

**feeling in the flesh:
approaching an ecological
ethic through whitehead and
merleau-ponty**

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AN OVERVIEW OF THE FLESH

The most important concept in Merleau-Ponty's late ontology is the concept of "flesh," which seeks to detail a fundamental continuity between the self and the world. This continuity is simultaneously stark and ambiguous. It is stark in its literal sense, whereby Merleau-Ponty claims that we are ultimately made from "the same stuff,"¹ yet thoroughly ambiguous in both its *immateriality*,² and the generality with which it is employed. Compounded by the unfinished nature of Merleau-Ponty's work, this ambiguity has led to multiple interpretations and emphases of the flesh within Merleau-Pontian scholarship, especially in regards to its usefulness as a concept to ground an environmental ethic. However, as this paper seeks to show, such ambiguity need not be seen as an obstacle standing in the way of developing an ethical stance based on the flesh. Rather, such "confusions" ought to be seen as a virtue of the flesh and a necessary component when thinking in terms of the flesh.³

Despite this resistance to an absolute and static definition, when approaching the flesh it is useful to employ what Lawrence Hass identifies as the three "primary" senses of the flesh, characterised as carnality, reversibility, and general being. Flesh as Carnality can be understood in the least metaphorical sense of the word,

as associated with notions of substance, visibility, animism, materiality, and tangibility. The presence of this sense of flesh in Merleau-Ponty's work is identified by Hass in words such as "surface," "density," "mass," "body," "weight," "thickness" and "presence."⁴ This sense of flesh has a heavy connotation, as an earthy substance, or the real "stuff" of which the actual world is made. This sense of flesh is typically understood as that which is "visible."

Unlike carnal flesh, flesh as reversibility is unsubstantial. This sense of flesh is understood in terms of the chiasmatic intertwining or folding over of the flesh, which Merleau-Ponty describes as the "exchange between me and the world."⁵ Hass identifies this in words such as "possibility," "latency," "cohesion," "coiling over," "folding back," "prototype," "style," and "paradox." Etymologically, the metaphor of "chiasm" refers to the "crossing over" that occurs when, from two monocular images, we attain the unity of a thing in binocular vision. Toadvine argues that it is through this notion of chiasm and binocular vision that we are provided with an affirmation of the pre-given unity of the world.⁶ The flesh as chiasmatic reversibility maintains what could be termed a "dissipative structure" or "constitutive paradox"⁷ that is located at the juncture of perceptual exchange.

Flesh as an element of general being is something more general than matter, mind, and substance.⁸ Hass associates this sense with the words "general principle," "exemplar," and "concrete emblem of being."⁹ While not carnal, this sense of flesh is understood as the most primordial and "elemental" sense of flesh. As Merleau-Ponty describes it:

To designate it, we should need the old term 'element,' in the sense it was used to speak of water, air, earth, and fire, that is, in the sense of a *general thing* midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea ... The flesh is in this sense an 'element' of Being.¹⁰

It is worth noting that Merleau-Ponty states that the "most difficult point" in conceptualising the flesh is "the bond between the flesh and the idea, between the visible and the interior armature which it manifests and which it conceals."¹¹ Flesh as general being is the most difficult sense to pin down and can thus be said to span the other two senses of the flesh, as the general principle that underlies all senses and expressions of the flesh.

These three senses of flesh are not final, static, hierarchical, or absolute; they are closely interrelated and simultaneously structure, support, and co-create one another. For instance, while general being can be considered primordial, it relies on visible, carnal flesh for its articulation. Conversely, general being becomes a meaningless category without some visible manifestation. This articulation is achieved through chiasmatic intertwining and reversibility, which speaks to the manner in which elemental flesh is situated “between” the individual and the idea.¹²

The flesh, then, must be understood as having multiple, inexhaustive meanings, of which these three styles merely represent dominant identifiable patterns, layers, or “sides” of the flesh.¹³ For instance, another characterisation of the flesh that Hass identifies is the flesh as Mother,¹⁴ which itself has important environmental implications relating to the familial bond between self and world, mostly in terms of the dependence of the former on the latter.¹⁵

Despite being perpetually incomplete—and always entailing more than can be directly stated—these three “primary” senses of the flesh identified by Hass provide a useful framework through which we can approach and understand the flesh in all its guises. While all three senses of the flesh are interrelated and co-constituting, this paper seeks to show that there are important ethical implications based on the movement or direction we take when thinking the flesh as a basis for environmental ethics.

THE FLESH FOURFOLD: ABRAM, TOADVINE, BARBARAS AND BANNON

In his book *The Spell of the Sensuous*, David Abram understands the flesh in two principle ways. First as the “mysterious tissue or matrix that underlies and gives rise to both the perceiver and the perceived”¹⁶ and secondly as “an intertwined, and actively intertwining, lattice of mutually dependent phenomena ... of which our own sensing bodies are a part.”¹⁷ The first of these descriptions speaks to the carnal sense of the flesh, while the latter description expresses a sense of reversibility and general being in the flesh. Abram demonstrates both these senses of the flesh in the following passage:

Each of us ... is both subject and object, sensible and sentient. Why, then, might this not also be the case in relation to another, nonhuman entity? ... Even an ant crawling along my arm ... displays at the same time its own sentience ... why might not this ‘reversibility’ of subject and object extend

to every entity that I experience? ... I find myself forced to acknowledge that *any* visible, tangible form that meets my gaze may also be an experiencing subject, sensitive and responsive to the beings around it.¹⁸

Following Merleau-Ponty's own trajectory derived from a philosophy of embodiment, Abram emphasises the material continuity between self and world. We are able to experience the world, Abram says, because we are a body *in* and *of* this world; such an experience is unavailable to "a wholly immaterial mind."¹⁹ He argues that we "might as well say we are organs of this world, flesh of its flesh," and adopt the view that "the world is perceiving itself *through* us."²⁰ Abram hopes that this approach to nature, which emphasises the material continuity of the touching/touched, will provide a "renewed attentiveness" to nature and the grounds for a new environmental ethic based on the "rejuvenation of our *carnal*, sensorial empathy with the living land that sustains us."²¹

The passage by which Abram traverses the flesh—from carnality (my arm), to reversibility (the ant's sentience in relation to my own), to general being (the earth itself, the reversibility of every entity)—expands outwards from embodied, lived experience towards a general sense of being. Because of this, it runs the risk of anthropomorphising the flesh and dissolving all differences in nature.²² This is problematic for an environmental ethic based on the flesh, as Brown and Toadvine have pointed out, because it runs the risk of collapsing humanity and nature into a "predictable, continuous, and homogenous unity," from which we cannot make any distinctions, ethical or otherwise.²³ It is for this reason that Toadvine argues that any ethical response to nature requires recognition of its unpredictable, non-homogenous and non-continuous character. This is something Merleau-Ponty sought to emphasise in his late works through a recognition that along with continuity there must be a sense of difference in the flesh, that is, a gap or an *écart* between the touching and the touched. However, such gaps need not imply total discontinuity and externality. As Merleau-Ponty puts it:

[T]his hiatus between my right hand touched and my right hand touching, between my voice heard and my voice uttered, between one moment of my tactile life and the following one, is not an ontological void ... it is spanned by the total being of my body, and by that of the world.²⁴

From this we can understand that *general being* spans carnal flesh, and that, though carnal flesh might be our inevitable starting point when *experiencing* the flesh, it

cannot be our starting point when *thinking* or *conceptualising* the flesh. Therefore, it is not so much the sentiment of Abram's account that is problematic as it is the *movement* itself. What is required is some distance between ourselves and the flesh—not an extreme *pensée du survol*²⁵ but a more modest suspension or *epoché* that is provided by the notion of gaps.

Whereas Abram emphasises carnality first and reversibility second, characterised by his movement from a shared animistic substance to a touching/touched relationship, Toadvine places an emphasis on the chiasmatic reversibility of the flesh whereby the carnal face of flesh must be understood as the product—rather than producer—of reversibility. Toadvine understands human life and sentience as expressions of the flesh, which only take on the status of carnal manifestation through the self-reflexive nature of flesh. In doing so, he recognises that it is only through differentiation that something like carnal substance can emerge. In this sense, reversibility must be seen as the pre-requisite for expression; that is, there can be no expressive qualities without difference; there can be no carnality without reversibility. In this sense, Toadvine's interpretation of the flesh primarily follows Hass' second sense, whereby flesh is understood as the folding over of itself into expressive styles or manners of being.

Where Abram stresses and explicates animistic flesh as a continuity of humans *in* nature, Toadvine emphasises expressive flesh as a flesh of difference and emergence *from* within nature. However, this shift in emphasis—from anthropomorphising nature to naturalising human being as an expressive mode of nature—ultimately leads Toadvine to conclude that there can be no ethical conclusions derived from Merleau-Ponty's ontology. He maintains that although we may be “folds of the world's flesh” this “points to no particular ethical consequences, environmental or otherwise.”²⁶ This echoes Merleau-Ponty's own working notes for the *The Visible and the Invisible* in which he points out that “the distinction between the two planes (natural and cultural) is abstract: everything is cultural in us ... and everything is natural in us.”²⁷ That is, there is a tautological impotence inherent to the concept of “the natural” as an ethical category. If we begin with reversibility, as Toadvine does, and emphasise *les écarts*, then we commit to a flesh of *in-difference*—difference for the sake of difference with no possible way of valuing any kind of difference or expression above any other.

The most forceful argument against the flesh as a basis for an environmental ethic is found in Barabaras' critique of the flesh. However, it is not the apparently val-

unless *cul-de-sac* of the flesh that Barbaras criticises, but the notion of the flesh itself. Barbaras rejects Merleau-Ponty's ontology on the grounds that it is internally inconsistent, insisting that there is "an irreducible incompatibility between a phenomenology of perception and a philosophy of flesh."²⁸ Barbaras' concerns are somewhat interrelated to Toadvine's, insofar as he emphasises *les écarts* and is concerned about the place of the human subject in a world where subject and object become invariably blurred. He argues that the blurring of the subject and the object simply results in the dissolution of the subject, whereby "there is *no longer an ontological difference between matter and organic beings*."²⁹ In order to embrace the philosophy of flesh, Barbaras holds that we must give up not only "the distinction between perception and perceived object" but also "the phenomenology of perception itself."³⁰

Nevertheless, Barbaras holds that Toadvine's position entails another form of anthropomorphism from which we cannot escape. According to Barbaras, we cannot escape this anthropomorphism because we always prescribe meaning to nature from a uniquely human perspective. As embodied subjects, Barbaras argues that we are forced to accept a "positive anthropomorphism"³¹ as a fundamental "truth with which we must reckon."³² This inescapability from our human situation extends to Barbaras' critique of the flesh in general, which he sees as incompatible with Merleau-Ponty's subjective starting point in the *Phenomenology of Perception*. This "positive" anthropomorphism is of a different kind to that found in Abram, and is one that exaggerates the gap between human being and nature. Rather than emphasise our continuity with the flesh of the world, and dissolve the subject into a greater unity, Barbaras *reinforces* the boundaries between them, embracing the privileged subjectivist position whereby man is "the measure of all things," and our bodies "the measurement of all reality."³³ Ultimately, Barbaras rejects the flesh as a viable ontology due to what he sees as Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological commitments to a philosophy of consciousness; that is, he holds that the flesh cannot be reconciled with perception, and that there can be no blurring between Merleau-Ponty's object (ontology) and his subject (phenomenology).

The most promising interpretation of the flesh for an environmental ethic is found in Bannon, who provides what could be termed a "process-relational" interpretation of the flesh that seeks to avoid the shared sense of anthropomorphism—whether advocated for or not—found in Abram, Toadvine and Barbaras. According to Bannon, this apparent inevitability of anthropomorphism stems from the phenomenological starting point of consciousness and "basing ontol-

ogy in perceptual experience.” Following Galen Johnson, who describes the flesh as “*event and process*” and an “*ontology of verbs and adverbs*,”³⁴ Bannon provides a relational interpretation of the flesh that challenges the assumption “that flesh is fundamentally a perceptual structure originating from a sentient body’s lived-perception.”³⁵ Rather than perception, Bannon maintains that we can understand the flesh “through the idea of internal relations” and what he terms a general theory of affectivity.³⁶ He argues that such an ontology must begin with a “general conception of experience” in which every natural body can be said to be both experiencing and sensitive to its environment in different ways. Therefore, what Bannon seeks is a kind of “inhuman” phenomenology concerned with the experiential relationships that exist between all things, living and non-living.³⁷ Bannon’s flesh posits things as characterised by interiority rather than exteriority, whereby “to be” simply means “to be open to affection.”³⁸ “The flesh,” on Bannon’s account, is not a word *for* “being,” but “the manner in which a body relates to other bodies.”³⁹ However, Bannon maintains that “to attribute interiority does not require the attribution of consciousness or even sentience,” as Barbaras or Abram seem to suggest.⁴⁰ On this understanding, “a thing” is considered to be a “nexus of flesh relations that constitute it as an individual.”⁴¹ Bannon argues that it is through such an approach to the flesh that we can avoid the “anthropomorphising position that Barbaras suggests is ... inevitable,”⁴² given that there is “nothing inherently anthropomorphic” about the idea “that a being is a nexus of relations.”⁴³

The flesh becomes a lot less like a “thing” of animistic substance and more like a metaphorical *fabric* that is woven out of many threads—relations—of which the visible flesh is seen to represent a “knot.”⁴⁴ It is worth noting that the French word *étoffe* is translatable to English as “stuff,” “cloth,” or “fabric.”⁴⁵ So when Merleau-Ponty says that we are “made of the same stuff” in reference to the flesh,⁴⁶ we can equally understand this as being “made of the same fabric.” The benefit gained from this shift in metaphor is that “fabric” better encapsulates the language of the “folding” and “crossing” over of the flesh. Unlike the homogenous and substance-monistic implication of “stuff,” it is generally the nature of fabric to be composed of individual threads, which also speaks to an understanding of a unity *in* and *from* difference. This relational understanding of the flesh as an ironically *immaterial* fabric helps us to guard against a movement that would *iron out* the differences in the flesh and dissolve the subject and the object into one. Rather, this conception of the flesh would understand that it is the folds in the flesh that add to its depth and quite literally enable it to *in-crease* itself beyond itself. Rather than breaking down the flesh, it is a conceptual movement that builds it up.⁴⁷

However, Bannon concedes that even if we overcome the anthropomorphism of the flesh “it remains unclear how this ontology provides a basis for normative judgements.”⁴⁸ Therefore, in order to develop a relational ontology and subsequent environmental ethic, Bannon notes that a “lingering” question remains: that is, “what transformations are necessary within phenomenological methodology in order to adapt it to a more general theory of affection?”⁴⁹ Such a transformation can be achieved through Whitehead’s philosophy of organism.⁵⁰

WHITEHEAD’S PHILOSOPHY OF ORGANISM

In Whitehead’s philosophy of organism we are presented with a metaphysical scheme in which both affectivity and perception are blurred at the most basic level of reality. In Whitehead’s metaphysics, actual entities are the “real things” that make up the world. Interchangeably referred to as “actual occasions,” these entities are understood to be durational processes of becoming. It is through these actual entities that Whitehead is able to attribute a notion of subjective experience throughout the whole of nature, with actual entities also understood to be “subjects” or “drops of experience.” Whitehead notes that “*experience* involves a *becoming*, ... [which] means that *something becomes*,” with that which becomes involving a “*repetition* transformed into *novel immediacy*.”⁵¹ Simply put, experience denotes change. In accordance with Bannon, such a conception of experience is understood in the broadest possible terms, and is not to be confused with consciousness. Experience remains “existentially prior” to consciousness,⁵² with all processes of change intrinsically involving “experience.” Hence, a rock can be said to “experience” the world around it, actively becoming that rock through hundreds of thousands of years of experience involving sedimentation, erosion and interference by animals and events. Similarly, a coastal rock formation will experience erosion caused by the waves that crash into it. In turn, those waves will experience and yield to the stopping power of the cliff-face.

If we understand actual entities as units of experience and transitory processes of becoming, then we can begin to think about the “life,” as it were, of actual occasions. This life span of actual entities is understood as a process of attaining “satisfactions” or “achievements,”⁵³ with “concrecence” the word used to describe the phase of growth that entities undergo in achieving their satisfactions. Concrecence signifies the growing together of the many into the unity of one, and this is achieved through acts of what Whitehead calls positive and negative prehension. The word “prehension” comes from the Latin verb *prehensio* meaning

“to seize,” with the act of prehending understood as the process of seizing data, the taking up of past actual occasions (the past actual world) and internalizing them in present occasions. It also involves the taking up of future possible worlds, with the becoming of an actual entity effectively understood as a synthesis of the actual past and possible futures embodied in one momentary satisfaction of nature. What Whitehead calls the satisfactions of actual entities then serve as the *efficient causes* for new entities, making up what is termed the “physical pole” of a concrescence. This involves the passive reception of what is “given” in past acts of becoming, while the second half of prehension is a self-directed component called the “mental” or “conceptual” pole of prehension. This consists of the subject determining its own act of becoming as a creative process. That it is termed “mental” again does not imply consciousness, but rather the prehension of what Whitehead calls “eternal objects.”⁵⁴ These eternal objects provide the “subjective aim,” “lure,”⁵⁵ or *final cause* of an actual entity.⁵⁶ There is, then, a two-fold potentiality. There is a “general potentiality provided by eternal objects” and a “real” potentiality “conditioned by the data provided by the actual world.”⁵⁷ In the becoming of an actual entity, there is a dialectical synthesis of constraint and freedom, of conditions and possibilities, which facilitates the passage of nature. It is the role of eternal objects, as essences or *styles*,⁵⁸ to help determine the potential pathways of becoming, and to serve as the final causes that guide an actual entity in selecting and rejecting the prehensions available to it.

The attainment of satisfaction signifies both the birth and death of an actual entity, whereby upon perishing, an actual entity will achieve its “immortality” as the objective datum available for prehension in new acts of concrescence. It is this becoming and perishing of actual entities that provides the continuity of nature, as well as the rhythmic pulse of reality. Like the beating heart of bodily flesh, the notion of a “pulsating” and “rhythmic” reality indicates the presence of temporal *écarts* in nature. Actual entities become “immortal” because each actual entity entails and requires the embodiment of the entire actual past within it; no actual entity is isolated from the relational network of becoming, and each must be understood as a product/producer of nature as a whole. Perished entities become quasi-causal, with causation understood as the transference of experience that results in the “re-enactment” of the feelings of causes.⁵⁹ An entity is in this sense compelled to reiterate what came before it, without necessarily *replicating* it exactly. This is not a monistic replication of nature whereby each actual entity is understood as displaying the *same* nature, but something that can be understood in terms of difference and divergence. As per the philosophy of organism, this trans-

mission of immortality can be understood as a genetic process, in the sense that we are products of, and carry within us, the experience of our ancestors. However, we do not simply replicate their experience; we have new experiences as a result of their experiences. Our ancestors achieve their immortality not only in us, but also in the cultural artifacts they leave behind, and the far-from isolated impact that their “mere” existence has had on the natural world. However, negative prehensions—those eternal objects not taken up and actualized in concrete reality—also play a role in the constitution of reality as unrealized “invisibles” that remain latent in nature. To again use a genetic metaphor, negative prehensions could be seen as those recessive traits that are not expressed in an organism but remain “invisible” within it, awaiting the facilitative conditions to achieve their satisfaction.⁶⁰ That is to say, they haunt the actual world as unrealized potentials.

Concrescence and prehension imply that actual entities are not atomistic objects *externally* related to one another, but experiencing subjects that are open and *internally* related to one another. Unlike Leibniz’s windowless monads, we cannot have an isolated actual occasion. This is because a new actual entity will require other past actual occasions to serve as the “object” or “material” that will help to constitute its own process of becoming.⁶¹ Thus, Whitehead’s actual entities are thoroughly “windowed” and open to one another—as momentary, ephemeral knots in a web of relations. As with the language of reversibility, actual entities co-constitute and envelop one another, seizing and grasping one another in order to become “visible” as a satisfaction and objective datum. In this sense, carnality is achieved through reversibility. Furthermore, they are *affectively* related to one another, with positive prehensions also termed “feelings.” Feeling is understood by Whitehead to be analogous to perception, whereby to *feel* is also to *perceive*. So when an actual entity, as an experiencing subject, *prehends* an external object, it is *perceiving*, *experiencing*, and *feeling* that object. It must also be stressed that the actual entity is a unitary whole that houses within it its physical (objective) and mental (subjective) poles. Furthermore, these poles are not “parts” of the actual entity, but *abstractions* from the whole. Nature itself is an holistic entity within which all other subjects/objects exist in a constituting/constituted relationship as abstractions from this whole. The reversibility expressed through the constituting/constituted relationship of actual entities is thoroughly “chiasmatic” insofar as it involves the folding over and in-crase of nature that results in the achievement of momentary “satisfactions”—instances of visibility that come to the fore as objective datum available for further acts of prehension. This entails recognition through perception and ultimately, the *constitution* of other visibles;

visibles that are not wholly contemporaneous but products of an ineliminable and temporal *écart* implied by the durational nature of process.

Thus for Whitehead, the very fabric of nature, both living and non-living, is composed of perceptual processes. It is in eternal objects that we are provided with the subjective aims of actual entities, which corresponds to Bannon's idea of developing an "inhuman" phenomenology. That prehension involves "seizing" speaks to the "touching/touched" quality of the flesh. Each actual entity is touching and touched, grasping and grasped, and this process implies a durational and temporal *écart*. Thus, we can understand that each actual entity is a minute, temporal and rippling "fold" within an overarching sense of the flesh, which can be characterized as general being.

Through a Whiteheadian reading of the flesh we thus arrive at a sense of general being characterized by a general, in-visible, potentiality, followed by the perceptual reversibility of actual entities, which attain their actualization in visible carnality. While this is opposite to the movement that Abram makes, it is worth noting that when we *experience* the flesh it is necessarily embodied and therefore carnal. Hence, it is important to acknowledge the necessity of both movements, which compliment each other. The movement from self to world, from carnality to general being, and back again requires a continual oscillation between these poles. Like Merleau-Ponty's own *œuvre*, which can be characterized as a movement from phenomenology to ontology,⁶² there remains within the incomplete pages of *The Visible and the Invisible* an unfulfilled intention to *return* to the phenomenology.⁶³

CULTIVATING INTENTIONAL POTENTIALITY

Whitehead's metaphysics opens up the possibility of conceiving a subjective flesh of relational interdependence. However, where does this leave us in terms of an environmental ethic? Given that Bannon "would prefer to imagine a nature in which humanity collectively cultivates beauty rather than facilitates its destruction,"⁶⁴ the importation of Whiteheadian metaphysics into a relational conception of the flesh may provide the grounding for the kind of ethic that Bannon seeks. Further to this, by modifying Bannon's position through the introduction of Whitehead's pansubjective metaphysics, wherein every entity in nature is said to have both a subjective aim and the capacity to feel and be felt, we can preserve the notion that the flesh as experienced is inherently perceptual, as in Abram,

Toadvine and Barbaras,⁶⁵ while also emphasising the relational, affective status of the flesh prior to human consciousness. From this, we can approach an optimistic ethic based on creativity and the cultivation of higher, more complex kinds of feeling. This is in accord with Toadvine, who argues that a “change in our thinking about what is can lead to an entirely different conception of ethics ... that circles less around principles of moral obligation and that instead concerns our dwelling within the world,” whereby to “encounter nature ... is also to creatively express it, [and] to take up its rhythms as our own.”⁶⁶ This is consistent with a Whiteheadian approach, which can help to overcome Toadvine’s resignation towards deriving an environmental ethic based on the flesh. In part, this arises from Toadvine’s resignation towards a “renewed philosophy of nature” as opposed to an “environmental” philosophy. According to Toadvine, any “environmental philosophy” is implicitly anthropomorphic, since it “connotes the surrounding world ... for human beings.”⁶⁷ By contrast, he argues that a shift towards a philosophy of nature provides a “rich ambiguity” concerning “the being of nature, the being of humanity, and the relation between the two.”⁶⁸ That is, it is necessarily *relational*. However, the very notion of an “ethic” is concerned with how human beings should act in the world, and thus any ethic will be implicitly anthropomorphic; we are not passive bystanders in nature, but active producers of nature who dwell within it. Since Barbaras has pointed out that Toadvine’s interpretation of the flesh simply leads us to a different kind of anthropomorphism, perhaps a different shift in terms is needed. Given that we exist at the chiasmic crux of nature, rather than adopting a strictly “natural” philosophy—which implies neutrality—or “environmental” philosophy—which implies situated dwelling and anthropomorphic projection—what we ought to be aiming for is an “ecological” ethic that acknowledges both the “natural” and “environmental” while emphasising the relational bonds that exist between the human and non-human world. An ecological ethic would then seek to overcome the neutrality of nature along with those positions that would render it an indifferent producer of meaningless and arbitrary differences. In developing such an ethic, nature must be shown to have ends independent of human consciousness. Therefore, what is required is a sense of agency or intentionality in nature.

Given that Whitehead’s philosophy is primarily concerned with the creative advance of nature, a Whiteheadian reading of the flesh can provide us with the means to develop an ecological ethic based on the cultivation of what I term the “intentional potentiality” of nature. Intentional potentiality is found in the mental pole of an actual occasion and denotes the degree of openness that particular

subjects have to act and become in the world. This speaks to the creative potential of nature and the inhuman intentionality that is found in Whitehead's eternal objects. Intentional potentiality in its most developed form is found in the mental pole of a society of actual occasions. Nature, as a society of actual occasions—or a society of societies—has *intentional objects* towards which it strives, with these intentional objects provided by the mental poles of subordinate societies, expressed in terms of a general intentional potentiality. The differences that occur in nature can then be understood as expressions of intentional potentiality, which indicate a particular valuation of one possible world over other possible worlds. On this understanding, value is not only inherent in nature, but is also the means by which it produces itself. Is it problematic to attribute a typically human notion of intentionality to all of nature? Not when understood in terms of pre-reflective intentionality. Intentional potentiality can thus be informed by Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the body-subject and being-in-the-world not as a matter of "I think," but of "I can."⁶⁹ For Merleau-Ponty the experience of being is not reliant on consciousness, and thinking is not a pre-requisite for existence. It is not a matter of "*je pense, donc je suis*," nor even "*je suis, donc je pense*." Rather, it is a matter of "*je suis, donc je peux*" or "*je suis parce que je peux*." It is matter of existing because one can, because one exhibits a style or a manner of being as a *verb*. A rose has its own manner of being, in the sense that even a rose "roses."⁷⁰ Likewise, a rock can be said "to rock"—that is, "exist."⁷¹ Therefore, an ethic grounded on the notion of intentional potentiality is concerned with providing the conditions in which nature can not only actively become, but actively become different—that is to say, become novel.

Despite the inherent significance of non-living things as intentional accomplishments of nature, such an ethic would inevitably grant a special place to human beings as those expressions of the flesh that possess highly complex and sophisticated degrees of intentional potentiality. However, it would also understand that such occasions are essentially *relational*, and would therefore value those non-living expressions of the flesh that contribute to and facilitate higher forms of intentional potentiality. On this understanding, it is an ethic that would value the *conditions* for autonomy more so than the explicit exercise of autonomy. However, this does not mean that we are condemned to revert to an anthropocentric position, wherein the cultivation of "beauty" that Bannon advocates would necessarily be an exclusively human kind of beauty. The notion of cultivating beauty accords with process ecologist John Cobb Jr's affirmation of greater value in a world that is beautiful to human beings. This is based on what Cobb identifies as a "consider-

able correlation between what we find beautiful and the sort of environment [that is] hospitable to higher forms of life.”⁷² In contrasting a “beautiful world” consisting of birds and animals with an “ugly world” of worms and insects, Cobb notes that the feelings of birds and animals are more valuable than those of insects and worms. In terms of intentional potentiality, the feelings of such entities could be regarded as more value-able, in terms of their capacity for making complex selections. Nevertheless, insects and worms are important for such a beautiful world because they participate in the ecosystem that makes all these things, including bird songs, possible. Thus a beautiful world of birds and animals cannot be abstracted and isolated from an “ugly” world of worms and insects. Further to this, given that conscious human existence is understood as an *accomplishment* of nature that is squarely rooted *within* nature, this apparent anthropocentrism is equally an eco-centricism.⁷³ Therefore, it becomes an ethic based on what *kind* of nature we want to participate in co-creating. This acknowledges both the creativity of human beings along with the autonomy of non-human nature. As Bannon puts it: “rather than seeking to preserve nature, we should be asking what sort of nature we should collaborate in the production thereof.”⁷⁴ Though some might argue that we have too often had a say in what kind of nature we produce, what intentional potentiality tells us is that human beings can exist in many possible styles; as either ecologically destructive or ecologically augmentative. Neutrality is not an option.⁷⁵

An ecological ethic based on a Whiteheadian reading of the flesh is fundamentally a relational ethic, the ends of which is the cultivation of intentional potentiality, or the cultivation of those relational conditions that enable and facilitate the emergence of novel creations, *qua* achievements, in nature. In short, it is the cultivation of nature’s creative potential. A necessary difficulty with this is that we cannot always tell when we are cultivating intentional potentiality, with the notion of cultivation far more ambiguous than that of control. This ambiguity demands a certain openness to novelty and uncertainty. A general rule is that an increase in nature’s intentional potentiality is always better than a reduction of intentional potentiality. However, the promotion of “novelty” alone is not sufficient. A cerebral lesion is certainly “novel,” as is a cancerous growth. What these achievements undermine, however, is the creative potential of individuals. Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of Schneider in *Phenomenology of Perception* provides insights into this.⁷⁶ Schneider’s reduced intentionality and his inability to perform abstract movements provides concrete reasons why we should, and generally do, guard against cerebral lesions and the shrapnel that causes them. We do this because

we value the autonomy provided by our access to higher degrees of intentional potentiality. Such autonomy is not the same as freedom. Suicide, the ultimate exercise of freedom, is also the ultimate undermining of intentional potentiality. It is therefore an illusory freedom, whereby one possible action completed serves to undermine an infinite number of possibilities. Hence, suicide limits autonomy and is not a condition of it. From this perspective, the development of nuclear weapons—whose horrid and dormant potential for destruction haunts the actual world—could not be considered an advancement of nature’s potentiality. While we now have the potential to create a nuclear winter, any realisation of that potential would extinguish a far greater number of possible achievements. Thus we cannot expect that the cultivation of intentional potentiality will always be linear or progressive, nor can we guarantee it at all. In fact, to have a net increase in the creative potential of nature is to equally have an increased potential for destruction. This is evidenced by the environmental crisis, which is wholly the product of intentional selection and valuation in nature brought on by human potentiality. Despite the technological advancements of industrialization and the “commodious” living standards we enjoy today, to have the earth’s ecosystem on the cusp of collapse speaks to a net reduction in intentional potentiality.

Therefore, an ethic based on intentional potentiality, with its emphasis on cultivation, is not a *laissez-faire* approach to nature. Cultivation implies some kind of purposeful, ends-driven activity, and this is the antithesis of *laissez-faire*. A *laissez-faire* approach to intentional potentiality, of novelty for the sake of novelty or change for the sake of change, does not distinguish between what *kind* of change we should engender and augment; it ignores our own autonomy as expressions of the flesh. Contrary to this, we should take up our role as conscious, self-regulating agents of the flesh. For instance, we should act to avoid a post-climate change world in which only one species flourishes at the expense of all others, as this would not be an expression of the flesh’s intentional potentiality, but a disavowal of it. This is because the flesh does not strive to iron out and dissolve differences. Rather, it seeks to build them up through a process of creative becoming. We can understand that the flesh is capable of achieving much more than homogeneity, and that nature’s autonomy is expressed most vividly in difference.⁷⁷ This is why, borrowing Whitehead’s terminology, expressions of the flesh can be deemed “achievements” that are the outcome of creative, purposeful activity. Therefore an ethic based on intentional potentiality would seek to maintain diversity and heterogeneity as pre-conditions for divergent potentialities and new achievements. This is consistent with the goals of process philosopher and speculative

naturalist Arran Gare, whose holistic principles for the creation of an ecological civilization include the need to maintain heterogeneity.⁷⁸

Hence, the ambiguity of the flesh itself speaks to an inherent ambiguity for any ethical system that can be derived from it. Though we are seeking a net increase of intentional potentiality, such a net increase cannot be gauged by utilitarian calculation. Rather than quantifiable calculation we should take seriously the notion of *feeling* our way towards increasing the intentional potentiality of nature. This is positively vague, but the vagueness of intentional potentiality should not render it any less valuable or useful as a general basis for making ethical decisions. Accordingly, there is a necessary tension that must be felt in an ethic centered on intentional potentiality, and this tension requires constant vigilance. In acknowledging the impossibility of control, rather than an outcome-based ethic grounded on the cultivation of “things” or even “occasions,” it is importantly the relations and conditions that sustain these things that must be cultivated. Ultimately, such an ethical stance is concerned with the autonomy of the flesh, which is partially expressed through human intentionality without being reducible to it. In characterizing the flesh in this way, as agentic and self-determining with the capacity for freedom, we can embrace and temper Barbaras’ notion of “positive anthropomorphism” through a humble acknowledgement that man is not the measure of all things, but a significant measure nonetheless. In light of this, we can consider ourselves as self-regulating and semi-autonomous agents of the flesh, with such a stance no more arrogant than that of the white blood cell that maintains and cultivates its own environment. Of course, white blood cells can become problematic—for themselves and others—in the event of autoimmune diseases, wherein they actively undermine their environments. A key difference between human beings and white blood cells is that our greater degree of intentional potentiality enables us to make more complex valuations to imagine and enact different potentialities. While it is difficult to blame the white blood cell for any self-destructive behaviors, our power to abstract and reflect means that we can certainly hold ourselves to account and address our own tendencies towards self-destruction.

The claim being made is ultimately a modest one: that a Whiteheadian approach to the flesh *can* lead to the development of an optimistic ecological ethic. Though it may seem unreasonably weak given the stakes, this need not diminish the importance of the claim. It would be too presumptuous to say that the notion of intentional potentiality “will” or even “should” lead to the development of an

ecological ethic. Such determinate language fundamentally goes against the idea of intentional potentiality itself, which is based on possibility. As a result, it is important that any claim based on such a concept remains cautious. Though modest, “can” signifies the provisional nature of intentional potentiality. More importantly, it also carries within it an imperative to act—it demands something of us; namely that we take up and enact possibilities. We cannot take for granted that any philosophical theory—no matter how compelling or well thought out—will ever be enough on its own. However, the urgency of the environmental crisis dictates that we rapidly adopt a general stance that can orient all our actions as entities becoming-in-the-world. As an orientation, intentional potentiality provides us with vaguely defined ends *en pointillé*—in outline. This vagueness is necessary given that the world and future—as we actively co-create it—is itself uncertain, provisional, and subject to change. As with the flesh, an ethic based on intentional potentiality is condemned to ambiguity. It requires humble acknowledgement of our lack of control over the natural world, while at the same time demanding that we do not abdicate our awesome responsibility as conscious agents of the flesh. It is a call to do the best we can in recognition of both these limits and capabilities.

As it stands, this paper only provides a preliminary outline of intentional potentiality as a basis for developing an ecological ethic. While there is more work to be done in developing the notion of intentional potentiality,⁷⁹ it is hoped that from this outline we can begin to “feel” our way towards an ecological ethic. How are we to act practically then? To use a crude metaphor, we can lead a horse to water but we cannot make it drink. Still, it is better that we at least give it that option. Since leading a horse to water inevitably implies human intervention, an ethic based on intentional potentiality is condemned to be anthropocentric to some degree. It naturally affords a special place to human beings who display immensely complex, if disproportionate, degrees of intentional potentiality. Thus for human beings, it is not simply a matter of passively accepting “what is natural,” or “what is,”⁸⁰ but of cultivating “what could be”—of cultivating intentional potentiality.

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NOTES

1. French: *La même étoffe*.
2. Merleau-Ponty says “the flesh we are speaking of is not matter.” Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968, 146.
3. In the sense that we are “mixed up with the world and with others in an inextricable confusion.” Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*. Trans. Donald A. Landes. New York: Routledge, 2012, 481.
4. Lawrence Hass, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008, 201.
5. Merleau-Ponty, *VI*, 214.
6. Ted Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2009, 111.
7. As described by Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers, dissipative structures are new types of emergent, non-linear structures that originate spontaneously in far-from-equilibrium thermodynamic conditions. This involves transformations from thermal chaos and disorder into order. See: Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers, *Order Out of Chaos: Man’s New Dialogue with Nature*. New York: Bantam Books, 1984, 12-13. According to Merleau-Ponty, a “constitutive paradox already lies in every visible,” and “what we call a visible is ... the surface of a depth ... a grain or corpuscle borne by a wave of Being.” Merleau-Ponty, *VI*, 136. The non-linear and seemingly paradoxical emergence of dissipative structures reflects this “being in latency.” Using the metaphor of ocean waves, which rise up and dissipate against a background flux, dissipative structures could be conceived as temporarily ordered/structured waves that emerge on the surface of a “chaotic” ocean (latency/depth).
8. Merleau-Ponty, *VI*, 139.
9. Hass, 202.
10. Merleau-Ponty, *VI*, 139.
11. Merleau-Ponty, *VI*, 149.
12. As Alphonso Lingis writes in his preface to *The Visible and the Invisible* “the chiasm effected across the substance of the flesh is the inaugural event of visibility.” lvi.
13. The flesh “unveils” itself through these senses, just as the visible sides of a cube tend to unveil its hidden sides: “The sides of the cube are not projections of it, they are nothing other than “sides”. When I see them, one after the other and according to perspectival appearance, I do not construct the idea of a geometrical plan that would account for these perspectives; rather the cube is already there in front of me and unveils itself through them.” Merleau-Ponty, *PhP*, 211.
14. Hass, 202.
15. Unfortunately, this was never fully explored by Merleau-Ponty and is mentioned only once in his working notes: “Do a psychoanalysis of Nature: it is the flesh, the mother.” Merleau-Ponty, *VI*, 267. However, it is from Smohalla (c. 1815-1895), a former leader of the Nez Perce peoples indigenous to the Pacific Northwest of America, that we find the most moving expression of this relationship. In resistance to the US government’s attempts to force farming upon his people, Smohalla argued: “You ask me to plough the ground; shall I take a knife and tear my mother’s bosom? Then when I die she will not take me to her bosom to rest. You ask me to dig for stones; shall I dig under her skin for her bones? Then when I die I cannot enter her body to be born again. You ask me to cut grass and make hay and sell it and be rich like white men; but how dare I cut off my mother’s hair?” Quoted by Brian Easlea in *Witchcraft, Magic, and the New Philosophy*, Sussex: Har-

- vester Press, 1980, 140. See: Arran Gare, *Nihilism Inc.: Environmental Destruction and the Metaphysics of Sustainability*, Como: Eco-Logical Press, 1996, 71.
16. David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World*. New York: Random House, 1996, 66.
 17. Abram, 85.
 18. Abram, 67.
 19. Abram, 68.
 20. Abram, 68.
 21. Abram, 69 (emphasis added).
 22. Bryan E. Bannon, "Flesh and Nature: Understanding Merleau-Ponty's Relational Ontology" *Research in Phenomenology* (41) 2011, 333.
 23. Charles S. Brown and Ted Toadvine, "Eco-Phenomenology: An Introduction" *Eco-Phenomenology: Back to the Earth Itself*. Eds Charles S. Brown and Ted Toadvine. Albany: SUNY Press, xvi.
 24. Merleau-Ponty, VI, 148.
 25. "High-altitude thinking."
 26. Toadvine, 134.
 27. Merleau-Ponty, VI, 253.
 28. Renaud Barbaras, "The Ambiguity of the Flesh" *Chiasmi International* (4) 2002, 25.
 29. Barbaras, 23 (emphasis in original).
 30. Barbaras, 25.
 31. Barbaras, 25.
 32. Bannon, "Flesh and Nature" 334-335.
 33. Barbaras, p. 22.
 34. Galen A. Johnson, *The Retrieval of the Beautiful: Thinking Through Merleau-Ponty's Aesthetics*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2010, 33.
 35. Bannon, "Flesh and Nature" 341.
 36. Bannon, "Flesh and Nature" 343.
 37. Bryan E. Bannon, "Nature, Meaning and Value" *Nature and Experience: Phenomenology and the Environment*. Ed. Bryan E. Bannon. London: Rowman & Littlefield, 60-61.
 38. Bannon, "Flesh and Nature" 351.
 39. Bannon, "Flesh and Nature" 344.
 40. Bannon, "Flesh and Nature" 347.
 41. Bannon, "Flesh and Nature" 348.
 42. Bannon, "Flesh and Nature" 344.
 43. Bannon, "Flesh and Nature" 352.
 44. In the final words of *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty quotes Saint-Exupéry in saying that "Man is a knot of relations, and relations alone count for man." 483.
 45. Johnson, 32.
 46. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception: And Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics*. Trans. James M. Edie. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964, 163.
 47. Thus it is a flesh of *emergence* rather than a flesh of "the One" or of "the Many."
 48. Bannon, "Flesh and Nature" 353.
 49. Bannon, "Flesh and Nature" 352.
 50. For an excellent and detailed account of the relationship between Whitehead and Merleau-Ponty see: William S. Hamrick and Jan Van der Veken, *Nature and Logos: A Whiteheadian Key to*

Merleau-Ponty's *Fundamental Thought*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2011.

51. Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: Corrected Edition*. New York: The Free Press, 1978, 137 (emphasis in original).

52. Sydney E. Hooper, "Whitehead's Philosophy: Actual Entities" *Philosophy*, (16:63) 1941, 290-291.

53. Hooper, 292.

54. Hooper, 301.

55. Elizabeth M. Kraus, *The Metaphysics of Experience: A Companion to Whitehead's Process and Reality*. New York: Fordham University Press, 1998, 108.

56. While they are implicitly aimed at by all actual occasions, it is only in the most complex societies of actual occasions, such as human beings, that eternal objects are explicitly aimed at.

57. Whitehead, PR 65.

58. This view of eternal objects as "styles" or "possibilities" attests to the "pre-given unity" of the world that Toadvine identifies in the chiasmatic reversibility of the flesh.

59. Hooper, 297.

60. Perhaps in future generations or iterations of the cosmos.

61. Hooper, 288.

62. As "mental" and "physical" poles respectively.

63. In *The Visible and the Invisible* Merleau-Ponty frequently indicates the need to revisit problems he considered "insoluble" in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, such as the consciousness-object distinction. In revising this, he sought to "show that what one might consider to be "psychology" (*Phenomenology of Perception*) is in fact ontology." VI, 176, 200.

64. Bannon, "Flesh and Nature" 355.

65. For Abram the flesh is encountered in sentient experience, for Toadvine it is based in chiasmatic reversibility, while Barbaras' emphasis is on the separation of the perceiving, phenomenological subject and its ontological object.

66. Toadvine, 134-135.

67. Toadvine, 6.

68. Toadvine, 7.

69. "Consciousness is originally not an 'I think,' but rather an 'I can.'" Merleau-Ponty borrows this notion for Husserl's unpublished materials *Ideas II* and *Cartesian Meditations*, Merleau-Ponty, *PhP*, 139, 523.

70. See: Merleau-Ponty, VI, 174, and Hamrick and Van der Veken, 107.

71. A rock does not need to "think itself" into existence, or even significance—though we may say that it *feels* itself into existence.

72. See: John Cobb Jr., "Ecology, Ethics and Theology" *Valuing the Earth*. Eds. Herman E. Daly and Kenneth N. Townsend. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1993, 214.

73. In a similar vein to Arne Naess' argument that "human fulfillment seems to *demand* and *need* free nature. 'Homocentrism' and 'anthropocentrism' which so often have been used in a derogatory way should be qualified by an adjective, 'narrow homocentrism' etc. ... the prospect of protecting the planet as a whole ... is seen as one of the greatest challenges ever. And it certainly is a specifically *human* task." Arne Naess, *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 141.

74. Bannon, "Nature, Meaning and Value" 63.

75. As Lynn White points out, "All forms of life modify their contexts." Lynn White Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis" *Western Man and Environmental Ethics*. Ed. Ian G. Barbour. London: Addison Wesley, 1973, 18. In a Buddhist sense, this amounts to saying that all living sys-

tems necessarily imply some kind of “violence” towards their environment—though it is the duty of “man to aim at the idea of nonviolence in all that he does.” See: E.F. Schumacher, “Buddhist Economics” *Valuing the Earth*, 179.

76. See: Merleau-Ponty, *PhP* 105-140.

77. Whitehead argues that contrasts provide “new existential types”, *PR*, 24.

78. Based on Simon Levin’s call for the maintenance of heterogeneity, sustaining modularity, preserving redundancy, tightening feedback loops, minimizing entropy production, producing nothing that cannot be recycled and recycling everything, building trust, and doing unto others what you would have them do unto you. See: Arran Gare, *The Philosophical Foundations of Ecological Civilization: A Manifesto for the Future*. London: Routledge, 2017, 182, and Simon Levin, *Fragile Dominion: Complexity and the Commons*. Cambridge, MA: Perseus, 1999.

79. This will require a more complete integration of Whitehead and Merleau-Ponty into a fully-fledged Process Phenomenology.

80. Thereby avoiding the is/ought problem of Hume.