

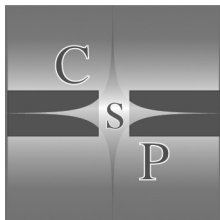
# Review Journal of Political Philosophy



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# REVIEW JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

## VOLUME 4: TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	vi
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### **Invited Essays: Ethics and Phenomenology**

1. "Husserl and the Responsibility and Sacrifice of Derrida" Janet Donohoe.....	1
2. "Touching the Other in Myself: Merleau-Ponty, Tactility, and Care Ethics" Maurice Hamington .....	17

### **Articles**

3. "Weithman and Rawls on Liberal-Democratic Citizenship" James Boettcher .....	36
4. "Strained Bedfellows: The Relationship between Politics and Philosophy in Platonic Thought" James Harrigan.....	54
5. "Secrecy and Responsibility: Georges Bataille's Philosophy of the Summit" Adam S. Miller.....	80
6. "Not Knowing Your Partners: An Argument Concerning Sexuality Within The Original Position" John Scott Gray .....	91
7. "Liberalism on Embryos: State Neutrality and the Stem-Cell Debate" Dov Fox .....	99
8. "Moral Duties And International Justice: Developing Allen Buchanan's Natural Duty Of Justice" Eric Roark .....	113

### **Book Review**

Espen Hammer, <i>Adorno &amp; the Political</i> Routledge, 2005, 205pp, \$ 31.95 (pbk), ISBN 0-415-28913-0 (Reviewed by Mario Wenning).....	133
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# HUSSERL AND THE RESPONSIBILITY AND SACRIFICE OF DERRIDA

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UNIVERSITY OF WEST GEORGIA

As my nearly-three-year old son comes running into the house from the backyard crying over his skinned knee, my one-year-old awakens from his nap, stands in his crib and cries to be freed from the limitations the crib bars pose. I, sitting at my computer attempting to get some writing done in a quiet moment on this warm summer day, am confronted with a dilemma, an ethical dilemma. Whose demands do I see to first and what about my own work project on the computer screen? How do we grapple with such everyday dilemmas, such competing demands? Is there a right thing to do in such a situation? In the following, I will put forth a Husserlian approach to ethics that offers a way to think through such dilemmas. In so doing, I will also suggest some ways in which Husserl's ethical theory can be viewed in conjunction with a Derridean presentation of sacrifice, responsibility and death. What are surprising in this are the elements of similarity between Derrida and Husserl. They are surprising for the most part because Husserl's later ethics involving the historicity of the subject, as well as an incorporation of the less rational elements of the subject's ethics are very often overlooked or simply not brought to light. In bringing this to light we will see that Husserl, while being a philosopher of consciousness, is also a philosopher who recognizes the sacrifice of the ego for the other that composes the daily existence of each member of humanity.

Husserl explains that conflict arises because each individual has committed himself or herself to certain ways of life that set up for one what Husserl calls "absolute oughts." He speaks of the absolute ought in terms of being called to a vocation. Each individual, he maintains, feels a personal love for a particular realm of value, for instance, academic philosophy, or child rearing. When a vocation is chosen in compliance with that love for a realm of value, an individual is claiming an authentic life. Such love for a realm of value gives life an encompassing, rational goal. One can realize a true self through developing

habits and convictions in line with this goal. This is one's personal *telos*.<sup>1</sup> The vocation that is chosen, establishes an absolute ought and the absolute ought sets up a realm of subjective absolute value. As absolute, this value does not rank within a hierarchy of values, but is a value to which one adheres completely. It is a value that cannot be compromised.

Husserl does not suggest that an absolute value is universally absolute. Rather, he retains the subjectivity of an absolute value by relating it to each individual's absolute ought. It is personal in that it is unique to each individual, but absolute in that it fundamentally binds a person as who he or she is. It provides one with value by providing one with a personal identity that is preserved through adherence to that ought. Note that Husserl is not identifying anything as being a realm of value outside of personal will. In committing my rational will, I create an ought that establishes absolute values.

The absolute ought places a burden upon the individual which requires that he or she make certain decisions or favor certain actions not necessarily universally upheld as being the best attainable in a situation. This means that there can often be a kind of reversal of values from how the general will might view certain goods. For instance, because my own children represent for me a realm of value that is absolute for me, I would be inclined to do my duty of feeding my one-year old as opposed to engaging in a more beautiful activity of singing Verdi's *Requiem*. As Husserl suggests,

There is an unconditioned 'You ought and must,' which is addressed to the person and which for the one experiencing this absolute affection is not submitted to a rational foundation nor is it dependent on an appropriate connection with such a foundation. This [affection] goes in advance of all rational analysis, even when such is possible.<sup>2</sup>

One's position can be in opposition to the general will precisely because the identification of one's values is not entirely rational or calculative, but instead depends upon what one has affection for. The values are individual and are decisively linked with personal identity. They are also linked with our singularity in that they are each person's duties personally, not duties that can be fulfilled by any other person. They are duties that are constitutive of my person

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<sup>1</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Aufsätze und Vorträge (1922-1937)*. Edited by Tom Nenon and Hans Reiner Sepp. Husserliana XXVII. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1989, p. 118. Hereafter referred to as *Hua XXVII*.

<sup>2</sup> Edmund Husserl, Manuscript B I 21, 61a as quoted in James Hart, *The Person and the Common Life*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1992, p. 325. All manuscripts are referenced with the designation provided by the Husserl Archives, Leuven, Belgium. My thanks to Rudolf Bernet, director of the archives, for permission to quote from the manuscripts.



and can thus only be accomplished by me. Our vocation requires a commitment of our will, which establishes lasting convictions that might at times put us at odds with the more general will. But such lasting convictions result in a concrete personal identity. Each position that an ego freely takes in any practical situation contributes to a habitual sedimentation of convictions. Without the sedimentation of such position-takings, there is no habituation, and without habituation, there is no development of convictions. Without these convictions the ego would be fragmented, dissipated.

The challenge is recognizing what our vocation and absolute oughts are. The relationship of the ego to its absolute ought is one that is not entirely rational. We come to an understanding of our vocation through active reflection upon our own identity and our own life. We must ask ourselves what it is that in our heart of hearts we really want. We must consider what is within our own capabilities that can bring us true joy. The answer to such questions is our absolute ought. Those are the things we should will above all others once we have settled upon them. But there is also the sense that this is a “calling.” Some realm of value calls to us as necessary and it calls to us in a way that makes it utterly evident. We are not attracted by just anything at all, but are drawn to those things that we must do if we are to remain ourselves. These things are evident to us as what supports our true self and what gives our lives lasting value. We also recognize those things that would be destructive of that true self and realize that we cannot engage in those activities without giving up our own identity. The idea of a calling that Husserl develops stands in tension with the idea of freely choosing a vocation or even any particular position. Are we truly free to choose a vocation if it is something we are called to? Husserl stresses that the calling comes from an *internal* love for a realm of value. We are drawn toward a vocation, but more fundamentally, we are drawn toward an ideal self that culminates in the ideal humanity. In being so drawn, we are compelled to choose the vocation that we love. Husserl’s understanding of freedom in this context is not an existential freedom, but a freedom to will one’s true self—a true self that is determined by nothing other than what I love.<sup>3</sup> My willing is always driven by the desire to be me and that desire is only fulfilled by choosing the vocation that represents for me the realm of value that I love.

Even though Husserl does not view the values arising from one’s vocation as universal oughts, this does not mean that they are solely subjective. Anything that is identified as a realm of value involves traditions inherited from prior generations. In order to be what one is, one must engage in certain behaviors and appropriate certain values that arise from an inherited tradition which one

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<sup>3</sup> What I love cannot be determined in isolation from humanity, so it is not as independent as it might at first sound. It’s connection with the community and with humanity will be discussed below.

has entered into. So to be a professor involves certain kinds of activities and values that one adopts from the tradition of a community that has certain expectations of professorial activity. Clearly, variation is possible as not every professor adopts the same professional values, but there are certain minimum values that are required in order to call oneself a professor or be recognized as a professor at all. Those values would, of course, be debatable, but they exist nonetheless.

Still, it is not at first evident that a vocation is an ethical task. To choose a vocation is to choose who one is. It is intimately connected with every aspect of one's life, not simply what one does for a living. It is *how* one chooses to be. Husserl claims that "we seek above all to develop genetically the ethical form of life as an (a priori) essential structure of possible human life, i.e. from the motivation which leads to it (the form of life) out of essential grounds."<sup>4</sup> Vocation, therefore, establishes the ethical form of life for each individual thereby defining his or her absolute ought. Vocational choice is what makes a human being truly human. Whatever our individual calling, we are each called to choose the best possible life

from now on in all its acts and with its total content of mental processes, the life that would be my best possible life—my best possible—that is, the best possible that I can live...That ought is the correlate of the will, and indeed of a rational will. The ought is the truth of the will.<sup>5</sup>

And for Husserl, this equates to a life that admits of no regrets. It is the life that each and every one of us is called to in our singularity. While this may seem like a relativistic position, in fact it demands of the subject the best possible life absolutely and is thus an absolute imperative. Again, as the quotation above shows, Husserl's position is that the absolute ought requires that all our acts from the moment of accepting a vocation be geared towards the best possible life that we can live.<sup>6</sup>

A complicating factor is that Husserl recognizes the possibility of multiple vocations each of which sets up an absolute ought. We think again of the example introducing this article. The choice of multiple vocations, the choice of motherhood and academia is possible on Husserl's account. It is, after all, what

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<sup>4</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Hua XXVII*, p. 29. "Versuchen wir zunächst die ethische Lebensform als eine (apriorische) Wesensgestaltung möglichen Menschenlebens genetisch, d.i. aus der zu ihr aus Wesensgründen hinleitenden Motivation zu entwickeln."

<sup>5</sup> Edmund Husserl, Manuscript F I 28, p. 199b "...von nun ab in allen seinen Akten und mit seinem gesamten Erlebnisgehalt so Leben, daß es mein bestmögliches Leben sei, mein bestmögliches, das heißt, das bestmögliche, das ich kann...Das Sollen ist Korrelat des Wollens, und zwar eines vernünftigen Wollens, das Gesollte ist die Willenswahrheit."

<sup>6</sup> Edmund Husserl, Manuscript F I 28, 199b.

we do. We commit ourselves to more than one realm of value. The values are absolute insofar as an individual is wholly committed to those values as constitutive of who he or she is. And our commitment to multiple vocations serves to increase the possibility that we will be confronted with ethical dilemmas that require sacrifice. There is no hierarchy of goods when absolute oughts come into conflict precisely because absolute oughts are absolute. Thus, one ought has to be sacrificed for another. Motherhood sets up an absolute ought, as does being an academic. When those things come into conflict, there must be sacrifice. There is no escape or compromise from this situation. One absolute must be sacrificed to the other. The sacrifice required is not one that is always based upon a rational determination of what is right, but is based upon the absolute love for a realm of value. Husserl's working out of this theory of ethics is in part an attempt to accommodate that love which does not fit into a thoroughly rational and calculative ethics.

The choice that one makes when faced with conflicting values is not one that can be calculated or placed into any kind of economy of exchange because the values to which one has committed oneself are absolute. They do not admit of degrees and cannot be placed in a hierarchy. Still, in making the choice to sacrifice one absolute value to the other, one is not forced to choose absolutely for one or the other. Often, we attempt to accommodate both values, but in doing so we sacrifice the *absolute* value of both, or we sacrifice one absolute value at one time and the other at another time. This is the result of the practical working out of the situation and it is inevitably a painful prospect for any individual. Its mark is left on the individual in conflict. The mark of sacrifice is the challenge to one's singularity. If it is one's vocational commitments that make one who one is, then any sacrifice of such commitments is a death of oneself. Thus, we are facing the death of self in each conflict of absolute oughts. The responsibility for such death lies with each individual.

The absolute ought commits one to a position that requires absolute self-responsibility. We cannot brush off decisions about our vocation as being answered by tradition. We cannot claim to subscribe to any particular way of life because we were born into a particular community. Rather, we must take upon ourselves the responsibility for our vocation, the values that it sets up, and the sacrifices it requires because we understand ourselves as beings who have chosen to accept or reject the culture to which we adhere. Husserl makes this clear in proposing that

the human, who lives already in the consciousness of his capacity for reason, knows himself then to be responsible for the right and wrong in all

his activities, be they cognitive activities or activities of valuing or directed action with an intended actual effect.<sup>7</sup>

Although we may think that vocation is important only for the identity of the individual human being, Husserl clearly maintains that the import is much more extensive. For it is only through the vocational commitments of each individual human that the culture of humanity is preserved. If one decides to become a professor, the realm of love defines one's absolute ought as a professor. By entering the community of professors, that person takes up the tradition and should do so in a responsible rather than naïve way. This does not mean that when she leaves the campus each day and goes home to be a spouse, or a mother, that she leaves that vocation behind. Husserl is concerned with the unity of roles that an individual takes up; mother, academic, spouse are all one individual and being a professor involves being a mother involves being a spouse and vice versa, just as being a scientist may involve being a churchgoer, and so forth. These roles cannot be parceled out and isolated from one another. Without a unity of these various roles, we find a human in crisis. "The philosophical-scientific doing becomes itself a branch of ethical doing and at the same time a necessary means of each ethical doing in general."<sup>8</sup> Our self-responsibility is a conscious maintenance of a united, ethical self.

What if one doesn't choose a vocation, is it possible to be mistaken about one's vocation? Husserl maintains that we determine our vocation through reflection upon the ideal that encompasses the whole of our lives. The ideal is what is desirable through and through and meets the conditions of allowing us to promote the ideal whole of humanity as well. It is possible, however, to allow ourselves to be distracted, or to mistake the call. It is also possible to lack consistent commitment to a realm of value. Such people would then also be lacking a real sense of identity. But would this mean that all of these kinds of people cannot be ethical and cannot be responsible? It in fact seems quite rare actually to have found one's "true calling." There is a tension here for Husserl because he does not want our commitment to be simply for the sake of commitment and it cannot be a thoughtless commitment. So, in addition to being committed, a commitment to a realm of value can be authentic or inauthentic. An authentic commitment is when one chooses a vocation based upon the call one feels to love a particular realm of value. But if one binds

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<sup>7</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Hua XXVII*, p. 32. "Der Mensch, der schon im Bewußtsein seines Vermögens der Vernunft lebt, weiß sich danach verantwortlich für das Rechte und Unrechte in allen seinen Tätigkeiten, mögen es Erkenntnistätigkeiten oder Tätigkeiten des Wertens oder auf reales Wirken absehbenden Handelns sein."

<sup>8</sup> Edmund Husserl, Manuscript F I 29, p. 6a as quoted in Ullrich Melle, "Development of Husserl's Ethics," *Études Phénoménologiques*, 13-14 (1991): .p. 127.

oneself to a realm of value without being called to that realm of value, then one is inauthentically committed. This doesn't mean that we always recognize the call either though. We often have doubts about our choice of vocation. That is part of the struggle to be authentic, to be ethical. We are ever required to renew and critique our own vocational commitments. Husserl does not provide any kind of formula for how we would know that we are right about our vocation except that it arises from our love thereby appealing to our own true self.

So, vocation provides one basis upon which we judge the rightness or wrongness of our actions, and that helps us to determine the reasonability of any option. But in addition to our vocation, we find ourselves with a *telos* that is beyond vocation, a *telos* that contributes to the ideal self we are trying to maintain. This means that our responsibility is not limited to the individual, but involves a responsibility to and for the other. The absolute ought applies to the other as much as it applies to the ego in that each person contributes to the identity of the other through a contribution to humanity. Each individual participates in the constitution of the identity of the community and so the *telos* for one and the *telos* for the other are simply different perspectives of the same higher-order *telos*. This means that the *telos* of each individual is inseparable from that of the community of which each individual finds itself a part. Further, it means that the *telos* of one is taken up by the other in the taking up of the *telos* of the community. The ideal *telos* of the community of humanity is founded upon universal ethical love, which is an infinite, absolute and universal love. It is an orientation of the will to live as a member of humanity; a will that cannot be usurped by any other will through the recognition by the ego that it can only realize its genuine life at that same time as it, as a member of the community of humanity, wills its own genuine humanity. Such a will is absolute. "Thereby is this will absolutely motivated. Or when I consider the possibility of a life such as I would love absolutely and unsurpassably, then I cannot help but decide to will such a life."<sup>9</sup> If the other is hindered in its struggle for its own identity and its own *telos*, then the *telos* of the community is also hindered and my *telos* too is hindered. These teleologies are inextricably linked. Clearly, the participation of an ego depends upon its *telos* as a member of humanity. That humanity is what Husserl refers to as the "higher-order we."<sup>10</sup>

What all of this implies is that the goodness of the community is my concern. I have a responsibility to the community. Thus Husserl writes, "I not only must desire myself as good, but also must desire the whole community as a

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<sup>9</sup> Edmund Husserl, Manuscript E III 4, p. 20 as quoted in James Hart, *The Person and the Common Life*, p. 344.

<sup>10</sup> For more on the higher-order we, see Janet Donohoe, *Husserl on Ethics and Intersubjectivity: From Static to Genetic Phenomenology*, New York: Humanity Books, 2004.

community of good people and, insofar as I can, I must take it in my practical circle of volition and aims.” This is connected to my humanity. Being human, which is equated with the truth of the will that is my vocation, “includes within it the will to be a member of a ‘true’ humanity.”<sup>11</sup> The good of the community, then, becomes something that I take within myself as part of my own responsibility. Self-responsibility is not only responsibility to the self and for the self. As such, it is also responsibility to and for the other.

Part of that self-responsibility is a rational responsibility toward tradition, toward the sedimentation of norms and values. Each individual is responsible for taking up tradition in a way that at one and the same time renews the tradition for a new generation, but is also critical of that tradition. This means contributing to the tradition through self-examination and rationality. It means “we have continuously anew the living truth from the living source, which is our absolute life, and from the self-examination turned toward that life, in the constant spirit of self-responsibility.”<sup>12</sup> So, when one becomes a member of the community of professors and takes up that tradition, one has a responsibility to do so in a critical way. One cannot simply accept the tradition unthinkingly. One cannot simply adopt the values without critique and rational analysis. In adopting that vocation one follows one’s calling by acknowledging a love for the realm of values that compose being a professor, but not in such a way that the commitment of one’s will does not allow for critique. The balance between the identity of the community maintained through renewal and its constant challenge through critique is difficult to sustain.

So what we see from Husserl’s ethical theory is a conception of the individual as choosing a vocation that has a double effect in establishing who one is as well as in aligning one with a community. Each individual is fully responsible for its own position-takings and for a larger sphere of the community that ultimately involves a self-responsibility for humanity. In claiming an authentic life, each human takes on a vocation that establishes for him or her a realm of absolute values and provides the identity and singularity of self. Responsibility for those values often confronts the individual with the

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<sup>11</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Hua XXVII*, p.46. “Es gehört also zu meinem echt menschlichen Leben, daß ich nicht nur mich als Guten, sondern die gesamte Gemeinschaft als eine Gemeinschaft Guter wünschen und, soweit ich kann, in meinen praktischen Willens-, Zweckkreis nehmen muß. Ein wahrer Mensch sein ist ein wahrer Mensch sein wollen und beschließt in sich, Glied einer ‘wahren’ Menschheit sein wollen oder die Gemeinschaft, der man angehört, als eine wahre wollen, in den Grenzen praktischer Möglichkeit.”

<sup>12</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Formal and Transcendental Logic*, Translated by D. Cairns. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969, pp. 247/279. German page numbers precede English translation page numbers.

necessity of sacrifice when absolute values conflict. In aligning oneself with absolute values that are of such a personal nature, each individual can at times be seen to be in conflict with the general values of a community. The preservation of one's singular identity through the habitual sedimentation of one's convictions requires such opposition to the community while at the same time making one an authentic member of the community of humanity. It also entails the responsibility to and for the other. Sacrifice, then, is not just the sacrificing of one particular good to another good, but in each moment of such sacrifice, there is the larger sacrifice of one's self to another. This is what Derrida will call the gift of death.

In *The Gift of Death*, Derrida provides a reading of responsibility in the philosophy of Jan Patočka.<sup>13</sup> It is no secret that Patočka was deeply influenced by Husserl's phenomenology, so it is not surprising that much of Patočka's work on this issue may reflect certain Husserlian themes. It is possible, then, to read Derrida as responding in some part to the Husserlian ethics outlined above. Patočka's project, according to Derrida, involves an account of the mystery of the sacred as related to responsibility. He reads Patočka as providing a genealogy of "the subject's relation to itself as an instance of liberty, singularity, and responsibility, the relation to self as being before the other: the other in its relation to infinite alterity, one who regards without being seen but also whose infinite goodness *gives* in an experience that amounts to a *gift of death*."<sup>14</sup> Already we see the possibilities for overlap with Husserl. Husserl would describe the revelation of the sedimentation of history that makes up responsibility as possible through the genetic inquiring-back into the origins of the ego and the other. Through the genealogy, Patočka shows the historicity of responsibility that we fail to acknowledge for fear of a conditionality that would be placed upon responsibility. At the same time, the history of responsibility must remain indeterminate; it must remain an open problem thereby resisting any kind of totalization. Derrida reads his argument as meaning that responsibility "exceeds mastery and knowledge."<sup>15</sup> Husserl describes much the same thing in terms of the need for a genetic inquiry into history to reveal the sedimented layers of meaning throughout history. Any self-responsible individual is called to unearth those sedimented notions through the process of

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<sup>13</sup> Derrida is specifically addressing Patočka's essay "Is Technological Civilization Decadent, and Why?" in *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, translated by Erazim Kohák, 95-118. Edited by James Dodd, Chicago: Open Court, 1996. I'm grateful to Dennis Keenan and his text *The Question of Sacrifice*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005 for directing me to Derrida's essay.

<sup>14</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, Translated by David Wills, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995, p. 3. Hereafter referenced as *GofD*.

<sup>15</sup> Jacques Derrida, *GofD*, p. 6

renewal and critique. Derrida stresses in this reading that a very common understanding of responsibility is one that sees itself in isolation from historicity.<sup>16</sup> Patočka, however, acknowledges that historicity must be “admitted to.” In this admission history is seen neither as a “decidable object nor a totality capable of being mastered, precisely because it is tied to *responsibility*, to *faith*, and to the *gift*.”<sup>17</sup> It is these questions of responsibility and gift that we will now explore in more detail.

Derrida defines responsibility, according to Patočka, in terms of a paradox. It is a paradox that is found in Husserl as well and one of which Derrida makes a great deal.

Saying that a responsible decision must be taken on the basis of knowledge seems to define the condition of possibility of responsibility (one can’t make a responsible decision without science or conscience, without knowing what one is doing, for what reasons, in view of what and under what conditions), at the same time as it defines the condition of impossibility of this same responsibility (if decision-making is relegated to a knowledge that it is content to follow or to develop then it is no more a responsible decision, it is the technical deployment of a cognitive apparatus, the simple mechanistic deployment of a theorem).<sup>18</sup>

This paradox of responsibility is the impossibility of subordinating responsibility to knowledge, while at the same time the impossibility of responsibility without knowledge. One must know what one is doing, but one cannot do what one is doing because of what one knows. For Husserl, there must be room for the influence of feeling within the rational decision-making that transpires due to one’s vocation. Responsibility moves outside of the calculative reason that characterizes so many ethical theories.

Furthermore, the concept of responsibility is ripe for thought, but one that resists thematization. Derrida asserts that responsibility is a concept that “presents itself neither as a theme nor as a thesis, it gives without being seen, without presenting itself in person by means of a ‘fact of being seen’ that can be phenomenologically intuited.” He indicates that the paradox of responsibility can be linked to what in certain religions would be called mystery. Thus, responsibility is always caught in a kind of double bind. It must be responsible to the tradition, authority, etc. while at the same time disrupting the tradition in making it our own. “There is no responsibility without a dissident and inventive rupture with respect to tradition, authority, orthodoxy, rule, or doctrine.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Jacques Derrida, *GofD*, p. 5

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Jacques Derrida, *GofD*, p. 24

<sup>19</sup> Jacques Derrida, *GofD*, p. 27



Husserl characterizes this as one's responsibility for both of the activities of renewal and critique. On the one hand, one is responsible for one's own choice of vocation to which one has been called. And yet, in adopting a vocation, one inserts oneself into a community that already has a tradition to which one commits oneself. At the same time, one has a responsibility not to commit oneself wholly to that tradition because one is responsible for critique of the same.

Responsibility places us in conflict in other ways as well. Husserl discusses responsibility with respect to the adherence to the absolute values we take on due to our vocation. If any vocation that we take up places us in the position of having taken on an absolute because of its relationship to our identity, then we are faced with the economy of exchange that makes the sacrifice of goods that Husserl discusses impossible. For we would not truly be sacrificing goods since we would always be doing so for the sake of some aim to be achieved, some positive outcome that we ourselves would receive which by definition would make the sacrifice not truly a sacrifice, but a bargain that we are more or less willing to strike in order to preserve something we desire. But for Husserl that's not why we take on vocation. We take on a vocation because we are called to a realm of value. We do not take on the responsibility in a calculative way, but due to this calling. When my children are each crying and each need my attention and comfort, what can I do but face the tragedy of choice at each moment? That tragedy places me in the position of having to engage in my own economy of exchange in order to justify my own actions to myself. I give the younger one attention now the older one attention later, or the more injured one attention now and the merely impatient one attention later. In making these decisions we are perhaps attempting to avoid true self-responsibility by entering into an economy of exchange with ourselves, a bartering system that avoids taking full responsibility for the decision. Yet, the decision does indeed still rest with me and I struggle on a daily basis with what motivates any given decision.

Derrida insists that responsibility depends upon a relation and response to the other. It includes "an experience of personal goodness and a movement of intention."<sup>20</sup> Further, he indicates that this experience requires a movement of infinite love. Again, this parallels Husserl's thinking about love as universal ethical love. This is the outcome of the development of the absolute ought of each individual. It has no boundaries, no restrictions to one community over another, but takes on the infinite nature of a universal love. In binding itself to the other in such a way, the ego is not adhering to a universal principle, but is actually acting to place the other in a position of a certain priority over itself. Moreover, this act is not a momentary gesture but an activity that requires

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<sup>20</sup> Jacques Derrida, *GofD*, p. 50.

constant renewal and recommitment. Derrida's claim is that this kind of infinite love, infinite requirement of response, responsibility, ushers in the concept of guilt. There is no possible way to respond to the infinite gift, no way to be responsible enough. Again, Husserl does not explicitly state as much, but he does say that the *telos* of universal ethical love of humanity is an infinite *telos* that serves more as something drawing us forth than as something that we can ever achieve. In the inability to reach the aim, we are left in the constant, failing activity that cannot help but leave us infinitely responsible, which means we are never able to claim that we have fulfilled our responsibility. We are always guilty of having further and still further responsibility.

Derrida suggests in *The Gift of Death* that he's attempting to work through the difference between sacrifice and suicide.<sup>21</sup> He wants to know what makes putting oneself to death different from dying for another. He speaks in such stark, ultimate terms, but I would argue that Derrida's discussion includes the kind of sacrifice of goods that Husserl has depicted as being related to the absolute ought of the self. This is not suicide in the most complete sense, but is closer to a kind of practicing for death that is associated with the Platonic lifestyle. That death is the gift of death that one gives oneself in taking the responsibility for the sacrifice. Most commentators read Derrida's meditation on sacrifice as meaning "sacrifice" in the ultimate sense of the term, as Abraham sacrificed Isaac, as Jesus sacrificed for humanity, as Socrates sacrificed for philosophy. But, when we read Husserl's position on sacrifice of goods, it lends another possibility to the idea of sacrifice that Derrida too acknowledges, but which many commentators ignore. Derrida's acknowledgment of the less ultimate sense of sacrifice is found in his analysis of Kierkegaard.

In *The Gift of Death*, Derrida provides a reading of Kierkegaard's account of the story of Abraham and Isaac in *Fear and Trembling*. Derrida's take on Kierkegaard is that the rendition of Abraham's sacrifice indicates that "The absolutes of duty and of responsibility presume that one denounce, refute, and transcend, at the same time, all duty, all responsibility, and every human law." Derrida argues that Kierkegaard shows that sacrifice on the order of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac requires a denial of the order of universality, a rejection of the general will. Instead, one's duty at the level of the absolute requires a kind of irresponsibility on the level of the general without giving up the very values of the general. As Derrida describes, Kierkegaard asserts that "Absolute duty demands that one behave in an irresponsible manner (by means of treachery or betrayal), while still recognizing, confirming, and reaffirming the very thing one

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<sup>21</sup> Jacques Derrida, *GofD*, p. 10

sacrifices, namely the order of human ethics and responsibility.”<sup>22</sup> Further Derrida suggests that this sacrifice is not so outrageous or unique as we might at first suppose, but rather that it is “the most common and everyday experience of responsibility.” This more closely reflects what we’ve outlined in Husserl above. Just as Husserl sees our adherence to our absolute ought as binding us to our duty in our singularity, Derrida reads Kierkegaard too as making reference to our duty to the other in our utter singularity. “Duty or responsibility binds me to the other, to the other as other, and ties me in my absolute singularity to the other as other.”<sup>23</sup> The absolute singularity of my adherence to my vocation also binds me to the universal ethical love of humanity. The result of this for Derrida reading Kierkegaard is that “what binds me thus in my singularity to the absolute singularity of the other, immediately propels me into the space or risk of absolute sacrifice. There are also others, an infinite number of them, the innumerable generality of others to whom I should be bound by the same responsibility, a general and universal responsibility (what Kierkegaard calls the ethical order). I cannot respond to the call, the request, the obligation, or even the love of another without sacrificing the other other, the other others.”<sup>24</sup> This passage makes clear the infinite responsibility to every other that must be sacrificed in any responsibility to a singular other. Yet, what else can we do but act toward the other as singular while neglecting the other others? Husserl, too, sees this and yet, in his notion of the universal ethical love, he allows for the love of each member of humanity through the adherence to the absolute ought of *universal* ethical love. In loving one, I love all. My absolute commitment to the personality of the higher-order displaces me in prioritizing the other and in willing the true self of the other. Its focus is the infinity of others that requires of me a style of life. My cultivation of this style of life attempts to view all others as being within the horizons of my proper community. This is a position that I am constantly revising and critiquing.

While Husserl tends to focus on the positive ideal and the telos of the individual in the communal we, the ramifications of his position on the sacrifice of goods leads us to a point that is not quite so rosy. It is not insignificant that Husserl’s most frequently used example when describing what he means by the absolute ought, sacrifice and ethical love is the vocation of motherhood. Let us return to the example at the opening of this paper. When confronted with the dilemma of my two children who are both equally needing my attention and the call of my work at the computer, I am faced with having to make a choice between absolute goods. I must sacrifice one or more absolute goods. And if we take the analysis of Husserl’s meaning seriously, then when I sacrifice a

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<sup>22</sup> Jacques Derrida, *GofD*, p. 66-7.

<sup>23</sup> Jacques Derrida, *GofD*, p. 67.

<sup>24</sup> Jacques Derrida, *GofD*, p. 67-8.

good, I am at the same time sacrificing myself since it is only because of my adherence to those absolute goods that I am who I am. In sacrificing myself, I am simply acknowledging the impossibility of complete self-identity, the impossibility of complete self-responsibility, the tragedy of human existence. To be human is to be committed to a realm of value, but it is at the same time to be confronted with the need to sacrifice that realm of value and oneself several times in any given day.

Finally, Derrida introduces the idea of gift with respect to death and responsibility in the second chapter of his text on Patočka, entitled “Beyond.” Here Derrida suggests that Patočka recognizes a way of accepting responsibility that “gives the gift that transforms the Good into a Goodness that is forgetful of itself, into a love that renounces itself.”<sup>25</sup> It is difficult to know what a love that renounces itself would be and what it could give. Patočka’s position seems to be that “what is given—and this would also represent a kind of death—is not some thing, but goodness itself, a giving goodness, the act of giving or the donation of the gift.” Patočka associates this giving of goodness with the giving of the gift of death. This is, of course, related to sacrifice—the giving of death in accord with a giving of goodness. For Patočka, again, it is a gift that subjects the receivers to itself as goodness, but also to itself as the law. Here we see the arrival of responsibility, responsibility to the gift that gives itself as law. Derrida explains.

In order to understand in what way this gift of the law means not only the emergence of a new figure of responsibility but also of another kind of death, one has to take into account the uniqueness and irreplaceable singularity of the self as the means by which—and it is here that it comes close to death—existence excludes every possible substitution.<sup>26</sup>

Derrida stresses that the irreplaceability that is the focus of Patočka’s analysis, following Heidegger, is that of death. I’d like to argue for the irreplaceability that Husserl stresses—one that is the very foundation of one’s singularity—that is, one’s vocation, one’s calling. One is called to be as well as to die. Patočka and Heidegger explain that one’s own death is the singularizing principle of one’s existence. It is the only thing that one cannot be replaced in. Certainly, another can die in my place, but that does not excuse me from my own death. It does not take my death away from me. For Husserl, one’s commitment to oneself is likewise unique. Another cannot perform my duties for me just as another cannot die for me. Even though another can place a band-aid on my child’s knee, it is *my* duty and not another’s and it can only fulfill me in my self

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<sup>25</sup> Jacques Derrida, *GofD*, p. 40.

<sup>26</sup> Jacques Derrida, *GofD*, p. 41.

as who I am. Although another can do my duty in my place, it does not relieve me of my duty. My duty and my responsibility are singularizing principles that call me to be me. And just as Heidegger's analysis of death as one's own reveals, the only way that a gift of self can be conceived is if that self is utterly irreplaceable. In this respect, the ground of responsibility overlaps with Husserl.<sup>27</sup> Still, the mode of responsibility defined by Derrida is "giving oneself death." The irreplaceability that characterizes each of us in our duty underlines the depth and weight of our responsibility. If no other can replace me in my duty, no other can replace me in my responsibility. The weight of the competing demands of my vocations is mine and mine alone to bear. It is this weight that makes me who I am but that also confronts me with the necessity of infinite sacrifice of myself. It contributes to the wholeness (and tragedy) of my life.

In conclusion, through this analysis we see that Derrida and Husserl have similar themes of responsibility and sacrifice that end in paradox. For Husserl, always the philosopher of the infinite task, these themes are explored through his description of the absolute ought of each individual that defines us in our identity and singularity, but which also bring us into conflict with ourselves and require sacrifice. Responsibility arises on the levels of both a responsibility for ourselves as well as a responsibility for and to the other. Derrida's analysis of the themes through Jan Patočka and Kierkegaard gives us a fruitful way to approach the Husserlian texts to draw out the rarely read difficulties located in his descriptions of a phenomenological ethics.

What does it mean for us to acknowledge the historicity of responsibility, to face the paradox of responsibility and sacrifice, to suffer the impossibility of responsibility and identity, to recognize the infinite responsibility that places us in a position of singularity and of death of onself? The foregoing analysis points to the inadequacies of our attempts to respond ethically, but also to the inadequacies of our ethical theories. Too often in the practical ethics that prevail today we are faced with the theories of how to deal with this or that business, medical, or professional situation that treat our ethical responsibility as a matter of "doing the right thing." Ethical actions and responsibility are treated as determinable through a variety of rational, calculative means without regard for our personal love or commitments. But what the previous investigation implies is the inability of these approaches to ethics to truly grasp the fundamental failure of any response. Husserl and Derrida remind us of the

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<sup>27</sup> Derrida, in *Gift of Death*, is careful to distinguish Patočka's similarity with Heidegger on this very point. I too am not claiming that the Husserlian ground of responsibility in the irreplaceability of the ego with respect to its absolute ought is on the same level as the irreplaceability of death, but the similarity is there nonetheless. See Derrida, *Gift of Death*, p. 43.

intricacies of human identity, human responsibility, and human sacrifice that go beyond the calculative doing to the call to life and to death.

# TOUCHING THE OTHER IN MYSELF: MERLEAU-PONTY, TACTILITY, AND CARE ETHICS

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The factual presence of other bodies could not produce thought or the idea if its seed were not in my own body.

--Merleau Ponty, *The Visible and The Invisible*

Michael Rosing, a staff nurse in the progressive cardiovascular unit at Genesis Medical Center in Davenport, Iowa describes an encounter with a patient, Madge, age 92, who came in for a few days of testing, observation, and treatment. The night before she was to be discharged, Madge called Rosing to her room. Rosing recounts the exchange: "Madge was perched on the edge of the bed waiting for me. As I approached, she asked me to put my hands in hers and said, 'you have the warmest hands of all the nurses who take care of me.' She'd called me in simply to comment on my hands." Madge went on to express her initial discomfort at having a male nurse take care of her, however his touch had subsequently put her at ease. These comments did not surprise Rosing, who acknowledges the significance of tactility for comforting, gathering embodied knowledge, and reciprocity: "touching can be a warming experience for both the patient and the nurse. It's the reason I shake hands or take the patient's hand in mine as I introduce myself. It's also why I touch or rest my free hand on my patient's shoulder while I listen, for example, to lung or bowel sounds." Rosing uses anecdotal evidence to conclude that touch therapy is an effective means for assisting patients.<sup>1</sup> How can we characterize the exchange between Rosing and Madge? Abstracted from the particulars of the context, the interchange between Rosing and Madge can be described as the contractual obligation between a professional health care worker and a client of his medical facility. However, this generalized description fails to capture the primal human connection inherent in the interaction as Rosing portrays it. Although largely accomplished

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<sup>1</sup> Michael W. Rosing, "Warm Hands, Warm Heart: My Patient Responded Positively to Touch. So Did I" *Nursing* 31, no. 12 (2001), 32.

through an unspoken process of bodily contact, we have a sense that *something* was indeed exchanged when Rosing touched Madge and when Madge touched Rosing and that the exchange was *good*. This is both an epistemological and an ethical observation. The touch was functional in the moral meaning shared but the understanding implied in Rosing's description is not a moral duty or right but something less determinate. The task of this article is to explore at least the contours of tacit embodied ethics: the relationship between touch and caring.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) undertook a comprehensive and radical philosophical inquiry into the human body. Ultimately, his project reframed traditional structures of meaning to give embodiment a unique epistemic privilege. Employing and extending the phenomenological method inherited from Edmund Husserl, Merleau-Ponty finds that the bracketing of phenomenal experience opens up the possibility for exploring the body's relation to the life-world. His explorations find a perceptual continuity that transcends categorical understandings such as those of "subject" and "object." In this manner, Merleau-Ponty embraces the indeterminacy of corporeal existence: "ambiguity is the essence of human existence, and everything we live or think has several meanings."<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, the traditional language of philosophy, with its desire to understand phenomenon through the application of precise labels that allow for thematic manipulation often appears inadequate to capture the life of the body. Merleau-Ponty is postmodernist in his rejection of categories and, of course, existentialist in his phenomenological account of the body. The combination lends itself to comfort with indeterminacy. For Merleau-Ponty, "our body is comparable to a work of art. It is a nexus of living meanings, not the law for a certain number of covariant terms."<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, feminist care ethicists have embraced the ambiguities of relational existence to advocate a morality not solely grounded in rigid categories of adjudication—right and wrong action. Nel Noddings describes caring as a moral ideal grounded in affective reciprocal relations.<sup>4</sup> Joan Tronto describes caring as labor that results in the flourishing of humans and their world.<sup>5</sup> Selma Sevenhuijsen views care as an attentive responsiveness that allows for

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<sup>2</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith, (London: Routledge, 1989), 169.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>4</sup> Nel Noddings, *Starting at Home: Caring and Social Policy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 13.

<sup>5</sup> Joan C. Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 103.



empathetic knowledge.<sup>6</sup> None of these understandings directly answers the question, “what am I to do?” in a manner abstracted from context. Care ethics attends to the situatedness of particular agents including their relationships to other agents. Accordingly, it is extremely difficult to care for humanity in general, but specific individuals who exist in particular places and times, are much more easily cared about. It is suggested here that part of the full contextualization of individuals cared for is that they are embodied. They are flesh and blood human beings not abstract and easily interchangeable moral agents.

Some philosophers are uncomfortable with care ethics and have categorized it as a subset of virtue theory or criticized it as relativistic. Philosopher Susan Hekman describes the discomfort surrounding care ethics as a result of it offering a new moral paradigm that “does not exist in the same epistemological space as that of Western moral theory. It stands not as a supplement to that tradition but in an other, incompatible theoretical space.”<sup>7</sup> Hekman makes a case that concern for adjudication and justice in philosophy have overwhelmed the moral voice of care; a voice that has always existed but has historically been marginalized. Like a number of care theorists, she gestures at the role of the body: “Moral voices are connected to moral persons, persons who are concrete rather than disembodied.”<sup>8</sup>

It is my contention that Merleau-Ponty’s insights into the perceptual body provide the epistemic space for a comprehensive understanding of caring. Elsewhere, I have explored the general role of the body in caring<sup>9</sup> to claim that through embodied knowledge and its perceptual posture, the body is built to care. In this article, the focus will be more specifically on the complex and central role of tactility in care ethics. I will suggest that Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of touch reframes a caring morality by grounding it in corporeal phenomenon rather than abstract categories. Most care ethicists begin, as Carol Gilligan did in the early 1980’s, by responding to the inadequacy of traditional moral categories and then positing an alternative voice. The need for fully integrating a philosophy of embodiment is claimed but is not entirely developed. Here, I propose to begin with Merleau-Ponty’s theory of the perceptual body and then establish caring as a potential of a tactile body. After reviewing the phenomenological method that Merleau-Ponty employed, we will inquire into how the body through tactility

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<sup>6</sup> Selma Sevenhuijsen, *Citizenship and the Ethics of Care: Feminist Considerations on Justice, Morality and Politics* (London: Routledge 1998), 83.

<sup>7</sup> Susan Hekman, *Moral Voices, Moral Selves: Carol Gilligan and Feminist Moral Theory*, (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1995), 25.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>9</sup> Maurice Hamington, *Embodied Care: Jane Addams, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Feminist Ethics* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004).

constitutes the self, knowledge of the world, knowledge of others, and finally morality. Merleau-Ponty gives us the tools to interrogate the moral meaning of Rosing's warm hands and how they brought comfort to Madge.

## Phenomenology

Numerous philosophical movements have begun with the call to make philosophy into an endeavor with the same certain footing as science. Descartes made such a claim and so did Edmund Husserl. What Husserl suggested was that given the cacophony of philosophical voices it was time for a radical new beginning to unify and energize philosophy.<sup>10</sup> Although Husserl's work failed to bring coherence to philosophy, it did influence some of the greatest minds of the twentieth century, not the least of which was Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Merleau-Ponty was an important literary critic and proponent of Marxism, but it was his extension of phenomenology to embodiment that marked his unique contribution to modern philosophy and what brings us insight into the possibility of understanding caring through the body.

While Sartre declared that existence precedes essence, Merleau-Ponty suggested that phenomenology, "puts essences back into existence." He describes the "bracketing out" of the natural attitude in Husserlian phenomenology as an effort to provide, "a direct description of our experience as it is, without taking account of its psychological origin and the causal explanations which the scientist, the historian or the sociologist may be able to provide."<sup>11</sup> For Merleau-Ponty, perception offers the central vehicle of the phenomenological method. Perception, "the common act of all our motor and affective functions" captures our primordial contact with the world without privileging the mind or body: "The soul is not merely in the body like a pilot in his ship; it is wholly intermingled with the body. The body, in turn, is wholly animated, and all its functions contribute to the perception of objects."<sup>12</sup> Given a philosophical tradition that has gone to great lengths to ignore the body, Merleau-Ponty's attention to the perceptual body marks a new direction that has inspired a number of contemporary philosophers seeking to reintegrate the body into philosophy.

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<sup>10</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. Dorion Cairns (Norwell, MA: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1995).

<sup>11</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, vii.

<sup>12</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "An Unpublished Text" trans. Arleen B. Dallery in Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, ed., James M. Edie (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1964).

Mark Johnson and George Lakoff acknowledge a philosophical debt to Merleau-Ponty's work on perception. They find the very simple phenomenological claim that the mind is inherently embodied as not only profound, but allowing for a link to empirical scientific discoveries, particularly those found in cognitive science. If the mind is acknowledged as dependent upon its embodiment, then scientific studies about the brain become relevant in a field that usually eschews empirical data. Rationality, the cornerstone of many theorists' concept of human ontology has historically been conceived as disembodied. However, rationality can be interrogated for its bodily basis given Merleau-Ponty's notion of an "embodied mind." As Johnson and Lakoff explain, "Reason is not disembodied, as the tradition has largely held, but arises from the nature of our brains, bodies, and bodily experience. This is not just the innocuous and obvious claim that we need a body to reason; rather, it is the striking claim that the very structure of reason itself comes from the details of our embodiment."<sup>13</sup> If Johnson and Lakoff, via Merleau-Ponty, are correct, and if furthermore morality is a rational endeavor, then it follows that a similar claim can be made about morality: the structure of morality itself comes from the details of our embodiment.

Given Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological approach, perception not only overcomes Cartesian dualism but reintegrates the mind and body around a perceptual function that reconceptualizes the body in a manner that will transform how we come to view epistemology, subjectivity, and, by extension, morality. If Descartes concludes that humans are "thinking things," Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological inquiry leads to the conclusion that we are indeed "perceiving things."

## Tactility

In regard to perception, Merleau-Ponty often privileges the visual, but he also on occasion engages in extensive discussions of touch, which hint at an important role for tactility in the constitution of being. "Tactility" describes the reversibility of touch; a phenomenon that can be experienced actively and passively, as toucher and touched. While the skin provides the surface for touch, a full account of touching is more complex and involves other components including motility and the mind. Merleau-Ponty comparatively describes tactile perception: "the movement of one's own body is to touch what light is to vision. All tactile perception, while opening itself to an objective 'property', includes a

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<sup>13</sup> Mark Johnson and George Lakoff, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 4.

bodily component.”<sup>14</sup> Because tactile information requires contact, bodily movement is usually involved in the touch process. This is particularly true with hands. While hands have more nerve receptors than most other parts of the body, they are also outfitted with greater motility, given the many small muscles and joints in the fingers, than other parts of the body to facilitate greater contact with surfaces. A singular instant of contact with a surface usually does not provide adequate sense data. To gain more information, the fingers move over the surface to enrich the sensory information. Our muscles know how to maximize contact by sweeping over an object without damaging it such as the light touch necessary to experience the surface of a rose petal. We can even experience sharp objects which as a pin or a cactus spine without hurting ourselves. The body has an amazing ability to maximize tactile experience through subtle movement. Merleau-Ponty recognizes the role of movement, “Even on the most sensitive parts of our tactile surface, pressure without movement produces a scarcely identifiable phenomenon.”<sup>15</sup> Merleau-Ponty notes that touching involves both time and space to complete its task

I will briefly emphasize two aspects of a phenomenological analysis of tactility: complexity and certainty. Philosopher Elizabeth Grosz suggests that touch may be the most complex of all the senses because “it is composed of so many interacting dimensions of sensitivity, involving a number of different functions (touch, pressure, texture, frequency, pain, and heat).”<sup>16</sup> Unlike sight, smell, or hearing, touch requires contact and in that contact the body collects a broad range of data regarding the nature of the touched not possible through the other senses. For example, shape, density, size, and temperature of objects are quickly obtained through touch.

While all the senses can be fooled, touch is in some ways the most certain. Visual cues are often deceptive in regard to size, temperature, and texture so we often seek tactile confirmation for sense data. A mug is steaming so I gingerly touch its side to see if it is too hot to drink. After shaving while looking at my face in a mirror, I feel my face to confirm its smoothness. In this manner our senses coordinate with one another to enrich the information of our perceptions. Merleau-Ponty refers to items for which we have coordinated our senses as inter-sensory entities: “any object presented to one sense calls upon itself the concordant occupation of all others.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 315.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward A Corporeal Existence* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), 98.

<sup>17</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 318.

Of course, touch also contains a high degree of cultural attribution. The phenomenological reduction begins with the bracketing out of the natural attitude, but is also attentive to the implications of the reinscription of social meaning given the establishment of essences. As Merleau-Ponty describes, the body “turns back on the world to signify it.”<sup>18</sup> Our physical contact with our environment entails connections to an array of meanings that go far beyond the mere collection of data.

Science fiction can be an excellent vehicle for exploring the human condition. By taking human beings out of the familiar and placing them in the unfamiliar, a form of phenomenological bracketing takes place in science fiction. In this manner particular aspects of human interaction that are taken for granted can be reexamined. The dialogue that follows exemplifies how humans give special status and meaning to touch. In the motion picture, *Star Trek: First Contact*, the crew of the starship Enterprise has traveled from the 24<sup>th</sup> century to the late 21<sup>st</sup> century, a time when creatures from another world war have overrun the planet. Captain Jean-Luc Picard (Patrick Stewart) and an android, Data (Brent Spiner), are inspecting an underground nuclear missile, the Phoenix, which would eventually be transformed into the means for interstellar travel and humanity’s first contact with aliens. The two characters are standing next to the missile when the Captain reflectively reaches out to touch the missile as the camera slowly pans over his hand and arm. Data observes his actions and looks at him quizzically.

Captain: “It’s a boyhood fantasy Data. I must have seen this ship hundreds of times in the Smithsonian but I was never able to touch it.”

Data: “Sir, does tactile contact alter your perception of the Phoenix.”

Captain: “Oh yes, for humans touch can connect you to an object in a very personal way. Make it seem more real.”

As an android, Data is incapable of accessing many of the subtle social constructions of meaning that humans attach to tactile experience. He also touches the missile but can only experience the raw phenomenon. Data is capable of bracketing the experience but not capable of the associative understanding. He describes his tactile experience, “I am detecting imperfections in the titanium casing . . . temperature variations in the fuel manifold. It is no more real to me now [after touching it] than it was a moment ago.”

In a bit of comic relief, another officer, Deanna Troi (Marina Sirtis) interrupts the Captain and Data while they are touching the missile and quips, “Would you

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<sup>18</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Unpublished Text,” 7.

three like a moment alone?”<sup>19</sup> The sexual innuendo is not foreign to the tactile experience: they both rely on carnal knowledge. As Captain Picard explained, to touch something is to have a unique, intimate understanding of the touched that we often valorize over the other senses. One might think of how fans value shaking the hand of a celebrity over seeing them or hearing their voice. Even if the tactile intimacy is fleeting and superficial, it carries a special status that indicates a personal connection. There is something special about touch that makes it important to us.

### **Tactile Knowledge, Tacit Knowledge**

Merleau-Ponty's interrogation of the body has significant implications for epistemology. A perception is more than a sensorial experience; it is also integrated and filtered through memory in a dynamic process of storing and reconceptualizing information. As Merleau-Ponty describes, “Knowledge and the communication with others which it presupposes not only are original formations with respect to the perceptual life but also they preserve and continue our perceptual life even while transforming it.”<sup>20</sup> In order to accomplish this understanding, Merleau-Ponty suggests that the body catches and holds perceptual experience. In this manner, the body can be said to contain knowledge—not a body separated from the mind but together. Merleau-Ponty proposes “habits” as one means for inscribing embodied knowledge. Habits are behaviors that do not require conscious attention because the body has acquired the requisite knowledge to place the habitual behavior in the background. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty offers the example of using a stick to navigate space where vision is not available. After the initial conscious attempts to use the stick, proficiency is eventually obtained and the use of the stick requires less attending to. “Once the stick has become a familiar instrument, the world of feelable things recedes and now begins, not at the outer skin of the hand, but at the end of the stick.”<sup>21</sup> Manipulating the stick has evolved into a bodily habit that extends the perceptual threshold employing both the tactile and motor knowledge of the body.

Embodied knowledge need not entail only motor habits. Our body may store information about our world that has not been committed to linguistic categories of propositional knowledge. If asked what water feels like, I do not have to go find some water to touch to develop a response. My body contains past

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<sup>19</sup> Jonathon Frakes (director), *Star Trek: First Contact* (Hollywood: Paramount Pictures, 1996).

<sup>20</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Unpublished Text,” 7.

<sup>21</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 152.