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Philosophies of Touch: from Aristotle to Phenomenology

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Abstract

This essay explores Aristotle's discovery of touch as the most universal and philosophical of the senses. It analyses his central insight in the *De Anima* that tactile flesh is a "medium not an organ," unpacking both its metaphysical and ethical implications. The essay concludes with a discussion of how contemporary phenomenology—from Husserl to Merleau-Ponty and Irigaray—re-describes Aristotle's seminal intuition regarding the model of "double reversible sensation."

Keywords

Aristotle – touch – phenomenology – Merleau-Ponty – carnal hermeneutics

A first philosophy of touch was sketched by Aristotle at the outset of Greek thought. He deemed tactility to be the most pervasive and intelligent of the senses. But his claim was largely sidelined for two thousand years. Platonism considered sight superior to touch since it was considered closer to reason, rising upward to supersensible ideas rather than descending, with touch, to dark feelings of flesh. Plato declared that "man is the *spectator* of all existence," citing the etymology of *anthropos* as "upward gazer": "The word *anthropos* implies that man not only sees but looks up at that which he sees, and hence he alone of all animals is rightly called *anthropos* because he looks up at (*anthropei*) what he has seen."¹ For Plato the eye is sovereign. The tactile body is a beast

¹ Plato, *Cratylus*, 229c. See also Fan O'Rourke, Introduction to *Cyphers of Transcendence* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2019).

of burden and contagion to be kept in its place. The pure and impure must live apart: “While we live we shall be closest to knowledge if we refrain as much as possible from association with the body ... and by our efforts we shall know all that is pure, which is presumably the truth, for it is not permitted to the impure to touch the pure.”²

The outcome of this battle of ideas was to characterize Western philosophy as *optocentric*—sight-centered—relegating the other senses, and especially touch, to the lower realms of perception. We would have to wait until the 20th century for existential phenomenology to rehabilitate the original Aristotelian discovery of touch, returning our sensibility “to the things themselves.”³ The most primordial things (*phenomena*) would now, once again, be relocated in our embodied lived experience—our sensations, moods and emotions prior to intellectual cognition. Phenomenology recognizes truth as already present in our life-world. But this recognition depends on us coming to our senses: learning to suspend ingrained prejudices and retrieve our primary carnal experience—what our everyday tact, savvy and flair tell us all the time. If only we dare to know what we already know. In contemporary

2 Plato, *Phaedo*, 67.

3 There are, to be sure, significant exceptions to the general neglect of touch in the history of Western philosophy between Aristotle and twentieth century phenomenology. Most obviously there is Aquinas's effort to rehabilitate Aristotle—via the Islamic philosophers Avicenna and Averroes—in the *Summa Theologiae* for the Middle Ages. For how, Aquinas asked, could one reconcile the resurrection of the body as material flesh if one held to the Platonic body/spirit split? Aquinas insisted, against Platonism, that the unique material body of the saved person is restored after death. But in spite of the partial retrieval of Aristotle to account for Christian resurrection, Aquinas and the scholastics remained largely captive to a dualist metaphysics of spirit versus matter. (It is a great irony that the residual “Platonism” of Augustinian-Thomistic-scholastic theology tempered the carnality of Aristotle's proto-phenomenology as well as the incarnationism of Christianity itself). It is true that many Christian mystics were deeply ‘incarnational’ in attitude, notably Francis of Assisi and later Franciscans and Celtic mystics like Eriugena, Pelagius and Scotus—three *Scoti* whose panentheist theology of nature as divine “enfleshment” (*ensarkosis*) held to the revelation of Word made flesh. And we might cite, later again, the work of 16th Century Italian Renaissance thinkers like the early Ficino (*De Rerum Naturam*) and Mario Equicola (*Di natura d'amore*)—writing on the spiritual-somatic power of erotic touch. But all these were ultimately of minor significance compared to the dominant metaphysics of Platonic dualism. But, I repeat, I am speaking here of metaphysical “Platonism,” not Plato himself, whose dialogues were too complex to be reduced to any scholastic system. There were also, of course, several materialist and empiricist philosophies which sought to overcome dualism at various times, but they did so largely in a reductionist manner which denied the complex “mediating” and “integrating” dialectic of the flesh. Finally, there existed many important non-Western traditions which had very different stories to tell about the spirit-flesh relationship; but that is work for another essay.

phenomenology we find a revolutionary effort to redeem Aristotle's inaugural insight, challenging the optocentric paradigm and restoring touch to its rightful place.

The following reading of Aristotle is deeply informed by the contemporary perspectives of phenomenology.

1 Recovering Our Senses with Aristotle

In the first great work of human psychology, the *De Anima*, Aristotle declared touch to be the most *universal* of the senses. Even when we are asleep, he noted, we are susceptible to changes in temperature and noise, pressure and movement. Our bodies are always “on.” All living beings possess touch and every sense implies tactility of some kind: light strikes the iris, sound the tympanum, odor the nose buds, taste the tongue.⁴ The entire human body is tangible qua skin (only hair and nails feel no touch).

Touch is also the most *intelligent* sense, says Aristotle, because it is the most *sensitive*. When we touch something we respond to what is touched. We are responsive to others in their distinctiveness precisely because we are in touch with them. “Touch knows *differences*,” thus serving as our basic power to discriminate between diverse kinds of persons and things.⁵ Intelligence begins with the vulnerability of skin. The thin-skinned person is sensitive and perceptive, observes Aristotle, while the thick-skinned is coarse and ignorant. Our first intelligence is epidermal.⁶ And this primal sensibility is also what places us at risk in the world, exposing us to adventure, suffering and wonder.

In saying all this, Aristotle was challenging the dominant prejudice of his time. The Platonic doctrine of the Academy, as noted, held that sight was the highest sense because it was deemed the most distant and mediated; and hence the most theoretical, holding things at bay, mastering meaning from above. Touch, by contrast, was judged the lowest sense because ostensibly immediate and thus subject to pressures from the material world. Against this, Aristotle made the radical counter-claim that touch *does* indeed have a

4 *De Anima*, 2, section 11. Touch for Aristotle is universal in so far as all living things—including animals and plants—possess touch. See Jean-Louis Chrétien's illuminating essay “Body and Touch” in *The Call and the Response*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 92–94. I am greatly indebted to Chrétien's reading.

5 *De Anima*, 2, 418.

6 Most wisdom traditions say as much: even the Buddha, when challenged by Mara to reveal his authority, simply touched a finger to the ground.

medium, namely “flesh” (*sarx*).⁷ For flesh is not just a material organ but a complex mediating membrane which negotiates our primary evaluations of things. Tactility is not blind immediacy, as Platonism professed. (Though the speculative “system” known as Platonism often simplified the subtle dialectics of its founder, Plato. Platonism was in many ways a forgetfulness of Plato). Our first wisdom comes through touch—mediated through flesh—where our sensing is already a *reading* of the world, interpreting things *as* this or that, constantly registering differences and distinctions. Tactful sensation makes us human by responding to singularities here and now.

But Aristotle did not win the battle of ideas. The Platonic vision prevailed and Western culture became a system governed by “the soul’s eye.” Sight came to dominate the hierarchy of the senses, and was esteemed the chosen ally of theoretical knowledge. (In Greek *theoria* means to see, hence the visual spectacle of “theater”). Western philosophy thus sprung from a dichotomy between the “intellectual” sense of vision, and the “animal” sense of touch. And Christian theology—though supposedly heralding a message of Incarnation (“Word made flesh”)—all too often endorsed this injurious Platonic dualism. Prompting Nietzsche to decry Christianity as “Platonism for the people”: a doctrine which “gave eros poison to drink.”

It seems the eye continues to rule to this day in what Roland Barthes calls our “Civilization of the Image.” The world is no longer our oyster, but our screen. Spectacle has swallowed the senses. We shall return to this claim elsewhere.

2 Flesh is a Medium

Let us take a closer look at Aristotle’s argument.

Claiming that touch is a discriminating sense, Aristotle insists that flesh (*sarx*) is a medium (*metaxu*) which gives us space to discern between different kinds of experience—hot and cold, soft and hard, attractive and unattractive.⁸ In touch, we are both touching and touched at the same time, but that does not mean we dissolve into sameness. Difference is preserved:⁹ which is why Aristotle declares that “flesh is a medium, not an organ.”¹⁰ And this breakthrough insight—which is philosophy catching up with lived experience—means that flesh harbors crucial spaces and intervals through which touch

7 It should be noted that in the *Metaphysics* BK 1, Aristotle is arguably still under a certain Platonic sway when he accords priority to sight, in the metaphysical sense.

8 *De An.* 2, 421–23.

9 *Ibid.*, 418.

10 *Ibid.*, 418.

navigates.¹¹ Flesh is full of holes, and that is a good thing. Touch is not immediacy but mediation through flesh. So unlike idealists who denigrated our sensory helplessness before the flux of phenomena, and contrary to materialists who claimed that touch brought us into raw contact with material stuff, Aristotle always insisted on the filtering character of tactility. To be tactile is to be exposed to the world across gaps, to negotiate *between* various embodied beings, to respond to solicitations, to orient oneself in the universe of others. As if moving one's fingers over the strings of a lyre. From the beginning, contact involves a *tact* for negotiating surprise, for liberating sameness into difference.

Aristotle then makes the startling claim that human perfection is the perfection of touch. Why? Because, he says, without tactility there is no life worth living. Precisely as the most basic and encompassing of sensations, touching expresses the fundamental "sensitivity" of flesh. But the most "basic" here does not mean the most transparent. In fact, touch turns out to be the most *elusive* sense, evading any literal location. Touch is "present throughout the flesh without any immediately assignable organ."¹² Although it operates in space and time, touch cannot be pinned down. It ranges freely through the forest of the body.

But if touch is enigmatic it is also keenly *attuned*. It is the sense which makes us most "sensitive" to the world, bringing us into touch with things other than ourselves and putting ourselves into question. To touch well is to live well, that is, *tactfully*. "The being to whom logos has been given as his share is a tactile being, endowed with the finest tact."¹³ And this is not just in the realm of the tangible, but, as we have seen, potentially in our other senses too—seeing, hearing, smelling, hearing. Touch informs every human sensation and its omnipresence throughout our corporeal experience is what keeps open our doors of perception, refusing to allow us to withdraw into ourselves. Closure is against nature. Touch keeps us susceptible to the world as it commutes, like Hermes, between inside and outside, self and other, human and non-human.

11 See Emmanuel Alloa, "Getting into Touch: Aristotelian Diagnostics," in *Carnal Hermeneutics*, ed. Richard Kearney and Brian Treanor, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016). Several of my observations below were first sketched in my introductory essay to that volume.

12 Aristotle, *Ibid*, 2, 11. Aristotle notes that the medium of touch "escapes us" (*De Anima*, 2, 11, 423b), giving rise to metaphorical readings of the flesh. See commentary by Chrétien, 95–96.

13 Chrétien, 85. It is also worth noting that in an enigmatic passage in the *Metaphysics* Theta, Ch. 10, 1051b 23–25, Aristotle speaks of apprehending the truth of something in terms of "touch" (*thigein*) and of ignorance as a lack of "touch," or as we might say, "being out of touch." I am grateful to Thomas Sheehan for alerting me to this passage.

Tactility is our most refined means of transition and translation. The touchstone of carnal hermeneutics.

While I may seem directly present to what I touch and directly touched by what is present, there is always something *mediate* in the ostensibly immediate; or, put spatially, there is always something “far” in the “near.” In other words, there is *sensing* in sense, a *making* sense and *receiving* sense from something *other* than ourselves. Flesh translates this otherness, crossing back and forth between self and strangeness. It enables us to navigate our world by discerning pre-reflectively between what makes sense and what doesn’t, what is hospitable and what is hostile, what is attractive and what is dangerous. Since all the senses involve touch, and since touch involves mediation, all our sensations can be said to involve somatic *interpretation* of some kind, understood as a primal orientation in time and space prior to theoretical consciousness.

By thus showing that interpretation (*hermeneuîn*) is at work in our most elementary experiences, Aristotle anticipates the insights of contemporary hermeneutics.¹⁴ Touch remains, for the most part, pre-conscious or unconscious (as we would say post-Freud), and is no less sensitive for that. *Au contraire*, there is so much going on in our sensible experience that we need to keep it at bay lest it flood our minds. From a theoretical point of view, we can make sense of sense indirectly. We cannot cognize it head-on, objectively, but only re-cognize it obliquely, *après-coup*, at work behind our backs, already operative in our sensory-symbolic negotiation of the world. Which is why Aristotle himself was compelled to approach touch *metaphorically*, describing flesh (*sarx*)—which mediates touch—as a watery membrane, air envelope, veil or second skin. When we try to grasp flesh as some *thing* it leaves tropes in our hands. Flesh is figural from first to last—the tactile calling for the poetic.¹⁵ The hands-on calling for the analogous. In touching the world we are

14 Chrétien, “The Body and Touch,” 87–90. Given Aristotle’s revolutionary claim that “flesh is not the organ but the *medium* of touch” (*De Anima*, II, 423b), and that all sensing—from top to bottom—is “mediated,” we have grounds for claiming that every act of human sensation, no matter how basic, is already an exercise in hermeneutic “understanding” (*Verstehen-Befindlichkeit* in Heidegger’s *Being and Time*). The hermeneutic as-structure is never absent from flesh. See Iris Murdoch on Heidegger’s recognition of Aristotle’s hermeneutics of the body, “*Sein und Zeit: Pursuit of Being*” in *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Justin Broackes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 95: “Heidegger reasonably claims that “the basic ontological interpretation of the affective life in general has been able to make scarcely one forward step worth of mention since Aristotle.”

15 See John Manoussakis, who develops Aristotle’s insights on touch in terms of a threefold hermeneutic distinction between “grasp,” “caress” and “kiss” in “Touching,” part 3 of *God after Metaphysics: A Theological Aesthetic* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007).

constantly prefiguring, refiguring and configuring our experience. Feeling our way tactfully as we move by instinct—from the beginning of time—between cooked and raw, friendly and fearful, loving and violent; each sense possessing its own imaginary, its own set of dreams and fantasies—etched onto the rocks and sculptures of the earliest works of art. Cave drawings. Stone carvings. Touchstones. Murals and frescoes. Orbs and curves, lines and crossings. All written on the body of the world.

3 Sensing the World—Skin on Skin

But if touch is something we do to the world it is also something the world does to us. It works both ways. As we reach out a hand, touch is what first *affects* us, in the most concrete, personal manner. From the beginning, flesh is charged with attraction and retraction. As child psychology tells us, when the infant responds to the touch of the mother or opens its mouth to feed from the breast, it is already orienting and interpreting.¹⁶ It is not merely reacting to a stimulus but responding to a touch. In the first natal contact of flesh on flesh we witness seizures and exposures of joy and fear, desire and anxiety. With the separation of birth, the mouth ceases to be a buccal cavity and becomes an oral medium.¹⁷ The infant's cry is a call reaching across distance, a leap over a caesura between self and (m)other. So the first touch is not neutral but already a reading between the lines—of skin and bone, soft and hard, hot and cold. Or to anticipate the terms of modern phenomenology, we might say flesh is not a thing—qua object or organ—but a dynamic “infra-thing” which makes sense of things: a carnal sensitivity which evaluates lived situations. Babies are moody little beings, their babblings and probings already a play of testing and

16 See the work of Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis.

17 See the very insightful distinction between the infant mouth as *os* and as *bucca* in its first gestures of touching and tasting, Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, trans. Richard Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 2–122. Nancy's phenomenological description of the body's radical exposure to the other from birth is captured in his wonderful neologism “expeausition”—the exposition of skin to skin (14f). See also his essays “Motion and Emotion” and “Essential Skin” in *Carnal Hermeneutics* where he speaks of the basic epidermal responses of skin being, from the outset, both psychological and physiological—two sides of the same flesh. It would be interesting to bring Nancy's hermeneutics of touch into dialogue with the recent work of philosophers engaged in more empirical-cognitive research, such as Catherine Malabou and Evan Thompson; or with empirical psychologists like Matthew Fulkerson, *The First Touch: A Philosophical Study of Human Touch*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014).

tasting.¹⁸ Before we ever say the words “here” and “there,” our fingers and lips are figuring things out in terms of this or that kind of experience. “Touching never does away with the interval between us, but turns the interval into an approach,” as Jean-Luc Nancy puts it. Touch, like taste, doesn’t simply record sensible properties: “it grasps and immediately feels their noxious or useful character, their relevance to the preservation of our being.”¹⁹ If we don’t know what something is, our first impulse is to touch it. Just watch an infant entering a room, as it gropes, strokes and tastes the things around it, treating them as threats or toys—transitional objects for its anxiety or joy. The baby makes a world with its hands. It feels the world through the pulse of the palm. Which is why Aristotle insists that touch, from the start, is “always true” (*De An.* 428a).

If touch was often called a “primitive” sense, it was because it provides our most basic apprehension of things. Why? Because tactility is the ability to modulate the passion of existence—Greek *pathos* understood as suffering, receiving, enduring others who come to us *as* this or that. Passion, passivity and patience share a common root. This is what the poet Christian Wiman calls the “passion of pure attention, nerves, readiness ...” To touch and be touched simultaneously is to be *connected* with others in a way that prizes us open. Flesh is open-hearted—where we are most exposed, skin on skin, keenly attentive to wounds and scars (starting with the navel), alert to preconscious memories and traumas. And this is crucial, for with this goes a deep sense of fragility and vulnerability. Which is no bad thing. Without exposure of skin (*ex-peausition*) there is no real experience.²⁰ Through flesh—naked and tactile—we are subject to touch, day and night. Exposed on all sides to risk and adventure. Keenly sensitive, we take nothing for granted. Over time, we develop savvy, treating flesh as a surface that is deep. And precisely because it mediates between a

18 Linguistics and psychoanalysis can also provide interesting insights regarding the original relationship between proto-speech sensibility and speech proper. See in particular Roman Jakobson’s analysis of the transition from infant “babble” to speech (which influenced the phenomenologies of Merleau-Ponty and Alloa) and Freud’s famous description of the child’s first acquisition of language as a synesthetic game of *fort/da* where the child touches a spool of cotton (pulling and pushing it out of vision) while pronouncing the words, “gone, back again” (see *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*). It might be recalled here that Aristotle had already noted the proto-hermeneutic power of the voice in *De Anima*: “Not every sound made by an animal is voice ... what produces the impact must have soul in it and must be accompanied by an act of imagination, for voice is a sound *with a meaning*, and is not merely the result of any impact of the breath as in coughing” (220b, 30).

19 Chrétien, 98.

20 Ibid. On the hermeneutic readings of scars and wounds (*traumata*), see our analysis of Euryclea’s touching/reading of Odysseus’ scar in “Writing Trauma: Narrative Catharsis in Joyce, Shakespeare and Homer,” in *Giornale di metafisica* 1 (Fall 2013).

self carnally located “here” and an other located “there,” touch is what enables empathy. *Em-pathein*—feeling oneself as one with the other. Which is why touching finds its social beginnings in the handshake: open hand to open hand—the origin of community.²¹ War and peace are skin deep in the true sense.

This question of pathos is crucial for our consideration of carnal intelligence. As the “medium” which enables us to feel with others, to touch and be touched by the world “out there,” flesh filters what is strange and alien. Diderot reminds us in his *Letter to Alemnbert* that we do not feel what is the *same* as us but only what is *different*: in the case of dipping a hand in water, for example, we sense what is hotter or colder than the temperature of our skin. While the organ of smell is odorless and the organ of sound soundless, the medium of touch is always tactile. Touch is touched by what it touches, and can touch itself touching. This fundamental reversibility means that I can risk feeling the other who is making me feel something inside from the outside—from what is *not* me. And it is this tactile sense of resistance and response which makes up one the most original aspects of our sensibility. The ability to discern through flesh. “Every sense discerns,” Aristotle reminds us, which means, at its simplest, that it is through the medium of flesh that i) we have “contact” with external sensibles; ii) we transmit these with “tact” to our inner understanding and iii) we translate the sense into language for others.

But let me return here to the question of *risk*—what we might call the *wagering of flesh*. Simply put: without the sensitivity of touch—bare-skinned and fragile—there would be no resourcefulness of tact. Sensitivity *is* sensibility because it provides the basic intelligence of attention, delicacy, vigilance, finesse. “Man’s flesh is the softest of all,” notes Aristotle in *De partibus animalium*. Our hides are porous and thin, feeling pressure and stimulation through our hands and feet. And precisely as highly susceptible beings, humans are the “most sensitive to differences,” and therefore superior to other animals, whose skins are thick, hairy, hard: “Those whose flesh is tender are more gifted intellectually” (*De An.* 2, 412A).²² For Aristotle, perfection of intelligence comes down, in

21 On the importance of the handshake for the primal turning of hostility into hospitality, see our “Welcoming the Stranger” in *All Changed? Culture and Identity in Contemporary Ireland*, ed. Andrew O’Shea (Dublin: The Duras Press, 2011). The essay analyzes the first wager of hand to hand encounter between Diomedes and Glaucus in Homer’s *Iliad* and Abraham’s greeting of the strangers at Mamre. See also “Double Hospitality” in *Imagination Now: The Richard Kearney Reader*, ed. Murray Littlejohn (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2020).

22 Cited and commented by Chrétien, 101–105. “The delicacy of touch has for its horizon the spirit’s discernment, and since the spirit is always that of a living being whose life

the end, to perfection of flesh. Human sensitivity is in the last instance carnal. A matter of touch.

All this is not without its conundrums and ambiguities. Recall once again Aristotle's startling claim that touch is *one* of the five senses and at the same time the pre-condition of *all* the senses. Touch brings us into intimate contact with particular tangible things while remaining a universal power traversing the other senses. It is the most singular and general at once. Punctually present and omnipresent. And synesthetic to the core. This point is important and bears repeating: one cannot live without sensing, exist as soul without flesh, and every sense requires the ability to be touched—whatever the distance—by what one senses (through eye, ear, nose or tongue). In sum, touch is the heart and soul of the senses, the inter-sensorial milieu which makes all sensible congress between outer and inner worlds possible. "Since we touch with our whole body, our soul *is* the act of touch, and only as such can it be a hearing soul, a seeing soul and so on."²³

4 Ethical Considerations

There are important ethical evaluations at work here. Tactile sensitivity involves moral sensibility—the combination of both implying tact. This is why in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle speaks of the importance of distinguishing between 1) good touch which differentiates between various kinds of sense, and 2) bad touch, which degenerates into coarse undifferentiated behavior (gluttony, violence, perversion). Immorality of the senses comes from *contact deprived of tact*: namely, grasping without feeling, consuming

is always exposed, it cannot for a single moment uproot itself from what finds it. Our sensitivity analyses differences at the heart of the world by articulating them to our life, depending on how clear the peril is. The primal and inalienable place of this articulation is touch, which explains why Aristotle attributes primacy to touch ... The affected being is not thought here as an obstacle to discernment but as the condition of greater discernment" (105). See also Emmanuel Alloa's reinterpretations of Aristotle's notion of mediality, "*Metaxu: Figures de la médialité chez Aristote*" in *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, Presses Universitaires de France, Nov 2, no 62, 2009 and "*La chair comme diacritique incarné*" in *Chiasmi International*, (Paris: Vrin, 2010). But to be a thin-skinned human does not require one to be privileged or effete; the blue collar worker, farmer or miner are equally if not more attuned, in their handiwork and manual labor, to the differentiations and nuances of the tactile universe. Hence our example of Seamus Heaney's simple diviner, below, intensely attuned to underground sources. The precious gift of nature's gentlemen.

23 Chrétien, 108.

without caring, swallowing without savoring (what the French call *dégustation*). “Self-indulgent people make no use of taste,” says Aristotle. “The role of taste is to discriminate between flavors; which is precisely what wine-tasters do, as well as those that season dishes.”²⁴ Here, we could say, lies the difference between the gourmand who ingests and the gourmet who relishes. Good taste knows how to wait, mark time, taking in the fullness of the thing sensed with the fullness of the tongue sensing. Good taste is integral, appreciative, free. Bad taste is partial, unmediated, driven.

This is why touch—as the most holistic and synesthetic of the senses—is logically the primal mode of sensibility in both life (survival) and love (value). A tall order for the body, forever on double duty, always on call, tactile through and through (except for our hair and nails, which feel no pain). And it is because touch thus belongs to flesh *as a whole* that it is the *sensus universalis*, capable of touching all things through all the senses. While we can close our eyes, our ears, our nostrils and our lips, we are always touching and being touched. Touch is a “membrane” sensitive to what is not itself, a portal opening onto a world that can never be shut. It is the first site of our consent to being and our welcome to others. Being in touch means being at risk—between suffering and joy. And without risk no life is worth living.

In all of this, Hermes—the Greek messenger—hovers. At the beginning of Western philosophy, Aristotle realized that meaning already exists at the core of carnal existence. The work of Hermes is everywhere. The body constantly sends and receives messages from the inner capillaries of our heart to the nerve endings of our fingers and toes—probing and coding, ciphering and signifying through skin and bone. Sometimes this work of mediating conceals itself, as Aristotle notes, in which case Hermes proves hermetic. Other times, we transit between deep and surface messages, translating between inner wounds and outer scars, between secrets and signs, in which case Hermes is hermeneutic—calling us to join him in the art of deciphering.

5 Back to the Senses: the Phenomenological Revolution

At the beginning of the 20th century, Edmund Husserl announced the phenomenological movement by inviting philosophers to return to the “things themselves”—namely, to revisit our pre-reflective experience of the lived body. The lived body (*Leib*), he argued, differs from the object body (*Körper*) in that the former remains a subject in touch with felt existence, while the latter

²⁴ Chrétien, 110–113.

is considered a thing to be measured and manipulated—“like a patient etherized upon a table” (T.S. Eliot). Challenging the philosophical dualism of mind versus body, Husserl, like Aristotle before him, declared touch to be the most primordial mode of relationship. In *Ideas 2*, written in 1912, we find the classic example of two hands touching to describe the basic phenomenon of “double sensation.” He writes: “The sensation is doubled in the two parts of the body, since each is then precisely for the other an external thing that is touching and acting upon it, and each is at the same time a (living) body, both receiving and imparting touch.”²⁵ In this act of double sensation, I do not experience myself as some disembodied consciousness experiencing a mere thing amidst things, but as flesh experiencing flesh in a fundamentally reciprocal way. To touch in this double way is to realize that one does not merely “have” a body—one “is” a body as one is a living person.²⁶ In showing how the recursive phenomenon of touching-touched is at the heart of our experience of the world, Husserl challenges the optocentric priority of sight and restores touch to its rightful place: “In the case of an object constituted purely visibly ... an eye does not appear to its own vision ... I do not see myself the way I touch myself. What I call the seen body (*Körper*) is not something seeing which is seen, the way my body as touched body (*Leib*) is something touching which is touched.”²⁷ Through a series of detailed phenomenological descriptions Husserl rehabilitates Aristotle’s insight—without naming him—that touch is an active-passive dialectic at work across the senses: auditory, olfactory, gustatory and visual.²⁸

Husserl then takes a further step—after Aristotle—in claiming that tangible-tactile flesh provides us with our most primordial experience of the *other*. This is because touch is not simply a way of actively perceiving the other but also a way of being passively perceived by the other; it serves as a swing door between myself and another as we exchange places in a cycle of reversible sensibilities. Two-way touch is sensitive touch—a transfusion between intimate flesh and foreign flesh. Whereas sight promises domination of my environment out there, touch is the crossroads between me and all that is not me, inserting me in a play of flesh which reconnects the “there” with the “here”—linking that stranger out there in the world with my embodied presence in this particular time and place. In such wise, touch serves as the indispensable

25 Husserl, *Ideas pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology*, Book 2 (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1989), 155f.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 Husserl’s phenomenology shows how synesthesia is the mark of genuine experience—where two-way tangibility turns sight into insight, taste into savor, smell into flair, sound into resonance.

agency of inter-corporality—and by moral extension, empathy.²⁹ Tact is feeling which resonates, emotion which evaluates, mood which appreciates. It makes us beings-in-the-world-for-one-another—and as such serves as the precondition of language. Whence Husserl's conclusion that "the body can be constituted originally only in tactuality and in everything that is localized in the sensations of touch."³⁰ And this tactile incarnation, he insists, operates always "in unity with consciousness as soul and psyche." This is important: flesh is not opposed to mind—it is deep mind, intimate mind, felt mind. Flesh and mind are like the inside and outside of our skin—two sides of one sleeve. And since tactuality is what allows for empathy with others, a civilization which loses touch with flesh loses touch with itself.

Husserl was followed by a host of "existential phenomenologists" who, like him, offered profound contemporary insights into our embodied being. These included Heidegger's descriptions of our fundamental "moods" of anxiety and our existential use of hands (ready-to-hand, present-at-hand) in *Being and Time* (1927); Sartre's famous description of the caress in *Being and Nothingness* (1943); Levinas's description of "sensibility" as our most radical form of intentionality; and Merleau-Ponty's vivid account of human relations as incarnate body-subjects in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1944).³¹

29 Ibid. This initial insight of Husserl's is born out by the work of recent experimental work on "mirror touch synesthesia" at the Empathy Project's Social Brain Laboratory in Amsterdam.

30 Ibid., 33. It is worth noting here that touch as double sensation is the prototype not only of language as call and response, but also of consciousness itself as a double reversible intentionality of projection-reception. The reciprocity of touch, touching and being touched, becomes the "model" of consciousness itself as "reciprocal," reflecting but also being reflected upon. While all other senses tend to follow the paradigm of single intentionality, it is arguable that it is the reverse intentionality of touch which gives rise to consciousness as such, and ensures a non-dualist continuity between body and mind. On the reversibility thesis see also Dermot Moran, "Vision and Touch: Between Husserl and Merleau-Ponty" in *Carnal Hermeneutics*, 214–234.

31 See for example Levinas' description of the "caress" in *Totality and Infinity* (1961) and of "sensibility" in *Discovering Existence with Husserl* (Northwestern UP, 1998): "The new way of treating sensibility consists in conferring on its very obtuseness and thickness a special meaning and wisdom, a kind of intentionality. Senses have sense" (91f). See also here Paul Ricoeur's powerful defense of our 'terrestrial-corporeal' embodiment (as acting-suffering beings) in relation to science fictions of AI technology, *Oneself as Another* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992), 149–152. For a more detailed discussion of these phenomenologists see my "What is Carnal Hermeneutics?" in *Carnal Hermeneutics*, and Matthew Clemente, "Eros as Touch, Caress, Kiss" in *Eros Crucified* (London: Routledge, 2020). See also Kevin Aho's analysis of existential embodiment and attunement in *Contexts of Suffering: A Heideggerian Approach to Psychopathology* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019), especially ch. 2, entitled "Depression: Disruptions of Body, Mood, and Self," 23–36.

Merleau-Ponty is arguably the most important of these thinkers for our purposes, as he explicitly focuses on the phenomenon of touch. For him, there is no dichotomy between subject and object such that the human being would be either wholly active, at a safe distance from things, or passively powerless at the mercy of the world. When I touch a thing, Merleau-Ponty observes, I am at the same time tangible, “such that the touch is formed in the midst of the world and as it were in the things.”³² Neither I nor the world fully determine my experience of tactility because touch is constituted by a “chiasm” of mutual traversal between my flesh and the flesh of the world. Perceiving and being perceived are “intertwined” throughout, and this intertwining is more fundamental than the subject/object dualism. Something that is true of all the senses: I see only because I touch the world with my gaze, yet what I see is not determined by my gaze alone: “one cannot say if it is the look or the things that commands.”³³ Likewise with tasting, smelling and hearing—each involves a receptivity to being touched (on the tongue, tympanum and nose buds respectively). We seek things with our senses as they give themselves to us. Whenever I am sensing, I go out to the world and receive from the world in a continuous circle. Sight is not touch and touch is not sight, but each traverses the other and works through “the same body” and “the same world.”³⁴

Merleau-Ponty took the novel step of applying the phenomenology of touch to the question of healing. In *Phenomenology of Perception* he cites the example of a psychiatrist who healed a seriously disturbed patient by touching his throat with his hand. “In treating (certain illnesses) psychological medicine does not act on the patient by making him *know* the origin of his illness: sometimes a *touch of the hand* puts a stop to the spasms and restores to the patient his speech.” He explains: “The patient would not accept the meaning of his disturbances as revealed to him without the personal relationship formed with the doctor, or without the confidence and friendship felt towards him, and the

32 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 134.

33 Merleau-Ponty, 133. See Jacques Derrida’s critique of what he calls Merleau-Ponty’s “haptocentrism” in *On Touching* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

34 Merleau-Ponty, 134. We live most of our lives “in our hands” and “in our legs,” as we live in a dwelling through habituated action: “When I move about in my house, I know immediately and without any intervening discourse that to walk toward the bathroom involves passing close to the bedroom, or that to look out the window involves having the fireplace to my left ... For me, my apartment is not a series of strongly connected images. It only remains around me as my familiar domain if I still hold ‘in my hands’ or ‘in my legs’ its principal distances and directions, and only if a multitude of intentional threads run out toward it from my body” (131–132). For Merleau-Ponty action is almost always an *embodied interaction* with other persons and things in space and time.

change of existence resulting from this friendship. Neither symptom nor cure is worked out at the level of objective or positing consciousness, but *below* that level.”³⁵ What this implies is that human symptoms cannot be explained by either biochemistry or intellectual volition alone—though both have their role. Ultimate healing involves an existential conversion of one body-subject in tactful communion with another.

These phenomenological insights into embodiment were amplified by feminist existentialists like Simone de Beauvoir in the *Second Sex* (1946) and later again by Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva—thinkers who stressed the philosophically neglected dimension of tactility in sexuality, art and mother-child play. In a remarkable essay, “The Fecundity of the Caress” (1984), Irigaray argues that when it comes to love relationships, it is not the optical that is primary but the tactile. “The face is swallowed up in the act of love,” she says, “returning to the source of all the senses—touch ... Lovers’ faces live not only in the face but in the whole body ... The lovers meet in the moment of incarnation. Like sculptors who are going to introduce themselves, entrust themselves to one another for a new delivery into the world.”³⁶ The caress is a poetics of flesh—and making love is a dual art of loving and making. In the double sensation of eros one enters a world of vulnerability and creativity where lovers become “creators of new worlds,” realizing a “birth still in the future.”³⁷ Irigaray is particularly alert to the regenerative possibilities of lovers experiencing reciprocal pleasure, a key aspect of touch long eclipsed by Platonic idealism.

In a similar vein, Kristeva explores the neglected dimension of psychic-corporal “semiotics” that needs to be addressed for real healing to happen. She is particularly strong on the formative post-natal relationship between mother and child which she calls “reliance” (from the French, *relier*, to connect). This

35 Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge, 2016). 163. The doctor in question was Ludwig Binzwaner, a famous German existential psychiatrist. See also Redmond O’Hanlon (2020): “Our muscles remember chronic abuse, though consciousness and the narrative capacity usually absent themselves completely from such a violation, leaving the involuntary muscle self to process the unspeakable by radical dissociation or repeated acting-out. That is why the attempt to talk a patient through sexual trauma does not work.” Some kind of embodied “genuine gesture,” Merleau-Ponty notes, seems called for.

36 Irigaray refers to this “birth of the future” as the “child before the child.” See Luce Irigaray, “Fecundity of the Caress,” 232f. See also her invocation of the *Song of Songs* as a pre-Patriarchal template for the sexual-spiritual caress in her conclusion to “Ten Questions to Levinas.” For another powerful phenomenology of the sensual see Anne Dufourmantelle *Power of Gentleness: Meditations on the Risk of Living*, especially the sections entitled “The Sensory Celebration,” I, II, II and IV.

37 Irigaray, “Fecundity of the Caress,” 232.

rapport of carnal “presubjectivity” has been ignored, she argues, by our overly calculative culture with serious consequences for our psychic well-being. “Between biology and meaning and the tact required for the transmission of the affects and language of the other, maternal reliance specifies the passion mothers have for their children.”³⁸ And vice versa. This semiotic dialectic of rupture-attachment begins at birth. For natal flesh bears our first wound, experienced as wonder and trauma. It marks the scar of the navel: the knot of the umbilicus signaling my inaugural separation from the mother and my primal exposition to the world. Flesh is radical vulnerability, as our primordial condition of being naked reminds us.³⁹

Carnal semiotics is at the core of our existence. We are constantly reading and being read by each other’s skins, making the body a kind of book. To be tangible is to be readable. As when Lady Macbeth says to Macbeth—“Your face, my Thane, is like a book where men may read stranger matters.” Flesh betrays thought. And this idea of the body as text recalls not only the age-old notion of Creation as a “book of nature” (*liber mundi*) but also the whole modern project of self-creation, witnessed in the perpetual reinvention of new body styles (tattooing, hair cropping, haptic vests, piercings) and various forms of somatic self-deprivation (anorexic fasting) or self-mutilation (cutting). In such instances, the body is our book for better or worse. Just as books often become embodied, our reading of texts become affective incorporations of meaning into action. From Ezekiel eating the scroll that turned sweet in his belly to modern readers imitating the lives of literary heroes. Censorship of literature only exists because books affect us in affective ways. We are touched by the texts we read, reduced to tears and laughter, moved to act, swayed to respond. Reading with the body is never neutral.⁴⁰

38 Kristeva, “New Humanism and the Need to Believe,” in *Reimagining the Sacred*, 115. See also the pioneering work of Julia Kristeva on the neglected dimension of psychic-corporal “semiotics” that needs to be addressed for real healing to happen. She writes of carnal “significance” in a recent interview: ‘L’analyse procède au démantèlement des défenses et des traumas, qui, à cette condition seulement, peuvent favoriser une renaissance. Cette approche du sens, ou plutôt du processus de la signifiante a ouvert la voie ... à la fabrique de la subjectivité, qui s’empare de l’anté-prédicatif (de Husserl) et de la transsubstantiation (Proust) pour rejoindre, avec sa propre chair, la chair du monde.’ http://www.kristeva.fr/philosophie_magazine_135.html.

39 Anne O’Byrne, “Umbilicus: Towards a Hermeneutics of Generational Difference” in *Carnal Hermeneutics*, p 182f.

40 On the notion of the body as book, see Karmen McKendrick *Word Made Skin*, and John Manoussakis, “Soma, Sema, Sarx and Sex” in *Somatic Desire*, ed. R Kearney, Sarah Horton et al (Lexington: Lexington Books, 2018).

But while the revolutionary thinkers of existential and feminist phenomenology call us back into touch with tactuality, the mainstream academy—in keeping with our opto-centric worldview—have not always listened. Our digital culture today is clearly one of excarnation rather than incarnation, making it all the more urgent to endorse philosophies of embodiment which promise new arts of touch.⁴¹

41 In addition to Husserl and the phenomenologists and feminists mentioned above, see also the analyses of phenomenological embodiment by thinkers like Didier Franck, Jean-Luc Marion, Emmanuel Falque, Jean-Luc Nancy, as well as a whole new generation of phenomenologists in dialogue with cognitive science and neuro-science, notably Evan Thompson, *Mind In life: Phenomenology and the Sciences of Mind*, Dan Zahavi, *Self and Other: Explaining Subjectivity, Empathy and Shame* and Gallagher/Zahavi, *The Phenomenological Mind*. Nor should one neglect here the crucial contribution to the phenomenology-cognitive science conversation made by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh* (1999), where the authors propose “to see how our physical being—flesh, blood, sinew, cell and synapse—and all things we encounter daily in the world, make us who we are.” For a full philosophical rethinking of carnal embodiment we need both the phenomenological and cognitive-scientific approaches. The arguments in this essay are rehearsed and developed in my forthcoming volume, *Touch: Recovering our most Vital Sense* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020).