Fig. 5: *A Hand,* fragment of the colossal statue of Emperor Constantine the Great from his basilica, Ca. 315–330 CE., Marble © Musei Capitolini, Rome /Art Resource, New York.

Jacob Levi

"Es wird Leib, es empfindet": Auto-Affection, Doubt, and the Philosopher's Hands

"Ta main sur ma main,
tiède épaisseur de l'ombre"
Edmond Jabès[1]

Doubt and belief are all too often an affair of the hands. The hand's touch can confirm what we believe to be true, just as it can rattle what we had taken as certain. Two scenes in the book of John offer a lucid illustration of the dual possibility of the hand's touch either instilling belief or raising doubt. When the resurrected Christ rebuffs Mary Magdalene's extended hand with the famous remark *noli me tangere*,[2] he suggests that faith is borne precisely in the absence of touch; in this case, based on sight alone. By contrast, the figure of "doubting Thomas," iconically depicted in Caravaggio's baroque masterpiece *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas*, insists on touching Christ's wounds to confirm what his eyes cannot; in this case, it is only touching the body of the risen Christ that validates Saint Thomas's faith, at which point he exclaims, "My Lord and my God."[3] These scenes present manifestly different empirical standards for faith in the resurrection, hinging on the certainty proffered by touch. Mary Magdalene is asked to have faith despite Christ's refusal of her touch, clearing a higher bar than Saint Thomas, whose incredulity is seemingly validated when Christ allows him to touch the wound. To touch or not to touch—these divergent standards for belief in the resurrection are never completely reconciled in the Gospel, in contrast to the strict interdiction of sensible representations of the divine in the Hebrew Bible. Whether sight, touch, or another modality of sensibility can adequately satisfy belief is a decisive question pertaining to God's modes of revelation in the Abrahamic religions.[4]

1 Edmond Jabès, "Main douce à la blessure même ...," in *Le seuil, le sable: poésies complètes 1943–1988* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), 379.

2 Jn. 20:17.

3 Jn. 20:28.

4 In contrast to these Christian notions of faith validated by touch or sight, and following the second commandment's interdiction of graven images or representations of God, in the Jewish tradition, the modes of God's revelation do not include sight or touch and only include sound in exceptional cases. When God reveals himself to the Hebrew prophets, it is always mediated by either an angel, a miraculous event, or a symbol. It is forbidden to speak the name of the God of the Hebrew Bible, just as it is forbidden to represent his sensible appearance. In the book of Exodus, the Israelites trembled in awe at the foot of Mount Sinai as they miraculously "saw the sounds" (Ex. 20:18) of the commandments, a sort of synesthetic experience of *seeing* the words of the commandments that God pronounces to Moses. However, in contrast to the disciples of the risen Christ, in the Jewish tradition, seeing God is out of the question. As Kant famously describes the interdiction of sensible representations of God in the *Critique of Judgment:* "Perhaps there is no more sublime passage in the Jewish Book of

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110627176-003

The questions of touch and belief that emerge from these biblical narratives directly relate to philosophical debates concerning the veracity of sensible impressions. Modern philosophy's obsession with external world scepticism is often expressed as a challenge to the hands, the appendages which effectively mediate between the subjective experience of the mind and the body's interactions with objects in the world. To what extent can we put our faith in the certainty of the hand's touch? What can and cannot be known from touch, and what are its epistemological limitations? Touch may confirm what is merely apparent in sight, but it is also subject to illusion and deception, which threaten to undercut its epistemological authority. That the hand's touch may inspire belief *or* doubt has made it a critical battleground in philosophical debates regarding the reliability of the senses regarding knowledge claims, which we might call the question of *haptic scepticism*. Haptic scepticism refers to both the existential questions concerning the faculty of touch —*whether* to touch or not, *can* one touch, *how* the sense of touch relates to other senses such as sight or hearing—and the experience of touch, its qualia, which pertains to what touching something is *like*. Even when the existence of objects is bracketed, notably in the phenomenological tradition, the qualitative experience of touch is nonetheless evaluated through the lens of haptic scepticism. Touch identifies the boundaries separating the subject from external objects, tracing the limits of the body; touch is the frontier of alterity that mediates between one's own flesh and that of others. The hand has the potential to distinguish self from other, subject from object, living being from mere thing. The ability to make these qualitative distinctions calls upon both the existential and the epistemological modes of haptic scepticism, questioning the existence of the hands as well as their qualitative experience of touch.

Before the qualitative determinations of touch are subject to sceptical challenges concerning the possibility of deception, they are implicated in a pre-theoretical analytic notion of what, in fact, it means to have hands. Despite its apparent self-evidence, the criterion for "having" hands is not primarily biological; rather, it is essentially a socio-cultural determination. The hands are the site of tactile impressions, but they are also an embodied metaphor for the human capacity for reason, language, or ethics. The requirements for "having" hands demand more than the motor faculties enabled by the prehensile organ; having hands also involves interactions with our surroundings, and specifically our treatment of the other living beings we encounter. In this chapter, I will discuss the hand's ability to distinguish between

---

the Law than the commandment: Thou shalt not make unto thyself any graven image, nor any likeness either of that which is in heaven, or on the earth, or yet under the earth, etc." (Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000], 5:274). The lawgiver can only be presented negatively, as a "pure, elevating, merely negative presentation of morality," because the sublime origin of the law is not derived from a sensible object of this world, but can only be understood via the higher faculty of intellectual imagination.

different classes of tactile impressions, against the backdrop of doubt. My argument is that the hand's touch is not only the site of epistemological contestation, it further calls upon a series of metaphors that describe what it means to be human, and how humans should treat other beings they encounter. When philosophers consider the hand's touch exclusively in terms of sensible perception, hiding behind sceptical challenges to sense-certainty, they obscure or sidestep the ethical dimension of the hands. The reduction of touch to a question of sense-certainty fails to acknowledge the generative role of the hands in our ethical lives as human beings. The hands are the site of what Emmanuel Levinas calls the "excendence" of sensibility by the infinite, "the overflowing of thought by its content,"[5] which Jacques Derrida describes as *epekeina tēs ousias*, that which is "beyond being."[6] As we will see, the ethical dimension of the hands emerges from the ongoing haptic sceptical challenges to the certainty of touch.

I will introduce the topic by briefly surveying how the hands are rendered the essential site of doubt in modern philosophy. From Descartes's doubt and Kant's "scandal of philosophy" to Moore's "here is one hand" proof of the external world, the hands are the philosopher's vital instrument for dispelling doubt. In the second part of the chapter, I will discuss the existential conditions for "having" hands and whether the hands are an essentially human characteristic; namely, I will analyse Martin Heidegger's "monstrous" hand and Derrida's critical reading of the philosophical anthropomorphisms born of the hand. We will see that this existential notion of "having" hands occludes the ethical demands encountered in the other's touch. The third part of the chapter will highlight the experience of touching different classes of objects, beginning with Edmund Husserl's description of auto-affection and the experience of the "double sensation" of one hand touching the other. Here, it is a question of what it is *like* to touch one's own flesh, and in what sense the touch of flesh sets itself off as a distinct category from mere objects. This leads to the purported analogy between the auto-affective touch of one's own hands and the hetero-affective touch of another. Does auto-affection inform the touch of *autrui*, or does it reinforce the otherness of the other? In the following section, I will analyse Maurice Merleau-Ponty's and Emmanuel Levinas's divergent readings of Husserl, relating the hand's touch to the notion of intersubjectivity. Whereas Merleau-Ponty sketches a haptic ontological framework that he calls the "flesh of the world," Levinas describes a haptic relation between self and other that exceeds epistemological questions of sense-certainty and introduces the possibility of transcendence in immanence. I will highlight Levinas's notion of the "caress," which seeks neither domination nor mastery, as a modality of touch that remains open to the excendence of haptic doubt by the ethical.

---

5 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1979), 197. Translation modified.

6 Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 2001), 105.

The Hands of Doubt

Modern philosophy is haunted by the possibility that sensible perception may be subject to deception. Whereas the visible field may produce certain illusions, touch purportedly affirms a thing's concrete reality, as if holding something in one's hand offers certainty. But even touch cannot dispel the possibility of deception. The example of the ball of wax in Descartes's second *Meditation* questions Aristotelean hylomorphism, which identifies the being of all objects in the unity of their substance and form. The solid ball of wax "is hard, cold, easily handled," but when it is heated, "it becomes liquid, it heats, scarcely can one handle it."[7] Descartes's ball of wax is paradigmatic of the endless fluctuations in the appearance of substances, and it suggests that touch can also deceive us regarding their true nature. Even when we believe that we grasp its true nature, like the ball of wax, an object may slip right through our fingers. This variety of doubt is a subspecies of the sceptical challenge to the existence of external objects. In the preface to the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant laments the "scandal of philosophy" that "the existence of things outside us [...] should have to be assumed merely on faith," rather than with "a satisfactory proof."[8] Such a proof cannot be based on evidence that we could hold in the palm of our hand. Sensible impressions of objects are insufficient to deduce their rational character because "intuitions without concepts are blind."[9] Touch is no less prone to deception than the other senses. Kant highlights the correspondence between sensible intuition and conceptual reasoning that is required to make epistemological claims: the hand's tactile impressions are only reliable to the extent that they can be conceptually understood.

Some philosophers have reasoned that if the true nature of external objects is subject to doubt, then perhaps certainty lies in the existence of the hands themselves. This philosophical deduction-by-the-hands reaches its apex in G.E. Moore's 1939 "here is one hand" proof of the external world. Responding to Kant's "scandal" of philosophy, Moore contends that the affirmation of the existence of a person's two hands is necessary and sufficient proof of the external world: "By holding up my two hands, and saying, as I make a certain gesture with the right hand, 'Here is one hand,' and adding, as I make a certain gesture with the left, 'and here is another' [...] I have proved *ipso facto* the existence of external things."[10] For Moore, recognising the mere existence of the hands in extended space obviates the scandal that so concerned Kant. Whether we find Moore's anti-sceptical proof convincing or com-

7 René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Donald Cress, 3rd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), 21–23.

8 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. and trans. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), Bxxxix.

9 Kant, A51/B76.

10 G.E. Moore, "Proof of an External World," in *G.E. Moore: Selected Writings*, ed. Thomas Baldwin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 166.

pletely absurd, it acknowledges that the sceptical challenges regarding external objects can also be applied to the hands themselves. Surely his proof is unsatisfying or unconvincing for many, but its elegance lies in its forthrightness. Moore strips the trimmings from external world scepticism and reduces it to the essential question: Can the existence of our hands alone overcome doubt? Of course, Moore's answer to this question is resoundingly affirmative, and he excludes himself from the haptic sceptical tradition. Nonetheless, his proof identifies the crux of external world scepticism as a challenge issued to the hands.

What conditions allow Moore to be certain that his hands exist? Ludwig Wittgenstein, an ally in Moore's quest against scepticism, offers a probing commentary on the "here is one hand" proof in *On Certainty*, a posthumously compiled text based on a draft written shortly before his death in 1951. Wittgenstein identifies Moore's first premise as decisive: "If you do know that *here is one hand*, we'll grant you all the rest."[11] Given the first premise, Moore's conclusion follows rather easily. However, Wittgenstein emphasises, we must actually *know* that the first premise is true, rather than simply believing it to be the case—this is the pivotal epistemological question. "From its *seeming* to me—or to everyone—to be so, it doesn't follow that it *is* so," Wittgenstein cautions, "What we can ask is whether it can make sense to doubt it." To understand what makes the hands' existence appear certain, we must identify the necessary conditions which would make it possible to doubt this premise. It surely *seems* that my hands are present in extended space, this perception is easily confirmed by others, and typically I have no reason to think otherwise. Perhaps it is possible to imagine a context in which someone has no hands but falsely believes that he or she does, but in ordinary experience, the conditions for doubting the existence of one's hands are not meaningfully present. In short, the validation of Moore's assertion of "here is one hand" is built into the context of the claim, and it is asserted precisely because ordinarily it seems self-evident. As Wittgenstein writes, "This possibility of satisfying oneself is part of the language game. Is one of its essential features."[12] Because the conditions for doubting the existence of the hands are not present, Moore's anti-sceptical conclusion is programmed into his framing of the problem.

Wittgenstein highlights the codependence of knowledge and doubt in context-driven language games. The conditions for doubt do not arise absolutely; rather, they must be occasioned by a surrounding set of facts taken as certain. Doubt functions like a door that turns on a set of fixed hinges: the door can only swing open if the hinges stay in place. The grounds for doubt can only arise in the specific ways permitted by the context of the situation. Wittgenstein writes, "(My) doubts form a system."[13] This system of doubt is the negative image of the world of certainty. Con-

11 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, ed. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright, trans. Denis Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969), 2.

12 Wittgenstein, 2.

13 Wittgenstein, 19.

sequently, just as one proves a claim by demonstrating its necessary conditions in a specific context, inversely, "one doubts on specific grounds."[14] Indeed, a host of circumstances could arise that would create a context in which to doubt the existence of one's hands, such as blindness, paralysis, phantom limb syndrome, or perhaps the influence of a psychotropic drug. Moore's proof is performative to the extent that the speaker must truly believe the assertion that the hands exist, and in a sense, it is only reciting the proof that speaks them into existence as an epistemological fact. However, under ordinary circumstances, the speaker has little reason to doubt the existence of the hands, and the conclusion of Moore's proof essentially follows from the language game built into its first premise. The certainty of the premise "here is one hand" depends on its context, but the near-constant use of the hands in ordinary life shields them from many forms of doubt. For Wittgenstein, the existence of the hand is no more the ultimate site of doubt than context allows: if Moore's argument is sound, it is only because it is precisely *when we are looking for certainty* that we look to our own hands. The "here is one hand" proof does not eliminate doubt: it simply displaces the "scandal" of philosophy to the hands.

We might ask why philosophers have privileged the hands over the rest of the body's capacity to touch. Of course, human beings are oriented towards the hands by force of evolutionary biology, and the hands are central to most fundamental human practices. The acute sensitivity, opposable thumbs, and nimble prehensility of human hands offer evolutionary advantages that allow us to fashion tools and harness the power of nature. Akin to the elephant's trunk, the snake's tongue, or the bat's echolocation, a human being's hands are the predominant mediators of his or her interactions with the external world. Nonetheless, we may wonder with Derrida in *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy* why the philosophical analysis of touch always reverts to an affair of the hands, as if they were the only locus of touch:

> Why only the hand and the finger? Why not my foot and toes? Can they not touch another part of my body and touch one another? What about the lips, especially? All of the lips on the lips? And the tongue on the lips? And the tongue on the palate and many other parts of "my body"? How could one speak without this? [...] And the eyelids in the blink of an eye? And, if we take sexual differences into account, the sides of the anal or genital opening?[15]

If the entire body is capable of touch, and in a multitude of different ways, why do philosophers almost exclusively refer to the hand in order to evaluate whether touch can overcome doubt? Why not evaluate doubt with our elbows? The privileging of the hands is a product of both human evolution and contingent cultural practices, but where would we even begin to delineate which of the hands' activities arise from "nature" and which are the artifices of "culture"? The impossibility of fixing the

14 Wittgenstein, 60.

15 Jacques Derrida, *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*, trans. Christine Irizarry (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 164.

limit between the hand's natural and socio-cultural activities illustrates its central place in human forms of life, which is irreducible to that of a mere corporeal appendage.

Heidegger's "Monstrous" Hand

Given their centrality in ordinary human activities, a culturally specific definition of the hands can be used as a wedge to exclude or invalidate others. This is readily apparent in Martin Heidegger's reflections on the hand as the essence of the human being. In his 1927 opus *Being and Time*, the hands primarily serve to mediate between *Dasein* and its surrounding world of equipment. Heidegger makes generous use of metaphors of the hands in his descriptions of *Dasein* interacting with things in the world through the basic "attitudes" of *vor-handenheit* (presence-at-hand) and *zu-handenheit* (readiness-to-hand).[16] When a hammer is used according to its equipmental being in the activity of hammering something, it is seized in its pre-theoretical mode as ready-to-hand, and the hand of *Dasein* and the hammer seamlessly interact in the act of hammering. By contrast, *Dasein* apprehends those things that are perceived as present-at-hand as defective, and they stand out as objects rather than as equipment. A broken or defunct hammer is no longer equipment, it is reduced to a mere object. The same can be said of the hands themselves: when the hands interact with things in the world in the mode of ready-to-hand, they are seized as equipment working in tandem with the tool, but if the hands are broken or otherwise ineffectual, then for Heidegger, they would be reduced to objects that are present-at-hand, quite literally, on the body. Heidegger sketches a robust role for the hands in mediating *Dasein*'s interactions with the world: the hands are essentially equipment, like the hammer.

Beyond the metaphors involving the hands in *Being and Time*, Heidegger suggests that "das Werk der Hand" goes well beyond grasping and touching, and even beyond related forms of *technē*. "The hand is a peculiar thing," Heidegger remarks in his 1951–52 lecture course *What Is Called Thinking?* "The hand's essence can never be determined, or explained, by its being an organ which can grasp."[17] In addition to its ordinary activities including touching, grasping, or holding, the essence of the hand also involves that which "reaches and extends, receives and welcomes—and not just things: the hand extends itself, and receives its own welcome in the hand of the other."[18] For Heidegger, the hand is more than simply a prehensile

16 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, repr. ed. (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008). For the discussion of the world of equipment and the distinction between *vor-* and *zu-handenheit*, see §16 in chapter 3 of Division One.

17 Martin Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?*, trans. Fred D. Wieck and J. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 16.

18 Heidegger, 16.

organ, it is also an essential opening to alterity and the gift. The hand can grip and take, but it can also carry, rescue, or give: "The hand holds (*hält*). The hand carries (*trägt*)."[19] The hand is the very nexus of intersubjectivity where individuals encounter the flesh of others: one may extend the so-called helping hand, or the hands can be used to possess and dominate the other. In his 1942–43 *Parmenides* lectures, Heidegger suggests that the dual possibility of the hand can be deployed for "both prayer and murder, greeting and thanks, oath and signal, and also the 'work' of the hand, the 'hand-work' and the tool." Beyond its use as equipment, the extended hand can help or harm the other: "The handshake seals the covenant. The hand brings about the 'work' of destruction."[20]

This definition of the hands identifies them with distinctly *human* practices. Heidegger rather brazenly declares in the *Parmenides* course, "No animal has a hand, and a hand never originates from a paw or a claw or a talon."[21] He makes a similar claim in *What Is Called Thinking?* where he quips, "Apes, for example, have organs that can grasp, but they have no hand."[22] If the hand is the primary organ for all of these advanced human activities—giving, taking, sharing, building, embracing—then while human and animal alike are equipped with the prehensile organs to hold and grasp, Heidegger considers that the essence of the hand lies in these higher-order functions that are limited to humans. This definition would exclude non-human animals who only possess prehensile organs for touching and grasping, as well as those humans whose hands cannot carry out what Heidegger considers their critical functions.

Heidegger is not bothered by external world scepticism, identified in Kant's "scandal" of philosophy and refuted by Moore's "here is one hand" proof. *Dasein* is not cut off from the world or even independent of it; rather, it is characterised in Division One of *Being and Time* by its "existentiales": "being-in-the-world"[23] and "being-with-others."[24] *Dasein* is irrevocably "thrown" into the world,[25] and there is no question of whether the external world exists—there is no "external" of which to speak.[26] Nonetheless, there is a different sort of scepticism at work in Heidegger's notion of the hands. He doubts that the ape has hands not because of a lack of visual or biological evidence that such is the case, but because he changes the

19 Heidegger, 16.

20 Martin Heidegger, *Parmenides*, trans. André Schuwer and Richard Rojcewicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 80.

21 Heidegger, 80.

22 Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?*, 16.

23 Heidegger's preliminary discussion of *Dasein*'s Being-in-the-world is found in chapter 2 of Division One of *Being and Time*.

24 The description of *Dasein*'s existentiales, Being-in-the-world and Being-with-others, is found in chapter 4 of Division One of *Being and Time*, where Heidegger introduces "certain structures of Dasein which are equiprimordial with Being-in-the-world: *Being-with* and *Dasein-with*" (114).

25 For the explanation of being-thrown, *Geworfenheit*, see *Being and Time*, §38.

26 For Heidegger's refutation of the external world problem, see *Being and Time*, §43.

conventional meaning of the word. Indeed, his definition of "handiwork" retraces the ontological difference dividing human and animal, echoing his characterisation of animals as "poor in world" in his 1929–30 course *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*.[27] Heidegger's comment about the ape's hands is indicative of a troubling pattern: doubting the hands of others enables a form of haptic scepticism where the hands become a proxy for the value of other beings.

In his 1987 text "*Geschlecht* II: Heidegger's Hand," Derrida forcefully elucidates the consequences of this delineation of the handed and the handless. First, he states that Heidegger's comment concerning the ape's hands illustrates that he knows nothing about these animals, and Derrida chides him for having "no doubt studied neither the zoologists (even were it to criticize them) nor the apes in the Black Forest."[28] Indeed, Heidegger's characterisation of animals is not correct even on his own terms. From primates that use their hands to fashion tools to others that have learnt sign language, there are numerous ways that non-human animals undermine the restrictive standards that Heidegger sets forth for "having" hands. Nonetheless, his comment about apes takes on an outsized significance because, as Derrida explains, the exclusionary logic governing this definition extends to "trace a system of limits within which everything he says of man's hand takes on sense and value." This is a defining feature of Heidegger's philosophical anthropocentrism. His characterisation equates "having" a hand with the *Geschlecht* of the human being, which, Derrida writes, "names what has the hand, and so thinking, speech or language, and openness to the gift."[29] According to this view, the hand is more than a prehensile appendage: it is the embodied form of thinking, reasoning, and ultimately writing. Heidegger's definition of the hands according to higher faculties of thought and language delineates this distinctly human feature from the activities reserved for the prehensile limbs with which animals are endowed. The difference between human hands and animal limbs is unbridgeable because, as Derrida remarks, "this abyss is speech and thought."[30] Heidegger's notion of the hand stands in for the capacity for rational thought and language itself.

When he identifies the essential functions of the hands as uniquely human capacities, Heidegger extends the tradition of philosophical anthropocentrism, following Descartes, Kant, and even Moore. In the *Discourse on Method*, Descartes considers animals mere automata who are incapable of genuine thought or reason, rendering the question of animal consciousness superfluous; a being that cannot

27 Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, trans. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1995).

28 Jacques Derrida, "*Geschlecht* II: Heidegger's Hand," in *Deconstruction and Philosophy: The Texts of Jacques Derrida*, trans. John P. Leavey Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1989), 174. The famously untranslatable German term *Geschlecht* most closely resembles the English notions of gender or sex, even if these terms fall short of capturing the manifold senses of this complex term.

29 Derrida, 174.

30 Derrida, 174.

think cannot doubt. If animals are thoughtless automata, they are certainly not capable of having hands in Heidegger's strong sense. Kant makes a similar argument in the *Anthropology* when he writes: "Nature seems to have endowed man alone with this organ [the hand], so that he is enabled to form a concept of a body by touching it on all sides. The antennae of insects seem merely to show the presence of an object; they are not designed to explore its form."[31] Kant delineates between the prehensile tactile organs of insects and the human hand's unique ability to form concepts from its tactile exploration of objects. Maine de Biran is only slightly more generous when he writes, "The elephant's trunk fulfills approximately the same functions as the hand of man."[32] The notion that human hands are endowed with the unique qualities of higher reason which are lacking in other animals is a common feature of philosophical anthropology, from Descartes's hands of doubt to Heidegger's denial of the ape's hands.

Heidegger considers the ability to write as the ultimate expression of the hand, entrenching the gulf separating human from animal. If, as he famously proclaimed, "language is the house of being"[33] and the essence of the human being is the capacity for language, then the hand's most important function is the ability to write. In his *Parmenides* course, Heidegger identifies the codetermination of the hand and the activity of writing:

> The hand sprang forth only out of the word and together with the word. Man does not "have" hands, but the hand holds the essence of man (*Der Mensch "hat" nicht Hände, sondern die Hand hat des Wesen das Menschen inne*), because the word as the essential realm of the hand is the ground of the essence of man. The word as what is inscribed and what appears to the regard is the written word, i.e., script. And the word as script is handwriting.[34]

Heidegger connects the very existence of the hands with the specifically human ability to write. Yet, as Derrida observes, Heidegger's curious phrasing is symptomatic of his discussion of the hand: it is almost always "the hand" in the singular, "as if man did not have two hands but, this monster, one single hand," as if human beings had a "single organ in the middle of the body, just as the Cyclops has one single eye in the middle of the forehead."[35] There is something awkward, unnatural, or even *monstrous* about Heidegger's discussion of the hand. "The man of the typewriter and of technics in general uses two hands," Derrida remarks, "but the man that speaks and the man that writes with the hand, as one says; isn't he the monster with a single

31 Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, trans. Victor Lyle Dowden, rev. and ed. Hans H. Rudnik with introduction by Frederick P. Van De Pitte, new ed. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996), 41.

32 Maine de Biran, cited in Derrida, *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*, 153.

33 Martin Heidegger, "Letter Concerning Humanism," in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), 217.

34 Heidegger, *Parmenides*, 80.

35 Derrida, "*Geschlecht* II: Heidegger's Hand," 182.

hand?" The singular hand of thought and language is detached from the manifold ways that humans use their hands, effectively reducing the quality of having hands to the singular ability to write. The only time Heidegger speaks of the two hands in *What Is Called Thinking?* is in a reference to hands clasped in prayer: "The hand designs and signs (*zeichnet*), presumably because man is a (monstrous) sign (*ein Zeichen*). Two hands fold into one, a gesture meant to carry man into the great simplicity."[36] Playing off the German *Zeichen* and the Latin *monstrare*, Derrida reveals the *monstrous* element of the being that points, *zeichnet*.[37] Heidegger's description of "the hand [that] holds the essence of man" is divorced from the ordinary experience of having hands. Ironically, where Heidegger's concept of the hand draws a line to exclude animals, it ultimately describes a *monstrous* human hand.

Beyond the existential question of who "has" hands, Heidegger has little to say about the experience of touching. Specifically, he ignores the hand's desiring touch, as if affective and erotic modes of touch were philosophically irrelevant. "Nothing is ever said of the caress or of desire," Derrida provocatively writes, "Does one make love, does man make love, with the hand or with the hands? And what about sexual differences in this regard?"[38] This omission echoes the criticism that Heidegger's concept of *Mit-sein* fails to offer a robust, fleshed-out structure of inter-subjectivity. Questions of flesh, desire, and nourishment are absent from the existential analytic in *Being and Time*, leading Levinas to write in *Totality and Infinity*, "*Dasein* in Heidegger is never hungry."[39] Indeed, Heidegger's monstrous hand is troublingly disincarnated. Didier Franck explores this perspective by suggesting that flesh is the unarticulated mode of *Dasein*'s givenness in *Being and Time*. Franck explains, "If flesh is absent from the existential analytic, is this not because flesh poses a threat to the privilege of temporality, and everything that derives from it?"[40] Whereas Heidegger considers *Dasein*'s temporal *ek-stasis* to constitute the horizon of its fundamental ontological structure, Franck argues that the unarticulated mode of *Dasein*'s embodiment as flesh reveals a lacuna in Heidegger's existential analytic. Indeed, rather than temporality orienting the transcendental horizon of *Dasein*'s ek-static Being, Franck argues that it is in fact *Dasein*'s *flesh* which makes its temporal constitution possible. This novel inversion turns the existential analytic on its head and suggests that Heidegger's monstrous hand is a symptom of *Dasein*'s unarticulated modes of embodiment.

36 Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?*, 16–17.

37 Derrida applauds the decision in Gérard Granel's French translation of *Was heisst denken?* (*Qu'appelle-t-on penser?* [Paris: PUF, 2014]) to maintain the resonance of the Latin and Germanic registers between the German *zeigen* and the French *monstre*. While the translation may initially appear strange—Derrida confesses that it "first seemed to me a bit mannered and gallicizing"—it reveals a deeper sense of monstrosity in Heidegger's work, which offers "occasion for thought" ("*Geschlecht* II: Heidegger's Hand," 166).

38 Derrida, "*Geschlecht* II: Heidegger's Hand," 182.

39 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 134.

40 Didier Franck, *Flesh and Body: On the Phenomenology of Husserl*, trans. Joseph Rivera and Scott Davidson (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 147.

Yet Heidegger's most troubling invocation of the hands highlights the philosopher at his most inglorious. In his *Philosophical Autobiography*, Karl Jaspers recounts that in May 1933, he invited his longtime friend Martin Heidegger to his home in Heidelberg for dinner with him and his wife Gertrud. Days before, Heidegger had been named the rector of the University of Freiburg, and he had travelled to Heidelberg to give a public lecture about the "renewal" of the university under National Socialism. Gertrud and Karl Jaspers were understandably distraught. In the intimacy of a dinner between old friends, Jaspers confronted Heidegger about his baffling public support for the ascendant Nazi regime. He asked, "How can such an uneducated (*ungebildet*) man like Hitler govern Germany?" Heidegger replied, "It is not a question of education, just look at his marvelous hands!"[41] His comment precipitated the end of both the dinner and their friendship. Heidegger's baffling comment suggests something far more nefarious than blind naiveté; it reflects a kind of political tribalism that endorses the sort of unthinking, spectacular brutishness that seems so foreign to his poetic mode of philosophy. Considering the importance that Heidegger assigns to human hands, his comments about Hitler's "marvelous hands" are even more troubling. One cannot help but speculate about the connection between Heidegger's exclusionary notion of the hands and his disastrous political affiliations, made all too explicit at the dinner in the Jaspers' home in Heidelberg. The exclusionary logic governing Heidegger's monstrous hand, its unarticulated mode of fleshiness, and its apparent disinterest in the desiring touch or caress are emblematic of the solipsistic thinking that failed to grapple with the monstrosity of Nazism.

Auto-Affection and Double Sensation

Edmund Husserl's *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy II* investigates the embodied projection of the self through the hand's tactile impressions of the world. Unlike Descartes's or Kant's engagement with haptic scepticism, Husserl is not interested in using touch to prove the existence of external objects, nor is he invested in Heidegger's existential qualifiers for what it means to "have" hands. Rather, Husserl brackets these questions and instead analyses the different forms of embodiment that account for the structure of experience. The hand's touch offers hyletic data, Husserl's term for the sensible content of intentional experiences, and highlights the constitutive role of the body in the structure of psychic reality. Husserl describes what it is like to touch different kinds of things and how touch can qualitatively distinguish between inanimate objects, one's own body, and the bodies of others. This new valence of haptic scepticism asks what touch can determine about our own bodies and those of others. Does touch affirm our in-

41 Karl Jaspers, *Philosophische Autobiographie: Erweiterte Neuausgabe* (Munich: Piper, 1984), 101: "Bildung ist ganz gleichgültig, sehen Sie nur seine wunderbaren Hände an!"

tersubjective relation to others—their proximity and likeness, our ethical obligation to others—or does it extend the sceptical disposition towards others? These doubts concerning the qualitative experience of touch emerge from Husserl's text, and they form a salient point of disagreement between Emmanuel Levinas and Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

In *Ideas II*, Husserl describes touching different classes of things. When one touches an inanimate object, a "mere thing," the sensation is felt as interior to the person who is doing the touching, and the object is sensed as external to the body, which is confirmed when that object is seen. When my hand touches a table, for example, I can evaluate *how* it feels—smooth, rough, cold, etc.—as a sensation which is felt by my body, but provoked by my contact with an external object. In these ordinary encounters with mere things, touch traces the phenomenological limits of the body relative to the external world of sensed objects. For Husserl, there is an intuitive understanding when we touch an inanimate object that it is merely a thing, whereas something distinct occurs when touching one's own body. Husserl famously identifies the auto-affective experience of the left hand touching the right as a qualitatively unique kind of touch, set off from the touch of mere objects:

> Touching my left hand, I have touch-appearances, that is to say, I do not just sense, but I perceive and have appearances of a soft, smooth hand, with such a form. The indicational sensations of movement and the representational sensations of touch, which are Objectified as features of the thing, "left hand," belong in fact to my right hand. But when I touch the left hand I also find in it, too, series of touch-sensations, which are "*localized*" in it, though these are not constitutive of properties (such as roughness or smoothness of the hand, of this physical thing). If I speak of the *physical* thing, "left hand," then I am abstracting from these sensations (a ball of lead has nothing like them and likewise for every "merely" physical thing, every thing that is not my Body). If I do include them, then it is not that the physical thing is now richer, but instead *it becomes Body, it senses* (*es wird Leib, es empfindet*).[42]

Distinguishing the experiences of touching *Leib*, the living Body, from *bloße Sache*, a mere thing, Husserl explains that in the case of one hand touching the other, the body has a double sensation which unfold on two levels of experience. While the left hand is touching the right, it receives hyletic data on the feel (and appearance) of the right hand as an object—its texture, what it feels like, etc.—but the sensation is double because the left hand simultaneously feels itself being touched by the right hand, and it is thereby also the *subject* of the sensation. As Dan Zahavi explains, "Husserl is anxious to emphasize the peculiar two-sidedness of the body," as both the interiority of sensing and the exteriority of something which is also visually and tactically external. The reversibility of the double sensation—that I can intention-

42 Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy. Second Book: Studies in the Phenomenology of Constitution* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1989), §36, 144–45.

ally alternate between the left hand sensing the right hand and the right hand sensing the left hand—"demonstrates that the interiority and the exteriority are different manifestations of the same."[43] Touch is the only sense that allows for double sensation: I can no more taste myself taste, or hear myself hear, than I can see myself see.[44] The double sensation of one's own flesh is a kind of bodily reflection which uniquely allows the body to sense its own exteriority and its peculiar status as both subject and object. This experience is qualitatively different from touching mere things. In the critical moment when one hand touches the other, the sensed object transforms into the body and gains sensation; as Husserl writes, "es wird Leib, es empfindet." This transformation of mere objects via touch suggests that the body can intuitively recognise the uniqueness of its own flesh and that self-touching is a qualitatively different experience from touching mere things. Auto-affective touch comes close to the certainty that Descartes discovers in the *cogito,* but even this singular kind of touch cannot foreclose the possibility of illusion, highlighted by the haptic sceptical tradition.

Is it possible for auto-affective touch to deceive? Maurice Merleau-Ponty's 1945 *Phenomenology of Perception* investigates certain limit cases of embodied phenomenology where the psychic projection of embodiment does not correspond to the actual body. The most famous of these phenomena are phantom limb syndrome, when a subject has a conscious representation of a non-existent limb, and anosognosia, in which a person has no conscious representation of an existing but paralysed limb. These symptoms follow from traumatic injuries often experienced during war, and they present as a false visual projection of the body that can be accompanied by intense pain in the afflicted limb, whether real or imaginary. Even when the patient is conscious of the projection, the symptoms can continue. These phenomena exhibit a perplexing etiology that originates neither exclusively in the body nor in the mind. Merleau-Ponty rejects the physiological explanation for phantom limb syndrome and anosognosia, which takes the false projection of a (non-)existent limb to be the product of a functional absence in the body's mechanics; he also rejects the psychological explanation, which explains the phantom limb or anosognosia as the product of a repressed memory of trauma. While these limit phenomena exhibit both physiological and psychological effects, Merleau-Ponty suggests there is an underlying *existential* explanation for these lags between the body and its phenomenological projection. He describes a kind of traumatic alteration to our embodied

43 Dan Zahavi, *Husserl's Phenomenology* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 104.

44 Of course, we can see ourselves seeing in a mirror and we can hear our own voice speaking in an echo, but these phenomena do not allow for what Husserl calls double sensation. Even if I look at myself in the mirror, I cannot alternate my perspective from my body to the mirrored image as I can with the left and right hand. If I hear the echo of my own voice, I cannot then reverse the sensation, take the perspective of the echo, and hear my actual voice as the echo. Touch is unique amongst the senses in this regard.

reality, "understood in the perspective of being-in-the-world." The existential root of these phenomena gives rise to their physiological and psychological effects:

> What it is in us which refuses mutilation and disablement is an *I* committed to a certain physical and inter-human world, who continues to tend towards his world despite handicaps and amputations and who, to this extent, does not recognize them *de jure*. The refusal of the deficiency is only the obverse of our inherence in a world, the implicit negation of what runs counter to the natural momentum which throws us into our tasks, our cares, our situation, our familiar horizons. To have a phantom arm is to remain open to all the actions of which the arm alone is capable; it is to retain the practical field which one enjoyed before mutilation. The body is the vehicle of being in the world, and having a body is, for a living creature, to be intervolved in a definite environment, to identify oneself with certain projects and be continually committed to them.[45]

Merleau-Ponty's analysis is couched in the distinctly Heideggerian rhetoric of being-in-the-world, and he analyses phantom limb syndrome in terms of the loss of the body's ordinary ways of inhabiting its world. Phantom limb syndrome and anosognosia stem from the dislodgment of the body from its ordinary commitments to practical activities involving the lost or paralysed limb, changing the human "vehicle of being in the world," like driving a car without knowing it is only equipped with three wheels. These limit cases reveal consciousness's stubborn refusal to confront loss and its incredible ability to compensate for loss through the projection of a phantom limb, or, in the case of anosognosia, the projection of absence where there is in fact a limb. Nonetheless, phantom limbs present mainly as objects of sight and pain, and it is unlikely that a phantom hand could produce the double sensation that Husserl describes in his experience of touching his own hands. Merleau-Ponty does not address the modalities of touch experienced by patients afflicted with a phantom limb, but the presence of pain suggests that even the hand's ghostly presence poses questions for the haptic sceptic: the subject of the phantom limb could recite Moore's "here is one hand" proof and believe it to be true and yet, in this exceptional case, the hand's auto-affective perception would be illusory, and the first premise of the proof would be demonstrably false. Inversely, a patient suffering from anosognosia might disbelieve Moore's proof, even if his or her hands are visible to everyone else. The possibility for self-deception in auto-affection indicates that even when the existential question of "having" hands is bracketed, the haptic sceptic can always challenge the purported certainty of tactile impressions.

---

45 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith, repr. ed. (London: Routledge, 2002), 94.

Touch and the Flesh of the World

Husserl's distinction between the touch of the living body, *Leib*, and that of mere things, *bloße Sache*, serves as an instructive analytical framework for thinking about the touch of others. Whereas the "double sensation" revealed in auto-affective touch offers some semblance of certainty regarding the limits of the embodied self, the hetero-affective touch of another's flesh reveals a set of intractable questions for the haptic sceptic. If we readily identify the double sensation of our own flesh and we are relatively adept at identifying the touch of inert objects, then what can the touch of another's flesh reveal about intersubjectivity? Can flesh intuitively identify flesh, or does the possibility of deception endure? Surely there is no double sensation when one touches someone else's flesh, but touching another's flesh is nonetheless intuitively distinct from touching a table. The critical question is whether there is an aura of flesh which distinguishes it as a living body as opposed to a mere object, and how the hand's touch navigates this qualitative difference. The passage on the auto-affective hands in *Ideas II* has become a touchstone for theories of embodied phenomenology, and Husserl's readers have debated the peculiar touch of *Leib* and its implications for an intersubjective ethics of touch beyond sense-certainty. Specifically, Levinas and Merleau-Ponty highlight Husserl's discussion of the auto-affective hands as the generative source for an intersubjective ethics, but they draw opposing conclusions from the analogy between auto-affective and hetero-affective touch.

In the essay "The Philosopher and His Shadow," published in *Signs* in 1960, Merleau-Ponty argues that auto-affective touch is in fact analogous to the hetero-affective touch of another's flesh, suggesting an intuitive recognition of the distinction between *Leib* and inanimate matter. In other words, he asserts a parallelism between one's own flesh and the flesh of others encountered in touch. Despite the manifold possibilities for deception involved in the touch of another, Merleau-Ponty stakes the claim that the embodied flesh of the self is in fact contingent on the flesh of others in an interconnected matrix which he calls "intercorporeality":

> In learning that my body is a "perceiving thing," that it is able to be stimulated (*reizbar*)—it, and not just my "consciousness"—I prepared myself for understanding that there are other *animalia* and possibly other men. It is imperative to recognize that we have here neither comparison, nor analogy, nor projection or "introjection." The reason why I have evidence of the other man's being-there when I shake his hand is that his hand is substituted for my left hand, and my body annexes the body of another person in that "sort of reflection" it is paradoxically the seat of. My two hands "coexist" or are "compresent" because they are one single body's hands. The other person appears through an extension of that compresence; he and I are like organs of one single intercorporeality.[46]

46 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The Philosopher and His Shadow," in *Signs*, trans. Richard C. McCleary (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 168.

For Merleau-Ponty, when I understand the potential for my flesh to be stimulated, I recognise that same potential in others. The assertion that flesh intuitively recognises the touch of another's flesh overcomes the sceptical challenge to the existence of other minds, and it gives rise to an intersubjective ethics based on a shared network of flesh. He insists that intercorporeality does not function by projection or analogy, but rather that the other's flesh offers the same sort of "reflection of the body" that occurs when the left hand touches the right. Merleau-Ponty asserts that there exists an intuitive recognition of flesh even in hetero-affective touch, which precedes the division of flesh into solipsistic individual minds and bodies.

In "The Intertwining—The Chiasm," published posthumously in 1964 in *The Visible and the Invisible,* Merleau-Ponty radicalises these reflections on intercorporeality. He extends the notion of shared flesh beyond self and other to the very composition of the world itself, which he calls "the flesh of the world." Beyond a simple parallelism of auto-affective and hetero-affective touch, this concept asserts the fully-fledged contingency of one's own body, others' bodies, and the surrounding world itself. This raises the stakes of the analogy between one's own flesh and that of others and obliterates the category of inanimate matter through the chiasm connecting the flesh of *Leib* to the material and phenomenal world. Merleau-Ponty describes how "the flesh (of the world or my own) is not contingency, chaos, but a texture that returns to itself and conforms to itself."[47] The self and the other's flesh are connected through the chiasm of the corporality of the self and the materiality of the world, a touch which extends beyond one's own hand and into the other's flesh. He carries Husserl's analysis of auto-affective hands beyond the limits of the solipsistic individual body by disconnecting double sensation from its origin in a singular consciousness. Merleau-Ponty writes, "If my left hand can touch my right hand while it palpates the tangibles, can touch it touching, can turn its palpation back upon it, why, when touching the hand of another, would I not touch in it the same power to espouse the things that I have touched in my own?"[48] Rather than determining the limits of *Leib* against the backdrop of mere objects, touch reveals the contingency of the subject and its surrounding world, in what he calls the chiasm. The ontological character of this connection of flesh precedes the dualist separation of body and mind. Merleau-Ponty urges us to think about the original unity of bodies and the world they inhabit: "We must not think the flesh starting from substances, from body and spirit—for then it would be the union of contradictories—but we must think it, as we said, as an element, as the concrete emblem of a general manner of being."[49] This does not mean that all distinctions between self and other disappear in the touch of another's flesh; rather, the flesh of the self and that of the world are

47 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The Intertwining—The Chiasm," in *The Visible and the Invisible; Working Notes*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 146.

48 Merleau-Ponty, 141.

49 Merleau-Ponty, 147.

intertwined. For Merleau-Ponty reveals "a new type of being, a being by porosity, pregnancy, or generality" whose body, this is connected to its worldly horizon: "His body and the distances participate in one same corporeity or visibility in general, which reigns between them and it, and even beyond the horizon, beneath his skin, unto the depths of being."[50] The chiasm of the visible and the tactile binds the ontological tissue of the self, others, and world.

The flesh of the world is bound together as a totality whose being precedes the dualist separation of minds and bodies. Merleau-Ponty writes that the other's touch offers "evidence of the other man's *being-there*," its *Dasein:* his notion of intercorporeality resembles Heidegger's *Mit-sein* to the extent that it sketches an ontological framework for understanding the presence of other human beings in terms of a shared world, *Mit-Welt*, of touching. However, Heidegger has little to say about the experience of touch, so *Dasein*'s recognition of others is merely implied or suggested. By contrast, Merleau-Ponty adds a layer of flesh to *Dasein*'s otherwise ghostly form of embodiment. According to Merleau-Ponty, I recognise the other's flesh as *Leib* because it is like my own flesh: together, they are co-constitutive of the flesh of the world. Touch connects us to others, it expands our sensitivity beyond our own atomistic bodies to the shared world of flesh, and it ultimately reveals the chiasm between the visual and tactile fields that tie an individual's flesh to the world. This reworking of Husserl's notions of touch extends the analogy between auto-affection and hetero-affection to an all-encompassing notion of flesh which treats the world as an organic totality with the living beings that inhabit it.

There are important objections to raise against Merleau-Ponty's extension of Husserl's analysis of auto-affection to the hetero-affective touch of another's body. Merleau-Ponty's intersubjective flesh of the world asserts a parallelism between touching one's own flesh and touching the flesh of others, which is a radical departure from Husserl's description of the limits of the living body demarcated by touching external objects. Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on the body's interconnectedness with its surroundings as the flesh of the world is in a certain sense analogous to Heidegger's description of the formal existential character of *Dasein* as being-with-others and being-in-the-world. Just as *Dasein* is a constitutive element of the shared world it inhabits along with others (rather than a Cartesian subject cut off from the world of other minds and external objects), Merleau-Ponty extends the *Leib* of the self to the intersubjective flesh of the world. Yet barring the invention of some sort of collective nervous system that would break through the hard problem of consciousness and allow us to literally feel what other people feel, even the most intimate touch of another could not replicate Husserl's double sensation of one's own body as subject and object. In *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy,* Derrida sharply rebukes Merleau-Ponty for misreading Husserl on this point: Merleau-Ponty "puts the shoe on the wrong foot, literally, turning upside down, short of completely misreading, the

50 Merleau-Ponty, 148.

sense of Husserl's text"[51] regarding the distinction between hetero- and auto-affective touch. Merleau-Ponty asserts an intersubjective connection between the flesh of the self and that of others, but, as Derrida observes, "the page in question clearly says that I can never have access to the body (*Leib*) of the other except in an indirect fashion, through appresentation, comparison, analogy, projection, and introjection." The flesh of the world exceeds the strict limits of phenomenological observation that Husserl establishes in *Ideas II*. In fidelity to Husserl's method, which strictly conscribes the sensible limits of *Leib*, Emmanuel Levinas also objects to Merleau-Ponty's parallelism between auto-affection and hetero-affection. Rather than revealing the flesh of the world, according to Levinas, the other's touch discloses precisely the *otherness* of the other's flesh. In a 1984 text entitled "In Memory of Alphonse de Waelhens," Levinas offers the counter-example of a handshake between two people, which neatly juxtaposes with Husserl's auto-affective hands: "Is the handshake a 'taking cognizance,' and a sort of coinciding of two thoughts in the mutual knowledge of one by the other? Is it not in the *difference*, proximity to one's neighbor?"[52] Far from being a melding of minds, shaking another's hand reveals the unbridgeable gap between the impressions of my body and others. The hetero-affective touch of the other does not present the same phenomenon as the double sensation specific to auto-affective touch. Rather, it is the *difference* between the other's touch and the touch of my own flesh that is constitutive of the embodied self.

The Caress and the Excendence of Sensibility

The touch of the other's flesh introduces further questions for the haptic sceptic. How does the hand's touch distinguish between the auto-affective touch of the self and the hetero-affective touch of another? Can flesh intuitively identify the flesh of others? Or does the possibility of deception continue to loom over any distinction of this sort? In contrast to Merleau-Ponty, Levinas outlines a crucial distinction between a notion of touch that seeks mastery over objects as an epistemological mode of knowing and his concept of the "caress," which illuminates a mode of contact between flesh which respects the alterity of the other. Beginning in his 1947 *Time and the Other* and further developed in his seminal 1961 text *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas articulates this distinction in the modes of tactile interactions with the other. In contradistinction to touch, the caress is an opening to otherness because, Levinas explains, "if one could possess, grasp, and know the other, it would not be other."[53]The question that arises for the haptic sceptic is whether the touch of the

51 Derrida, *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*, 190.

52 Emmanuel Levinas, "In Memory of Alphonse de Waelhens," in *Outside the Subject*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 111–12.

53 Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 89.

other's flesh can respect her alterity without trying to master or objectify her as a possession. The caress, as a touch beyond touch, reveals the "excendence" of immanence in the other's touch, giving rise to the possibility of both ethics and Eros.

In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas describes touch as a means of appropriation and mastery. Highlighting the linguistic connection between grasping and understanding, he explains, "La main prend et comprend," "The hand takes and comprehends."[54] This connection between touch and understanding is made explicit in German, between grasping, *begreifen*, and the concept, *Begriff*. Grasping is a form of taking possession that transforms the subject's mode of interacting with the world from existing to possessing, rendering objects knowable. When the hand extends to touch something, to grasp and "comprehend" it, the hand "is no longer a sense-organ, pure enjoyment, pure sensibility, but is mastery, domination, disposition—which do not belong to the order of sensibility."[55] The qualitative feel of an object is set aside when the hand seizes it in its grasp. Drawing a parallel between the senses of vision and touch and the activities of representation and labour, Levinas states that "vision moves into grasp":

> Vision opens upon a perspective, upon a horizon, and describes a traversable distance, invites the hand to movement and to contact, and ensures them. Socrates made fun of Glaucon who wished to take the vision of the starlit sky for an experience of height. The forms of objects call for the hand and the grasp. By the hand the object is in the end comprehended, touched, taken, borne and referred to other objects, clothed with a signification, by reference to other objects.[56]

The hand's touch is its attempt to master the object, to neutralise its alterity and appropriate it for itself. Merleau-Ponty's notion of intercorporeality is in fact evidence for Levinas's claim that touch overwhelms alterity, insofar as the former describes flesh as extending the zone of familiarity and sameness beyond the self to the flesh of others. In his guide to Levinas's *Totality and Infinity* entitled *Levinas and the Night of Being*, Raoul Moati explains that touching an object renders it a possession, domesticating its otherness and incorporating it into the realm of sameness or ipseity. "Things delimit being insofar as they are possessed," he writes, "in possession, being is no longer something that escapes me, but rather something that I comprehend—that is, something whose alterity has been neutralized." Possession changes an object's existential modality: it is "a being (*être*) transformed into a having (*avoir*)."[57] If touch is used to appropriate and dominate, it cannot be the source of ethics; for Levinas, ethics springs from the encounter with the infinite otherness of the other.

---

54 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 161.

55 Levinas, 161.

56 Levinas, 191.

57 Raoul Moati, *Levinas and the Night of Being: A Guide to* Totality and Infinity, trans. Daniel Wyche (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 96.

In contrast to the touch which obliterates difference by co-opting objects as possessions, Levinas's notion of the caress is a distinct modality of tactile impression geared towards respecting the alterity of the other. Whereas touch seeks to master knowledge in the hand's grasp, the caress is an encounter with the unknown *otherness* of the other's touch. Contra Merleau-Ponty's "flesh of the world," which is a predicate that emerges from the domain of the sameness or ipseity of all beings, the caress is an expression of the infinite relation to the other, precisely in her irreducible otherness. The caress is a touch beyond touch: it reveals the transcendence that arises out of the immanence of tactile impressions. It is precisely this unknown and unknowable quality of the other's touch that is responsible for its allure, as the locus of desire or ethics. The caress is marked by its incalculability. Levinas explains in *Time and the Other:*

> The caress is a mode of the subject's being, where the subject who is in contact with another goes beyond this contact. Contact as sensation is part of the world of light. But what is caressed is not touched, properly speaking. It is not the softness or warmth of the hand given in contact that the caress seeks. The seeking of the caress constitutes its essence by the fact that the caress does not know what it seeks. This "not knowing," this fundamental disorder, is the essential. It is like a game with something slipping away, a game absolutely without project or plan, not with what can become ours or us, but with something other, always other, always inaccessible, and always still to come [*à venir*]. The caress is the anticipation of this pure future [*avenir*], without content. It is made up of this increase of hunger, of ever richer promises, opening new perspectives onto the ungraspable. It feeds on countless hungers.[58]

Touch arises from the domain of sameness or ipseity: one's own flesh is comparable with the flesh of others, and together it forms a unified totality which Merleau-Ponty calls the "flesh of the world." For Levinas, this is indicative of the tendency in philosophy to seek totality rather than infinity: it suggests aligning everything in the domain of sameness. Levinas "contest[s] the idea that the relationship with the other is fusion," and instead he insists, "the relationship with the Other is the absence of the other," which is "an absence that is time."[59] The horizon of the caress opens to a future, *avenir*, to be fulfilled in a time "to come," *à-venir*. The caress exceeds the plenitude of being and opens possibilities that derive from the infinite order of alterity. As Raoul Moati explains, "The caress discovers that which remains essentially resistant to any inscription within being: the pure future that is not available in any case in the mode of a being toward the future, which is to say of a possibility. The caress leads to an adventure."[60] The meaning of the caress goes beyond the immediacy of sense perception, beyond being, and calls out to the future. Levinas explains in *Totality and Infinity*, "anticipation grasps possibles," and the deferral of the caress into the future maintains a constant reflection on the otherness of the other, who is never fully mas-

58 Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 89.
59 Levinas, 90.
60 Moati, *Levinas and the Night of Being*, 168.

tered: "What the caress seeks is not situated in a perspective and in the light of the graspable."[61] Levinas's caress does not involve a method for testing the veracity of epistemic claims; rather, it embraces the mystery of the other's flesh which reveals the excendence of totality. The caress goes beyond being, it exceeds the limits of sensibility, and it reveals the always-already deferred fulfilment of the ethical responsibility to the other.[62]

The caress' engagement with alterity extends beyond the thinking of totality and stems from the domain of what Levinas describes as infinity. In his 1964 essay "Violence and Metaphysics," Derrida describes Levinas's thinking of the ethical as transcending the immanent limits of being. He writes: "For Levinas the sun of the *epekeina tēs ousias* (beyond being) will always illuminate the pure awakening and inexhaustible source of thought," which is the overcoming of totality by a thinking of infinity; it is "the instrument of destruction for the phenomenology and ontology subjected to the neutral totality of the Same as Being or as Ego."[63] The immanent tactile impressions exceed the epistemological register of sense perception and instead derive from something beyond the totality of being, from the infinity of alterity. This transcendence of the caress at the heart of the immanent field of touch reveals what lies beyond being. For Levinas, this is the origin of the erotic touch as well as a potential source for an intersubjective ethics. Derrida continues: "In *Totality and Infinity* the 'Phenomenology of Eros' describes the movement of the *epekeina tēs ousias* in the very experience of the caress."[64] The caress always has "a foothold in being," but Levinas describes its movement as "the exceeding of being,"[65] a departure

61 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 258.

62 It certainly bears mentioning that Levinas would later revise his views on the caress, and in later texts, including his landmark 1974 text *Otherwise Than Being*, he would revise many of the views that he presents in *Time and the Other* and *Totality and Infinity*. In his later work, Levinas suggests that the other's touch reveals the otherness contained within oneself, like a wound which reveals the nudity of the self before the other, and leads to a hyperbolic, sacrificial ethics. A longer discussion of Levinas's evolution regarding these views is beyond the purview of this paper, but Jacob Rogozinski offers an insightful critical reading of Levinas's evolution regarding the caress and the touch of the other. He explains: "In the view of *Otherwise Than Being*, the caress always proves to a vulnerability, but it is no longer that of the Other, of the Beloved: it is that of the I in its devotion, its 'immolation' of the Other. While caressing the body of the Other, I hurt myself, I cut myself on his contact; I let myself be lacerated by this body that I caress, be torn apart by it up to the point where I 'sacrifice my skin.' In reality, this being skinned precedes all caressing, all external contact with the Other, since I have him in my skin, he has always perforated me, torn me away from myself. We are faced here with an 'exaggeration of tangency,' where the motifs slip from hyperbole to hyperbole [...] If one is to accept this postulate, one has to conclude that contact is necessarily altered, disconnected from the self by the alterity of the foreign flesh." Jacob Rogozinski, "From the Caress to the Wound: Levinas's *Outrageousness*," trans. Sofie Verraest, *Sophia Philosophical Review* 3, no. 2 (2009): 47–48.

63 Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," 105.

64 Derrida, 106.

65 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 113.

from the totality of being that gives rise to "ethical excendence":[66] the caress calls upon the ethical, but nonetheless steps beyond its limits in the transgressive activity of Eros.

The caress is a touch which transcends touch, a form of sensibility that, by its essence, exceeds the limits of the sensible. Hence, the caress is unperturbed by sceptical challenges to epistemological claims based on sensible impressions. The excendence of being discloses the possibility of an infinite responsibility to the other, as well as what Levinas calls the "phenomenology of Eros":

> The caress, like contact, is sensibility. But the caress transcends the sensible. It is not that it would feel beyond the felt, further than the senses, that it would seize upon a sublime food while maintaining, within its relation with this ultimate felt, an intention of hunger that goes unto the food promised, and given to, and deepening this hunger, as though the caress would be fed by its own hunger. The caress consists in seizing upon nothing, in soliciting what ceaselessly escapes its form toward a future never future enough, in soliciting what slips away as though it *were not yet*. It *searches*, it forages. It is not an intentionality of disclosure but of search: a movement unto the invisible.[67]

The caress ventures into the unknown; it is hands grasping in the dark, an encounter with alterity. For Levinas, the hand's caress implies curiosity, uncertainty, and intimacy: they are both the hands of doubt and the hands of desire. Whereas touch grasps and manipulates, the caress maintains a timidity and gentleness indicative of an encounter with the unknown.[68] Yet the phenomenology of Eros explored in

---

66 Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," 106.

67 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 257–58.

68 It is important to note that Levinas's phenomenology of Eros is explicitly framed in the gendered, heteronormative terms of an encounter between a man and a woman, and he has been criticised for his depiction of the feminine as the source of alterity. In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir fiercely attacks Levinas's notion of the feminine for its objectification of women: "I suppose Mr. Levinas is not forgetting that woman also is consciousness for herself. But it is striking that he deliberately adopts a man's point of view, disregarding the reciprocity of the subject and the object. When he writes that woman is a mystery, he assumes that she is mystery for man. So this apparently objective description is in fact an affirmation of masculine privilege" (Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevalier, new ed. [New York: Vintage Books, 2011], xxii n. 3). Levinas certainly describes his phenomenology of Eros from the perspective of the masculine philosopher's encounter with the female beloved, but it is questionable whether this perspective allows for reciprocity between male and female subjects. De Beauvoir's claim that Levinas exclusively describes women as an object of mystery for man runs contrary to his assiduous delineation of the touch from the caress. The caress refuses to master or objectify the feminine; it rejects the modality of possession for the erotic or ethical excendence of the unknown other. Levinas explains that the caress refuses domination or mastery over an object and that the feminine is the very source of alterity, which refuses objectification: "Erotic alterity is not restricted either to that which, between comparable beings, is due to different attributes which distinguish them. The feminine is other for a masculine being not only because of a different nature but also inasmuch as alterity is in some way its nature. In the erotic relation is it not a matter of another attribute in the Other, but of an attribute of alterity in the Other. [...] The feminine is described as the *of itself other,* as the origin of the very concept of al-

the caress is also a profanation of the ethical insofar as it does not proceed from the infinite responsibility glimpsed in the face of the other. As Moati explains, the erotic caress "consists in the transgression of a limit"; it "profanes that which it carries beyond the ethical presence of the Other and the face" and thus "transgresses the frankness of the face that deploys itself in the ethical injunction, in the prohibition against murder, and in signification."[69] The caress exhibits the sublime ambivalence of sensibility that exceeds the bounds of sensibility. It is connected to being but nonetheless destined to exceed it; it holds the potential for ethical activity, and yet it constantly transgresses the ethical responsibility to the other derived from the face. In the ambivalence of the caress, the hand is irreducible to an instrument for evaluating epistemological claims. The ethical and erotic excendence of the hand holds the possibility of transcendence as well as transgression.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have highlighted the crucial role of the hands in the philosopher's interactions with the world and other living beings, and the ubiquity of sceptical challenges to tactile impressions. From the external world scepticism that gives rise to Kant's "scandal of philosophy" to Levinas's insistence on the absolute otherness of the Other's flesh, the question of haptic scepticism proves indelible and even inescapable. Even Moore's anti-sceptical "here is one hand" proof of the existence of the external world only displaces the site of doubt from the existence of the external world to the existence of the hands. Haptic sceptical doubt can challenge the existential question of "having" hands, as well as the qualitative experience of what it is like to touch different classes of things. We have seen that Heidegger's obsession with the existential delineation of the handed from the handless comes at the expense of a rigorous analysis of embodiment and the peculiar experience of touching the flesh of another. This form of haptic scepticism occludes the ethical dimension of the hands in favour of its existential qualifiers, and it leads to Heidegger's solipsistic, disembodied notion of *Dasein*.

When we turn to the qualitative experience of touching different classes of objects, new iterations of haptic scepticism emerge. Husserl's analysis of auto-affection

terity" (Emmanuel Levinas and Philippe Nemo, *Ethics and Infinity*, trans. Richard A. Cohen [Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985], 65–66). There are clearly problems that arise from the explicitly gendered, heteronormative perspective from which Levinas analyses the phenomenology of Eros, but he assures us that there is nothing intrinsically irreversible in his analysis of the caress. What is ultimately important for Levinas in the erotic caress is not that it is a man's encounter with the feminine, but that it is an encounter with the radical alterity of the other: "The pathos of the erotic relationship is the fact of being two, and that the other is absolutely other" (Levinas and Nemo, 66).

69 Moati, *Levinas and the Night of Being*, 164.

suggests that the experience of touching one's own hands is unique because of the "double sensation" in which the body perceives itself as both subject and object. Levinas and Merleau-Ponty's dispute over the analogy between auto-affective and hetero-affective touch implies that the hands can offer certainty, just as they can plunge the veracity of tactile impressions into doubt. Whereas Merleau-Ponty's notion of the "flesh of the world" articulates a parallelism between the flesh of the self and the flesh of others, Levinas convincingly argues that this effort to relegate all flesh to sameness ostensibly neutralises the other's alterity, and that this kind of touch is used to assert mastery and domination over the other. The caress is not immune to doubt, but instead is committed to the otherness of the other's flesh. Even as the haptic sceptic continues to question the veracity of tactile impressions, the caress admits and embraces the mystery of the other.

Sceptical challenges to the hands' tactile impressions will inevitably continue to raise doubts regarding the epistemological certainty of touch, but such challenges are only part of the question. Reducing the hands to the preeminent appendage for epistemological squabbles occludes their significant role in ethical life. The hands are not merely the site of doubt and certainty; further, they mediate our interactions with others, and form a crucial locus for action in our ethical lives. Unperturbed and even nourished by the challenge of haptic scepticism, the ethical dimension of the hands exceeds the epistemological limits of sensibility. The "ethical excendence" of the hands constantly overflows the limits imposed by epistemological doubt.

Bibliography

Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevalier. New ed. New York: Vintage Books, 2011.

Derrida, Jacques. "*Geschlecht* II: Heidegger's Hand." Translated by John P. Leavey Jr. In *Deconstruction and Philosophy: The Texts of Jacques Derrida*, edited by John Sallis, 161–96. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.

Derrida, Jacques. *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*. Translated by Christine Irizarry. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005.

Derrida, Jacques. *Writing and Difference*. Translated by Alan Bass. New ed. London: Routledge, 2001.

Descartes, René. *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*. Translated by Donald Cress. 3rd ed. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993.

Franck, Didier. *Flesh and Body: On the Phenomenology of Husserl*. Translated by Joseph Rivera and Scott Davidson. London: Bloomsbury, 2014.

Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. Reprint ed. New York: Harper Perennial, 2008.

Heidegger, Martin. *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*. Translated by William McNeill and Nicholas Walker. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1995.

Heidegger, Martin. "Letter on Humanism." In *Basic Writings*, edited by David Farrell Krell, 190–242. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978.

Heidegger, Martin. *Parmenides*. Translated by André Schuwer and Richard Rojcewicz. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992.
Heidegger, Martin. *Qu'appelle-t-on penser?* Translated by Gérard Granel. Paris: PUF, 2014.
Heidegger, Martin. *What Is Called Thinking?* Translated by Fred D. Wieck and J. Glenn Gray. New York: Harper & Row, 1968.
Husserl, Edmund. *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy. Second Book: Studies in the Phenomenology of Constitution*. Translated by Richard Rojcewicz and André Schuwer. Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1989.
Jabès, Edmond. *Le seuil, le sable: poésies complètes 1943–1988*. Paris: Gallimard, 1990.
Jaspers, Karl. *Philosophische Autobiographie: Erweiterte Neuausgabe*. Munich: Piper, 1984.
Kant, Immanuel. *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. Translated by Victor Lyle Dowden. Revised and edited by Hans H. Rudnik with an introduction by Frederick P. Van De Pitte. New ed. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996.
Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Edited and translated by Paul Guyer and Allen Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Translated by Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
Levinas, Emmanuel. *Outside the Subject*. Translated by Michael B. Smith. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993.
Levinas, Emmanuel. *Time and the Other and Other Essays*. Translated by Richard A. Cohen. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987.
Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Interiority*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969.
Levinas, Emmanuel, and Philippe Nemo. *Ethics and Infinity*. Translated by Richard A. Cohen. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985.
Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Translated by Colin Smith. Reprint ed. London: Routledge, 2002.
Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Signs*. Translated by Richard C. McCleary. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964.
Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *The Visible and the Invisible; Working Notes*. Edited by Claude Lefort. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968.
Moati, Raoul. *Levinas and the Night of Being: A Guide to* Totality and Infinity. Translated by Daniel Wyche. New York: Fordham University Press, 2016.
Moore, G.E. "Proof of an External World." In *G.E. Moore: Selected Writings*, edited by Thomas Baldwin, 147–70. New York: Routledge, 1993.
Rogozinski, Jacob. "From the Caress to the Wound: Levinas's *Outrageousness*." Translated by Sofie Verraest. *Sophia Philosophical Review* 3, no. 2 (2009): 31–49.
Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *On Certainty*. Edited by G.E.M Anscombe and G.H. von Wright. Translated by Denis Paul and G.E.M Anscombe. Oxford: Blackwell, 1969.
Zahavi, Dan. *Husserl's Phenomenology*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003.