

# The Flight from Vulnerability

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DEBRA BERGOFFEN

## INTRODUCTION

Phenomenology teaches us that we are inescapably ambiguous. It describes us as lived embodiments of an ever active consciousness engaged in the world and with others from two different directions – as subjects for ourselves and as objects for others. As subjects for ourselves we exist at the center of the perceivable universe and as the source of its meanings and values. As objects for others we find ourselves perceptually de-centered and subjected to the meanings and values of their world. This ontology of ambiguity is an affirmation of the intertwining of conscious and bodied existence. It is an endorsement of the body's full humanity and in this endorsement, offers a route out of the problematic mind-body dualism characteristic of the Western philosophical and religious traditions. This phenomenology also challenges the patriarchal hierarchy of the sexes, for the legitimacy of this hierarchy is grounded in the idea that the subordination of women (identified as the body) to men (the signifier of the mind) is necessary lest the unruly flesh threaten the rule of reason. The success of phenomenology's challenge to the mind-body dualism of philosophy and the misogyny of patriarchy, however, will depend on its effectiveness in undermining the legacy of this tradition, the idea and experience of vulnerability as humiliating, for the denigration of vulnerability is another way of degrading the body.

So long as vulnerability is conceptualized negatively, experienced as shameful and equated with victimhood, we will attempt to flee it, and through this flight directly or indirectly support ideas and politics that legitimate treating those designated as bodies as inferior types of human life. This essay examines the forces that fuel the flight from vulnerability, the various forms this flight takes, and the price we pay for engaging in it. Finding that the denigration of

vulnerability is disastrous for women, who, figured as bodies, are degraded, and for philosophy insofar as it entangles it in insurmountable problems of accounting for the mind-body relationship, it reads the feminist phenomenological project in terms of an affirmation of an embodied ambiguity that, in confirming the dignity of the lived, alive, and vulnerable body, leads philosophy out of the dead-end cul-de-sac of mind-body dualism as it digs the grave of patriarchy.

I begin by reading Jacques Lacan's account of the mirror stage and its accompanying aggressivity in terms of an infantile trauma of vulnerability that we never quite outgrow. Turning to Simone de Beauvoir, I examine the ways this trauma expresses itself in the sexed and gendered subjectivities of the patriarchal world. Drawing on Beauvoir's analyses, I read the Steubenville Ohio, USA rape case as a concrete example of the ways these gendered subjectivities are produced, enforced, and reproduced. Given the current realities of sexual violence in American high schools, colleges, and universities, there is, unfortunately, nothing unique about the fact that a girl was raped by boys on the Steubenville high school football team. The specifics of this particular rape scene, however, crystallize the way the particular violence of rape enforces the patriarchal gendering of the flight from vulnerability. They also alert us to the price both men and women pay for perpetuating the idea that vulnerability is a sexed rather than a human condition. The last section of this essay, finding this price unacceptable, turns to the lived body to counter the denigration of the body enacted in the flight from vulnerability. It argues that re-configuring gender in ways that signify vulnerability not only in terms of the risks entailed in our exposure to the other, but also in terms of the gifts of intersubjectivity, awakens us to the wonder of what Maurice Merleau-Ponty calls "wild being" and the joy that Beauvoir describes as the passion of the erotic.

In pursuing the idea of the flight from vulnerability by cultivating the implications of the thoughts of Lacan, Beauvoir, and Merleau-Ponty, I am engaging in a way of thinking that Merleau-Ponty describes as an intentional encroachment, a method he describes as following other thinkers in their problems by developing "a thought of one's own that does not kill them, either by overcoming them or by copying them."<sup>1</sup>

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1 Merleau-Ponty, Maurice: Working Notes, in: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, Evanston 1968, pp. 165-276, here p. 198.

## JACQUES LACAN: THE FLIGHT FROM VULNERABILITY

Lacan's description of the mirror stage and its consequent aggressivity is a complex account of how the human infant, in encountering its reflection in the mirror, sees this image of coordinated wholeness as the antidote to its experience of itself as inadequate, fragmented, and unlovable. Taking up its reflection in the mirror, the infant exchanges this experience of itself as a collection of mismatched body parts for the image of an organized, securely bordered, schematized body. It (mis)identifies itself with its reflected image in the hope of guaranteeing its (m)other's love – of curing itself of the anxiety of vulnerable dependency. Lacan likens the work of creating oneself in the image of one's image to a construction project. He describes the infant's (mis)identification as laying the foundation of an imaginary adult identity that he calls the "fortress ego", a mode of subjectivity closed in on itself and thereby immune to the vulnerability of dependency.<sup>2</sup> Lacan speaks as if this mode of subjectivity is adopted by/ available to all of us. A feminist phenomenology, guided by Beauvoir, indicates that it is a uniquely patriarchal mode of masculine subjectivity.

By imagining itself as the embodiment of an irresistibly perfect body, the infant should not be seen as attempting to escape its vulnerability *per se*. No imaginary trick can convince the newly born child that it is either invulnerable or autonomous – that it can feed or care for itself. The anxiety that accompanies the experience of the fragmented, incompetent body, however, can be evaded. As its "*imago*" the infant can assure its care by securing its tie to the (m)other. Thus the infant attempts to guarantee the (m)other's love by making itself absolutely lovable – the omnipotent object of her desire. As its *imago* the infant seduces the (m)other, flips the dependency relationship, and immunizes itself from the possibility of being abandoned.

All of this sounds rather calculating. Clearly the infant is not consciously strategizing. It cannot tell us what it is up to when it expresses its joy on encountering its reflection in the mirror. Lacan is doing the thinking. He infers the meaning of the infant's behavior by reflecting on the fact that unlike the chimpanzee, who is soon bored with its reflection and goes on to other things, the infant remains jubilantly attached to it. Lacan links the difference between the infant's and the chimpanzee's relation to the image to a crucial biological distinction. The chimpanzee is capable of negotiating the world on its own shortly after birth, the human infant, being "prematurely" born, is not. It will spend its early

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2 Lacan, Jacques: The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I, in: Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, New York 1977, pp. 1-8.

years dependent on others, being vulnerable. From these two pieces of evidence Lacan offers two explanations for the infant's joy. One, the image carries a promise. It directs the infant toward a mode of embodiment that escapes the vulnerability of its currently lived, uncoordinated body. Two, it introduces the infant to the powers of seduction. As its image, it can evade the vulnerability of being abandoned by its (m)other. The image will operate on her as it operates on the infant itself. It will seduce her. In both accounts, vulnerability is tagged as a lack to be overcome. In both accounts, the mirror stage is the first scene in the drama of assumed adult personas that, however different they seem, share the infant's experience of vulnerability as a life threatening dependency, and endorse its project of adopting immunizing identities.

From Merleau-Ponty's perspective the mirror stage is an early expression of the fact that "man is the being who is not content to coincide with himself like a thing but represents himself to himself, sees himself, imagines himself, and gives himself rigorous or fanciful symbols of himself, it is quite clear that in return every change in our representation of man translates a change in man himself."<sup>3</sup> Where Lacan focuses on the mirror stage as an essentially alienating process that will continue to warp adult life as the infant's *imago* identity morphs into the adult's self-representation as the fortress ego, Merleau-Ponty sees this self-transformative identification as an inevitable process that can either be alienating, if it is ruled by "fancy", or promising, if it is engaged in "rigorously". The infant's experience of itself as lacking, from Merleau-Ponty's perspective, is not a matter of its "premature" birth or prolonged dependency. It is an experience of the unique fact of being human - that, because we do not and cannot coincide with ourselves, we exist as lack. From this perspective, there is nothing infantile in identifying with an image of oneself. It is not the identification that is problematic, but the expectation that through this identification the lack can be overcome. From Merleau-Ponty's perspective, the mirror *imago* is an alienating (mis)identification because it is a fanciful symbol that rejects our existence as lack, rather than a rigorous one that allows us to live with ourselves as lack. Reading between Lacan and Merleau-Ponty, we see that, so long as the human condition of lack is associated with the trauma of infantile dependency, it will be experienced as something to be fled. We also see that translating lack into the trauma of vulnerability is neither inevitable nor necessary. Recognizing lack as constitutive of who we are allows us to experience it as the source of the forces of becoming and self renewal that mark us as human.

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3 Merleau-Ponty, Maurice: Man and Adversity, in: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, Evanston 1968, pp. 225-246, here p. 225.

Following Merleau-Ponty, the fact that we recognize ourselves in the infant before the mirror may explain why Lacan's account of the mirror stage has captivated theorists across the disciplines. The idea of the mirror stage has been used to provide a foundation for such ideas as the role of the gaze in the subject's narcissistic relationship to film and to account for second-wave feminism's inability to recognize the differences among women.<sup>4</sup> As a distinct stage in psychic development, however, the mirror stage mode of self-representation comes to an end at eighteen months. Having lost interest in its image, the child now sees itself doubled in the other. It sees this double as a rival that threatens to replace it in the (m)other's affections and responds to this perceived threat aggressively. The other as my double, the enemy who must be destroyed. In this variation of the Hegelian fight to the death, the child's insistence that the world is not big enough for two is, in effect, a refusal to accept its lack in terms of its finite position in a world among others. Whereas in the *imago*-period of the mirror stage the infant saw itself as the absolute object of its (m)other's desire, beginning at eighteen months, recognizing the existence of others and seeing them as competitors for the (m)other's love, the young child attempts to secure its invulnerability by erasing them.

This aggressive refusal will be tempered once the child encounters the power of the Law and is forced to enter what Lacan calls the symbolic register, the level of language and the social contract.<sup>5</sup> Now the mediation of language replaces the fantasies and aggressions of the imaginary – or at least it is supposed to. The pull of the imaginary, as we shall see, retains its power. Though aggression will have to hide behind symbolic justifications that obscure the desire to erase vulnerability, the flight from vulnerability will not be annihilated. It will be legitimated by/as the law.

In calling the ground of the symbolic the Law of the Father, Lacan himself invites the imaginary into its domain. According to Lacan the Law of the Father, properly understood, is the law of mutual vulnerability. It requires us to recognize ourselves as finite, imperfect, and interdependent. Recognizing this law and assuming a place in the symbolic order should put an end to the seductions of the mirror stage and its aggressive subject. In fact it gives it new life. Exiting the

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4 Copjec, Joan: *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists*, Cambridge 1994, p. 30. Campbell, Kirsten: *Lacan and Feminist Epistemology*, New York/London 2004, p. 100.

5 Lacan, Jacques: On a Question Preliminary to Any Possible Treatment of Psychosis, in: Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, New York 1977, pp. 198-249; and Lacan, Jacques: The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconsciousness, in: Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, New York 1977, pp. 223-360.

mirror stage we do not escape the fundamental narcissism of all vision.<sup>6</sup> We will still attempt to see ourselves and be seen as idealized bodies. Though the symbolic register shatters the fantasy image of the perfect body and dashes the hope that as possessed of this body we can immunize ourselves from the trauma of vulnerability, entry into the symbolic announces the reign of the fortress ego, a subject that flees its vulnerability through identifying itself with the law. Lacan insists that the Law of the Father does not refer to the authority of real fathers, yet in calling the symbolic the Law of the Father he invites the slide from the idea of a law of intersubjectivity that marks all of us as vulnerable, the Law of the Father, to the idea of a law that saves some of us, those whose bodies indicate that they are or, can become, fathers, from their vulnerability by embodying the Father's Law.<sup>7</sup> With this slide, the fantasy of the mirror stage morphs into another fantasy, that as the one who embodies the Father's Law one can escape their vulnerability by becoming an autonomous subject within an intersubjective world -- a self sustained being upon whom others depend. Further as the metaphor fortress ego makes clear, entry into the symbolic does not end the reign of the aggressive subject who emerges at eighteen months. Fortresses must be defended.<sup>8</sup>

In their introduction to Lacan's *Encore* and Seminar of 21 January 1975, Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose find a tension in these works between a critique of the forms of mystification latent to the category Woman and the repeated question of what her otherness might be.<sup>9</sup> Blurring the boundary between the symbolic and the imaginary, these Lacanian texts indict the symbolic for the imaginary unity, which its most persistent myths continue to promote. They identify woman as the fantasy that guarantees man's fantasy of wholeness and secures the myth of his own self-knowledge and worth.<sup>10</sup> Noting that, as his negative, woman is degraded and defamed, Lacan also notes that the price for degrading woman is the renunciation of *jouissance*.<sup>11</sup>

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6 Merleau-Ponty, Maurice: The Intertwining – The Chiasm, in: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, Evanston 1968, pp. 156-164, here , p. 139.

7 Bergoffen, Debra: Queering the Phallus, in: David Pettigrew/François Raffoul (Ed.), *Disseminating Lacan*, Albany 1996, pp. 273-294.

8 Lacan, Jacques: Aggressivity in Psychoanalysis, in: Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, New York 1977, pp. 9-32.

9 Mitchell, Juliet/Rose, Jacqueline: *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the École Freudienne*, New York 1985, p. 52.

10 Ibid., p. 47, 50.

11 Ibid., p. 49.

This fantasy, and its accompanying renunciation of *jouissance* plays, as we shall see, a crucial role in heterosexual rape.

## SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR: GENDERING THE FLIGHT FROM VULNERABILITY

The route between Lacan's account of the adult sexed legacies of the infant's imaginary attempts to escape the trauma of vulnerability and Beauvoir's attention to the ways these sexed and gendered legacies are politicized in the oppressions of patriarchy lies in paying attention to the fact that, as the imaginary and its anxieties continue to live in the symbolic order, vulnerability continues to haunt the masculine fortress ego's assertion of wholeness and autonomy. Reading Lacan we learn that the fight from vulnerability is rooted in the very real facts of prolonged infant and child dependency and that it operates as a powerful force throughout our lives – a force that as pre-linguistic and unconscious is difficult if not impossible to argue away or control. Reading between Lacan and Beauvoir we learn that this originally unsexed trauma – all infants are fascinated by their image in the mirror and jubilantly identify with it becomes sexed and gendered in fantasies that express the desire to escape the lack that Merleau-Ponty teaches us is the mark of the human condition.

Lacan's analysis show us that social, cultural, and political gender norms follow the paths of the desire to be, rather than the demand to submit to, the Law of the Father. Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* describes the ways the pursuit of this desire impacts the lives of women. The stigmatized female Other will be oppressed and exploited. Her status as fully human will be questioned. Fantasies of masculine invulnerability and feminine dependency will become empirical realities through disciplines that mold the bodies of girls and women according to styles of feminine vulnerability and provide men with lessons in violence. The difference between the way she appears in the world, her way of walking, sitting, dressing, and his muscular approach to the world, assures him that, as long as he is a he and not a she, vulnerability is a sexed condition that he can escape. This is not to say that ideologies of femininity do not attend to the desire to flee vulnerability. Women were once infants. They too experienced the anxieties of vulnerability. Patriarchy will give women a way to deal with these anxieties by offering them the protection of invulnerable men. The mother-infant couple will become the adult heterosexual couple with the man occupying the position of the fantasized invulnerable, all-powerful mother and the woman that of the dependent infant. The degradation of women as children speaks to this truth of patriar-

chal heterosexuality and its normalization of the flight from vulnerability. It also reminds women that receiving protection is conditional. They must become and remain the object of man's desire and abide by the prescriptions/restrictions of the Father's Law as it masquerades as the Law of the Father.

Though Merleau-Ponty does not link the mirror stage dialectic to the ideology of invulnerable masculinity, his discussion of its effects is helpful in understanding the way it continues to support patriarchal structures. Merleau-Ponty describes the trauma of the mirror stage as a fixation, which survives in the adult as an instance of repression where the past survives as "a style of being [where] I relinquish my personal power of giving myself 'worlds' to the benefit of one of them [that] [...] ends up being no more than a personal anxiety."<sup>12</sup> Seen in this way, the myths of masculinity and femininity are signs of a repression, an adherence to a "previous [infantile] present that cannot [will not?] commit to becoming past."<sup>13</sup> It is a style of being responsive to a particular anxiety – an "emotional essence detached from its empirical origins."<sup>14</sup> Thus the trauma of vulnerability, a trauma triggered by the absolute dependency of the infant, is detached from the situation of infancy to create styles of being, masculinity and femininity, in response to an anxiety that has lost its empirical justification. By describing this style of being as a flight, I follow Merleau-Ponty when he describes the attitude of flight as an expression/elaboration of a general form of life.<sup>15</sup>

As the child matures, some of the promises of its imaginary body are realized. The lived body becomes competent and coordinated. It can navigate the world effectively and more or less master the challenges it encounters. It becomes a habituated body, a body that possesses the internal necessity for an integrated existence.<sup>16</sup> As competently habituated, however, the lived body never completely fulfills the image's promise. It remains fluid, ambiguous, and undecidable, still ensnared in the vicissitudes of vulnerability. As an impossible promise, the imaginary body retains its seductive powers. Patriarchy genders the promise. Women are given the infant's route to fulfillment. They will be lured to transform the spontaneity of their lived bodies into quasi-object seductive images that will guarantee the love needed to protect them from their vulnerability. Men's flight from vulnerability takes a different, no less imaginary route. It relies on the infant's image of an invulnerable all powerful (m)other. Men's flight from vulnerability will invoke the image of this phantasmatic (m)other to posi-

12 Merleau-Ponty, Maurice: *Phenomenology of Perception*, New York 2014, p. 85.

13 Ibid., p. 86.

14 Ibid., p. 186.

15 Ibid., p. 161.

16 Ibid., p. 89.

tion itself in her invulnerable space. The irony is inescapable. He has to steal her power to become a man. Everything depends on convincing those gendered as vulnerable that his imaginary power is real. Enter the role of violence.

No understanding of the legacies of the mirror stage is complete unless it attends to the role of aggression. Lacan's phrase *fortress ego* makes it clear that claims of autonomy and invulnerability are never secure. They must be defended. Vulnerability is inescapable. Heterosexual rape and the global epidemic of violence against women needs to be understood in this register, for it is patriarchy's way of transforming vulnerability from a shared human reality to a sexed condition that men can escape. Within the patriarchal frame the terms vulnerable and victim become interchangeable. The humanity of vulnerability is erased. Where the violence of the eighteen-month-old was the effect of its inability to distinguish itself from the other, patriarchal violence against women is used to maintain the sexed distinction between invulnerability and vulnerability. Here aggression is the effect of the refusal to see oneself in the other and to acknowledge the shared vulnerability of the human condition.

## **RAPE: THE VIOLENCE THAT LEGITIMATES THE PATRIARCHAL IMAGINARY**

Rape and sexual assault are uniquely suited to affirm the gendered sexual difference of vulnerability. Seeing sexual aggression as an act, through which men make it clear that, though women are vulnerable, they are not, allows us to see what is sexual about sexual assault. Seen as a violence triggered by the flight from vulnerability we will not make the mistake of equating rape with other acts of violence. Nor will we be seduced into believing that the fantasy of invulnerability is self-sustaining. As an expression of the fortress ego it must be continuously re-asserted and defended. Without women gendered as vulnerable, "autonomous" men would have no way of enacting their fantasies of invulnerability. Feminine vulnerability is the (k)not around which patriarchal masculine identity is wound.

Of the many concrete cases that could be used to support this analysis of the role rape plays in the sexed ideologies of the flight from vulnerability, the genocidal rapes in the wars in the former Yugoslavia and in Rwanda that were intended in part to emasculate Muslim and Tutsi men by destroying their status as protectors of women, the rapes of the euphemistically-called "comfort women" during WW II, to bolster soldiers' image of themselves as invincible protectors of the nation, for instance, the 2013 Steubenville Ohio, USA rapes provide a

dramatic example of the social function served by the idea of invulnerable men. They also reveal the price women and men pay for endorsing this ideology. What may be obscure in other rape cases is clear here: as a sexed assault on vulnerability, rape is a violent expression of vulnerability as a festering wound. It speaks to the ways this legacy of infancy, by stigmatizing the risks of being open to the other, repudiates the joys of the lived body's eroticism – for these joys are only offered to those who experience their vulnerability as the promise of living their lack as the desire to encounter (but not possess) the mystery of the other.

Big Red, the Steubenville football team, was renowned throughout the state. The winner of many football championships, it was admired throughout the town. Friday football games were the center of town social life. The defendants in the Steubenville case, Trent Mays, 17 and Malik Richmond, 16 were stars of the Big Red high school football team. The victim went to a different school. She was not part of the high school crowd. It is unclear whether or not this made her a mark. What is clear is that she was drunk and unconscious when the rape occurred. She only became aware of what happened through videos and remarks circulating on the web. The videos show the boys carrying and displaying her unconscious naked body. Michael Nodianos, a recent graduate of Big Red, used his cell phone to record himself saying, "You don't need any foreplay with a dead girl. She is so dead right now." His statements are heard against a background of laughter that goes on for twelve minutes. Mays sends a text message saying, "She was dead already and I needed sexual attention." Later Mays texts the girl, who he calls his friend, and asks her not to report what happened because it would end his football career. When Mays tells his coach, Reno Saccoccia, about the night's events he is assured that it will be taken care of and that everything will be OK. The coach jokes about it. The prowess of the team is more important than one girl's rape. One commentator, reflecting on the pervasiveness of this attitude, sees the Steubenville case as evidence of a culture that sacrifices girls and women to protect boys and men. So much for men as protectors of women.

The idea that a man's sexual assaults should not be counted against him, that he should not be required to sacrifice his future for an attack on a woman is not unique to Mays, his coach or the people of Steubenville. The New York Times reported that when the University of Berkeley Provost Claude Steele was asked why he did not fire Mr. Choudhry, the Dean of the Law School, who sexually harassed his assistant Tyann Sorrell, the Provost explained that he decided against terminating the Dean because it "would ruin the Dean's career, that is,

destroy his future chances for a future appointment.”<sup>17</sup> After the Stanford University student Brock Turner was found guilty of raping an unconscious woman, Judge Aaron Pensky, echoing this way of thinking, argued that a long prison term would severely impact Brock’s future and sentenced him to six months jail time rather than the fourteen years recommended by the prosecutor.

This understanding of the Steubenville case was accompanied by others. Some saw it as indicative of a rape culture that sexualizes preteen and teen girls and endorses sexual conquest as a way to prove manhood. Others found it evidence for the fact that rape is treated like a sport. Without discounting these characterizations of the meaning of this rape, for me it is best understood as a symptom of the cult of feminine vulnerability and masculine invulnerability. The girl is unconsciousness. The boys see her as dead. What other body could be more femininely vulnerable than a dead woman’s body? What other body could offer a boy such assurances of his invulnerable sexed status? What other body offers such protection from the risks of the erotic? As a performance of the masculine ethos of invulnerability this sexed assault on a “dead” woman’s body also shows that the patriarchal assault on vulnerability is an attack on the eroticism of sexuality. In enacting the fantasy of their invulnerable imaginary bodies, the rapists abandon the *jouissance* of the lived body’s passions. Mechanical ejaculation with a “dead” woman is a poor substitute for the fleshed intimacies of erotic sexuality.

## THE LIVED BODY: CHECKING THE POWER OF THE FLIGHT FROM VULNERABILITY – PERHAPS

Four claims about the flight from vulnerability are circulating here: 1) that it is a legacy of mind-body dualism fueled by an infantile trauma; 2) that within the gender codes of patriarchy it is materialized in two modes of subjectivity: protected dependency and autonomous invulnerability; 3) that rape needs to be understood as a form of violence uniquely suited to enforce these gendered codes of vulnerability and invulnerability; and 4) that as a promised cure from the anxieties of vulnerability these modes of subjectivity alienate us from the joys and wonders of the life of the lived body. In supporting these claims with arguments and examples I do not, however, believe that arguments and examples alone can convince us to exchange representations that promise to save us from the anxie-

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17 Fuller, Thomas: Berkeley’s Provost Resigns Amid University’s Turmoil, in *New York Times*, April 16, 2016, A13.

ties of vulnerability for those that validate the human promise of vulnerability. The role of affect can neither be ignored nor minimized. It must be mobilized. Arguments exposing the disastrous consequences of the flight from vulnerability need to call on the power of the affects of joy, wonder and *jouissance* to counter it.

Lacan, Beauvoir, and Merleau-Ponty show us that these affects are embedded in the lived body. They teach us that listening to the voices of this body can counter the pleasure of ‘getting off’ with a dead girl. Beauvoir’s accounts of the erotic alerts us to one of this body’s voices. Merleau-Ponty’s discussions of philosophy as a radical reduction enacted through the body direct us to another. Speaking in different registers, these lived body voices speak the language of the flesh, where flesh designates the route through which we are led beyond the sedimented meanings of the world to the sources of these sedimentations, and where, as the encounter through which these sedimentations are uprooted, we become the questioning that creates new ways of being/becoming human.

Merleau-Ponty speaks of the flesh as an element of being, an incarnate principle that brings a style of being into existence.<sup>18</sup> Our bodies are modes of stylized being. They are not permanent objects but ways that our flesh speaks to the flesh of the other and the world.<sup>19</sup> They are stabilizations, ever open to destabilization, of what Merleau-Ponty calls the wild brute being world of silence that precedes and sustains expression - a world discovered through a philosophy of the radical reduction, where the incompleteness of this wild world as the mirror of our own incompleteness moves us to return to it continuously.<sup>20</sup>

This account of the radical reduction echoes Beauvoir’s account of the original moment of intentionality. As described in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, intentionality itself is ambiguous. It is a relationship to being of attachment that originates in a “wanting to disclose being” that takes delight in the foreignness and forbiddingness of the sky, the quiet water, the snowfield, that, evading all possibility of possession or domination, calls us to return to the joy of discovering the inexhaustible mysteries of the world. Importantly for the discussion here, Beauvoir ties this account of intentionality to the fact that we exist as lack, and that it is as lack that we can make ourselves present to the world and the world present to us.<sup>21</sup> Giving these dynamics of intentionality something Merleau-Ponty’s radical reduction lacks, the joy evoked by the disclosure of being, Beauvoir gives us

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18 Merleau-Ponty, Maurice: *The Intertwining – The Chiasm*, p. 139.

19 Merleau-Ponty, Maurice: *Working Notes*, p. 173.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 168, 170, 177 f..

21 Beauvoir, Simone de: *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, New York 1948, p. 12.

an affect with which to confront the anxieties associated with the infantile trauma of vulnerability.

In *The Second Sex* the intentionality joy of disclosure is concretized in the erotic encounter that eschews all scripts of possession. Here too the affinity with Merleau-Ponty is striking. Reading Merleau-Ponty's accounts of wild being as that which precedes and sustains expression, I read *The Second Sex* account of the erotic as an eruption of this silenced world that interrupts the smooth functioning of patriarchy. Merleau-Ponty's receptivity of the flesh is lived in Beauvoir's account of the fleshed risks of the erotic, where the false privileges of stable gendered identities are surrendered for a carnal fever *jouissance*. Merleau-Ponty invites this comparison when he sees the body as arising from a polymorphism that situates us beyond the subject-object split and when he describes the male female relation as "the union of impossibles, the being in transcendence", the irresistible fitting together "because each is the possible of the other."<sup>22</sup> By situating the erotic within the distortions it suffers through the structures of patriarchal subjectivity Beauvoir points to this union of impossibles when she writes:

"man is, like woman, a flesh, [...] and she, like him, in the heart of carnal fever is consent, voluntary gift and activity; each of them lives the strange ambiguity of existence made body in his or her own way. [...] [I]f both assumed [their ambiguity] with lucid modesty, as the correlate of authentic pride, they would [...] live the erotic drama in harmony [...] they would no longer be tempted to contend for false privileges."<sup>23</sup>

Describing what she calls the carnal fever of the erotic with the words strange, ambiguity and flesh, Beauvoir makes it clear that the drama of the erotic will never be adequately scripted. She reminds us that in learning to listen to the world of silence and attempting to give it voice we can neither possess nor exhaust it. She reminds us that as strange, the experience of the erotic is inexhaustible, and that as inexhaustible it invites our return. The hope of this invitation lies in its antidote to the temptation to wrap oneself in what Beauvoir calls the false privileges of patriarchal subjectivity, for the curtain to the drama of the erotic and its inexpressible wild being is only opened to those who expose themselves to the risks of carnal fever vulnerability.<sup>24</sup> Though Merleau-Ponty's invo-

22 Merleau-Ponty, Maurice: Working Notes, p. 207, 228.

23 Beauvoir, Simone de: *The Second Sex*, New York 2009, p. 763.

24 For an extended discussion of the erotic in *The Second Sex* see Bergoffen, Debra: *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Gendered Phenomenologies, Erotic Generosities*, Albany 1997.

cation of the reduction may seem to limit the accessibility to wild being to the few who engage in the philosophy of the reduction, Beauvoir's account of the erotic embeds the epoché in our lived bodies. The access to wild being is available to all. Much depends, however, on whether the reduction effected by the passions of the erotic is taken as a critique of the disasters of the denigration of vulnerability or dismissed as a marginal event of private life.

Neither Beauvoir nor I are naïve enough to believe that the erotic voice of the lived body's wild being can, by itself, ground the flight from vulnerability. It will have to be challenged on many levels – political, economic, social, and cultural. It will also have to be monitored for its ability to take up different forms and justifications. I turn to Merleau-Ponty's idea of wild being, and Beauvoir's allusions to the erotic, not as a cure-all, but for the ways that they speak of the experience of vulnerability through a mode of desire that sees our existence-as-lack as a gift rather than as a liability. Taking up the challenge to the flight from vulnerability in this way, I join the psychoanalytic understanding of the limits of reason to the phenomenological commitment to the power of reflection. I see the desire of the lived body's wild eroticism as clearing the ground for a reflection that, by lifting the repression of the infantile trauma that refuses to become past, opens a path towards a future where we have learned to live our vulnerabilities well.

Whether the feminist critique of gender norms opens a path to this future remains undecided. Much depends on how demands for equality are framed. Will they speak in terms of a world where finitude and vulnerability are valued as indexes of our embodied intersubjectivity or will they perpetuate the fantasy of the fortress ego invulnerable subject? If the drive to become men's equal devolves into a drive to become like men, if it is politicized as a demand to extend the false privileges attached to those now gendered as male to both women and men, then revised gender norms will change little. We will continue to pay the price for being ruled by an infantile trauma. Undoing the legacy of this trauma will require something more radical than tinkering with current gender categories. The very concept of stable gendered identities needs to be critiqued. So long as gender is constructed along definitive binary lines, thereby recalling the binary of the (m)other-infant precarious relationship, vulnerability will be equated with the trauma of helplessness. From this perspective, the deconstruction of gender enacted by those who refuse to be identified with any gender, by those who identify as trans-gender and by those who speak of themselves as bi-sexual, creates a unique opportunity to re-imagine the category of gender. These challenges to fixed gender identities align gender with the realities of ambiguity. They are a dramatic way of signifying the fluidity of the intertwining of consciousness and

bodied existence that defines us as subjects. Other expressions of this truth are possible. However differently the expressions of this truth may be lived they will share this: the vulnerability of embodiment will be validated as an essential moment in the ongoing process of the becoming of the ambiguous subject rather than as a stigma to be fled.

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