

Intelligent Bodies and Ecological Subjectivities: Merleau-Ponty's Corrective to Postmodernism's "Subjects" of Education

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Postmodernism, including some strands of feminism and educational theory has delivered a primarily negative assessment of the Enlightenment "subject." Post-modern analyses have regarded the subject as merely an effect of discourse or as a "position within language." But simultaneously there has been a burgeoning interest in the notion of embodiment as a means of getting at the realities of "difference" among a multiplicity of subjectivities. In this paper I make some brief critical comments about post-modern feminism's account of the subject by way of an exploration of Merleau-Ponty's well known articulation of the "body-subject" and his lesser known concept of "flesh." My argument is that his work may provide a means of enriching our understanding of human subjectivity in ways which avoid some of the pitfalls of postmodernism, and which remind us of the "lived engagement" of the embodied subjects of education with their environments.

Feminist post-modern critiques have been of particular relevance in the interrogation and contestation of humanist and Enlightenment ideals in education.¹ While approaches have varied, it is clear that there are commonalities in the ways writers have addressed issues of subjectivity, the nature of social life, and the importance of the interrelationship of these for an understanding of learning and teaching. Despite differences, all have focused critically on those privileged forms of subjectivity enshrined in the discourses of liberalism and the Enlightenment as well as that of Marxism. Feminist postmodernists in education are agreed that we can no longer speak with certainty of "male" and "female" as unitary categories, but must now attempt to show how it is that biological males and females are produced as masculine or feminine "subjects" at the intersection of "multiple positionings" in discourse. Whatever their differences on other issues, feminist post-modernists in education are clear in their opposition to the a priori unity of the subject of philosophical tradition. For them subjectivity is something to be struggled for but never arrived at.

The critique of the unified subject of the enlightenment has involved for some feminists (mostly outside of education) a foregrounding of embodiment as a major theme for exploration.² More widely, embodiment has also appeared briefly in the recent work of educational theorists such as Giroux and McLaren, who want to draw attention to the body as an "organ of mediation" in the development of various kinds of student resistance to the authoritative pedagogy of the school. Feminists of the body have written within a context of exploration and re-formulation of the work of Freud, Lacan, Nietzsche and, of course, Foucault, although the application of their work to education is neither widespread nor straightforward. That which has occurred, has largely focused on the nature of sexual difference and its significance for classrooms.

It seems to me that bringing bodies back into the picture has been crucial for education. As teachers, educational theorists and the like, we need to direct our attention to the realities of bodies in discursively constituted settings. Western philosophy can be seen as the history of successive periods of Western humanity's cultivation of its own "mind." Bodies became discursively submerged as the philosophical tradition developed. Further, as feminists have shown, the "maleness" of that "mind" masked a domination of the feminine -- of women's (and others) embodied subjectivity. The sense of bodily contact with objects in the world, with others, and with oneself, retreated as traditional philosophical "foundations" were laid. Western culture produced the symbolic and

abstracted as its highest achievements, forgetting in the process that the symbolic can only be embodied *in* bodies which are always gendered.

Recent post-modernist moves and the interrogation of the tradition by feminist philosophers has begun to bring the body squarely into focus, so that for some educational theorists, issues of critical pedagogy are now central to the politics of the body. Feminist and post-modern critiques have begun to provide an understanding of the constructed and performative nature of subjectivities and (following Foucault) of the notion of a direct somatic discipline, of the inscription of the body, and of the embodied learning which occurs in daily life. Most significant is the recognition of the gendered body as subject to a multiplicity of gender regimes within education. Nevertheless, I want to argue here is that the gender dimension, though crucial, does not exhaust the discussion concerning subjectivity .

In developing my argument, I want to suggest that there are two aspects of embodiment which are of importance to philosophy of education. The first concerns the claim that embodiment can be meaningfully talked about irrespective of gender; the second draws attention to a specific, complex notion of embodied subjectivity which I believe captures a sense of the human being's "immersion" in places, spaces and environs in which, as gendered subjects, they encounter the world as dwelling place. I would argue that, while we cannot deny the fundamental category of gender (or race or disability), we need also to examine (differently) embodied subjects' "first-hand" involvements with "place," and the intimate connection of the sense of "place" with other dimensions of living that subjects experience. The latter include socio-economic positionings, intersubjective and social dimensions, as well as the temporal context which situates each of them in a personal and communal history. Therefore, my interest is in the body's "knowing," its finding of its way around its environment, of the movements which occur for bodies without, or prior to, conscious direction, in other words with that bodily intentionality which Merleau-Ponty has called the "body-subject."

Such an enlarged focus on embodiment entails an attempt to understand the body's capacity to direct behaviors intelligently in ways which acknowledge the gender dimension, but which are not consumed by gender. It seems to me that Merleau-Ponty has provided the most challenging account, not only of what it is to be "intelligently embodied," but also to be connected as subject with environment -- to be, in other words, an "ecological subject," bodily attached to a geographical location and encountering it in the fullest sense. Together, I believe the twin notions of intelligent bodies and ecological subjectivities provide an added dimension to post-modern feminist accounts of the subject of education. This is a view of embodiment as elaborating a semiotics and culture across, not just within species, and in separation from the environment. In Merleau-Ponty's work on embodiment there is a non-monadological sense of body-world connectedness enabled by a particular recasting of the notion of being as "universal dimensionality," in which the postures and initiatives of living bodies interact with an environment as those specific bodies "understand" it.

BODY-SUBJECT AND WORLD

Merleau-Ponty's project was to identify the "origin of the object in the very centre of our experience."³ He concluded that this center was, quite simply, the body; hence his account of a human being as "intelligent subjectivity." His early work demonstrates the ways in which the philosophical tradition and its successors (notably cognitivism in psychology) had overlooked the centrality of the body in human experience. For him, bodies have their worlds, and understand their worlds, without recourse to "symbolic" or "objectifying function." Consciousness -- the "symbolic" or "objectifying" function -- does not direct the body's movements; these are directed instead by the intelligent body's connections with the world at hand. It is the body, not an occupying consciousness, which understands its world. And, I would add, it is bodies, male and female, which have, *in the same way*, in them the intentional threads that run out towards their worlds.

Like later post-modern and feminist critics of the tradition, Merleau Ponty worked to undermine dichotomies of reason/emotion, mind/body, and the demand for epistemological foundations. His

radical account of the mutual "sensuous recognition" of individuals emphasizes that it is the body which encounters others and the world, not an abstracted mind which somehow inhabits that body. Therefore bodies *are* "lived experience." Bodies have understandings of the world which are independent of any sort of cognitive map; these understandings are like a set of invisible but intelligent threads which stream out between the body and that world *with which the body is familiar*. Cognition does not, somehow, screen the world at hand; that world is the body's directly. In his account of experience, Merleau-Ponty articulated a notion of place, of lived space, which is in an important sense *in* bodies whether they are marked as "masculine" or "feminine." The body-subject's lived experience is necessarily of *location* because its language is that of gestures, movements and action.

For Merleau Ponty, experience is, in every instance, corporeally constituted-- located *within* and *as* the body-subject's incarnation. As Grosz comments "experience can only be understood between mind and body (or across them) in their lived conjunction not in their logical disjunction."⁴ The experience of body-subjects is, simultaneously, that of bodily incarnation and intersubjective, historical situation. Therefore, individual experience cannot simply be ignored. On the contrary, it must be made the focus of an analysis which addresses the issue of where experience is located if it is not, as the tradition has it -- within one or the other of the binary terms (mind or body, consciousness or corporeality) -- but instead, somehow between the two. Merleau-Ponty's understanding that lived experience encompasses not only "styles" of bodily movement, grasp, "customary spatial level for operating on the world" and so on , but also , social and political dimensions, is crucial in the attempt to theorize a subjectivity which is neither a private consciousness nor a mere effect of discourse.

While some philosophers still speak of *having* a certain kind of body, post- modern feminists write of our being embodied within discourse as masculine or feminine. Now, as we are well aware in this day, bodies are not merely the means or instrument of the mind. But neither, I would argue, is subjectivity fully explained in terms of positions within phallogentric discourse, since on that sort of view, experience is ignored altogether. While there is, for Merleau-Ponty, acceptance of the socially constructed nature of experience, he focuses, nevertheless, on the pre-reflective knowledge of the body -- on its psychical interiority and schemas. There is a creative power in the body to which we fail to do justice when we persist in seeing it as the handmaiden of consciousness. The same is true when we ignore the body's intelligent connections with the world at hand in order to draw attention to the linguistic construction of social structures and the symbolic features attached to "subject positions" within discourse. In my view, both accounts fall prey to extreme forms of intellectualization.⁵

Merleau-Ponty's rich and detailed account of intelligent embodiment is described in *The Phenomenology of Perception* and in other early writings. The experience of body -subjects is articulated from within a phenomenological framework in which bodies are described as acting in intentional ways. The "body-subject" is an intelligent, holistic process which *directs* behaviors in a fluid, integrative fashion, thereby coordinating relations between behavior and environment. The idea of the "body-subject" provides a way of conceiving the relations between body and world without privileging either mental or material, and without recourse to notions of monads. This new relationship is expressed in Merleau-Ponty's account of the body and world as being of the "same fabric." It is to that idea which I now turn in addressing the notion of "ecological subjectivity."

BODIES OF FLESH AND THE WORLD AS FLESH

In Merleau-Ponty's last and incomplete work *The Visible and the Invisible*, the notion of "flesh" is introduced. In that work it sheds its accustomed meaning to become an elementary term which seems to have no counterpart in Western thought, but which may not be entirely foreign to some other cultural traditions.⁶ "Flesh" is a basic term describing the phenomenon of perceiving, and of being the object of perception, of reciprocal tactile contact, of mutual mingling. Whereas in *The*

Phenomenology of Perception, the author had emphasized the intermingling of subject and world as intelligent embodiment, his final work involved a study of the interrelationship of inner and outer -- the "criss-crossing" of the touching and the tangible, of seer and seen, of toucher and touched, and of the indeterminacy of the "boundaries" of each of the senses and their inherent transposability.

In foregrounding the human's pre-discursive experience (prior to schema of rationality and language) Merleau-Ponty focuses on "raw" sensibility. But this is not an attempt to excavate a pre-social level of human experience, or a sort of foundation of consciousness. Rather, the aim is to avoid any atomistic conclusions and to bring to light the genuine openness of subjects and world. Merleau-Ponty demonstrates this point in his account of relations between the visible (sensible) and the invisible (intelligible), the seer and the seen. The visible is a sort of "palpitation" of being.⁷ It is never self-identical, nor absolutely dispersed. Being is not plenitude, self-identity or substance, but rather divergence, non-coincidence. "Flesh" refers to the capacity of being to fold in upon itself, its simultaneous orientation to inner and outer. Using the term "double sensation," Merleau-Ponty describes the transfer of what is touching to that which is being touched, explaining that the touching subject passes over into the rank of the touched, descending into things, such that it is the *one touch* which occurs in the midst of the world and in things.

Thus, our attention is drawn to the interaction of the tangible and the visible. Merleau-Ponty writes of the implication of the seer in the visible, and of the shared participation of the subject and the object in a visibility of everything. But it is his articulation of the tangible which is particularly significant, signaling a radical departure from the Western philosophical tradition in which, while the toucher is always touched, the one who sees merely does so from a distance and is, therefore, not implicated in what is seen. His discussion of the tangible underscores a determination to depict both "subject" and "object" in a generalizable visibility, which is, for each, the same visibility -- that is, the same "flesh." From this discussion of flesh comes the insight that everyone who sees is simultaneously in view as it were, to another. The artist sees a landscape but the landscape, in an important sense, also "sees" the artist. But this is not anthropomorphism at work. On the contrary, what it amounts to is a major claim about a non-entitative, non-identical materiality shared by both the subjects and the objects of perception. "Flesh" furnishes the capacity for turning the world back on itself, to bring into play its reflexivity. Thus subject and object are inherently open to each other for they are "constituted" in the one stroke separating the flesh into its distinct modalities.

The account of "flesh" in Merleau-Ponty's work undermines the dichotomous structure of the mind/matter dualism, doing away with the separation between animate and inanimate, between species, between observer and object of investigation. Such a move gives us a way of re-conceiving materiality so as to make it one, enabling us to dispense with the conventional mental/material distinction. The body-subject is an experienced structure; the things outside of the body are always "encrusted" in its joints. The body is that which reveals other "thats," precisely because it consists of the same material as they. One's flesh is where the lines of direction of the world are inscribed on a fold in their midst. Movement of eye and hand are of a tissue like that of the structured layout of the world. Lived human experience is, thus, a seamless web -- a unified zone of awareness which is rent through that process of abstraction which accompany all attempts at objectification.

BODY SUBJECT AS PLACE-CONSTRUED, IMMersed IN ENVIRONMENT

As more than one critic of the philosophical tradition has pointed out in recent years, the subject-object distinction, the "man and the world" separation has functioned discursively as an elaborate but powerful fiction supporting a reality in which man has dominated women, other men, and nature. The results have been disastrous for all but the few. Merleau-Ponty's account of the relationship of humans to the world presents body-subjects and environments as synonymous for the purpose of everyday living. Although the material world provides the individual with images of himself or herself, that world is not, however, "outside" the person. On the contrary it is experienced as inextricably bound up in a quite concrete sense with the embodied ("enfleshed") subject. It seems

to me, therefore, that, in Merleau-Ponty's account, body-subjects are always in an important sense "place construed" in the same way that all knowledges and everything in the world is so construed. All existence arises from the specificities of place and all environments have body-subjects who are at different times, in differing cultures, related to them.

While aware that, in the dominant cognitive mode, the world is an objective entity for a "thinking subject," Merleau-Ponty is concerned with the moments of daily living in which as subjects we interpenetrate the world and are fused with it. So for him there are no ontological "cracks" between persons and nature, the self and world, between what exists (the issue for traditional philosophy) and what we say about what exists (what has become the key issue for postmodernism). They are one and the same. Merleau-Ponty's account of body-subject and "flesh" demands that we pay attention to the connectedness of body-subject to world and to the immersion-in-world that is the reality of human existence.

The definition of things, their discontinuities with all other realities, and the habit of referring to borders which demarcate oneself and all possible others is just *one way* of talking about experience. It is the one most familiar to us. But "realities" alter dramatically when different aspects of human existence are foregrounded, (for example the aspect of place or locatedness within environment). We can focus on the notion of subject as rationality, or the self as an arrangement of bodily parts, thoughts and feelings, or on "subjects" inscribed within gendered discourses. Or we can take Merleau-Ponty's perspective, that it is not so much that every "reality" has an inherent structure, but rather that structure can be seen to inhere in a whole range of "realities." What such a view seems to me to contain within it is a conception of the material as an inherent intertwining of subject and world. It is a conceptualization of materiality which does not demand a split between human corporeality and the corporeality of "nature." Ultimately this conception of materiality, which clearly has a cosmological dimension, includes everything *in* and *of* the world.

PROBLEMS OF POSTMODERNIST ACCOUNTS OF "SUBJECTIVITIES"

Specific cultures draw pictures of reality and place the boundaries at particular points. All cultures are selective in doing so: that is, they include some aspects of human experience and omit others. The Western philosophical tradition had been clear in its insistence on the ontological and epistemological autonomy of that subjectivity which constructs its objective world as standing outside of individual consciousness. This is a view in which individuals inhabit a particular sort of reality in which there are objects (including ourselves) to be counted, accumulated, and assigned a specific sort of value and transacted. Until recently its centerpiece has been the notions of historical consciousness and the unitary ego. Much contemporary post-modern /feminist work has drawn our attention to the ways in which the tradition had produced a strong sense of the individual's independence from the processes of social formation. Through their deconstruction of the unitary, authorial subject, such analyses have emphasized the discursive construction of gendered subjectivities.

I do not want to dismiss the importance of such work, but as I have pointed out earlier, the postmodern turn, at least in its feminist form, has tended to empty a now discredited "universalist," rational subject into a gendered subject -- one which, at present, seems to me wholly exhausted in that gendered character. So, while it has succeeded in undermining the fictitious consciousness, the "owner" of its body, and has shown the importance of taking very seriously, indeed, gendered bodies, it now faces the prospect of being unable to conceive of female difference in such a way as to bring actual girls and women back into play other than as profoundly alienated subjects of the normalizing grid of a monolithic phallogocentric culture. All other possibilities for conceptualizing the nature of human embodiment seem closed unless we can find a way of getting at that most basic account of body-subjects, unselfconsciously involved in an immediate and communal relationship with the meanings of the world. This is what I believe Merleau-Ponty's account of body-subjectivity provides.

MERLEAU-PONTY'S "SUBJECT" AND EDUCATION

As McLaren has pointed out, students react to information viscerally.⁸ Knowledge is not something to be "understood"; it is always felt and responded to somatically -- that is, in its corporeal materiality. What matters is what is felt knowledge -- knowledge as a "lived engagement." Within education, any general typology of the body must take into account its gendered or racially marked aspects. It must take account of the multiplicity of positionings within a variety of frameworks which subjects will occupy. Yet, at the same time, it must also acknowledge that the subject of understanding is precisely the everyday world encountered anew. The primacy of lived experience must be recognized, for it is lived experience which entails the possibility of a creative and productive appropriation of the meaning of individuals' life circumstances. As a species it is our opportunity for transformation through a new understanding of our world that allow us to sustain it, dwell in it, develop it and articulate it.

In my view then education must involve a recognition of the inherent order of human locatedness. It must create a life world which supports a satisfying human existence grounded in a livable environment. This may mean that, initially, we need to become much less naive about how experience actually occurs. In his account of the pre-conscious awareness of body-subjects, Merleau-Ponty demonstrates that the term perception is impoverished. "Encounter" is the notion we need to recover in order to do justice to our fundamental relationship with the world. This entails a multi-faceted ebb and flow of attention and involves all shades of obliviousness, attending to, taking notice of, and intensified contact. Education needs to be seen as education in environmental encounter, which is education concerned with those modes of awareness that develop and enhance an individual's understanding of her/his world. Emphasis should be placed upon watching in new ways, noticing, opening oneself to, and attempting to see the world as it is, in its own fashion, so that person and world ultimately emerge. That world is to be explored experientially. Discourses are rightly the focus of concern for postmodernists, but bodies are the source of discourses as well as their product. The discourses identified by post-modern writers exist and are reproduced only through bodies and their activities. Experiential exploration is, first and foremost, bodily exploration, and knowing is, above all, bodily knowing.

But this is not how knowing is articulated within much current educational discourse. The most esteemed forms of curricula still enshrine knowledge abstracted from somatic being. So there persist underlying assumptions that we live, *at times*, as essentially, minds furnished with powers of knowing and, *at other times*, as agents who will swing into action. Thus our most influential models of learning and knowledge rend the seamless web of lived human experience. This experience consists of layers of meaning which constitute our world. Our world is one which subsumes us because in our daily living we do not experience it as separate; it is not a thing and stuff removed from us. But neither is it merely an inhibiting world of convention and repressive social experience as some post-modern feminist theory would suggest. Rather, it is a world of ecological bonds that link people with environment in which human interpenetration with the environment includes experiential links. As I have noted, this interpenetration is extremely difficult to capture because it travels through the prereflective forces of body and feelings. But Merleau-Ponty was convinced of its reality and of our locatedness in our world as the primal core of dwelling. If he was right, then education, whatever else it involves, should now take as a major goal the wholehearted attempt to understand this primal core.

1. See Chris Weedon, *Feminist Practice & Poststructuralist Theory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 12-174; and Carmel Luke and Jennifer Gore, eds. *Feminisms and Critical Pedagogy* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 54-73.

2. See Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies .Towards a Corporeal Feminism* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1994), 62-111; and Luce Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 57-173.

3. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1962), 98-153.
4. See Grosz's brief discussion of "experience" in Merleau-Ponty's work in Thesis Eleven, No 36 1993, 41-54
5. For Merleau-Ponty consciousness *is* perception. It is not merely restricted to figure/ground awareness (or analytic consciousness) but is phenomenological perception, in which our environment "perceives" us.
6. I have suggested elsewhere that the idea of one being "encountered" by environment may be very familiar to some indigenous peoples. See Marjorie O'Loughlin, " Body, Identity and World --Young Adolescents' Ways of Being and Knowing," *Curriculum Perspectives* 14, no 3 (1994): 10-12; and "Being and Knowing: Explorations in Ontologies" (Proceedings of the Biennial Conference of the International Network of Philosophers of Education, Leuven, Belgium, August 1994).
7. This is Grosz's description of Merleau-Ponty's account of "a momentary crystallization of colored being or visibility" which *is* a "flesh of things.
8. Henry Giroux and Peter McLaren, "Radical Pedagogy as Cultural Politics: Beyond the Discourse of Critique and Anti-Utopianism," in *Theory /Pedagogy /Politics: Texts for Change* , ed. Donald Morton, and Mas'ud Zavarzadeh (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 170.

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