when someone wants a drink. In dispensing the water, Heidegger reasons, the jug becomes a site for the event of being to unfold.

. . . in the gift of the outpouring that is drink, mortals stay in their own way. In the gift of the outpouring that is a libation, the divinities stay in their own way, they who receive back the gift of giving as the gift of the donation. In the gift of the outpouring earth and sky, divinities and mortals dwell together all at once. These four, at once because of what they themselves are, belong together (Heidegger, 1972, p. 173).

This meditation on the jug suggests that entities in the world have ontological depth which are comprised of latencies and absences that remain concealed as long as we continue to reduce the world around us to mere objects. In a sense, the jug is what it is not (its empty interior). Its (ontological) significance is found in the "presentation of an absence."

For Merleau-Ponty, the "presentation of absence" refers to the invisible that accompanies every exposure of the visible. By introducing the invisible as an essential component of the visible, Merleau-Ponty deepens his critique of the naive assumption that space is purely mathematical. Beneath the objective

world of uniform, mathematical space is an ambiguous, amorphous, textured *flesh* of the world, of which our body, “the sensible sentient, is a remarkable variant” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 136). “Between the alleged colors and visibles, we would find anew the tissue that lines them, sustains them, nourishes them, and which for its part is not a thing, but a possibility, a latency, and a flesh of things” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 132). This “possibility” or “latency” is brought into focus in the important notion of reversibility.

As a variant of the flesh of the world, we exist as the sensible sentient, the visible seer, and the tactile toucher. These reversibilities reveal the porous nature of boundaries between the body and the world with which it interacts. Merleau-Ponty writes,

. . . it is reversibility always imminent and never fully realized in fact. My left hand is always on the verge of touching my right hand touching things, but I never reach coincidence; the coincidence eclipses at the moment of realization, and one of two things always occurs: either my right hand really is interrupted; or it retains its hold on the world, but then I do not really touch it - my right hand touching, I palpate with my left hand only its outer covering. (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 147)

This hiatus between the toucher and the touched, the seer and the seen, however, is not a void. Like the empty space in Heidegger’s jug, the hiatus between toucher and touched carries deep ontological meaning. It is the invisible “zero point” between two solids that enables them to join together like the interstitial space between the cells of living bodies. Hence, the invisible is as much a part of the flesh as the visible. The perspective that reduces the objective world of things to isolated units existing side by side is revealed as a derivative of the primordial field of being called the flesh. This is why Merleau-Ponty writes that the flesh is not matter, mind, nor substance. Instead, it is something like the ancient Greek notion of an “element,” in the sense of a general thing, midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea, a sort of incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 139). As the principle or style of being, existing in latency among the entities of the world, the flesh is that which generates and receives the forms of entities in the world. It is “a texture that returns to itself and conforms to itself . . . or . . . the formative medium of the object and the subject . . .” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 146). The flesh is an *incarnate* style or principle by which beings interact and mutually constitute each other within a circle of reversibility. This circle encompasses the self and the world in which I live. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, “my body is made of the same flesh as the world . . . and moreover . . . this flesh of my body is shared by the world . . .” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 248).

Merleau-Ponty can recognize this reversibility of the flesh because of his ability to see that the physical world is everywhere animated. The flesh of the

world is both animate and the source of animation for all beings. In the climactic chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible* entitled “The Intertwining-The Chiasm,” Merleau-Ponty not only points out the reversibility of the flesh but also describes its animating power:

. . . if I was able to understand how *this wave arises within me*, how the visible which is yonder is simultaneously my landscape, I can understand *a fortiori* that elsewhere it also closes over upon itself and that there are other landscapes besides my own. . . . If my left hand can touch my right hand while it palpates the tangibles, can touch it touching, and can turn its palpation back upon it, why, when touching the hand of another, would I not touch in it the same *power to espouse* that I have touched in my own? (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 141 emphasis added)

Within the flesh is the *power to espouse*, the *wave of life* that arises within me and permeates all beings. David Levin suggests that in identifying this transpersonal and animating dimension of the flesh, Merleau-Ponty “deconstructs, in just one devastating sweep, not only the dualism of subject and object, but also the egology and objectivity of the body – and indeed, the entire complex of metaphysical representations within which the human body has been held captive” (Levin, 1985, p. 65). In deconstructing the traditional confines of embodiment through his ontology of the flesh, Merleau-Ponty has taken unprecedented steps toward tapping into the potentially transformative force of being, especially as it works through the body. We can only speculate as to what direction Merleau-Ponty would have taken these insights, but in working towards an original ethics characterized by the *hale (das Heilein)* (Heidegger, 1993, p. 254), we need to focus on how to appropriate the animating force of the flesh. To this end, we need to provide more detail to the non-dualistic account of the flesh while cultivating its potential for a deeper attunement to, and appropriation of, its animating force.

Supplementing Merleau-Ponty’s Account of the Flesh

The releasement of the body from metaphysical dualisms that Merleau-Ponty initiated is evident in that his idea of the flesh resonates not only with such influential thinkers as Heidegger and Derrida, but also with phenomenological accounts of the body and being outside of the Western philosophical tradition. For example, the goal of self-cultivation in Taoism and Buddhism is the attainment of *samadhi* (no-mind) which involves the overcoming of dualisms, such as self and world, mind and body. As it was for Merleau-Ponty, the guiding assumption in these ancient traditions is that the world and all of its constituents consist of matter *and* spirit, immanence *and* transcendence, mind *and* body. Just as the flesh consists of the *power to espouse* for Merleau-Ponty,

Qi (life-force) in Taoist thought animates the physical world. In Chinese medicine, for example, Qi is understood to be that which animates all life, propelling the development and growth of all beings, while developing along with them.¹⁰ Like the flesh, Qi is more than just a principle; it is the actual source of growth and development. Unlike a first cause that may initiate a process of development without itself participating in the process it initiates, Qi is inseparable from the movement of which it is the source. It is both cause and effect. “Like air, Qi has its own movement and also activates the movement of things other than itself” (Beinfeld and Korngold, 1991, p. 31). In general terms then, “matter is Qi taking shape. Mountains forming, forests growing, rivers streaming, and creatures proliferating are all manifestations of Qi” (Beinfeld and Korngold, 1991, p. 30).

Those who are familiar with Qi as the animating force of all life understand that its proper cultivation is crucial to human well-being. The Japanese term for self-cultivation is *shugyo* or *gyo*, which has the connotation of training the body, but it also implies training the mind or spirit (Yasuo, 1993, p. 3). Since Qi is operative throughout the entire human organism, its influence is crucial in the development of the mind and the body. Hence, the methods of self-cultivation which have evolved over centuries of practice, actually focus on the body as much as they do on the mind. Given the overlap between Qi and the Merleau-Ponty’s account of the *flesh*, an examination of the methods for cultivating Qi will demonstrate that the flesh can be cultivated towards ontological fulfillment.

Here I will focus on two ancient Chinese practices for cultivating Qi: medicine and martial arts.¹¹ Functioning at the interface between the material and immaterial of the body, Qi has an important role to play in the overall health of individuals. Recognizing this role, traditional Chinese medicine uses acupuncture as one of its principal methods for treating illness. Acupuncture is a technique used to influence the flow of Qi throughout the body. The guiding premise of acupuncture, and Chinese medicine in general, is that the body works as an interconnected organism. The different organs and systems of the body are connected and nourished by the Qi-energy that moves throughout the organism along a meridian system. Illness, especially chronic disease, usually represents an imbalance or blockage in the flow of Qi. Hence, the Chinese physician does not combat the symptoms of the disease primarily, but uses the symptoms as a means for discovering the underlying cause of the disease, the area where Qi is blocked or disrupted. When the physician locates the problem area, s/he manipulates the flow of Qi by inserting acupuncture needles at various acupuncture points located along the meridian system.

Meridians are channels or pathways linking together various organs and substances of the body as well as its surface and interior. Like the Qi that moves along these pathways, the meridians are invisible but embody a physical reality insofar as they carry nourishment and strength throughout the body. When

this flow is interrupted, causing an imbalance of energy, the physician manipulates the flow of Qi by inserting needles into the appropriate acupuncture points along the meridian pathways. Because the meridians connect the surface of the body to the interior of the body, the acupuncture needles can affect the interior flow of Qi, bringing it back into balance.¹²

While acupuncture is primarily used as a physiological treatment, its manipulation of the flow of Qi toward a more balanced state initiates a transition toward a more spiritual state for the individual as a whole. That is, as the blockage or disruption of Qi is dissipated, the energy of Qi is released from the site of the physiological disruption to a more free-flowing, efficient, and purified state moving throughout the body. This enables the body to enjoy a more efficient appropriation of Qi that can be used in all situations, rather than having it concentrated on one physiological disruption.

This transition is evident not only in medicine, but also in the self-cultivation of martial artists who emphasize the integration of emotion and Qi-energy into their practice. Yasuo draws a distinction between the martial artist and the modern athlete that is based upon their different conceptions of embodiment and the practices they develop as a result. In making this distinction, Yasuo outlines four levels of body structure, two of which are predominant in the Western approach to embodiment, while the other two are prominent in the Eastern conception of embodiment. The first two levels of embodiment, familiar to Western ideas of the body, are the external sensori-motor system and the coenesthetic system. The external sensori-motor system forms a circuit initiated by the passive reception of stimuli from the external world and the activity of motor nerves that respond to it. Yasuo compares the functioning of this circuit to a computer. Sensory organs, such as an eye or an ear, receive stimuli that are transformed into impulses that move along the sensory nerves to the cerebral cortex. At the cerebral cortex, these impulses are processed and then sent along the motor nerves to the motor organs such as a hand or a leg thereby initiating action. As with a computer, input is processed and an output is generated. But unlike a computer, the sensori-motor circuit interacts with and relies upon the second information circuit of the body: the coenesthetic level.

Yasuo describes this system as an internal information apparatus concerning the condition of the body itself. This system is divided into two subsystems: kinesthetic and somesthetic. The kinesthetic is made up of the motor nerves which carry commands from the cerebral cortex to the limbs, and the sensory nerves located in the muscles and tendons, which send messages to the brain with information about their condition. Among other things, this circuit is responsible for the body's coordination such as is required of athletes, craftsmen, and performing artists. The circuit of communication between the limbs and the brain is highly developed in such performers, which enables them to adapt to situations with spontaneous insight and grace. Yasuo suggests

that the kinesthetic circuit is what accounts for the intelligence and abilities of what Merleau-Ponty describes as the “body scheme.”

The second subsystem of the coenesthesia system, the somesthetic circuit, is centered on the splanchnic nerves. “These nerves send information to the brain about conditions of the visceral organs, but since their corresponding area in the neocortex or neocephalon of the brain is rather small, a splanchnic sensation cannot be clearly felt in ordinary circumstances, unlike motor sensation which can be localized” (Yasuo, 1993, p. 46). Since the part of the brain that is responsible for controlling this circuit is small, we are usually unaware of its functioning. Hence, this information circuit is most noticeable when something unusual takes place. For example, when an abnormality such as sickness occurs, the splanchnic nerves carry the sensation of discomfort or pain to the central nervous system, which gives a response in an attempt to compensate for the cause of the pain and restore balance to the affected areas. Like a thermostat that gives a signal to stop the heat supply when the area it serves is warm enough, the central nerves receive and send messages in order to maintain homeostasis within the body. According to Yasuo, the information that circulates within the coenesthetic system makes one conscious of the condition of one’s body. This awareness is heightened in the habits and memory developed through repetition of the body’s functions. For example, an athlete develops a skill by constantly practicing a movement. In doing so, the coenesthetic circuit forms a pattern of information that becomes a part of the system itself, bypassing the mental analysis of a movement that a novice must go through in order to master it.

The two systems of embodiment that Yasuo associates with the Eastern perspective are the emotion-instinct circuit and the quasi-body of the meridian system (discussed above).¹³ The “emotion-instinct circuit” is related to the automatic nervous system, which controls the visceral organs. The automatic nervous system is made up of sympathetic and parasympathetic nerves. “[T]he visceral organs maintain their normality when these two nerves maintain balance between being tensed and relaxed. When an extremely tense situation is prolonged, an abnormal condition occurs because of stress” (Yasuo, 1993, p. 48). Evidence of this process is mounting exponentially as stress is now recognized as the cause of many chronic diseases, such as arthritis, cancer, and heart disease. These diseases are usually not addressed until they manifest themselves in their final, most pronounced stages because, unlike the first two circuits, the emotion-instinct circuit is not directly connected to the cerebral cortex. Hence, the subtle messages that something may be off-balance, often go unnoticed, and so give disease the opportunity to take root. This often initiates the development of a chronic imbalance. These messages go unnoticed because the activities of the visceral organs are performed below a conscious level. In Yasuo’s model, the brain converts stimuli received from the visceral organs into an emotional response such as pleasure or pain and sends it to the

distal visceral organs. Since it is an emotional response, we usually do not have much control over it. Emotions arise within us, often without an awareness of whence they come, because they often are responses generated from an information system that has developed with very little, if any, input from consciousness. This dimension of existence has become more familiar to us through psychoanalysis. In our everyday mode of existence, however, we are less aware, less conscious, of the activities of the body as we move from the first information circuit to the third.

According to Yasuo, our lack of awareness concerning the emotion-instinct circuit and the quasi-body of the meridian system represents a crucial difference between Eastern and Western approaches to self-cultivation and the role the body plays in this process. For example (speaking in somewhat broad but useful generalizations), Yasuo asserts that modern athletes¹⁴ focus their training exclusively on the coenesthetic level and the motor activity it controls. They seek to strengthen muscles and limbs and improve motor coordination without any regard for the emotional development of the unconscious. In contrast, martial artists of Japan and China see emotional development as an essential part of their art. This difference is a result of the different understandings of the body at work in each culture. For the modern athlete, the body is understood as a machine-like thing with the goal of making that machine as fast and as strong as possible. In contrast, the goal for the martial artist is the cultivation of the whole person culminating in *samadhi* or “no-mind,” which involves a deep awareness and integration of the relationship between Qi-energy and the emotional-instinctual activities of the body. Thus, their training is focused as much on the unconscious and emotional activities of the body as it is on the conscious (motor) activities of the body, because balanced emotion and energy is an integral part of the art that is performed.¹⁵

Emerging Paradigms of Emotion and the *Bodymind*

As a supplement to Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of the flesh, Yasuo’s account of embodiment, and the methods for cultivating Qi, provide a solid justification for grounding Heideggerian ethics in the body. However, recent developments in neuroscience make it unnecessary to sharply distinguish Western and Eastern approaches to the body. One such development is an integrative field of research called Psychoneuroimmunology (PNI). Popularized by neuroscientist Candice Pert in her recent book, entitled *Molecules of Emotions: Why You Feel the Way You Do*, PNI research supports the claim that the mind and body are indistinguishable when viewed from the level of molecules and cells. This assertion is based on research showing the interconnection of “the three traditionally separated fields of neuroscience, endocrinology, and immunology, with their various organs – the brain; the glands; and the spleen, bone marrow,

and lymph nodes” (Pert, 1997, p. 184). These systems form a nonhierarchical network of communication that is linked together by signaling chemicals or information substances called ligands. Ligands consist of neurotransmitters (nervous system signals), hormones (endocrine system signals), and paracrines (chemicals that act locally and are rapidly destroyed) (Marieb, 1996, p. 77). Ligands bind to receptors on cells according to the chemical attraction between ligand and receptor. Receptors are like moving or vibrating keyholes that work in conjunction with the cell to which it is attached, generating a response to the connecting ligand. As a result of the discovery of ligands and the corresponding cell receptors, our understanding of how information is transmitted within the body increased exponentially. In the past, traditional neuroscience understood information to be transmitted as electrical impulses traveling across miniscule synapses to and from nerve endings. The informational network linked by ligands travels much more freely throughout the body and makes connections based on chemical compatibility.

Focusing on the chemical transmission of information, neuroscience underwent a radical shift in understanding the relationship between the body and brain as well as the body and mind. After the discovery that immune cells make endorphins, a chemical traditionally thought to be produced only by the brain, neuropeptide receptor sites were also found in the immune system. In fact, every neuropeptide receptor found in the brain is also found on the surface of the human monocyte, the largest leukocyte or white blood cell. Since monocytes have receptors for peptides that directly effect the way a person feels (such as opiates and PCP), a direct link between the immune system and emotions was found. Emotions have been traditionally associated with the unconscious psyche or mind. Given the molecular make up of emotions, it is logical to understand the body as that which stores the information of the unconscious:

Emotional states of moods are produced by the various neuropeptide ligands, and what we experience as an emotion or a feeling is also a mechanism for activating a particular neuronal circuit – simultaneously throughout the brain and the body – which generates a behavior involving the whole creature, with all the necessary physiological changes that behavior would require. (Pert, 1997, p. 145)

The implications of this thesis are immense. First, because the cells of the body, not just the brain, receive and secrete information-bearing chemicals, the whole body is an intelligence-bearing organism. Merleau-Ponty’s work already shows this from a phenomenological perspective. Now there is scientific research to confirm the body’s intelligence.

Second, the research showing the body’s intelligence emerges out of the Cartesian legacy which is largely responsible for the split between mind and body that has guided modern science, technology, and medicine. Since

neuroscience has uncovered the intertwining of mind and body, it is unnecessary for “postmodern” thinkers to completely dismiss Modern paradigms of research.

Third, because different systems of the body such as the immune system, nervous system, and endocrine system communicate via information substances and receptor sites on cells, the most effective approach to well-being is holistic. That is, the cultivation of self cannot focus on the mind as an abstract phenomenon that is separate from the processes of the body. Likewise, the well-being of the body cannot exclude the processes of the mind. Regardless of how external stimuli enter the organism, whether as a thought, an emotion (fear, anger), or a chemical (food, drug), its influence will spread throughout the organism, and will affect mind and body. In fact, from this perspective, one could reclaim Spinoza’s¹⁶ position that mind and body are merely different ways of viewing the same process. For our purposes, PNI offers a concrete approach to articulating the intertwining of the visible and the invisible in Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the flesh. Furthermore, it confirms Yasuo’s insistence on the need to consciously integrate the unconscious body, including the emotions and Qi-energy, if one is to cultivate the whole self.

The *Ethos* of Original Ethics

These supplements to Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of the flesh make it more feasible to cultivate an *ethos* that embodies *das Heilein*, the goal of Heidegger’s original ethics. By combining Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the flesh with Yasuo’s phenomenology of the emotion circuit and the meridian circuit of the body, as well as PNI, the corporeal dimension of Dasein’s thrownness is made explicit. By appropriating an Eastern ontology of the body and the science of PNI, methods of self-cultivation can focus on both the visible and invisible components of the body as a means of integrating psychological, emotional, physical, and spiritual dimensions of existence.

Since this account of the body is an explicit and unapologetic call for the primacy of *self-cultivation*, it may rekindle the objections made by Levinas (1969) and Caputo (1993), who argue for the primacy of ethical obligation toward the other. Yet, by bringing Merleau-Ponty’s thought into dialogue with Yasuo and modern science in order to appropriate Heidegger’s original ethics, it is possible to accommodate the concern for the other because advanced self-cultivation culminates in an experience of something like Jung’s “transpersonal collective unconscious,” or Merleau-Ponty’s “intertwining of the flesh.” What these notions refer to is the interdependence of all beings, human and more-than-human, that precedes our rational abilities for comprehension. At the higher levels of self-cultivation, we become aware of the blurred and porous division between self and others. In Chinese medicine, for example, the

manipulation of Qi, which is the underlying source of all life, reveals that there are no firm boundaries between interior and exterior or between self and other. Therefore, in response to arguments that original ethics is unethical because it is based on ontology, which reduces the other to the same, the ontology of Merleau-Ponty and Yasuo reveal that even at the level of the body, the self is other *to itself*. Therefore, in cultivating the self, one is already working with and toward the other. In arguing that ethics, not ontology, is primordial, and that the call of the other is my primary responsibility, thinkers such as Levinas and Caputo give no recourse as to how one can be prepared to hear the other's call. On the other hand, self-cultivation through the body is a process that is constantly preparing for the appropriate response. To hear the other's call, we must first overcome the narcissism that seems endemic to the modern human condition.

When I hear the call of the other from a well-cultivated disposition, I hear with my whole being and I am moved by what I hear. The voice of the other generates passion, emotion, and feeling in me, in my body. I am moved down to my very cells, and, further, as Yasuo points out, down to the very energy that sustains the life of my body. This energy is never neutral. It is influenced by moods, feelings, and emotions. Therefore, the way in which I receive and appropriate the energy that comes to me from the other will determine how I interact with the other. Unless I have achieved a balanced appropriation of the movement and tone of the information and energy that moves through my body, my understanding of the other's call and the response it generates will be determined, for the most part, by an ill-tuned unconscious. As such, my responses will be arbitrary and unreliable.

By releasing ourselves from traditional notions of fragmented subjectivity, we become aware of our participation in the play of primordial energy (Qi) or the field of Being that connects all beings in a dynamic interplay of creativity and dependence. In recognizing the otherness that pervades my "self," I step outside of the ego's tendency to totalize the other and into an ontological horizon from which I can understand, feel with and for, and relate to, the other. Hence, original ethics can be recovered from Heidegger's oversights if the body is understood in an appropriate way. This involves bridging Eastern, Western, and scientific conceptions of embodiment in addition to developing methods for gaining the necessary awareness of the body.

Notes

1. I want to emphasize Heidegger's notion of *Ereignis* to avoid the traditional conception of "Being" as a static universal presence. *Ereignis* refers to the differentiating event of becoming that constitutes and expresses the ontological emergence of individual beings in the factual world.
2. Heidegger (1985) distinguishes the "ground question" of the history of metaphysics from its "guiding question." The latter inquiries into Being as the objectified meaning

- of the totality of beings, and thus manifests a will to power and control over Being as an objectified presence. Heidegger describes this as the penultimate question of philosophy. The ultimate question, the ground question, asks what is Being as the historical process in which the Being of beings come to pass? “This question, the one which above all is to be unfolded and grounded, we call the grounding question of philosophy, because in it first philosophy inquires into the ground of beings as ground, inquiring at the same time into its own ground and in that way grounding itself” (Heidegger, 1985, p. 67).
3. There are other important critiques of Heidegger, most notably of his Nazi affiliation, which many argue is not in conflict with his thought.
 4. I deal with this critique in “Embodying Original Ethics: A response to the Levinasian Critique of Heidegger,” (Carey, 1997).
 5. This quote is taken from the forthcoming anthology edited by John Van Buren, Theodore Kisiel, and Thomas Sheehan.
 6. See (Carey, 1997), (Caputo, 1993), and (Krell, 1992).
 7. For a detailed discussion of the fourfold see “Building, Dwelling, Thinking” (Heidegger, 1971).
 8. The term “more-than-human” comes from (Abram, 1996). Abram shows that the more-than-human is an animated realm that we are most often closed off from due to our obsession with language and our anthropocentric concerns.
 9. Heidegger’s changes his stance on the ability of non-human life to participate in *Ereignis* (the event of Being). Van Buren (1994, pp. 258ff), points out that prior to *Being and Time*, in the 1925 Kassel Lectures, Heidegger held that plants and animals have worlds. That is, the world is meaningful for them and they are sites through which Being is manifest. In *Being and Time* and subsequent writings, however, Heidegger held that animals and plants are worldless. They exist primarily as ready-to-hand; that is, things that are there to be used as means to some other end. This anthropocentrism undermines Heidegger’s early openness and liberality concerning the ability for Being to infuse meaning into all life, not just human life. Also see, Krell (1993) for a treatment of Heidegger’s views on biology in the early 1930’s.
 10. As the source of all movement, while remaining inseparable from movement, the notion of Qi resembles *aporia* in Anaximander, *logos* in Heraclitus, *physis* in Aristotle.
 11. Meditation is another important practice used for cultivating Qi, though I do not have space to include this discussion here.
 12. For a discussion of this process and actual examples of how it works, see (Kaptchuck, 1983, 78ff).
 13. Although Yasuo associates this circuit with Eastern thought, there is powerful research emerging from the Western scientific paradigm that demonstrates the molecular and cellular constitution of emotions. This emerging field called *psychoneuroimmunology*, which will be considered below, provides a unique scientific ground to the unification of mind and body. In turn, possibilities for understanding Merleau-Ponty’s conception of the flesh as the site for ethical development are magnified.
 14. Following Yasuo, I am loosely associating “modern” athletes with “Western” in order to show a contrast between modern athletes and traditional martial artists. However, the distinction between “East” and “West” with regard to athletics and the understanding of the unconscious in relation to the body is not very clear since modern athletes in “Eastern” countries are employing many of the same techniques as those in the “West.”
 15. This is not to suggest that emotions are not important in the performances of modern athletes. Clearly they are important, which makes it more mysterious as to why their training does not focus on harnessing them more explicitly.
 16. See (Spinoza, 1982)

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