son and not even something that needs to be reluctantly accepted – the
decentering of the subject is interpreted in terms of reception and gift.
The dialectic of decentering and centering in Ricoeur's philosophical
anthropology also makes it possible to recognize "the hermeneutical func-
tion of distanciation in all communication" and the importance of distan-
ciation for all kinds of appropriation.31

Third, Smith's critical realist personalism is founded on the concep-
tion of a center with purpose, a centeredness of the subject associated
with a more stable ontology with frequent references to what is "natural".
In Ricoeur, we approach a much more unstable and fragile person who is
disproportional with him/herself (in almost Pascalian terms) and consti-
tuted of a number of dialectical relationships that makes the person never
more – or less – than a heterogenous synthesis (Synthèse de
l'hétérogène). Due to the fact that Ricoeur elaborates on a "broken" on-
tology, he always uses "mixed categories" so that the person is constituted
in a confictual way, according to the dialectics of the ideological and
utopian functions of the social imagination, the dialectics of understand-
ing and explanation. Since the real is constituted as a conflict, it is the
intersection of ideology and utopia as two functions of the social imagi-
nation that make sense of each. Ricoeur's concept of human time is thus
full of tensions and appears as a hybrid, a "third" time only possible to
establish in terms of a series of "connecting procedures" by which the
phenomenological experience of lived time is re-encapsulated in the
necessity of cosmic (universal) time. Because time, as human time, in the
end only appears a "join" between the time of the soul and the time of the
world, the person can never reach anything more stable than "incomplete
mediations" from which there is no possible means of articulating that
kind of unified theory that Smith asks for.32 However, this lack of stabili-
ty considering both philosophical anthropology and social theory is moti-
vated by a dialectical approach that makes it possible to resist, cope with,
and transcend academic schizophrenia.

32 One of the few places where we find a more dynamic, and almost dialectical approach
in Christian Smith's presentation of personalism is on page 197 in What Is a Person?:
"Humans, it turns out, exist in a state of dynamic tension between power and limits,
action and reflection, capacity and finitude, perception and reason, truth and fallibility,
ideas and materiality, knowing and not knowing, determination and freedom [...] com-
plex, vibrant, interactive [...] our complex, dynamic, stratified, tension-animated real-
ity."

BETWEEN FLESH AND TEXT:
RICOEUR'S CARNAL HERMENEUTICS

RICHARD KEARNEY

Paul Ricoeur's philosophy expressed a double fidelity to questions of
embodiment and textuality. In the 1940s and 50s he developed an existential
phenomenology of flesh inspired by Gabriel Marcel and Edmund Hus-
sler. But while this early philosophy was developing strongly in the direc-
tion of a diagnostics of carnal signification, once Ricoeur took the "lin-
guistic turn" in the 1960s it seems to have departed from this initial path
in favor of a more explicit hermeneutics of the text. There are, however,
some fascinating reflections in Ricoeur's final writings which attempt to
reanimate a dialogue between his seminal phenomenology of the flesh and
later hermeneutics of language. I will take a look at these by way of sug-
gesting new directions for what I call a 'carnal hermeneutics' - direc-
tions which might bring together the rich insights of a philosophy of em-
bodyment (in parallel with Merleau-Ponty) and a philosophy of interpreta-
tion (in dialogue with Heidegger and Gadamer). I believe that these new
directions indicate important possibilities for rethinking the whole rela-
tionship between humaneness and the natural environment, especially as it
relates to Merleau-Ponty's notion of la chair du monde.

Let me begin with a word about Ricoeur's early "diagnostics" of
bodily expression. I will confine my remarks to a few summary points.

A) DIAGNOSTICS OF THE BODY

Ricoeur's main contribution here comes in the form of three important
sections of his first major work in phenomenology, Freedom and Nature:
The Voluntary and the Involuntary, published in 1950, five years after
Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception. The sections in question
are titled, "Motivation and the Corporeal Involuntary," "Bodily Sponta-
neity" and "Life: Structure, Genesis, Birth."

Ricoeur sets out in this work to explore the life of the "incarnate coge-
to," drawing on three seminal sources: the phenomenological notion of

1 See our development of this notion in my essay, 'The Wager Carnal Hermeneutics,' in
University Press, 2015, pp. 15-36.
the *corpus proprie* (announced by Husserl and Merleau-Ponty), Gabriel Marcel’s notion of incarnation, and Main de Biran’s analysis of the embodied cogito (as touch, effort, and resistance). From the outset Ricoeur proposes an account of the body as a dialectical rapport between the voluntary and the involuntary in direct opposition to naturalism. Starting with the phenomenon of *affectivity,* he notes that "sentir est encore penser," understanding sentir no longer as a representation of objectivity but as a revelation of existence. Carnal affectivity is thus seen as a mediating bridge between (i) our flesh and blood existence and (ii) the “thinking” order of interpretation, evaluation and understanding. But if “incarnation” is the first anchor of existence, it is also the temptation of betrayal — for the affective body is always susceptible to reductive objectifying accounts.

Ricoeur takes up the challenge, beginning with “need” as something to be phenomenologically experienced not as a natural event from without, but as a lived experience from within. It is here, right away, that Ricoeur proclaims his diagnostics of the lived body: “the diagnostic relation which conjures objective knowledge with Cogito’s apprehension brings about a truly Copernican Revolution. No longer is consciousness a symptom of the object-body, but rather the object-body is an indication of a personal body (corpus proprie) in which the Cogito shares as its very existence.” Affectivity and thought are thus connected from the outset by a tie of mutual inherence and adherence. The two bodies (inner and outer) are not separate realities but two ways of “reading” the same flesh — externally (as nature) and internally (as incarnation).

Ricoeur then goes on to show how need relates to *pleasure* in terms of various “motivating values and tendencies” — evaluative discriminations that are not imposed by consciousness or reason but are already operative in our most basic affective relations. Nor is need to be reduced, naturalistically, to a mere reflex sensation translating an organic defect in the form of a motor reaction. It is not a “re-action but a pre-action” — an “action towards...” Otherwise put, need reveals me not as a mechanism of stimulus-response but as a “life gaping as appetite for the other.” To have needs does not mean being determined by them; we are continually discerning between needs and pre-reflectively evaluating when best to realize or suspend them. “It is because the impetus of need is not an automatic reflex that it can become a motive which inclines without compelling and that there are men who prefer to die of hunger than betray their friends.” As Gandhi’s hunger-strikes or the sacrifice of countless heroes and saints attest, “man is capable of choosing between his hunger and something else.”

Need is thus revealed as a primordial spontaneity of the body where it mixes with a “first rank of values” which I have not engendered but which mobilize my feelings. The existing body, as living flesh, is the original source of what I call ‘carnal hermeneutics’. It is what makes our first *savoir a savoir-faire,* a finesse of life, a form of wise savoring from the Latin, *sapere-sapiens.* “Through need, values emerge without my having posited them in my act-generating role: bread is good, wine is good. Before I will it, a value already appeals to me solely because I exist in flesh; it is already a reality in the world, a reality which reveals itself to me through the lack [...]. The first non-deductible is the body as existing, life as value. The mark of all existents, it is what first reveals values.” It is at this crucial point that Ricoeur addresses the role of carnal imagination at the crossroads of need and willing. He explores how we imagine a missing person or thing (which we need or desire) and the ways towards reaching it. But the corporeal imagination is not just about projecting possibilities *from within;* it is equally a means of reading the “affective signs” of real sensible qualities *out there in the world.* The carnal imagination — witnessed in need, pleasure and desire — is already a “diagnostics” in which primal judgments become both affective and effective. Imagining the world in the flesh is a matter of feeling, valuing, and doing. “We must not lose sight of the *sense* quality of imagination,” insists Ricoeur, alluding to sense as both meaning and sensation. “For it is our imagination mobilizing our desires and discerning between good and bad ways of realizing them that ‘our life can be evaluated.” Values mean nothing unless they touch me. Unlike Kant and the idealists, ethics requires the mediation of flesh. Ricoeur concludes his reading of the body as primal field of evaluation with this manifesto:

The body is not only a value among others, but is in some way involved in the apprehension of all motives and through them of all values. It is the affective medium of all value: a value can reach me only as dignifying a motive.

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and no motive can incline me if it does not impress my sensibility. I reach values through the vibration of an affect. To broaden out the spread of values means at the same time to deploy affectivity to its broadest span."

Ricœur spends the rest of his phenomenological analysis exploring this claim for affective sensibility as "medium" of evaluation. Suffice it for now to note that his initial sketch of corporal diagnostics offers what we might call a proto-hermeneutics of the flesh.

B) THE TEXTUAL TURN

In spite of this promising early diagnostics of the body, however, Ricœur was soon to abandon this trajectory. After the "textual turn" in the 1960's, we witness a surprising (and I believe regrettable) rift between a hermeneutics of texts, on one hand, and a phenomenology of affectivity, on the other. He now looks back on the whole emphasis on sensible experience as susceptible to the lure of "immediacy, effusiveness, intuitionism," contrasting this with the more authentic "mediation of language."38 And he even commends the later Merleau-Ponty — in an obituary homage in 1962 — for moving beyond his initial phenomenology of "incarnation" towards a "second philosophy" of language as privileged medium of "distance" and "reflection."39 A commendation which, one suspects, is curiously applicable to himself.

This tension between flesh and text is nowhere more evident than in the 1964 essay "Wonder, Eroticism, Enigma." Here Ricœur speaks of sexuality as contrary to language. He starkly opposes what he calls (1) the "immediacy" of the "flesh to flesh" relationship and (2) the "mediations" of language and interpretation. Simply put: Sexuality de-mediates language; it is eros not logos.40

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40 Ricœur, Paul "Hommage à Merleau-Ponty," (1962) Lectures 2: La Contrée des Philosophes. Paris: Le Seuil, 1999, pp. 163-164. One of the aims of our carnal hermeneutics project is to bring Merleau-Ponty's radical phenomenology of flesh (working forwards to a diacritical hermeneutics with his notion of diacritical perception) with Ricœur's hermeneutics of the text (working backwards to his early phenomenology of embodiment in light of his later hermeneutic reflections on flesh as a paradigm of "oneself as another"). For a more detailed exploration of this idea see my essay, "The Wager of Carnal Hermeneutics" in Carnal Hermeneutics, ed Richard Kearney and Brian Tressor, pp 15-56.

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Eros in our contemporary culture, Ricœur argues, has lost its old cosmic force in sacred mythology and assumed the form of a "restless desire." It becomes a "demonism" that resists both the logos of understanding and the logic of instrumental rationality. "The enigma of sexuality," he claims, "is that it remains irreducible to the trilogy which composes human existence: language, tool, institution."41 And if at times it articulates itself, it is "an infra, para-, super-linguistic expression." Eros "mobilizes language," admits Ricœur, but only in so far as "it crosses it, jests it, sublimates it, stupifies it, pulverizes it into a murmure." Utterly de-mediated in this manner, eros cannot be reabsorbed either in an "ethic" (like marriage) or a "technique" (reproductive or hedonistic technologies); it can only be "symbolically represented by means of whatever mythical elements remain."42 Left to itself, short, the "flesh to flesh" relationship defies the order of logos: "Ultimately, when two beings embrace," writes Ricœur, "they don't know what they are doing, they don't know what they want, they don't know what they are looking for, they don't know what they are finding. What is the meaning of this desire which drives them towards each other?" Sexual desire does not, explains Ricœur, contain its own meaning but gives the impression that it participates in a network of powers whose cosmic connections are forgotten but not totally abandoned. Eros shows us that there is more to life than life — "that life is unique, universal, everything in everyone, and that sexual joy makes us participate in this mystery; that man does not become a person [...] unless he plunges again into the river of Life — such is the truth of sexuality."43 But this River of Life has, Ricœur notes, become obscure and opaque for us today. Like a lost Atlantis sunk within us long ago, it has left sexuality as its "flotsam" (épave). Hence the enigma of eros. The meaning of this submerged, dislocated universe is no longer accessible to us in terms of immediate participation, but only indirectly "to the learned exegesis of ancient myths." There is no straight route to eros — only hermeneutic detours. And this is part of its contemporary crisis.

Ricœur concludes rather stoically that the best means to interpret the enigma of sexuality is a hermeneutics of ancient texts which record and represent this forgotten world of cosmic eros. The opposition bet-
ween flesh and text could not be more explicit: “It lives again only thanks
to hermeneutics – an art of interpreting writings which today are mute.
And a new hiatus separates the flotsam of meaning which this hermeneutics
of language restores to us and that other flotsam of meaning which
sexuality discovers without language, organically.” On the one hand,
textual reading, on the other, organic feeling. Two forms of flotsam at
the limits of reason. A dualism of logos and eros.
C) ONE’S BODY AS ANOTHER’S
But this was not to be Ricœur’s last word on the matter. Fortunately, he
returns to other possibilities of a hermeneutics of flesh in one of his last
major works, Oneself as Another (1990). In a section of the final chapter,
titled, “One’s own body, or the Flesh,” Ricœur defines flesh as “the
mediator between the self and a world which is taken in accordance with
its various degrees of foreignness.” As such, it reveals a certain “lived
passivity” where the body, in the deepest intimacy of flesh, is exposed to
otherness. How to “mediate” between this intimacy and this otherness,
between the immanence of the lived body (Husserl’s Leib) and the trans-
cendence of the face (Levinas’ Visage), becomes a key concern.

This dialectic of passivity-otherness signals the enigma of one’s
own body. Or to put it in phenomenological terms: how can we fully ex-
perience the human body if it is not at once “a body among others” (Kör-
per) and “my own” (Leib)? We need both, suggests Ricœur. First, we
need the experience of our own lived flesh to provide us with a sense of
our individual belonging. This is what gives a corporeal constancy and
anchoring to the self. Flesh is the place where we exist in the world as
both suffering and acting, pathos and praxis, resistance and effort. Com-

19 Paul Ricœur, Oneself as Another, trans. Kathleen Blamey. Chicago: University of
20 See Ricœur’s cogent critique of Derek Parfit’s “puzzling cases” of consciousness
without bodies as well as of technological fictions of “remote human and identities (Ri-
cœur, Oneself as Another, pp. 150-151). Ricœur’s main literary example is Robert Mu-
sil’s Man without Qualities, but one could also add more recent sci-fi movies like St.
monoe or Her where a virtual OS (computer operating system) is divorced from physical
touch and taste, with dramatic existential consequences. Ricœur’s basic point is that if
one deprives the human of its terrestrial-corporeal anchoring one deprives the self of any
perturbing lived identity as constancy-in-change (denum-ipse). Ricœur argues that literary
fictions, unlike technological fictions, remain imaginative variations on “as invariants,
our corporeal condition experienced as the existential mediation between the self and the
world” (Ibid., p. 150). This invariant anchoring of lived corporeality testifies to the onto-
logical condition of carnal selfhood in “acting and suffering persons” (Ibid., p. 151).

bining the pioneering work of Maine de Biran with the phenomenologies
of the corps propre in Husserl and Michel Henry, Ricœur shows how it is
through active “touch, in which our effort is extended, that external
things attest to their existence as much as our own.” It is the “same sense
that gives the greatest certainty of one’s own existence and the greatest
certainty of external existence.” In the pathos of passivity and passion,
“one’s own body is revealed to be the mediator between the intimacy of
the self and the externality of the world.”

Here Ricœur makes the interesting point that it is not, as we might
expect, in Heidegger – who ostensibly existentialised the phenomeno-
gical subject – that we discover the greatest ontology of the flesh. It is
rather Husserl who offers the “most promising sketch of the flesh that
would mark the inscription of hermeneutical phenomenology in an onto-
logy of otherness.” Ricœur’s hermeneutic retrieval of Husserl runs as
follows. In the Cartesian Meditations—written ten years after Ideas II—the
founder of phenomenology had argued that in order to constitute a
“foreign” subjectivity, one must formulate the idea of “ownness”—

22 Ricœur, Oneself as Another, p. 322.
23 Ricœur, Oneself as Another, p. 322.
24 Ricœur argues that Heidegger never developed a real ontology of flesh, though he
possessed all the ingredients for such a project. His notion of Befindlichkeit – affective
state of mind expressed in our moods – was particularly promising in this regard (Ri-
cœur, Oneself as Another, p. 327 and note 34). It is telling that Heidegger acknowledged
Aristotle’s interpretation of “affects” (pathê) as the “first systematic hermeneutic of the
everydayness of Being with one another” (Murtin Heidegger, Being and Time, trans.
not, alas, himself push this hermeneutic in the direction of an “ontology of flesh” open
to the world of others. In spite of his investigation of Dasein as “thrownness,” Heidegger
did not develop a hermeneutic reading of “the property proper modalities of our desires
and our moods as the sign, the symptom, the indication of the contingent character of
our insertion in the world” (Ricœur, Oneself as Another, p. 327, note 34). In Heidegger a
temporality of disincarnate Dasein (transcendental ontology) ultimately trumped a spa-
tiality of incarnate flesh (carnal “entities”). Ricœur asks pointedly: Why “did Heidegger
not grasp this opportunity to reinterpret the Husserlian notion of flesh (Leib), which he
could not have been unaware of, in terms of the analytic of Dasein?” Ricœur’s answer:
“If the theme of embodiment appears to be stifled, if not repressed in Being and Time,
this is doubtless because it must have appeared too dependent on the inauthentic forms
of care – let us say, of preoccupation – that make us tend to interpret ourselves in terms
of the objects of care. We must then wonder if it is not the unfailing of the problem of
temporality, triumphant in the second section of Being and Time, that prevents an au-
thentic phenomenology of spatiality – and along with it, an ontology of the flesh – from
being given its chance to develop” (Ricœur, Oneself as Another, p. 328).
25 Ricœur, Oneself as Another, p. 322.
namely, flesh in its difference with respect to the external body (of others seen by me or of me seen by others). Flesh opens up a realm of Leibhaft (immediate embodied givenness), excluding all objective properties. It is the pole of reference of all bodies belonging to this immanent nature of ownness. And it is by pairing one flesh with another that we derive the notion of an alter-ego.

But here we return to the deeper paradox: flesh as a paradigm of otherness. Flesh is what is both most mine and most other. Closest to me and furthest from me at the same time. This enigma of far/near is revealed most concretely, once again, as touch. As center of pathos, our flesh’s “aptitude for feeling is revealed most characteristically in the sense of touch.”26 It proceeds and grounds both the “I can” and the “I want.” Indeed, it even precedes the very distinction between the voluntary and the involuntary. “I, as this man,” explains Ricœur, “is the foremost otherness of the flesh with respect to all initiative.”27 Or to put it in more technical language, “flesh is the place of all the passive syntheses on which the active syntheses are constructed, the latter alone deserving to be called works (Leistungen); the flesh is the matter (haut) in resonance with all that can be said to be haut in every object perceived, apprehended. In short, it is the origin of all ‘alteration of ownness.’”28

Ricœur concludes accordingly that flesh is the support for selfhood’s own “proper” otherness. For even if the otherness of the stranger could be derived from my sphere of ownness – as Husserl suggests – the otherness of the flesh would still precede it.29 This paradox of flesh as ownness-otherness reaches dramatic proportions in a crucial passage from Husserl’s “Fifth Meditation,” where flesh is claimed to be a primordial space of immediacy prior to all linguistic or hermeneutic mediations:

Among the bodies [...] included in my peculiar ownness, I find my animate organism [meinen Leib], as uniquely singled out – namely as the only one of them that is not just a body but precisely an animate organism [flesh]: the sole

26 Ricœur, Oneself as Another, p. 324.
27 Ricœur, Oneself as Another, p. 324.
28 Ricœur, Oneself as Another, p. 324. See Franck, Didier Chair et Corps: Sur la phénoménologie de Husserl. Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1981, pp. 109-111. Ricœur relies heavily on Franck’s influential commentary for his reading of Husserl. He adds: “The kind of transgression of the sphere of ownness constituted by appearance is valid only within the limits of a transfer of sense: the sense of ego is transferred to another body, which, as flesh, also contains the sense of ego. Whence the perfectly adequate expression of alter ego in the sense of a ‘second flesh’ (‘seconde chair propre’)” (Ricœur, Oneself as Another, p. 334).
29 Ricœur, Oneself as Another, p. 324.

Object within my world stratum to which, in accordance with experience, I ascribe fields of sensation (belonging to it, however, in different manners – a field of tactile sensations, a field of warmth and coldness, and so forth), the only Object “in which” I rule and govern immediately, governing particularly in each of its organs.30

It is on the basis of this primordial materiality of immanent flesh that I found the “pre-linguistic” world of ‘I can’. But it is also here that phenomenology reaches its limit, and Ricœur departs from Husserl. In seeking to derive the objective world from the "non-objectifying primordial experience" of flesh, Husserl went too far. He ignored that flesh is not just my body but equally a body among other bodies – both Leib and Körper at once. In order to make flesh part of the world (mondaniséer) one needs to be not just oneself but oneself as another – a self with others. And this means that the otherness of others as “foreign” relates not only to the otherness of my flesh (that I am) but also exists prior to any reduction to ownness. For the flesh can only appear in the world as a body among bodies to the degree that I am myself already an other among others – a self-with-another “in the apprehension of a common nature, woven out of the network of intersubjectivity – itself founding selfhood in its own way.”31

So Ricœur concludes this highly intricate analysis by observing that while Husserl recognized the primordiality of subjective flesh and the necessity of intersubjective language, he could not reconcile the two. “It is because Husserl thought of the other than me only as another me, and never of the self as another, that he has no answer to the paradox summed up in the question: how am I to understand that my flesh is also a body.”32 In short, Husserl could not adequately account for both the flesh’s intimacy to itself (in the absolute immediacy of immanence: Leib) and its opening onto the world (through the mediation of others: Körper). He had a carnal phenomenology but lacked a carnal hermeneutics. Only the latter – uniting Leib and Körper, body and flesh – could provide a full account of the ontological relationship between flesh and world.

D) BEYOND HUSSERL AND LEVINAS

In correcting Husserl it is important, however, not to go to the other extreme. And this is, according to Ricœur, where Levinas erred in traver-

31 Ricœur, Oneself as Another, p. 326.
32 Ricœur, Oneself as Another, p. 326.
singing flesh too quickly towards alterity. Identifying the carnal coxae with a play of feminine immanence, Levinas, as we saw, redirected the virile self in the direction of an ethics of vertical transcendence in which the Face trumps Flesh. In contrast to both Husserl and Levinas, we might say (with Ricoeur and Irigaray) that if flesh needs the other to save it from fragmentation and inner collapse, the Other needs flesh to save it from Platonic moralism and paternalism.33 And here we return, finally, to the realization that we need to combine sensibility (flesh) and language (face) in a new carnal hermeneutics. The ultimate question stands: how to make sense of sense by making flesh a body in the world — that is, a face with an outside, a face for others.

Let us recap. In order for my flesh to engage upon an intersubjective world with others and empathize with them, I must have both an intimate body for me (Leib) and a physical natural body among other bodies (Körper). This involves a complex intertwining (Verflechtung/entrelacs) whereby I experience myself as someone in a shared world. Thus Ricoeur, challenging the Sartrean dichotomy of flesh versus body, asks: “To say that my flesh is also a body, does this not imply that it appears in just this way to the eyes of others? Only a flesh (for me) that is a body (for others) can play the role of first analogon in the analogical transfer from flesh to flesh.”34 And this reveals in turn that intentionalities that are aimed at the other — as strange and foreign to me — go beyond the sphere of my immanent ownness in which they are rooted and given. The other is revealed to my flesh as both inscribed in my embodied relation through flesh and as always already transcendent. Or to put it in more technical terms, the other is not reducible to the “immediate givenness of the flesh to itself” in originary presentation, but only in appreciation — as another’s body. The gap can thus never be bridged between “the presentation of my experience and the appreciation of your experience.”35

And this interval is confirmed in the fact that the pairing of your body over there with my body here always retains a certain distance. The analogizing grasp between two embodied selves is never complete or ade-

33 In addition to Ricoeur’s critical reading of Levinas in this regard, we should note again here Luce Irigaray’s pioneering feminist-psychoanalytic critique of Levinas’s phallocentric metaphysics as well as the new feminist hermeneutics of the semiotic lived body in such thinkers as Kristeva, O’Byrne, Rambo, and McKendrick, all represented in this volume. Kristeva’s new feminisms of the body is linked to her project for a new humanism informed, in part, by a retrieval of the deep unconscious resources of the “sensible imaginary” in writers like Colette, Duras, and Teresa of Avila.

34 Ricoeur, Oneself as Another, p. 333.
35 Ricoeur, Oneself as Another, p. 333.
36 Ricoeur, Oneself as Another, p. 334.
37 Ricoeur, Oneself as Another, p. 335.
38 Ricoeur, Oneself as Another, p. 355.
39 Ricoeur, Oneself as Another, p. 336.
CONCLUDING REMARKS

Is it not precisely the task of carnal hermeneutics to find the just balance between the movement of same toward other and the other toward same? A balance which would not only bridge the divide between Husserl and Levinas, but also, by extension, between Merleau-Ponty’s reversible chair and Derrida’s irreversible différence?

The answer, we submit, is yes and raises further on-going questions. For what kind of language are we talking about? One not only of words and writing, but also of sensing and touching. And what kind of dialogue? One not just between speakers but also between bodies. And what kind of sense and sensibility? One not only of intellectual “understanding” but also of tangible “orientation.” Thus does the simplest phenomenon of touch lead to the most complex of philosophies. Because the simplest is the most complex and remains the most enigmatic. In posing such questions, Paul Ricoeur opens a portal where phenomenology and hermeneutics may cross in the swing-door between body and flesh. An opening onto new horizons of understanding regarding our aesthetic and ethical relationship to nature and the environment. This marks a new beginning. But, as Ricoeur himself says, the last word of his work is “inachevément.” The project of carnal hermeneutics will always be unfinished business. There is always more to be done when it comes to our responsibility for the health and well-being of la chair du monde.