

# **Reinhabiting the Lifeworld: Ecology, Reversibility, and Self-Reversal**

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A few years ago, I witnessed an astonishing event while attending a conference. A colleague was so caught up in his own heady pronouncements in the course of talking and walking that he walked right through a glass door, and hardly seemed to notice when the glass shattered into fragments behind him. I take this as a graphic illustration of the counter-ecological posture. It demonstrates quite literally that detachment from one's physical environment can bring about the fragmentation of that environment.

If ecology is broadly defined to include the social milieu as well as the biophysical, I must admit that I too tend to be "ecologically challenged" at academic conferences and similar functions. For, while I have never been so disengaged from my physical surroundings as to unwittingly walk through glass, I have been inclined to be disengaged from my colleagues. At my worst, I am apt to be overly self-possessed. Effecting a posture of cool aloofness in my interactions, I will harbor an exaggerated sense of my own significance and centrality, embodied particularly in the imagined centrality of MY WORK, compared with that of others. In this mood of self-important insularity, if I deign to actually listen to others (rather than to my own interior monologue), I will tend to listen with an ear toward being critical instead of receptive. The words of another will command my attention mainly when I perceive them to be grist for my mill, when I can dissect them in such a way that my own position is strengthened and enhanced. This division of the other's words is first made possible by my division *from the other*, my detachment from the lifeworld that we share. In losing contact with this world, I lose my sensitivity for my co-inhabitants. It is then that they appear as nothing but objects cast before this disconnected subjectivity of mine, there for my use or even abuse—or else *not* there, imperceptible to me.

No doubt my story is familiar—a sad case perhaps, but hardly unprecedented. From the first division—the severance of the subject from the *Lebenswelt*—many others arise and eventually proliferate until the division of the lifeworld becomes the order of the day and the ecosphere is ultimately decimated. The general history of the process is well known. It is commonly traced to the transformation of consciousness that took place around the time of the Renaissance, and that was cemented in the philosophy of Descartes. It was not simply that mind and body were split at that time, but that they were split in such a way that mind "ascended to the stratosphere" while body stayed "down on the ground." That is, what Descartes's work facilitated was the *abstraction* of the subject, its detachment from the world of concrete bodies and happenings. By the same stroke, the bodies were relegated to the status of being *mere objects*; they were to be treated as merely factual, as having—in the words of Heidegger—"no concealed qualities, powers, and capacities ... [but being] only what they *show* themselves as" (1962/1977, p. 268). These devitalized objects "showed themselves" within the "uniform space-time context" (p. 268), Heidegger's term for the spatial framework in which all bodies could be precisely located, probed and experimented upon. The objects of nature were thus laid open, fully exposed, extended for scrutiny (they were *res extensa*), whereas the subject—being *unextended* in Descartes's new definition of mind or spirit—was closed to view, essentially anonymous.

In this way, consciousness became *irreversible*. With the Renaissance, the subject—having become detached and disembodied, thus rendered anonymous—was not to *be* known; *it* was to do the knowing. Modern consciousness therefore was set to function in but one direction: *from* the subjective ground of experience *to* the objects that are cast before the experiencing subject. In this *from-to* orientation, where awareness is geared to move exclusively "forward," *whatever* we attend to, we make into an object.

Was the division of the *Lebenswelt* simply a regrettable mistake? I do not think so. While it is true that the pre-Renaissance lifeworld did not split subject and object in the dualistic manner of Descartes, rather than being consciously fused subject and object tended to be *confused*; there was a limited ability consciously to differentiate them. Therefore, pre-Renaissance awareness is not something to be idealized. According to Barfield, this "kind of

knowledge...was at once more universal and less clear. We still have something of this older relation to nature when we are asleep" (1977, p. 17). Gebser (1985) and Ong (1977) make it plain that pre-Renaissance experience was less lucidly focused than the mode of awareness that succeeded it. The differentiation that gave rise to the splitting of subject and object served the interest of creating sharper understanding, a greater capacity for reflection and intellectual achievement; in that way it helped to fulfill humankind's potential. So, far from being merely a pathological departure from an ideal state of affairs, the transition to Cartesian consciousness was both necessary and beneficial. The distinctions thereby generated were fruitful; in the language of the ecologist Gregory Bateson (1972), they were "differences that made a difference."

Nevertheless, it seems the time has come when this is no longer entirely true. An important criterion for the fruitfulness of distinctions is that they play a constructive role in human transactions. The well-differentiated consciousness that took hold with the Renaissance led to modern research methods and new mathematical advances (Cartesian coordinates, the calculus, etc.); these, in turn, gave rise to technological innovations that have transformed our world. Without some of these developments, the production and distribution of the present article would have been a far more difficult proposition and you might not be reading it today. Yet it does seem hard to deny that, in general, advances in technology have been accompanied by ever greater departures from the lifeworld that grounds and links us. Insofar as this is true, the differences thereby generated tend no longer to make a fruitful difference, since they serve less of a concrete purpose in the actual life of the community. Difference then loses substance, becoming more a source of noise or pollution than of useful information or meaning.

There is indeed reason to believe that, the better our technical capacity to communicate with each other has become, the less we have had to say of any substance. The "revolution" in electronic media appears to bear out this irony. Newton Minnow summed up the situation decades ago with his famous indictment of television as a "vast wasteland." I suggest that the "global electronic village" is a waste-land, an ecological catastrophe, because, in it, the *Lebenswelt* is nowhere to found. This seems obvious to me from my own experience of watching

TV. Often, in viewing a given program, I find myself soon becoming bored and restless, and feel inclined to press the buttons on my channel selector to see what is happening elsewhere. In fact, at times I find myself disposed to jump from channel to channel purely for the sake of the jumping. When I indulge myself in such activity for a long enough spell, I seem to enter a trancelike state of vacuous drift, an inert frame of mind wherein the contents of the particular programs "flatten out" so completely they lose all interest and meaning. Evidently, the underlying message is that of quantity stripped of quality, of pure homogeneity, the repetition of repetition itself and *only* repetition (à la Andy Warhol). It is not so much an ambiguity of meaning that I experience here, for ambiguity has now become so pervasive that there *is no* meaning. My experience in cyberspace is rather similar (see Rosen 2004, pp. 115–117).

What I am attempting to indicate via this personal account is the broader ecological nightmare of postmodernity that comes, I suggest, from paying no heed to the *Lebenswelt*. It is here that the phenomenological philosopher Merleau-Ponty made his contribution to ecology. In his time, he sought to call attention to the dialectical reality of the lifeworld that underlies the idealizing objectifications of the detached Cartesian subject. Because Merleau-Ponty's call has not been heeded, because the high-flying modernist subject has persisting in ignoring his tie to the earth, time and again he has come down to earth the hard way, by crashing into *postmodernity*.

A dialectic governs the contemporary crisis we are discussing. "What goes up must come down." The modernist world of lofty aspirations and bright promises and the postmodern world of desolation and despair are in fact the *same* world. Neither constitutes the lifeworld. As Merleau-Ponty noted in his critique of Sartre's "*bad*" dialectic, "It is precisely because Being and Nothingness, the yes and the no, cannot be blended together ... that, when we see being, nothingness is immediately there" (1968, p. 64). But in the *lifeworld* dialectic there is an "inherence of being in nothingness and nothingness in being" (p. 73) that brings into play "density, depth, the plurality of planes, the background worlds" (p. 68). In a Merleau-Pontian reading of our ecological dilemma then, what makes the earth such a wasteland is the *idealized splitting off* of waste—of negation, meaninglessness, nothingness, subjectivity—from positive being and

objectivity. No doubt meaning is lost when we lose touch with the practical reality of the lifeworld. Merleau-Ponty helps us to see the dialectical form that this takes: authentic lifeworld meaning is split into the “purely positive” meanings of modernity that in fact are too good to be true, and postmodernism’s “utter negation” of significance, which is actually too *bad* to be true. Given the inherent inseparability of the “yes and the no,” modern existence proves to be a roller coaster ride on which we repeatedly drop from the heights of perspicacity to the depths of chaos.

To be sure, the *Lebenswelt* continues to be obscured by the enervating abstractions of contemporary life. But—like the tenacious roots of a cemented-over flower—it is there beneath the surface. Its inhabitants are decidedly non-Sartrean. The lifeworld subject is no anonymous negativity standing apart from the world. It is a fully situated, fully-fledged participant engaging in transactions so intimately entangling that it can no longer rightly be taken as separated either from its objects, or from the worldly context itself.

Merleau-Ponty made it patently clear that, in the lifeworld, there can indeed be no categorical division of object and subject. The lifeworld subject—far from being “irreversibly” detached, anonymous and invisible—dwells among the objects, is “one of the visibles” (1968, p. 135), is itself always an object to some *other* subject, so that the simple distinction between subject and object is confounded and “we no longer know which sees and which is seen” (p. 139). Merleau-Ponty termed this ambiguous dialectical interplay *reversibility*.

In his most well-known example, he portrays the interchange as a “veritable touching of the touch, when my right hand touches my left hand while it is palpating the things, where the ‘touching subject’ passes over to the rank of the touched, descends into the things” (1968, pp. 133–134). What we have here is a free reversibility of subject and object where, in one moment, my left hand plays the role of subject, fingering some object, while, in the next moment, my left hand itself becomes object to the “subjectivity” of my right hand. And this reciprocal relation is not limited to the senses, to touching or seeing. According to Merleau-Ponty, “As there is a reversibility of the seeing and the visible ... so also there is a reversibility of speech and what it signifies” (1968, p. 154). This means that the speaking and thinking subject—no less than the

sensing subject—is an embodied participant in the earthly transactions of the lifeworld, not just a detached *cogito*.

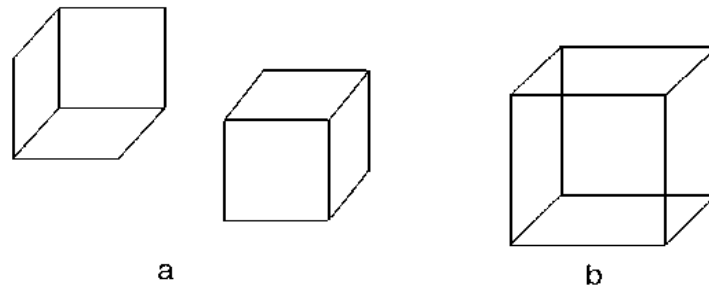
Nevertheless, Merleau-Ponty imposes a significant limitation on the interrelatedness of subject and object:

[W]e spoke summarily of a reversibility ... of the touching and the touched. It is time to emphasize that it is a reversibility always imminent and never realized in fact. My left hand is always on the verge of touching my right hand touching the things, but I never reach coincidence; the coincidence eclipses at the moment of realization, and one of two things always occurs: either my right hand really passes over to the rank of the touched [i.e., becomes an object], but then its hold on the world is interrupted [it is no longer a subject]; or it retains its hold on the world [remains a subject], but then I do not really touch *it*—my right hand touching; I palpate with my left hand only its outer covering. (1968, pp. 147–48)

In other words, while what was subject can be known as object a moment later, I cannot know subjectivity *as such*. The subject is still the one who *does* the knowing, while the object remains that which is *known*. Apparently then, the intimate reciprocity of subject and object does not add up to a literal fusion.

What I am proposing is that—to speak effectively to the ecological crisis currently confronting us—we need to find a way to actually reenter the *Lebenswelt*. With Merleau-Pontian reversibility, it seems we stop just short at the border. Passage to more concrete ground is blocked by Merleau-Ponty's self-imposed constraint. Although the intimate relatedness of subject and object that would give access to the lifeworld is *inferred* from their reversibility, any *particular* cognitive act is itself actually *irreversible*, is a unidirectional movement from subject to object. On one occasion my left hand serves as subject as I pass from it to its object. Then there is a gap—what Merleau-Ponty went on to call an "irremediable hiatus" (1968, p. 148)—after which it is now my right hand that plays the role of subject, that *from* which my *left* hand is known as object. Though the identity of subject and object is thus easily reversed from the first occasion to the second, what does *not* change is the irreversibility of the action *within* the given occasion that puts the subject out of reach. So, while Merleau-Pontian reversibility changes what is being objectified, it does nothing to challenge the act of objectification itself, the act by which we pass *from* subject *to* object, thereby occluding lived subjectivity per se. I would now like to propose that, beyond reversibility, we require an act of *self-reversal*.

In his study of space, Merleau-Ponty (1962) made use of a well-known visual structure of Gestalt psychology: the *Necker cube* (fig. 1b). I suggest that this same structure can provide a graphic illustration of the distinction between reversibility and self-reversal. Let us first consider the *Cartesian* principle of opposition, as expressed through visual perspective in figure 1a.



**Figure 1. Cartesian perspectives (a) and Necker cube (b)**

If you were initially viewing a solid cube from the angle shown in the left-hand member of figure 1a, you would obtain the point of view of the right-hand member by (1) moving 180° around the cube to the opposite side, and (2) moving above the cube, since the left-hand perspective gives the view from below. The faces of the symbolized solid that are visible from the right-hand perspective are precisely those which were concealed from the left-hand point of view, and vice versa. In our ordinary experience with perspective, it is of course impossible to view both the near side and the far side (or the inside and the outside) of an object simultaneously; all the faces of the cube cannot be apprehended in the same glance. Opposing faces are closed to each other.

The ordinary mode of perception is the Cartesian one. Here we perceive objects and events as extended in the world outside us, but have no immediate access to the inner, subjective ground of our perceptions: we cannot see our own act of seeing, touch our own touching. What figure 1a illustrates is that this underlying opposition between the subjective seat of perception "in here" and the objective realm "out there" is reflected in the external objects themselves, in the diametrical opposition we ordinarily encounter between their concealed and exposed surfaces. Opposing sides of objects cannot be viewed at once.

Turning now to figure 1b, you can see that both of the perspectives shown in 1a are encompassed in the body of the Necker cube. This creates visual ambiguity. You may be perceiving the cube from the point of view in which it seems to be hovering above your line of vision when suddenly a spontaneous shift occurs and you see it as if it lay below. Two disparate perspectives certainly are experienced in the course of gazing at the cube and this disparity reflects the continuing distinction between opposing sides. But the cube's reversing perspectives overlap one another in space, are internally related, completely interdependent (think of what would happen to one perspective if the other were erased).

The Necker-cube relationship of oscillating perspectives is clearly illustrative of Merleau-Pontian reversibility. In this regard, here is a comment made by Merleau-Ponty himself:

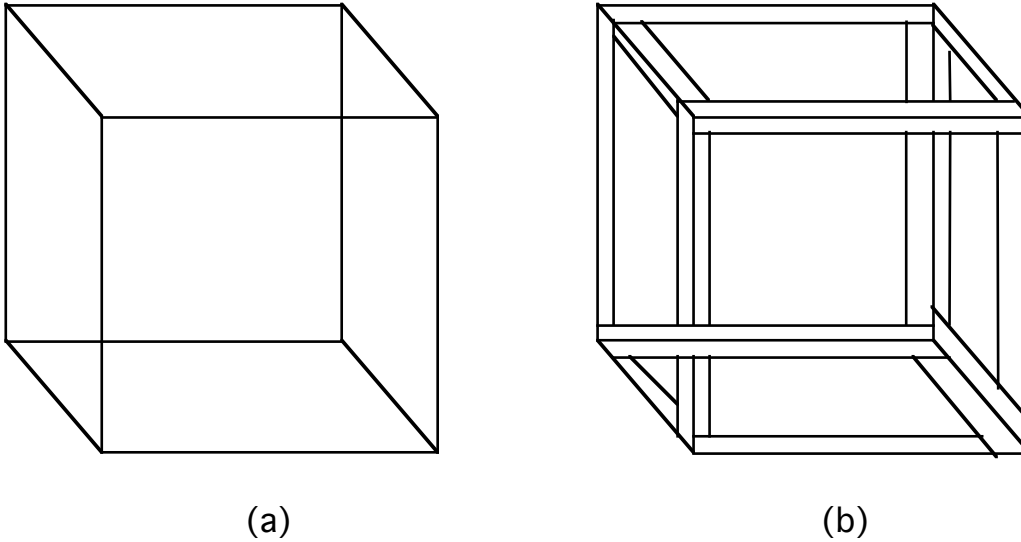
... if the hidden face of the cube radiates forth somewhere as well as does the face I have under my eyes, and coexists with it, and if I who see the cube [I, the "invisible" subject] also belong to the visible, I am visible from elsewhere, and if I and the cube are together caught up in one same "element" (should we say of the seer, or of the visible?), this cohesion, this visibility by principle, prevails over every momentary discordance. (1968, p. 140)

We have considered Merleau-Ponty's tactual example of the intertwining of sentient and sensed—the "veritable touching of the touch, when my right hand touches my left hand while it is palpating the things." The sense of this is symbolically well-conveyed by the overlapping perspectives of the Necker cube. Yet remember: "My left hand is always on the *verge* of touching my right hand touching the things, but I never reach coincidence; the coincidence eclipses at the moment of realization," so that the subject ("my left hand") actually falls short of coming to know its counterpart as subject ("my right hand touching the things"). Therefore, according to Merleau-Ponty, there is an "impotency to superpose exactly upon one another the touching of the things by my right hand and the touching of this same right hand by my left hand [...], there is always a 'shift,' a 'spread,' between them" (1968, p. 148). The phenomenal character of this "shift," this transition from right hand touching to right hand touched, from subject to object, inside to outside, is depicted quite precisely in the Necker-cube shift in perspective wherein each face that had appeared as an inner surface now presents itself as an outer surface, and vice versa.

If we view the Necker cube in our customary way of viewing things, the limitation imposed by Merleau-Pontian reversibility is certainly supported. But the fact is that we can go a step



further in our perception of the cube. Instead of allowing our glance to merely oscillate from one perspective to the other, we actually can break this visual habit and view both perspectives of the cube at once.



**Figure 2. Bare Necker cube (a) and cube with volume (b)**

In figure 2b, I've added some volume to the Necker cube, fleshed it out a bit. This modification should make it easier for you to see what I am talking about. When the cube's perspectives are integrated as I am suggesting, there is an uncanny sense of self-penetration; the cube appears to do the impossible, to go *through* itself. Here—at least symbolically—the division of inside and out, of subject and object, is surmounted in the creation of an experiential structure whose opposing perspectives are simultaneously given.

Simultaneously? Well, that is not exactly the case. I am proposing that we can apprehend the cube in such a way that its differing viewpoints overlap in time as well as in space. But what we actually experience when this happens is not simultaneity in the ordinary sense of static juxtaposition. We do not encounter opposing perspectives with the same immediacy as figures appearing side by side in space, figures that coexist in an instant of time simply common to them (as do the words printed on this page, for example). If the coincidence of the cube's perspectives were limited to that, Merleau-Ponty certainly would be right to say that such

opposites could "never reach coincidence." But there is indeed a coincidence in the integrative way of viewing the cube, for perspectives are not related in simple temporal succession (first one, then the other) any more than in spatial simultaneity. If opposing faces are not immediately co-present, neither do they disclose themselves merely in *seriatim*, in the externally mediated fashion of linear sequence. Instead the relation is one of *internal* mediation, of the *mutual permeation* of opposites. Perspectives are grasped as flowing through each other in a manner that blends space and time so completely that they are no longer recognizable in their familiar, categorially dichotomized forms. You can see this most readily in viewing figure 2b. When you pick up on the odd sense of self-penetration of this allegedly "impossible" figure, you experience its two modalities neither simply at once, nor one simply followed by the other, as in the ordinary, temporally broken manner of perception; rather, you apprehend an *unbroken flowing* from one to the other.<sup>1</sup>

The self-penetration that is realized in the perspectival integration of the Necker cube affords an indication of what I mean by *self-reversal*. We have found that the ordinary way of perceiving the cube in effect signifies that, within each occasion of experience, there is an irreversible passage from subject to object. It is this ostensive irreversibility that enforces the separation of subject and object. Though subject and object can readily reverse roles from one occasion to the next, "the hinge between them, solid, unshakeable, [...remains] irremediably hidden from me" (1968, p. 148). What the perspectival *integration* of the cube connotes is the *exposure* of the "hinge."

Let us reconsider the actual manner in which we normally become aware of the reversal of the cube's perspectives. We are viewing the cube from one point of view when, quite suddenly, we realize that we are now perceiving it from the other. When this happens, we are not actually cognizant of the transition itself, but only of the *result* of this event. That is, in deducing retrospectively that a shift "must have taken place," we engage in an abstractive reconstruction of the concrete act, rather than directly apprehending it. It is when this is done that the "hinge" is hidden and we fail to perceive what lies *between* the opposed perspectives, i.e. the concrete *process of reversing* that first gives rise to their separation. With the perspectival integration of

the cube it is different. Here we are not limited to observing perspectives that already have been reversed but can indeed witness the actual event of reversal. Symbolically, the integration of perspectives bespeaks an action that does more than merely turn what *was* subject into a new object, with awareness continuing to move in the "forward" direction, *from* subject *to* object. Instead there is a "switching of gears" in which subjective awareness now moves *backward into itself*, draws back in upon itself so as to apprehend its own activity *as* subject. In this act of self-reversal, one does not just reverse the roles of subject and object; their very division is reversed.

However, the Necker cube example does have its shortcomings. This visual model expresses the subject-object relation less directly than Merleau-Ponty's illustration of the "touching of the touch." Rather than implicating the subject and object *per se*, the Necker cube relies on the above-mentioned fact that the opposition of subject and object is *mirrored* by opposition within the object. In shifting from one perspective of the cube to its opposite, there is no actual *subject-object* shift. The viewer of the cube does not become the viewed in this transition but maintains her "hold on the world" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 148). The reason for this limitation is obvious: whereas my hands can palpate each other in such a way that one can play the role of subject and the other of object, my eyes cannot do the same.

Might there not be a tactual counterpart of the visual integration, one that can incorporate the subject and object themselves? Venturing beyond Merleau-Ponty's example, Irigaray calls forth a manner of touching that is "more intimate than that of one hand taking hold of the other," a tactility that "evokes...the touching of the lips silently applied to one another" (1993, p. 161). The Necker cube-like, paradoxically interpenetrative character of such touching is evident in Irigaray's passionate essay, "When Our Lips Speak Together":

Neither one nor two. I've never known how to count. Up to you. In their calculations we make two. Really, two? Doesn't that make you laugh? An odd sort of two. And yet not one. Especially not one. [...] I'm touching you, that's quite enough to let me know that you are my body. [...] I love you, your body, here and now. I/you touch you/me, that's quite enough for us to feel alive. (1985, pp. 206–209)

We will soon see, however, that even such tactual intimacy as this may not by itself suffice to provide the order of subject-object integration necessary for reinhabiting the lifeworld. As for the visual example, the advantage of the Necker cube is that it provides a graphically immediate

realization of the reversing process in the body of this text. The cube has indeed been put to good use by phenomenological writers like Ihde (1983, pp. 86–93), Leder (1990, p. 104), and Cataldi (1993, p. 83), and by Merleau-Ponty himself (1962, p. 263). Again, though it is not actually subject and object that are reversed in the exercise with the cube, the perspectival reversal that does take place effectively mirrors subject-object reversal, as is clearly implied in the passage from Merleau-Ponty cited above (1968, p. 140). Moreover, in concluding this essay I will touch on certain topological counterparts of the cube that could help us to approximate more closely the fusion of subject and object required for reentering the lifeworld.

I am certainly aware that figure 2b may seem like a trick or an illusion that is only possible because we are in fact not working with the concrete reality of the lifeworld but only with a geometric abstraction. I agree that the geometric diagrams I have employed do not do justice to our lived reality, and before I am finished I will say a little more about the prospects for going further with geometry. For now, let me just point out that the “everyday perceptual world” in which a structure like the paradoxical cube is judged “impossible” in fact is only the *post-Renaissance* world. As thinkers like Gebser (1985), Barfield (1977), Ong (1977), and Lavery (1983) have observed, the Renaissance brought an abstraction of consciousness that was not just reflected in the philosophical thinking of the time but in human perception itself. It was because consciousness became “irreversible” at that time that a self-reversing structure like the perspectively integrated cube has been deemed impossible. I would conjecture that, even though the integrative way of viewing the cube may appear quite abstract, it may actually be *closer* to original lifeworld experience than “everyday perception” as we know it today.

By way of seeking to better understand self-reversal, let us say that the movement symbolically suggested by the exercise with the cube is that of *proprioception*. Etymologically, to *perceive* is to “take hold of” or “take through,” and to *conceive* is to “gather or take in.” These activities correspond to the ordinary “forward gearing” of consciousness dominant since the Renaissance. The term “proprioceive” is from the Latin, *proprius*, meaning “one’s own.” Literally then, proprioception means “taking one’s own,” which can be read as a taking of self or “self-

taking." The term finds its most common usage in physiology where it signifies an organism's sensitivity to activity in its own muscles, joints and tendons. In touching this printed page, you can indeed obtain a proprioceptive sense of the action of your fingers. The sheet of paper is the object and your hand, playing the role of subject, palpates this object, engages in an operation upon it that you can come to *know* via proprioception. This act in which the subject "takes itself" certainly seems different from Merleau-Ponty's example of the left hand being taken *by* the right hand, as its object. Irigaray's intimate evocation of "self-touching" cited above also seems to be a form of proprioception. In both cases, the knowing of another is at once a *self*-knowing ("I/you touch you/me"). But while this kind of proprioception may be necessary for reengaging with the lifeworld, we may ask whether it is sufficient.

Recall Merleau-Ponty's distinction between the reversibility of "the seeing and the visible," on the one hand, and of "speech and what it signifies," on the other. The former concerns the activities of the sensing subject (seeing, hearing, tactility, etc.), whereas the latter involves the *thinking* subject, the subject as it operates in the realm of language and conceptuality. Merleau-Ponty pointed to the *superordinate* role of the latter by characterizing it as "that central vision that joins the scattered visions, that unique touch that governs the whole tactile life of my body as a unit, that *I think* that must be able to accompany all our experiences" (1968, p. 145). If Merleau-Ponty was correct, if the "whole tactile life of my body" is governed by that "unique touch," that *I think*, then—to fully address the problem of reentering the lifeworld—it would indeed not be enough for me to proprioceive the muscular activity in my hand as it grasps the printed page. Were I limited to that, then, while the *sensing* subject would be functioning proprioceptively, the superordinate *thinking* subject would not be. Consequently, the peripheral proprioception of the activity in my hand would be "centrally processed" in a *non*-proprioceptive fashion, experienced as itself but an object cast before this *I think*, who would be geared to move "forward." It seems the same would have to be said for the kind of self-touching described by Irigaray: though the touching surely is of an intimate sort, if it is "peripheral," if this bodily touching leaves the *thinking* subject untouched, then the latter will continue the non-proprioceptive domination that constrains intimacy. I therefore suggest that to free tactility (and the sensible

world in general) from the yoke of the thinking subject we not only require an "I/you touch you/me," but an "I/you *think* you/me." It is the *thinking* subject itself that must be proprioceived, if the *Lebenswelt* is truly to be reinhabited.

In this regard, Bohm spoke of the need for "proprioceptive thought," which he viewed as a kind of meditative action wherein "consciousness ... [becomes] aware of its own implicate activity, in which its content originates" (Bohm in Rosen 1994, p. 232). Of course, there is more than one type of meditation. Whereas classical meditation generally aims at transcending the body, the self-reversal of thinking I have in mind would seek to move back into it. The goal would be *re-embodiment*, reconnection with the lifeworld. But would this not require a *disengagement* from thought and a return to the bodily *senses*? Merleau-Ponty's *I think* is no detached Cartesian ego but possesses its own bodily grounding. For Merleau-Ponty, the dimension of language and thought operates as a "second flesh," a second order of embodiment: "It is as though the visibility that animates the sensible world were to emigrate, not outside of every body, but into another less heavy, more transparent body, as though it were to change flesh, abandoning the flesh of the [sensible] body for that of language" (1968, p. 153). It is this *bodily* character of language and thinking that is denied when thinking is geared to move irreversibly forward. And the *proprioceptive self-reversal* of thinking would amount to a withdrawal of the *cogito's* projections that would disclose the actual grounding of Cartesian consciousness in the "second flesh."

So it seems that, to reenter to the lifeworld, we would need to "switch gears," to move in a backward direction against the Cartesian grain that has prevailed for hundreds of years. Putting it differently and in the words of Gendlin (1978), we need to obtain a bodily "felt sense" of our cognitive activities as we enact them. An organism, a lived body, lies behind this projective activity I am engaged in, behind these abstract words I am writing; and you read these words with your *own* bodies. In his essay titled "Words Can Say How They Work," Gendlin (1993) suggests that our thoughts and words indeed originate from a bodily source that continues to operate even as we write and read so that, in principle, this source can be engaged. "Words can say how they work" because they work from the body, and, becoming cognizant of their own bodily underpinnings, they can link back to it.

I believe that nothing less than a phenomenological reposturing of this kind is required for addressing the ecological crisis we face. Neither implementing new conservation practices nor coming up with a new theory or philosophy should suffice; rather, *a new way of philosophizing* seems needed, one that manages to incorporate the bodily core of human experience (as Jaspers [1941/1975] foresaw). Theories *about* lifeworld experience cannot effectively stand in for the concrete reality. We cannot look to abstract theories alone for a solution of the ecological problem because one-sided abstraction is what is largely responsible for the problem to begin with. Since the ecological dilemma primarily results from the exclusion of embodied experience, it stands to reason that the crisis can fruitfully be dealt with only by putting our bodies where our theories are.

If we really hope to close the gap between theory and experience, there is at least one more crucial issue I think we would need to consider: the question of our *mode of signification*. I will briefly touch on this matter in the remaining paragraphs.

At the moment, the signifiers I am using to convey my ideas to you consist of this written text physically composed of typographical bodies of ink. Does the physical mode of signification matter? Is it relevant to the task of proprioception I have outlined? The illustrations of the Necker cube I have used can be said to constitute another mode of signification, one that appears to be more concretely embodied than alphabetic squiggles of ink. Is it not clear that the exercise we have done with the cube conveys the experience of proprioceptive self-reversal more graphically than words alone could do? If “a picture is worth a thousand words,” perhaps our mode of signification does matter; perhaps words alone cannot concretely deliver the proprioceptive self-reversal of consciousness. Perhaps, to fully sense the bodily source of the acts of signification we engage in, the signifiers themselves must become more embodied. For, if the signifier is too abstract, the gap between it and the lived experience it signifies may be difficult or impossible to bridge. Upgrading the signifier or symbol system by fleshing it out therefore may be necessary to create a smooth mesh between the symbolic or conceptual side, on the one hand, and the side of lived experience, on the other.

I acknowledged earlier that while the Necker cube brings us closer to the embodiment we require, it surely does not go far enough. In considering this problem elsewhere (Rosen 1997), I demonstrated that the signification of proprioceptive self-reversal must be further "upgraded" by *raising its dimension*. There are *higher-dimensional versions* of the line-drawn, one-dimensional Necker cube, topological bodies (such as the two-dimensional Moebius strip and the three-dimensional Klein bottle; Rosen 1994, 1997) that can deliver proprioception in an even more concrete fashion. Topology, by the way, does seem to be an appropriate medium for the concrete delivery of self-signification. Despite the highly abstract form it takes in the hands of modernist mathematics, topology is the study of *topos*, a Greek word that, like *oikos*—the word from which 'eco-' derives—refers to a dwelling place or home. In keeping with the concreteness of *topos*, Sheets-Johnstone is able to demonstrate that, whereas the Euclidean study of space involves practices that are largely disembodied, "topology...is rooted in the body" (1990, p. 42). It is not surprising then that Merleau-Ponty himself would propose we "take topological space as a model of [wild or brute] being...[which is] constitutive of life" (1968, pp. 210–11). Transposed into the present context, we might say that topo-logical space can be seen as constitutive of an ecologically cohesive lifeworld.

Ultimately, we require a topological signifier whose dimension is high enough to allow it to blend unbrokenly with the "fourth dimension," i.e., the *inner* dimension that encompasses lived subjectivity. Though the lower-dimensional Necker cube does indirectly signify the proprioceptive blending of subject and object, it is itself actually only an object appearing over against our detached subjectivity. A sufficiently dimensioned version of the cube, in engaging the dimension of lived subjectivity itself, would *tangibly deliver* the self-reversal. That is, in signifying self-reversal, it would signify itself (Rosen 1997). The ecological crisis would then be addressed in the only way I believe it can be: not merely conceptually (by signifying solely what is other), and not in a "purely experiential" way, but through a proprioceptive self-reversal of thinking that would thoroughly merge the realms of concept and experience. Through such a self-thinking, thinking's grip on the sensible world would be loosened and the whole of the lifeworld could be reinhabited.



## Endnote

1. Was not Merleau-Ponty himself actually trying to articulate this dialectic of mediation and immediacy when he spoke of "self-mediation" (*médiation par soi*) in "Interrogation and Dialectic," a chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible* that precedes "The Intertwining—the Chiasm"? If so, in the relevant passages I have cited from the latter, Merleau-Ponty does not seem as closely in contact with this dialectic. Here he appears to favor mediation in a one-sided way.

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