

THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF INCEST ABUSE

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Lay Abstract

Using Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, I will explore the way in which incest abuse affects one's development, one's perception, and one's relations with others. I will argue that the dominant psychological perspective, as depicted in the DSM-5, insufficiently captures the reality of incest as an ongoing relational trauma, as it is founded upon a dogmatic assumption, namely that there exists in each individual body an isolated psyche turned inwards. Dualistic in nature, this ideology fails to recognize consciousness as an externally directed manner of relating to others. The implications of these assumptions are significant to the exploration of incest trauma, as this form of abuse is fundamentally based upon the child's relations to others. As I will demonstrate, incest trauma cannot be reduced to a series of causal events nor psychological reactions to external stimuli, for these accounts fail to acknowledge the organic act of perception which organizes one's experience and relations to others.

Abstract

Beginning with a brief examination of the dominant psychological perspective, I will demonstrate how the ideology espoused in the current Diagnostic and Statistical Manual insufficiently captures the reality of incest abuse. Founded upon the dogmatic assumption that there exists in each individual body an isolated psyche turned inwards, this tradition fails to recognize consciousness as an externally directed manner of relating to others. The implications of these assumptions are significant to the exploration of incest trauma, as this form of abuse is fundamentally based upon the child's relations with others. This dominant psychological and philosophical tradition influences our current understandings of trauma, yet runs counter to the experience and perspectives of those it directly impacts. For this reason, through the lens of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, I will argue that incest trauma ought be reduced to a series of causal events nor psychological reactions to external stimuli. I will explore Merleau-Ponty's theory of perception and provide reasoning as to why his theory of embodiment better captures the practical orientation we, as organisms, take up towards the world. I will address his understanding of the postural schema as primary consciousness, the specular image as a new horizon, and the way in which these affect the body's primordial powers of perspective and habit. Using these terms, I will then better clarify the infant's relations with others and how these relations give rise to a particular style of embodied existence. Lastly, I will describe the sense of attunement that may exists between the child and the caregiver, and demonstrate both the impact of its presence and its absence. Rather than solely relying upon co-morbid conditions to explain the impact of incest abuse, this relational trauma must be captured using language that directly reflect the experience of survivors.

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Introduction

This thesis is an attempt to address the impact and experience of incest abuse. Using Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology I intend to explore the ways in which this type of trauma affects one's development, one's self-perception, and one's relations with others. Acquiring an understanding of the effects of incest trauma is integral to victims' survival and empowerment. For, in order to endure ongoing incestuous abuse, victims of incest often become increasingly alienated from the reality and value of their bodily experience and, as a result, they feel futile and ineffective as a self in the world amongst others. Burdened by stigma and the reality of their trauma, many of these individuals rely on self-denial in order to survive. As a result, the reality and burden of this trauma remains hidden, deeply embedded in the hearts of its victims. In order to dismantle the stigma surrounding this topic and strip away the feelings of guilt, shame, and isolation harboured by so many victims I intend to explore the phenomenology of incest abuse and provide a more accurate description of the ways in which this type of trauma is experienced over time. For it is my belief that the dominant understanding of this phenomenon, as depicted in the DSM, insufficiently captures the reality of incest abuse as an ongoing relational trauma.

Accurate representation is important for incest survivors, as victims often suffer for years without the ability to articulate, understand or relate to the cause of their distress. Dissociative techniques, developed in early childhood, work in a covert manner to the extent that many individuals discover only later in life that they have experienced trauma. Moreover, as I will later demonstrate, grooming and manipulation of perspective, which begin during childhood, establishes the exploitative relation as something normal, something familiar. The perpetrator's abuse is presented to the child as a sense of love and affection. Perpetrators exploit their victims' mal-

leability as children, their naivety, and their vulnerability. They manipulate their victim's perspective so as to ensure the exploitative relationship is protected and maintained. The stigma surrounding this type of abuse also perpetuates its insidious nature. Survivors of incest abuse have been historically perceived as "hysterical" and therefore unreliable as a source of objective information. As a result, feelings of shame burden these victims, often leading them to deny the reality of their trauma to themselves and/or to others. Thus, when investigating incest trauma, it is crucial to develop an understanding of the phenomenon as it is experienced by the victims themselves. I believe Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the embodied self provides a more intimate and nuanced depiction of the ways in which individuals endure suffering, and the exploration of incest trauma through this lens may allow survivors to feel empowered by their history and develop a sense of radical self-acceptance.

I believe this investigation is necessary, as the dominant psychological and philosophical tradition that influences our current understandings of trauma runs counter to the experience and perspectives of those it directly impacts. This perspective, endorsed in the current Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, is founded upon and perpetuates the presumption that there exists in each individual body an isolated psyche, fundamentally incommunicable to others. According to this line of thought, one's relations with others are founded upon the belief that there exists in another's body an isolated psyche or 'self' much like one's own. Therefore, one can only objectively know another's bodily conduct, which is to be used as evidence of the existence and intention of the other's psyche. However, this complex, intellectual act, as an association or judgment, is impossible for an infant, as she innately possesses neither an understanding of herself as an individual nor of others. This conceptual distinction must be learned by the infant

over the course of many months, yet they are able to positively respond to the perception of their caregivers and attempt to crawl towards them. Traditional accounts of consciousness, which posit an isolated psyche turned inward, can neither accurately explain nor depict the child's relations with others. Dualistic in nature, it fails to acknowledge the existence of consciousness as an externally directed manner of relating to others, a style of bodily conduct which takes place in a world inhabited by others. The child's perception of her caregiver enacts a sense, perhaps one of affection and nurturance, and her dynamic structure of experience responds accordingly. As organisms, we are practically oriented toward the world and become accustomed to our environment through habit. As Merleau-Ponty states, "my psyche is not a series of states of consciousness that are rigorously closed in on themselves and inaccessible to anyone but me."¹ Rather, human beings are organisms, unified systems with postural schemas, discoverable only in relation to their environment. We take up the world and discover our body through such engagements. As infants, our awareness of our body and the other's body are two parts of a single, unified experience, and our ability to discriminate between 'self' and 'other' must be built up over time.

These phenomenological conclusions are significant to the exploration of incest trauma, as this form of abuse is fundamentally based on the child's relations to others, particularly with the abuser (a parental figure or older relative). Though grooming and sexual abuse do not typically transpire during the early infantile stage (however they may), inappropriate and damaging relations between parent/guardian and child do (e.g. neglect, psychological abuse, verbal abuse,

¹ Merleau-Ponty, "The Child's Relations with Others," in *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*, ed. Ted Toadvine and Leonard Lawlor (Northwestern University Press, 2007), 146.

manipulation, etc.).² Far before they are cognitively capable of discriminating between one's own self as an embodied agent and the other's, victims of incest abuse during the infantile stage develop a style of relating to others primed by this exploitative relation, which remains with them as an organizing structure of experience and perception. As I will attempt to illustrate, trauma is not stored within an isolated psyche; rather, it is lived out through the body and through one's relations with others.

I believe Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, which captures the symbolic functioning and global awareness of the body, is better equipped to accurately represent victims' experience of trauma. His phenomenology is founded upon an understanding of the human body as a dynamic organism which globally surveys its psychosomatic situation and behaves according to a sense, with purpose or intent. He acknowledges that primordially, or below the level of apperception and judgment, the world is not perceived as an entity wholly distinct from the self, especially during infancy, which is when the abuse (in some form or other) typically begins. Rather, the subject and its environment are deeply invested in one another. They are ambiguously interwoven and, therefore, inseparable. As bodies, we are uniquely oriented toward the world which we then take up, consider, intend, reject, and affirm. Insofar as our actions are always being organized by perception and integrated into an organic structure of experience, they transcend their scientific explanations, all the while maintaining a deep connection with the world which grounds their existence. Incest trauma cannot be reduced to a series of causal events nor psychological reactions to external stimuli, for these accounts fail to acknowledge the organic act of

² I will not delve into the abuser's manner of relating to others, as this lies beyond the scope of this investigation. However, it should be noted that the abuser does not start off respecting the infant's bodily autonomy and overall well-being at birth, only for it suddenly to cease to exist at the moment the abuser chooses to commit an abusive action. Rather, respect for the child never existed in the first place.

perception which organizes one's experience and relation to others. The dominant psychological perspective relies solely upon the objectification of the body as evidence of psychic intention and, in doing so, misses the very nature of this trauma as a relational happening. Instead, incest trauma must be explored as it is experienced by the victims, beginning as a non-dualistic phenomenon. Unable to fully discriminate between her own self as an embodied agent and the other's, the perception of her primary caretaker(s) will be the closest thing to identification she is able to experience.³ For this reason, the family and environment in which a child develops will have an enormous impact on her experience of embodiment. The organizing structure of experience, or the Self, is a psychosomatic style or posture which arises within a field of intersubjectivity, out of the Self's experience of embodiment as a child. The posture one develops can be understood as a style or way of being in the world with others, and the way in which a child develops an understanding of herself, primarily through learned interaction with caretakers and peers, will affect her structure of experience, perception and behaviour.

In order to demonstrate the relevance of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology with regard to incest abuse, I will begin with a brief discussion of the dominant psychological perspective as well as its limitations. The DSM-5, which structures the way in which health professionals diagnose and treat individuals suffering from mental health disorders, influences the way in which survivors learn to understand both themselves and others. It assumes legitimacy and authority over the general population. While I do not argue that the DSM-5 lacks any/all practical value, I agree with Merleau-Ponty's critique that science and the dominant psychological perspective fails to acknowledge the fundamentally ambiguous nature of our relations with others. This is

³ Merleau-Ponty, "The Child's Relations with Others," 163-164.

particularly significant with respect to incest abuse, as it is a unique relational trauma typically experienced over the course of many years. The ideology motivating the DSM-5 criterion favours objective, empirical evidence at the expense of incest victims' intersubjective reality. Neglecting this complexity, incest trauma remains misunderstood, undetected, and alarmingly common. Rather than helping survivors to heal and better understand their current experience of trauma, health professionals diagnose these individuals with co-morbid conditions, such as PTSD/C-PTSD, Anxiety, Depression, Dissociative Disorders, Borderline Personality Disorder, Bipolar Disorder, and/or Substance Abuse Disorders.⁴ To further illustrate the limitations and errors of the dominant psychological perspective, I will present a brief history of trauma as depicted throughout various editions of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, as psychological discourse has become, for many, the dominant source of one's self-understanding.

I will then attempt to prove Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology to be of great worth for survivors and their healing journeys, as it more accurately expresses their experiences and the way in which they relate to others. In order to demonstrate this, I will begin with an exploration of Merleau-Ponty's conception of *embodiment*, as this will provide us with phenomenological tools necessary for the investigation of incest abuse as a relation and a shared sense. This will include an exploration of the *postural schema* as primary consciousness, the *specular image* as a new horizon, and the way in which these affect the body's primordial powers of perspective and

⁴ Harald Bækkelund, Paul Frewen, Ruth Lanius, Akiah Ottesen Berg, and Espen Ajo Arnevik, "Trauma-related altered states of consciousness in post-traumatic stress disorder patients with or without comorbid dissociative disorders," *European Journal of PsychoTraumatology* 9, no. 15 (2018): 2; Katie A. Ports, Derek C. Ford, and Melissa T. Merrick, "Adverse childhood experiences and sexual victimization in adulthood," *Child Abuse & Neglect* 51, (January 2016): 314.

habit. In the proceeding section I will explore the development of the infant's relations with others and how these relations give rise to a particular style of embodied existence. I will describe the sense of attunement that may exist between the child and the caregiver, and demonstrate both the impact of its presence and its absence. Finally, by exploring numerous cases of incest abuse through the lens of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, I intend to reveal the variety of ways in which this particular type of trauma can impact one's embodied consciousness and relations with others.

1. Against the Dominant Psychological Perspective

Most individuals situated in a 21st century Western society value public health institutions for the funding they receive and the knowledge they gather through research and observation. We participate in these institutions insofar as we receive vaccinations to prevent illness, we get assessed and treated in hospitals, and we seek diagnoses from psychologists in order to better understand ourselves. Most of us rely upon nurses, doctors, psychologists, and psychiatrists. We trust their perspective as individuals in positions of authority and generally endorse their judgments of our own experience based on their understanding of "normality." We allow mental health professionals to influence our understanding of our bodies. In fact, in their research on psycho-politics, Marta Csabai and Orsolya Papp-Zipernovskyy, describe psychological discourse as "one of the main linguistic vehicles in our times."⁵ Moreover, I believe they are correct in stating that "nowadays people like to validate their self through the authority of science," which "re-

⁵ Marta Csabai and Orsolya Papp-Zipernovskyy, "Psycho-Politics and Illness Constructions in the Background of the Trauma-Concept of the DSM-5," in *Psychology and Politics*, ed. Anna Borgos, Ferenc Eros, and Julia Gyimesi, (Central European University Press, 2019), 330.

veals the self as in constant need of diagnosis and treatment.”⁶ However, like Merleau-Ponty, I argue that the dominant psychological perspective, which mental health professionals (i.e. those in positions of power/authority) rely upon as a guide for diagnostic treatment, is founded upon a philosophical assumption that not only makes the child’s relations with others incomprehensible, but also fails to accurately capture the nature of incest abuse as a relational trauma, typically beginning in infancy. The “objective” or “third person” perspective that the DSM seeks to establish, in reality, is merely the specular image, a de-realizing mode of consciousness which is founded upon one’s primordial being in the world. For the basis of our experience is founded upon intersubjectivity - an embodied coexistence with others.

In order to achieve a sense of objectivity, the psychological perspective, as evidenced in the DSM-5, calls into question “[w]hat, in fact, is the psyche - mine or the other’s” and, in turn, undermines the validity of the victim’s perception. It assumes that consciousness resides in the psyche, which “is *what is given to only one person.*”⁷ Thus, I can only assume by analogy that others, who appear to me as bodies much like my own, possess emotions and thoughts which I may witness indirectly through their bodily acts, including conduct, expressions and words. Because there is no way of directly reaching the consciousness of the other, it follows that you “cannot represent to yourself how I feel my own body, and it is impossible for me to represent to myself how you feel your body.”⁸ This directly impacts victims of incest abuse, as there is, according to this line of reasoning, no way of knowing with absolute certainty whether or not the

⁶ Marta Csabai and Orsolya Papp-Zipernovskyy, “Psycho-Politics and Illness Constructions,” 330.

⁷ Merleau-Ponty, “The Child’s Relations with Others,” 143.

⁸ Merleau-Ponty, “The Child’s Relations with Others,” 144.

child's perception of what she expresses to be abuse is accurate, exaggerated, or misunderstood. Thus, for the sake of reliability and legitimacy, the psychological perspective resorts to "supposing that, as a spectator of the gestures and utterances of the other's body before me, I consider the set of signs thus given, the set of facial expressions of this body to me, as the occasion for a kind of decoding ... I project, so to speak, what I myself feel of my own body ... I interpret the appearances, I transfer to the other the intimate experience I have of my own body."⁹ In order to remain objective, the dominant psychological perspective relies upon a diagnostic criteria which strictly acknowledges objectively physical and/or sexual violence and fixates upon isolated, traumatic events.¹⁰

However, as Merleau-Ponty notes, from this line of reasoning arises "the difficulty of relating my knowledge or experience of the other to an association, to a judgement by which I would project into him the data of my intimate experience," especially when one considers that "the perception of others comes relatively early in life," prior to any comprehension of "the exact *meaning* of each of the emotional expressions presented to us by others."¹¹ This complex intellectual act, that is the analogical judgement that there exists in the other's body a psyche much like my own, is impossible for infants, as they do not possess an articulate understanding of themselves as individuals separate from others. At early stages in their development, infants are incapable of distinguishing between 'self' and 'other'. Their sensory organs must be slowly built up in order to become attuned to their environment. When learning to walk, for example, the

⁹ Merleau-Ponty, "The Child's Relations with Others," 144.

¹⁰ American Psychiatric Association. (2013). Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (5th ed.): 271; Carol S. North, Alina M. Suris, Rebecca P. Smith, and Richard V King, "The Evolution of PTSD Criteria Across Editions of DSM," *Annals of Clinical Psychiatry* 28, no. 3 (2016): 199.

¹¹ Merleau-Ponty, "The Child's Relations with Others," 145.

child neither perceives nor attempts to reproduce the motor functions of the other's body with her own, comparing her own 'cenesthesia,' or "mass of sensations that would express to the subject the state of [her] different organs and different bodily functions," to another's.¹² She hasn't the experience, knowledge, or cognitive functioning necessary for this sort of anatomical mimicry. The child's attempt at walking is neither simply a reenactment nor an imitation of motricity and, for this reason, cannot be accurately depicted by the dominant psychological perspective. In seeking out third person objectivity, this tradition overlooks what Merleau-Ponty discovers "beneath the objective space in which the body eventually finds its place," that is "a primordial spatiality of which objective space is but the envelope and which merges with the very being of the body."¹³

We do not experience a point-by-point input of sensory data. Rather, the "experience of my body and the body of the other form a totality and constitute a 'form' ... (*Gestalt*) ... which develops according to a law of *internal* equilibrium, as if by *auto-organization*" over time.¹⁴ Though they lack the cognitive capacity and experience required for ontological judgments and discriminations, infants are highly attuned to their environment. They are neither born with an awareness of themselves as bodies separate from others nor the ability to control their own attention, emotions, and psycho-somatic reactions, yet they are highly responsive to and engaged in the environment, even showing preferences. This is because, fundamentally, our body is experienced as something *of* the world, not separate from it. Primordially, we exist by virtue of a sym-

¹² Merleau-Ponty, "The Child's Relations with Others," 144.

¹³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (London: Routledge, 2012), 149.

¹⁴ Merleau-Ponty, "The Child's Relations with Others," 150.

bolic functioning, a global awareness of the body, a sense of *embodiment*, which organizes our manner of relating to the world. For this reason, consciousness is best understood not as an “I think,” but rather an “I can,” in relation to its environment and situation.

Not only does the dominant psychological perspective make incomprehensible the infants’ relations with others, when applied to incest abuse this line of thought often calls into question the credibility of survivors’ experiences of the trauma, particularly the process of grooming, which occurs prior to and during overt acts of physical/sexual violence. This is because, in order to uphold a sense of reliability, legitimacy, and certitude, mental health professionals rely upon what they consider to be an “objective” diagnostic criterion. This is evidenced in the publication of the DSM-5, which omits the earlier criterion guideline of ‘subjective reaction,’ as there were “questions concerning the legitimacy of those categories of illness that either lack a clear or specific diagnosis or whose definition is strongly influenced by social and psychological factors,” namely trauma/PTSD.¹⁵ Previous editions of the DSM acknowledged the significance of survivors’ subjective responses to trauma, such as fear, terror, horror and/or feelings of helplessness, and incorporated this into the PTSD diagnostic criterion.¹⁶ For these feelings or moods are characteristic of the ways in which survivors exist in the world and relate to others. Feelings of helplessness, for example, affect one’s living communication with the world insofar as one’s lack of power, strength, and dependence limits one’s possibilities. From the exclusion of survivors’ subjective response in the diagnosis of trauma, it becomes clear that the dominant psychological perspective continues to hold a deep “desire for certainty,” and a philosophical bias

¹⁵ Csabai and Papp-Zipernovsky, “Psycho-Politics and Illness Constructions,” 329, 340.

¹⁶ North et. al, “The Evolution of PTSD Criteria Across Editions of DSM,” 199, 204. and Csabai and Papp-Zipernovsky, “Psycho-Politics and Illness Constructions,” 340.

which accepts “only ‘evidence-based’ illnesses” as “‘real illness.’”¹⁷ The strict diagnostic criterion for PTSD perpetuates a dogmatic psychological perspective, as it favours objective verification in the form of traumatic events (i.e. either physical or sexual violence) at the expense of acknowledging more insidious forms of relational trauma. That all trauma amounts to easily identifiable, isolated events which are “re-experienced” in the form of nightmares and flashbacks is an assumption which dangerously oversimplifies the phenomenon of incest abuse, and fails to account for, what I will later establish as, covert grooming tactics and embodied estrangement.¹⁸

This is significant, as the DSM-5 guides the way in which mental health professionals diagnose and treat survivors, thereby re-shaping the framework through which they may develop an understanding of self and a style of relating to others. Due to the ambiguous nature of our relations with others, that is the fundamentally non-dual manner of relating to the world which Merleau-Ponty openly accepts and describes, the reality of incest abuse is neglected, if not entirely overlooked, by the dominant psychological perspective as depicted in the DSM-5. This is especially detrimental to survivors of incest abuse, as this type of relational trauma begins during early infancy, when individuals are most vulnerable, impressionable, and dependent, and, therefore, most susceptible to be manipulated and emotionally primed by their abuser.

The diagnostic criterion for PTSD, which defines trauma as an “event(s)” involving “exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence,” fails to account for the covert grooming process which occurs over a long period of time.¹⁹ The dominant psychological

¹⁷ Csabai and Papp-Zipernovsky, “Psycho-Politics and Illness Constructions,” 333-334.

¹⁸ American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed.): 271-274.

¹⁹ American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed.): 271.

perspective assumes that trauma experienced by incest victims amounts to easily identifiable, isolated events which are “re-experienced” in the form of nightmares and flashbacks after they have occurred. While “re-experiencing” trauma can occur in this way, reducing the definition of incest abuse to isolated sexually and/or physically violent acts or events dangerously oversimplifies the trauma of incest abuse and perpetuates a dogmatic and oppressive line of reasoning, as it often calls into question survivor’s credibility, further stigmatizing the individuals affected.

1.1 The History of Incest as Depicted in the DSM

In all editions of the DSM, trauma has been depicted as a causal psychiatric condition resulting from either direct or indirect exposure to a *stressful event*.²⁰ This definition was thought to be general enough so as to include various types of stressors (e.g., war, natural disasters, rape, etc.) but objective enough so as to avoid pathologizing what mental health professionals considered “normal” human experience. However, significant controversy arose surrounding issues of diagnostic “validity, the trauma criterion, the role of symptoms in defining its psychopathology, differentiation from other disorders, and specifiers such as delayed onset.”²¹ For soon after the official classification of PTSD in the DSM-3, published in 1980, “a number of psychotherapists tried to rehabilitate Freudian seduction theory, unveiling abusive childhood memories of the patients.”²² The seduction theory stipulated that the “origin of neurosis lay in early sexual traumas”

²⁰ North et. al, “The Evolution of PTSD Criteria Across Editions of DSM,” 198.

²¹ North et. al, “The Evolution of PTSD Criteria Across Editions of DSM,” 198.

²² Csabai and Papp-Zipernovsky, “Psycho-Politics and Illness Constructions,” 339; Judith Lewis Herman, *Father-Daughter Incest* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981): 9,10.

and “that these early experiences were real, not fantasies, and had a damaging and lasting effect on the later lives of the children who suffered them.”²³ This was problematic for the dominant psychological perspective, which has always been driven by the need for objectivity and precision. The issue resided in the fact that, if one accepts the existence of isolated psyches, it is extremely difficult, if not entirely impossible, to measure the validity or weight of trauma suffered by an individual. For according to the dominant psychological perspective, the psyche is incommunicable to others; thus, there is no way of knowing, with absolute certainty, whether trauma is “real” or “imagined”. We are neither able to verify the abuser’s psychical intent nor the victim’s. Subjective responses, such as fear, helplessness, distress, and the like, which were previously accepted as indications of trauma, were no longer credible, as it was considered impossible to verify the appropriateness or source of one’s emotional and psychical states. Current explorations of trauma, as depicted in the DSM-5, perpetuate this bias against the reality of one’s intersubjective relations with others, as many claim that “the emotional response to trauma must be separated from the traumatic event itself, otherwise any negative emotional response to an event may be used as evidence that the event constituted trauma.”²⁴ As a result of this reasoning, only objectively traumatic, isolated events, either in the form of physical, verbal, or sexual violence, are to be considered conditional for a PTSD diagnosis.²⁵

²³ Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson, *The Assault on Truth: Freud’s Suppression of the Seduction Theory* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1984): 31.

²⁴ North et. al, “The Evolution of PTSD Criteria Across Editions of DSM,” 206.

²⁵ It should be noted that PTSD is the primary diagnosis survivors receive, as trauma, more generally, is not listed in the DSM-5 as a particular type of mental disorder. For this reason, the description of PTSD as seen in the DSM-5 has significant impact on the treatment and lives of survivors of incest abuse. Medical care is therefore directed towards aiding and minimizing the effects PTSD as well as any possible comorbid conditions (e.g. depression, anxiety, dissociation, etc.). Instead, treatment must be directed towards repairing the embodied style of communication which results from the relational trauma.

Freud's original seduction theory, posited in the late 1890s, explored the ambiguity and entanglement of our experience and relations with others, and acknowledged that early infantile sexual memories, recalled by "hysterical" clients, were, in fact, evidence of "real sexual act[s] forced on a young child who in no way desires it or encourages it."²⁶ Freud considered the traumatic relations uncovered in therapy to be an incestuous "seduction ... which wounds the child in every aspect of her ... being."²⁷ Freud's seduction theory was further developed as the "confusion of tongues" by his once close associate, Sándor Ferenczi, in a paper published shortly before his death in 1933, entitled "The Passions of Adults and Their Influence on the Sexual and Character Development of Children."²⁸ In this article, Ferenczi argued that the dominant view of trauma, during his investigation, relied upon "facile explanations" of the victim's hysterical constitution.²⁹ Hysterical women were previously considered to be individuals with predispositions to anxious, neurotic outbursts, as this conclusion was favourable to accepting the alternative, namely the horrific reality and prevalence of incest abuse. Ferenczi noted that parents, relatives, and clinicians relied upon "substitute gratification in this pathological way" at the victims' expense. Rather than bearing the secondary burden of accepting the rape of their children or patients, many preferred to believe that infantile sexual experiences were "only sexual fantasies of the child, a kind of hysterical lying."³⁰ Ferenczi, in light of Freud's seduction theory and his own

²⁶ Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson, *Assault on Truth*, 32.

²⁷ Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson, *Assault on Truth*, 39.

²⁸ Sandor Ferenczi, "Confusion of Tongues between Adults and the Child," *Contemporary Psychoanalysis* 24, no. 2 (1988): 196.

²⁹ Ferenczi, "Confusion of Tongues," 196.

³⁰ Ferenczi, "Confusion of Tongues," 201.

investigations, believed that such incestuous seductions are common occurrences among pathological adults who perceive and accept their child's play to be a form of sexual desire. These abused children are unable to make sense of their sexual seduction, especially when it is disguised as paternal tenderness, and often victims' are unable to recall memories of abuse until later on in their adulthood for this very reason. Ferenczi concluded that, because one is only conscious of what sense is available, children are often tormented for years by this confusion of tongues, that is the abuser's tendency to replace paternal tenderness with sexual seduction.³¹

Despite all of his own discoveries, as well as those made by Ferenczi, Freud was aware of his colleagues' personal disinclination and the more general aversion to discovering the truth regarding the prevalence of childhood sexual abuse. He later retracted his seduction theory, instead claiming that sexual fantasies - not real sexual traumas - were the cause of neurosis in these individuals. According to Freud, his previous investigations were to be deemed unworthy of consideration:

These patients, primarily women, were laboring under a common fantasy, one that, moreover, dominated their entire lives: Since childhood masturbation is such a general occurrence and is at the same time so poorly remembered, it must have an equivalent in psychic life. And, in fact, it is found in the fantasy encountered in most female patients - namely, that the father seduced her in childhood.³²

Despite Freud's admission, many believe that the accusations regarding his inappropriate psycho-sexual seduction of his daughter/clinical patient, Anna, likely influenced his decision to

³¹ Ferenczi, "Confusion of Tongues," 203.

³² Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson, *Assault on Truth*, 39.

retract the original seduction theory.³³ Regardless, as a result of this retraction, incest abuse remained undetected and misunderstood, as Freud's "Oedipus complex," and "healthy" psycho-sexual stages replaced his original seduction theory. For, according to the dominant psychological perspective, one cannot possibly discern between truth and fiction in another's psyche, nor determine whether an individual's narrative has been affected. As Jeffery Masson demonstrates, by the early 1900s, incestuous seduction had be relegated, once again, "to the fantasy life of the child, or to the lies of hysterical women" and, in turn, the diagnosis criteria for PTSD considered strictly overt physical/sexual acts of violence (e.g. rape, digital penetration, explicit death threats, and the like).³⁴

The controversy surrounding the DSM-3 runs parallel to the retraction of Freud's seduction theory and the introduction of his psycho-sexual stages of childhood development. The removal of individuals' subjective responses from the diagnostic criteria in the DSM-3 impacted the definition of PTSD in the DSM-5, which incorporated a more Freudian description of trauma as the "re-experiencing" of an overtly sexual or physically violent act in the form of flashbacks, nightmares, and the like. However, as I've attempted to illustrate, this criterion relies upon a narrow understanding of trauma as a single, evidently threatening event from the past. By focusing on the event and the physical force of the traumatic incident, rather than the injury occurred, the DSM fails to capture the embodied response of victims and survivors, that is their relational habits, their understanding of self, and their perception of others. Moreover, as Ferenczi noted,

³³ Arnold W. Rachman and Susan A. Klett, *Analysis of The Incest Trauma: Retrieval, Recovery, Renewal*, (London: Karnac Books, 2015); Judith Lewis Herman, *Father-Daughter Incest*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000); Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson, *The Assault on Truth: Freud's Suppression of the Seduction Theory* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1984).

³⁴ Masson, *Assault on Truth*, 185.

the emotional trauma suffered by child sexual abuse victims manifests in a confusion of tongues, a distressing yet unidentifiable, relational phenomenon. It is the ambivalence experienced by the child, the feelings of guilt and shame that accompany the abuser's sexual seduction or "tenderness," that cause her such distress.³⁵ The dominant psychological perspective, as depicted in the DSM-5, considers victims' subjective reactions to be nothing but "contamination[s] of the definition of trauma."³⁶ The diagnostic criterion for PTSD fails to capture the intersubjective nature and effects of incest abuse and, as a result, survivors often receive inadequate diagnosis, treatment, and support.

Incest abuse cannot and should not be reduced to what the dominant psychological perspective deems to be "objectively traumatic" acts of sexual/physical violence, for it is far more than that. Incest abuse is a traumatic relation, a guilty confusion, a sexual seduction, a secret burden, a carried stigma, and an utter lack of understanding, empathy, and support. It is a phenomenon which takes place in a society which has historically blamed the "hysterical woman" for her "daddy issues." We should not be looking to individual events in order to uncover the reality of trauma. Rather, we should be examining the nature of victims' relations with others, the situation in which these relations were originally developed, and the environment in which they currently play out. For trauma is an embodied, relational phenomenon which is articulated over time, not an isolated, strictly causal or psychical experience of the past. The dominant psychological perspective, which explains trauma strictly in terms of objective, causal evidence, distorts

³⁵ Ferenczi, "Confusion of Tongues," 206.

³⁶ North et. al, "The Evolution of PTSD Criteria Across Editions of DSM," 204, 206.

our understanding of the way in which we experience the world by reducing it to the sum of stimuli and qualities.

2. Embodiment

Having briefly presented the inadequacies of the dominant perspective, I will now provide a more detailed demonstration of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology as an alternative lens through which we can examine the experience of incest abuse. I believe his understanding of embodiment, which fundamentally opposes dualistic assumptions, is revealing of the ways in which one's relations with others develop as a shared sense. Using Merleau-Ponty's notion of the *postural schema*, an originary or primordial mode of consciousness, I will describe the way in which one's understanding and perspective is dynamically organized below the level of apperception according to a pattern of motor and perceptual habits which begin to form during early childhood. In this chapter, I will also make use of the *specular image*, a term coined by Merleau-Ponty which describes the sense of one's awareness of themselves as a body separate from the environment, both able to perceive and to be perceived by others. This exploration will provide us with a foundational understanding of the manner in which one becomes familiar with their embodied consciousness and the environment in which they are situated. Finally, in this section, I will investigate the development of one's perspective and habit as a perceptual and motor style, a unique manner of inhabiting the world and relating to others. My goal in exploring these concepts is to demonstrate to the reader the ways in which Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology provides a more nuanced depiction of the child's development and relations with others. Moreover,

it is my hope that contextualizing Merleau-Ponty's philosophy in this way will set the ground-work for a more intimate investigation of incest abuse as a sense which is created and shared by the perpetrator and the victim. I believe Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the embodied self allows for a deeper understanding of the ways in which these individuals endure suffering, and the exploration of incest trauma through this lens may allow survivors to feel empowered by their history and develop a sense of radical self-acceptance. While acknowledging the limitations of conducting empirical research, Merleau-Ponty makes use of observations made on patients during psychological examination in order to reach his phenomenological conclusions. Using case studies, Merleau-Ponty attempts to unveil the more fundamental acts of consciousness which are often overlooked. In the proceeding chapter, I will present the empirical observations made in *The Child's Relations with Others*, focusing in particular on the development of the child's perceptual understanding.

2.1 The Postural Schema as Primordial Consciousness

In *The Child's Relations with Others*, Merleau-Ponty explores "how and under what conditions the child come[s] into contact with others ... the nature of the child's relations with others ... [and how] such relations [are] possible from the day of birth on."³⁷ This is important for the investigation of incest abuse, as the traumatic parent-child relation begins to form in early childhood. Moreover, as Merleau-Ponty concludes, and as we've previously noted, the infant's perception of her mother cannot be explained by an association of ideas nor by a purely constituting

³⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The Child's Relations with Others," 143.

consciousness. The infant neither possesses the cognitive capacity nor the experience necessary for understanding the meaning of “other” or “mother.” The infant’s perception cannot be explained as the clarification of a pre-existing form. She can neither interpret signifiers and their significations nor can she understand the social expectations to which mothers are typically upheld. Rather, as Merleau-Ponty states, the child’s perception of her mother is best understood as “the active constitution of a new object that develops and thematizes what was until then only offered as an indeterminate horizon.”³⁸ The infant’s perception of her mother is best understood as a sense which is created and shared by both the infant *and* her mother as bodies in a particular environment, and this relation is like a horizon insofar as the sense of the object, the mother, will continue to develop and become articulated over time. In this sense, “the child lives in relations that belong to his future” which are not yet realizable.³⁹ Infants, entirely dependent on their relations with the environment, learn to orient themselves toward and make sense of psychosomatic phenomena by anticipating a sense that is to come.

As organic bodies we are affective objects *of* the world, made of the same fundamental material, *flesh*, and this commonality is what affords us with a living communication such that our perceptions will “arouse in [us] the preparation of motor activity related to it.”⁴⁰ This organizing power of, what Merleau-Ponty refers to as the *postural schema*, is the foundation of our experience, and exists as our primordial mode of consciousness.⁴¹ The postural schema is an or-

³⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 33.

³⁹ Merleau-Ponty, “The Child’s Relations With Others,” 167.

⁴⁰ Merleau-Ponty, “The Child’s Relations With Others,” 147.

⁴¹ Merleau-Ponty, “The Child’s Relations With Others,” 147.

ganic system which, while alive, is never fully complete. It organizes perception dynamically according to a sense or *gestalt*. That is to say, the embodied consciousness is an organized whole which is greater than the sum of its parts. The postural schema, or the body's orientation to the environment (i.e. the background), creates and destroys different *gestalts* (figures in the foreground) by organizing the body's "emerging focus of attention and activity."⁴² As our organism continues to change over time, our postural schema, which gives sense to the world and our relations with others, will also develop through experience. At first, one's embodied process of self-regulation is entirely dependent upon and vulnerable to its environment. As the infant develops, her postural schema starts to form habits, ways of best meeting its needs and maintaining its survival given its current situation. For "the consciousness I have of my body is not the consciousness of an isolated mass; it is a *postural schema*," an organizing power of perception which finds itself in the world with others.⁴³ Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology reveals to us that we do not learn to move our bodies; rather, we learn to navigate the world, and our sensory organs, which are parts of this greater, organic whole that is the postural schema, give us access to a world with sense through the power of perception.

According to this line of thought, the body's role, which centres around motricity and perception, presents itself as original intentionality. As organisms, we find ourselves already at work in the environment, doing our best to regulate our emotions and meet our needs. The postural schema, as a global awareness of the organism in its environment, is directed out toward the world as a body - this is what Merleau-Ponty refers to as *embodied consciousness*. The postural

⁴² Joel Latner, *The Gestalt Therapy Book*, (New York: The Julian Press, 1973), 27.

⁴³ Merleau-Ponty, "The Child's Relations With Others" 147.

schema responds to the solicitation of psychosomatic stimuli by creating a sense or *gestalt* which can be articulated and/or destroyed over time. In this way, “as a system of motor powers or perceptual powers, our body is not an object for an ‘I think’: it is a totality of lived significations that moves toward its equilibrium.”⁴⁴ Our organism is deeply invested in its environment, they work in tandem to create “an interdependent unity in which the organism is striving to regulate itself.”⁴⁵ Our postural schema works in such a way so as to establish a well-functioning orientation to and attunement with its environment. In this way, we are fundamentally unique manners of embodied existence, reaching out toward the world and imbuing it with sense. The individual cannot be separated from its environment, for both the organism and the situation in which it finds itself are essential aspects of the postural schema, the “background” against which all figures appear with sense. We cannot separate, for example, the act of vision on the subject’s side and the thing seen on the object’s side. Vision, as an original intentionality, is both of these things together. It is the creation of a sense which arises out of the postural schema’s power of perception. The subject’s touch cannot be separated from the object she touches. To touch and to be touched are fundamentally unified acts, primordially experienced by the organism, which arise out of one’s embodied existence, the postural schema, and its powers of motricity and perception.

Infants are not, however, born with immediately attuned postural schemas. Their perception of their own body is not immediately familiarized with the perception of their environment. While highly responsive, infants are, to a great extent, unaware of themselves as individuals dis-

⁴⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 155.

⁴⁵ Joel Latner, *The Gestalt Therapy Book*, 19.

tinct from the situation in which they find themselves. They lack the capacity to focus their attention, to regulate their emotions, and to perceive others as articulated figures emerging from backgrounds. There is, therefore, a phenomenological indistinction, at birth, between “self” and “other.” This is what is referred to by Merleau-Ponty as “syncretic sociability,” wherein there exists “a confusion at the core of a situation that is common to both” the infant and her environment.⁴⁶ The infant’s inability to distinguish between her perception of herself and her perception of others is such that she will experience any changes in the environment as changes which affect her *interoceptively*, a word used by Merleau-Ponty to refer to the experience of indistinction, as psychosomatic stimuli will be perceived solely with regard to one’s own embodied state of well-being as a perceiving subject, rather than as an object perceived in an environment with others. As Merleau-Ponty notes, in the beginning of a child’s life, “external perception is impossible for very simple reasons; visual accommodations and muscular control of the eyes are insufficient.”⁴⁷ Without the familiar relation that will eventually arise between the body’s perception of the environment and the global consciousness of the body itself, infants’ experiences are dependent solely upon the psychosomatic phenomenon made available to them.

That the infant’s perception with others is *non-dual* is an observation made by Merleau-Ponty and which others refer to as the *joint ownership thesis*.⁴⁸ Prior to the acknowledgement of what we, as adults, understand to be objective bodies in space, we are unaware of ourselves as distinct individuals and, because of this, we are entirely open and therefore much more suscepti-

⁴⁶ Merleau-Ponty, “The Child’s Relations With Others,” 149.

⁴⁷ Merleau-Ponty, “The Child’s Relations With Others,” 151.

⁴⁸ Joel Krueger, “Merleau-Ponty on Shared Emotions and the Joint Ownership Thesis,” *Continental Philosophy Review* 46 (2013): 510.

ble to changes in our environment. This mode of embodiment is described as a *syncretic system*, a state of “pre-communication ... wherein the other’s intentions somehow play across my body while my intentions play across his.”⁴⁹ The child’s perception of others is indistinguishable from her perception of herself and, because of this, the mother’s absence, for example, will be experienced as incompleteness in the child, rather than understood as simply a temporary absence from her line of sight.⁵⁰ Likewise, in responding to the cries of other children by calling out themselves, infants’ sympathy “rests on the ignorance of [themselves] rather than on the perception of others.”⁵¹ In hearing another baby’s cry, the infant experiences discomfort herself. She feels it within and lives it out through her own cry. This is because infants’ postural schema, which organizes the way in which they understand both themselves and others, is non-dual and, therefore, entirely open to psychosomatic phenomena. They are not yet able to make sense of their environment and, therefore, can neither create nor destroy gestalts by directing or averting their attention. All of our perceptions, according to Merleau-Ponty, are fundamentally based upon this embodied system of the postural schema, which first experiences non-duality, becomes articulated over time, and acquires knowledge of itself through experience.

According to Merleau Ponty’s understanding, the postural schema, as an embodied system of global awareness, is “turned toward things,” and this orientation towards the world allows us to “meet things in the actions of another and find in these actions a sense, because they are

⁴⁹ Merleau-Ponty, “The Child’s Relations With Others,” 148.

⁵⁰ Merleau-Ponty, “The Child’s Relations With Others,” 153.

⁵¹ Merleau-Ponty, “The Child’s Relations With Others,” 149.

possible themes of activity for my own body.”⁵² For example, as infants we understand the other’s smile not as the signification of an isolated psyche’s happiness, but as a motive or sense which “speaks directly to [our] own unique motility.”⁵³ We learn to smile through the shared experience of another’s, as it evokes in us a feeling or sense of, perhaps, completeness, safety, or familiarity, which we then take up and express in turn. Our bodies appear to us as postures toward a certain task, we perceive in our environment various types and styles of conduct, and such perceptions impregnate us with gestural meanings and embodied potentials. Insofar as the infant is the object of the caregiver’s attention and the caregiver’s conduct provides for the infant gestural meaning, the two experiences (i.e. that of the infant and of the caregiver) work in tandem to create a numerically single experience shared by both individuals, hence the name *joint ownership* thesis. This is why skin to skin contact, for example, is important during early stages of infancy, and why some individuals deeply value breastfeeding. Insofar as the mother, for example, is experienced by the infant only as “a state of well-being in the baby’s organism because [s]he is held more firmly or more tenderly in her arms,” we cannot say the mother is actually perceived as a distinct object.⁵⁴ Nonetheless, the psychosomatic sensation of the mother’s hug is perceived by the infant, incorporated into her postural schema, and even held as a preference. The child’s interoceptive perception of her mother’s body *touching* her is linked to her motility or style of moving in the world and relating to others - her ability to *touch* - and is evidenced in this preference.

⁵² Merleau-Ponty, “The Child’s Relations With Others,” 146.

⁵³ Merleau-Ponty, “The Child’s Relations With Others,” 146.

⁵⁴ Merleau-Ponty, “The Child’s Relations With Others,” 153.

According to this line of thought, in the acquisition of a habit or a style of relating to others it is the body that understands, not an isolated psyche incommunicable to others.⁵⁵ One's embodied consciousness gradually becomes attuned to its environment through experience, and the postural schema adjusts and restructures itself accordingly. Figures will begin to emerge and thematize by virtue of the child's perceptions. Much like a melody, the infants' styles of relating to the world and others will begin to unfold and become more familiar to her over time. As Merleau-Ponty states, "consciousness of one's own body is thus fragmentary at first and gradually becomes integrated; the corporeal schema becomes precise, restructured, and mature little by little."⁵⁶ At birth, the child will experience perception interoceptively or non-dually, taking the environment to be solely a reflection of her own state of well-being. However, after approximately six months, the child will begin to perceive others, primarily fixating on parts of their body (e.g. mouths smiling or biting, hands clapping or grasping, etc.).⁵⁷ Over time, the child will become familiarized with the perception of both herself and others as bodies in a particular environment. The awareness of one's body as something *in* the world, perceived by others, is what Merleau-Ponty refers to as *the specular image*. This alternative hold over the body will be explored in greater detail, as I will demonstrate its origin as well as its function as an extension of the child's syncretic sociability. The specular image, as a secondary orientation toward the world, is a de-realizing mode of consciousness, founded upon the postural schema's global awareness. The specular image, once developed, turns the child away from her experience of primordial indis-

⁵⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 145.

⁵⁶ Merleau-Ponty, "The Child's Relations With Others," 152.

⁵⁷ Merleau-Ponty, "The Child's Relations With Others," 154.

inction in exchange for a system of relations. It allows the child to experience a relation of co-existence, wherein she appears as a subject, both perceiving and perceived.

2.2 The Specular Image

In order to understand the development of the child's experience with her own body, both as something which appears for her interoceptively, that is as a perceiving subject, and as something which is perceived by others, Merleau-Ponty turns to the child's engagement with a mirror. He begins by considering the child's image she has of others' bodies, rather than her own, as infants first become acquainted with the former. Using studies conducted by Wallon, Merleau-Ponty observes that, at first, around four or five months, the infant will solicit the reaction of simple fixation upon the perception of his father's specular image in the mirror. However, after five or six months, the infant smiles in the mirror at the image of his father:

At this moment his father speaks to him. The child appears surprised and turns toward the father. As a result it seems that at this moment he *learns* something ... He is surprised, because at the moment before his father spoke, he did not have a precise awareness of the relation of image to mode. He is surprised that the voice comes from another direction than that of the visible image in the mirror. The attention he gives to the phenomenon shows, in effect, that he is in the process of understanding something, that is not a question of simple training. One might be tempted to say that we are here present at the formation of a conditioned reflex and that the mirror image becomes "comprehensible" by becoming the conditioned stimulus of responses that were formerly evoked by the father.⁵⁸

Several weeks after this occurrence, however, the infant reverts back to his previous attempts at grasping with his hand the image of his father in the mirror. This inconsistency reveals that the

⁵⁸ Merleau-Ponty, "The Child's Relations With Others, 156-7.

child does not immediately come to possess a clear symbolic or spatial relation between the visual image he sees in the mirror and the image he has of his father beside him. The mirror is not used as a conceptual tool, but rather as a practical image which holds for the child an inferior existence to that of his father's body, a "quasi- reality." The child orients himself toward the mirror as though it occupies an imaginary depth, an extension of his world rather than a reflection. Only at around the age of eight months will the child's specular image become, for him, a spectacle.⁵⁹ At thirty-five weeks the child reaches out and attends to his image in the mirror, he will react and look in the mirror when called. However, his relation with the specular image of his father and with that of himself is fragmentary and incomplete, as the child, weeks later, will still turn toward his father, away from the mirror, when spoken to. The mirror is not yet perceived as a reflection of himself and his environment.

In dealing with these relations, the child becomes familiarized with the experience of himself and others as objects which can be perceived in the mirror, as well the visual experience he has interoceptively of both of these specular images as a perceiving subject. He must learn to navigate and distinguish between the experience he has of himself as an embodied being - feeling, touching, seeing,- and the experience he has of himself in the mirror, as something which can be sensed by both himself and others. The child's relation with the specular image of his own body develops later than that of the other because, prior to the perception of himself in the mirror, the infant has had no exposure to visual evidence of his embodied consciousness as something which appears in the world for others, aside from the few parts of his body which he may glance down upon on occasion. In coming to understand his father's embodied consciousness as

⁵⁹ Merleau-Ponty, "The Child's Relations With Others," 157.

a specular image, that is as something which he perceives both in the mirror and in the world beside him, the child utilizes two global, visual experiences. The child's perception of himself as something which appears for others is far more foreign and, therefore, requires more experience in order to develop as a relation with which the child is familiarized. The child must learn that her own specular image, something *seen* in the mirror, also appears in the world for others and, moreover, that it is, in fact, the thing doing the *seeing*. She must learn to distinguish between what Merleau-Ponty refers to as the "lived" and the "symbolic."

Merleau-Ponty's observation reveals that there belongs to the child's experience of the specular image "a mode of spatiality ... which is altogether distinct from adult spatiality ... a kind of space clinging to the image," an open field of non-duality which "will eventually be reduced by an intellectual development" to spatial values which are redistributed. The child's empathy and emotive responses are a result of her openness to the situation, her non-dual experience of the world and others around her. The ideal space experienced by adults, which includes spatial and perceptual conceptions of "self" and "other," slowly takes precedence over the non-dual phenomenal field which, at first, clings to the specular image.⁶⁰ This imaginary space is an extension of the child's syncretic sociability, the primordial unity she experiences as a body, an organism *of* the world. The child's primordial experience of unity will ultimately shape the postural's schema's organizing powers of perception and motility and orient the child toward certain behaviours, postures, and styles of inhabiting certain situations. The way in which infants learn to navigate the world, or create and destroy gestalts, will affect their awareness of themselves as an embodied consciousness among others.

⁶⁰ Merleau-Ponty, "The Child's Relations With Others," 158-9.

After approximately twelve months, one might see a child step before a mirror with a hat and perceive the mirror as a reflection of this. In this case, when “she puts her hand not to the image of the hat in the mirror but to the hat on her head ... the image in the mirror suffices to call forth and regulate a movement adapted to the object itself.”⁶¹ The child, at this point in time, makes use of the mirror as a tool which allows her to perceive her own specular image. The visual phenomena she *senses* in the mirror, which clings to non-duality, is overridden by the experience of herself as something which is *sensed*. At fifty-seven weeks, the same child might be seen passing her hands behind a mirror, contemplating her own reflection yet, the very next day, she might not pay it any attention at all.⁶² From this it is clear that the child’s postural schema does not at once acquire an established relation between her embodied consciousness as something that *sees* and her specular image as something that is *seen*, nor can it be said that she may acquire a similar understanding of the other. The development of the child’s experience of her own body in its interoceptive aspect and as a specular image, as well as her relations with others, is a non-linear progression. The child’s perception of her own specular image, as the inhabitant of a non-dual phenomenal field, is both inconsistently displaced and identified as the reflection of her seeing her body by virtue of her body.

In observing the development of the specular image, Merleau-Ponty makes references to a similar phenomenon which is said to be experienced by dying people, by those in certain hypnotic states, and by those drowning. He compares these individuals’ pathological perceptions of a quasi-visible character to the child’s primordial experience with her own embodied conscious-

⁶¹ Merleau-Ponty, “The Child’s Relations With Others,” 159.

⁶² Merleau-Ponty, “The Child’s Relations With Others,” 159-160.

ness in the mirror, as in both cases the postural schema lacks a well established system of relations between the image of the body and the body itself.⁶³ This correspondence must be built up through experience and, as evidenced in aforementioned cases, is capable of being disrupted. Moreover, the specular image will never be perceived as simply the copy of a model; it retains for us a *quasi-presence*. As Merleau-Ponty notes, “even an adult will hesitate to step on an image or photograph; if he does, it will be with aggressive intent.”⁶⁴ The specular image, or the perception of another’s embodied consciousness, continues to evoke a response in us, both as children and as adults, in our experiences of a reflection, a picture, or a shadow. We imbue the specular image with a sense over time; however, it holds an albeit inferior existence to what we learn to understand as the object it reflects. We never lose the ability to experience our presence *in* the mirror or the presence of another *in* a picture. Insofar as our postural schema’s organization of the specular image is dynamic and flexible in this way, it is never fixed.

Merleau-Ponty’s insight on the embodied consciousness as a malleable, organizing system is significant, as it depicts the individual’s development as an ongoing manner of inhabiting the world, taking up situations, and adjusting oneself accordingly. As an adult, one remains open to perceptual and motor possibilities experienced during what we’ve depicted as the infant’s syncretic sociability. The embodied consciousness is capable of drastic changes in perspective. The dominant psychological tradition, in assuming the development of an objective, psychic intelligence, misses this phenomena entirely, as it is unable to account for fundamental disruptions in the postural schema. For the progression of a child’s perception of and relation to the specular

⁶³ Merleau-Ponty, “The Child’s Relations With Others,” 158.

⁶⁴ Merleau-Ponty, “The Child’s Relations With Others,” 161.

image is neither linear, nor does it “obey the ‘all or nothing’ law” whereby “either one knows or one does not know. One cannot ‘slightly know,’” for example “the sum of two and three.”⁶⁵ The dominant line of reasoning, which assumes that each individual acquires the conceptual understanding of self and others as bodies possessing incommunicable psyches by virtue of an intellectual association, cannot account for the non-linear developments observed in the development of the specular image. Moreover, the dominant perspective cannot explain disruptions that occur between one’s relations with the image of one’s own body and the body itself, as depicted in pathological perceptions of quasi-visible characters and as evidenced in psychological experiences of dissociation, derealization, and depersonalization.⁶⁶ This is because the postural schema’s organized system of relations between the body as something perceiving and the body as something that is perceived is constantly at work. It continuously orients itself toward situations using perceptual and motor possibilities to make sense of its environment and meet its needs.

As infants learn to distinguish between their own embodied consciousness and that of other, the primordial unity first experienced during the stage of syncretic sociability or non-dual perception slowly begins to transform. The postural schema begins to organize itself in accordance with the child’s experiences with her own interoceptive state of well-being as a perceiving subject, her perception of herself as a specular image, and the other’s presence, which appears in

⁶⁵ Merleau-Ponty, “The Child’s Relations With Others,” 162.

⁶⁶ William S. Helton, Martin J. Dorahy, Paul N. Russell, “Dissociative tendencies and right-hemisphere processing load: Effects on vigilance performance,” *Consciousness and Cognition* 20, (2011): 700. This study provides more information on the impact of dissociation, and notes that an increase in dissociation is significantly related to decreases in perceptual sensitivity. Thus, the disturbance in one’s experience of reality and relations with others are directly related to one’s interoceptive experience (i.e. one’s experience as a perceiving subject).

the world both as an embodied consciousness and as a specular image. This lends us insight into the manner in which a child enters into relations with others. As Merleau-Ponty notes:

The specular image, given visually, participates globally in the existence of the body itself and leads a 'phantom' life in the mirror, which 'participates' in the life of the child himself. What is true of his own body, for the child is also true of the other's body. The child himself feels that he is in the other's body, just as he feels himself to be in his visual image.⁶⁷

Prior to the development of the visual consciousness of his body, or the specular image, the child cannot separate what she *perceives* from what is *perceived*. The psychosomatic phenomena to which a child is exposed is experienced as something which she lives out and feels within. In this way, the child *globally* identifies with her environment. Her embodied consciousness, in reaching out toward the world and giving it sense through perception, slowly develops a relation to and style of functioning within her situation. Her postural schema attempts to gratify its needs by making use of the capabilities it currently has available (e.g. crying, breastfeeding, teething, crawling etc.). During early stages of infancy, the manner in which the child learns to self-regulate and the sense with which she imbues things in the world is entirely dependent upon the environmental support with which she is provided. Her embodied consciousness is free only insofar as it is able to organize itself according to the possibilities with which it is presented.

Recent studies in neuroscience, such as Ruth Feldman's article on "Oxytocin and Social Affiliation in Humans," support Merleau-Ponty's account of the child's relations with others. According to Feldman, affiliative bonds, "defined as *selective* and *enduring* attachments," arise by virtue of a close, interpersonal relation, such as that between a parent and a child.⁶⁸ This bond

⁶⁷ Merleau-Ponty, "The Child's Relations With Others," 162.

⁶⁸ Ruth Feldman, "Oxytocin and Social Affiliation in Humans," *Hormones and Behaviour* 61 (2012): 381.

is created by the child's experience of the caregiver's habitual responses and is established by virtue of "unique neurohormone systems and brain circuits, hence linking specific biology to specific behaviour" in the parent and child's relation.⁶⁹ Often, one's maternal capacity and instinctive desire for affiliative bonding is ignited and kindled through biological capacities, such as labour, breastfeeding, and skin to skin contact. Through the engagement of any of these activities, the body releases oxytocin, thereby reinforcing this affiliative bond. Working in tandem, the mother and the child's embodied consciousness creates a sense of love and attachment. Yet, the relation between a parent and child is neither solely an intellectual association nor a mechanical happening. Rather, the child's relation with her parent is established by the caregiver's behaviour, their original *intent* to form an affiliative bond. For maternal instincts may be triggered by innate biological capacities (e.g. pregnancy, labour, and/or breastfeeding); however, those who have not or are not capable of engaging in such activities may establish affiliative bonds with their children simply through active parental care - embodied habits of relating to others. By attending to and perceiving the child's embodied consciousness as something precious, vulnerable, and in need of care, oxytocin is released in the body's system, thereby affirming the parent's initial active striving toward the creation of such an attachment.⁷⁰ The parent and the child's postural schema makes use of the range of possibilities with which they have been endowed. Parents feel the embodied consciousness of their child when she cries out for attention or nourishment, for example, and the child experiences the embodied consciousness of her parents to the extent that they attend to her needs. The difference is that while parents can distinguish their child's

⁶⁹ Ruth Feldman, "Oxytocin and Social Affiliation in Humans," 381.

⁷⁰ Ruth Feldman, "Oxytocin and Social Affiliation in Humans," 382.

cries from their own interoceptive state of well-being and their sympathy for the child rests on this fact, the child cannot perceive her parents' behaviour as something other than her own embodied consciousness. Her sympathy or openness to the environment is founded upon her primordial experience of unity and indistinction.

The mirror, Merleau-Ponty shows us, offers the child an experience of her specular image, making possible for the first time a contemplation of selfhood. In perceiving her specular image in the mirror, the child is torn away from her interoceptive experience in the non-dual phenomenal field. Acquiring the image of herself in the mirror as something *perceived*, the child becomes alienated from her experience as a purely perceiving subject, for she is now something in the environment, available for others. Merleau-Ponty reveals to us that, in this way, the specular image has a *de-realizing* function, leading the child away from her primordial experience, toward a new manner of relating to self. Rather than perceiving the mirror as an extension of her environment, at this stage in the child's development, she will experience "a kind of *identity at distance*, a *ubiquity* of the body; the body is at once in the mirror and present at the point [she] feel[s] it tactually."⁷¹ It cannot be said that the mirror is perceived by the child as a reflection or two aspects of the same object occupying different points in space, as this intellectual association is too complex for the child at this stage in life. Instead, the experience of her embodied consciousness is felt at an *imaginary* distance *in* the mirror, and through this phenomenal exploration the child anticipates the development of a sense of self amongst others - an identity. As Merleau-Ponty illuminates:

The child's problem is not so much one of understanding that the visual image and the

⁷¹ Merleau-Ponty, "The Child's Relations With Others," 168.

tactile image of the body - both located at two points in space - in reality comprise only one, as it is of understanding that the image in the mirror is *his* image, that it is what others see of him, the appearance he presents to others subjects; and the synthesis is less a synthesis of intellection than it is a synthesis of coexistence with others.⁷²

Our embodied relations with others, which develop out of the infantile stage of syncretic sociability, structures the way we experience the world. The visual experience the child has of her specular image in the mirror anticipates and thereby orients her embodied consciousness toward what others see her to be. Merleau-Ponty's investigations reveal to us that what the dominant psychological perspective believes to be a judgment of a psychic intelligence is, in fact, a bodily understanding, an attunement of the postural schema with its environment. The child's experience of her specular image in the mirror is not an intellectual re-calculation of spatial values. Rather, the child's postural schema organizes its developing powers of motility and perception according to new phenomenal explorations.

The system of relations which arise out of one's postural schema are never completely established so as to prevent a return to the phenomenal field of primordial unity experienced by infants. The indistinction between the act of speaking and the act of hearing, for example, can reoccur in the form of, what psychologists refer to as, projection. One may sense in the other his own feelings of hope by perceiving his partner's words, "you're a great guy," to be an affirmation of their relationship when, in reality, the phrase was intended to soften the blow of a breakup that is to come. The perceptual mode of global identification, which the child solely experiences during the first phase of her development, is returned to in moments such as this one. The specular image is never fully conquered, as one remains capable of experiencing the phenomenon of

⁷² Merleau-Ponty, "The Child's Relations With Others," 168.

transitivism, an embodied perspective wherein one is unable to distinguish between one's own experience and another's. The infant's non-dual manner of relating to the world is not abolished, but rather it "re-forms itself in the emotional makeup of the adult" and, in this way, our postural schema's orientation toward the world moves along a non-linear continuum of relations with others.⁷³ As the embodied consciousness develops, the postural schema learns to inhabit the world and its relations with others in a certain manner. The body learns to navigate its powers of perception and motility according to the situations in which it frequently finds itself and the possibilities with which it has been afforded. Behavioural tendencies will become articulated over time and identified by others as our personality. For the embodied consciousness, these organizational habits will amount to a unique style of primordial dwelling - a dynamic perspective and posture which appears in a world with others.

2.3 Perspective and Habit

Having depicted the origin and development of the child's relations with others, I will now turn to the maturation of one's motor habits and perspective, as this will reveal the way in which the child's personality or identity is formed. This section will include an investigation of the child's embodied recognition of others and the organized structure of motility and perception that arises out of this awareness. I will explore the way in which the child develops a perspective by making sense of the environment both spatially and temporally as this will help to illuminate,

⁷³ Merleau-Ponty, "The Child's Relations With Others," 167.

in later chapters, the manner in which victims and survivors of incest abuse in particular learn to perceive themselves and others.

As I have previously shown, perception and motility, the powers which allow us to take up a situation, are modalities of the postural schema, our primordial perspective. These embodied powers allow us to make sense of our situation and interact with the world around us. As the body develops, so too will the postural schema. Our embodied consciousness slowly becomes familiar with certain psycho-physiological stimuli - certain people, things, and situations. We develop unique styles of inhabiting the world with individualized patterns of intending, feeling, and behaving. In becoming accustomed to our environment we develop *instincts* or *reflexes*. Any given situation with which we are familiar will facilitate within us a particular response which, as I've attempted to demonstrate, is best understood *not* as a wholly articulated concept nor a mechanically determined reaction, but rather as a vague, unarticulated sense which organizes our perception and motility. As children, the situations in which we find ourselves are at first experienced as “only a practical signification, and the recognition that it induces is merely a bodily recognition.”⁷⁴ Learned styles of conduct are evoked by one's experience with environmental phenomena and, in a non-dual field of perception, the child's embodied consciousness, something capable of visual, auditory, and tactile perception, is already in communication with others, prior to any conceptual understanding of the “self” or the “other.”

The mother's body, for instance, which the infant first experiences as something which solely expresses her own organic well-being, can evoke a response in the child through the performance of an action. The perception of her mother clapping her hands together, for example,

⁷⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 80-81.

can prompt within the child a certain intention and style of motor conduct. The infant perceives her mother's actions insofar as she experiences "a certain 'view' of the world," a "certain handling of things which were until now [hers] alone."⁷⁵ The child's original experience of the world is, as we have seen, distinct from the adult's insofar as the concepts of "self" and "other" are absent from her perspective. In this way, the child's perspective is "pre-objective."

Over time, by familiarizing ourselves with the sense of our body as something which can be perceived we learn to separate our interoceptive experiences from the situations in which we find ourselves. We learn to make sense of our interoceptive or "pre-objective" experience as simply a "first person" account of the world as a perceiving subject. Over time, we begin to acquire an additional hold on our bodies, a "third person" perspective, which affords us with, what many consider to be, objectivity. This new perspective, founded upon a more primordial, pre-objective experience of the world, incorporates the sense of one's embodied consciousness as something which can be perceived, something which includes the concept of "self" and "other." Over time, the child learns to develop a sense of herself as someone beyond her environment - she is also a specular image. She learns that, just as she perceives others, others can perceive her. In turn, she slowly begins to grasp another hold over her body, another mode of relating to the world, a new dimension of existence.

For example, in hearing her mother's linguistic expression, "I made this for you," the child will begin to develop a reflex which corresponds with the sense of herself as something to which the mother's "you" refers. She learns over time that, just as she experiences her mother as a "you" or as an "other" and, likewise, just as she is an "I" for herself, the same can be said for

⁷⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 369-370.

her mother. In other words, the child learns that mother is, much like herself, something which perceives and can be perceived. This new phenomenal field of existence wherein things appear is incorporated into the postural schema's powers of original intentionality, and includes the recognition of the mother as a perceiving subject in addition to something the child perceives. In light of this gradual discovery, the infant's postural schema, that is her organized powers of motility and perception, adjusts itself accordingly. It slowly incorporates into its motor and perceptual possibilities conduct which includes a bodily recognition of the self and the other.

Around the age of three years, in light of this development, the child will become irritated by the other's gaze. She will experience what Merleau-Ponty refers to as "the crisis at age three."⁷⁶ In developing an embodied awareness of herself as something which is perceived by others, the child's postural schema begins to adjust and re-orient itself toward the experience of her specular image. Focusing on this sense of her body as a thing *in* the world, *perceived* by others, the child becomes alienated from her interoceptive experience. Much like a camera lens, the child's perceptual focus on the specular image will push to the background the sense of herself as something *of* the world, something indistinguishable from her environment. The child's perception of herself as something seen takes precedence over her primordial, non-dual perspective. At this stage of development, the child will hide from the other's gaze or, conversely, she might seek out the other's gaze by misbehaving. She may, perhaps, "interfere with the play of others for the sake of [her] own pleasure," taking "things away from others solely for the fun of it; as soon as [she] has taken them [she] abandons them."⁷⁷ She simultaneously craves and despises the oth-

⁷⁶ Merleau-Ponty, "The Child's Relations With Others," 179.

⁷⁷ Merleau-Ponty, "The Child's Relations With Others," 181.

er's gaze, as this new discovery estranges her from her primordial perspective. The other's gaze leads her to a new phenomenal field and, in turn, the child must learn to express a new kind of sympathy for the other, one which rests on *distinction*, rather than *unity*. Due to the foreign nature of this separation, the child at this stage acts provocatively - she is learning what her limits amount to and how to test them.

When learning to share, for example, the mother's gaze brings to the child's attention the sense of her specular image, her "third person" experience as someone *in* the world *with* others and thereby moves her away from her interoceptive experience of her body as something *of* the world, something indistinct from it. In this way, the specular image makes the child susceptible to being influenced by situational values and, more specifically, other people's intentions and styles of conduct. These new possibilities (e.g. sharing, holding hands, "playing nice" etc.) are *globally* perceived by the child's postural schema, as they orient her toward not only a cultural or "geographical milieu," but a "behavioural milieu" as well.⁷⁸ For the awareness of one's specular image as something which is perceived by others takes place in an environment wherein there exists previously established expectations of appropriate social conduct and historically established traditions. In learning to share, the child's perception of her mother's gaze orients her toward a task, a situation wherein she is expected to conduct herself alongside others in a particular manner. She learns that her perceived world is not hers alone, for other people's conduct and behaviours are aimed at this world as well. The phenomenal field in which she and others appear is now recognized as a shared world.

⁷⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 81.

The child's perception of the world slowly becomes organized by the postural schema in accordance with this newly learned system of relations, which is referred to by Merleau-Ponty as the system of "me-and-other."⁷⁹ Out of this system there will arise a new dimension of one's experience as a perceiving subject, a new hold over the body. For the instincts or reflexes one develops are, in essence, motor and perceptual habits which express "the general synthesis of one's own body," a bodily awareness.⁸⁰ These habits, as expressions of a unique system of relations with the world, establish for the postural schema sort of "knowledge relation" with regard to situations, persons, and/or things, thereby imbuing the world with another layer of sense - a "third-person" perspective, or what others might identify in the individual as a personality. The child's explorations of the environment and of others, in time, will give rise to a unique postural language or style of communicating her embodied consciousness. Her habitual relations with others arise out of reciprocal exchanges between her own intentions and gestures as well as the intentions and gestures of others. In this sense, the child is free to share, for example, only insofar as the other brings to her awareness and thereby affirms in her this style of conduct.

As children's relations with others develop, their spatial perspective will also begin to change. For the way in which children orient and conduct themselves during this stage of development is now highly influenced by their awareness of themselves in relation to other people and things in the world. The postural schema learns to organize the organisms' means for embodied existence so as to best make sense of the situations into which it is thrown. As we develop, our postural schema's powers of perception and motility become more attuned to the environment,

⁷⁹ Merleau-Ponty, "The Child's Relations With Others," 174.

⁸⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 153.

and in becoming familiar with the system of “me-and-other,” our embodied consciousness organizes our experiences according to, what Merleau-Ponty defines as, an *object-horizon structure*. When a child exerts muscular control and focuses on a toy held by another child, for example, she *anchors* herself in it, and her perception imbues the object with a sense - it is something she desires at the present moment, something with which she can play. In pausing before the object and paying it attention, her gaze utilizes a modality of movement, it opens up the exploration of an object which was previously surveyed as simply one of the many objects before her, as a part of the *background*. The gaze, which arises out of the postural schema’s power of perception and motility, works in such a way so as to bring the object to the foreground, thereby closing off the landscape in which the object previously appeared as merely one thing among others. In focusing on a fragment of the landscape, the object becomes animated, imbued with sense, while the other objects recede into the background and exist as context for the child’s situation.

Perhaps, after stealing the toy away from another child, the infant’s mother might turn to her and catch her gaze. The child’s awareness of her mother perceiving her re-orientes her awareness and perspective on the situation. They affirm in one another a shared sense, as the child’s perception of her mother perceiving her directs her toward a new style of inhabiting the world with others. The same can be said of the mother, as her conduct and its gestural meaning cannot be separated from its context, wherein she exists as a mother and intends to teach her daughter how to relate to others. The mother may, perhaps, gently take the toy away from her daughter and explain to her that it’s important to share toys, that there are other toys, and that she will eventually get her turn. These expressions allow the child to learn a new gestural meaning and new styles of perceptual and motor conduct. In this way, perception is a two-sided act, requiring

the act of perceiving on the subject's side *and* the thing perceived in the environment. It is the creation of a signification which is inseparable from its sign. As organisms, we come before an object in a perceptual field - a practical arrangement with regard to the situation in which we find ourselves, and objects in the world are there for us as tools which we have the capacity to utilize through perception and motility. As Merleau-Ponty depicts, things in the environment function as "poles of action" toward which the body is oriented, possibilities which arise out of a particular context. We learn new ways of inhabiting the world by perceiving the tendencies of others, their embodied intentionality. As bodies, we are geared toward the world through our projects and motor habits, and the gaze is one of the many means of experiencing spatial perspective.

In the same way that objects, such as the child's toy, can be investigated spatially by virtue of the object-horizon structure, throughout her development, the child will learn that she is capable of investigating things in terms of their temporality as well. In becoming familiarized with the passing of days, for example, children learn to explore people, objects, and events in terms of their situatedness in time. Along with the immediate past, children learn they have access to the horizon of the future that surrounds it. Children learn to perceive the present situation as a moment in time, as a "today," as a "now" which can be investigated in relation to a "yesterday" or a "tomorrow." Their postural schema becomes familiar with the "actual present seen as the future of the past" and "along with the imminent future, [it] also [has] the horizon of the past that will surround it; that is," it has its actual present as the past of a future.⁸¹ The postural schema orients one's body toward the present situation as containing in it both the immediate

⁸¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 71-72.

past and the future as horizons, thereby imbuing one's perception and motility with a global sense, a *field of presence*:

It spreads out according to two dimensions: the dimension of here-there and the dimension of past-present-future. The second dimension clarifies the first. I "hold" or I "have" the distant object without explicitly positing the spatial perspective (apparent size and form), just as I "still hold in hand" the near past without any distortion and without any interposed "memory." If one still wishes to speak of synthesis [of depth] this synthesis will be, as Husserl says, a "transition synthesis," which does not link discrete perspectives, but which accomplishes the "passage" from one to the other.⁸²

For Merleau-Ponty, one's memories of the past and anticipations of the future are vague senses of one's existence which may be clarified by one's current field of presence. In remembering our situatedness in the past, we bring to the forefront of our awareness an experience and make use of our current field of presence as the background against which this sense appears. This global awareness of embodiment exists for the postural schema as a bodily knowledge. It acts as the background against which things appear, making sense of our situation, and giving rise to stylized patterns of organizing perception and motility.

To globally make sense of the environment in this way, both spatially and temporally, is precisely the function of the organism. Out of one's spatial and temporal experiences in the world with others as bodies, instincts or *reflexes* arise, expressing a unique orientation toward one's field of presence, which includes both a behavioural and cultural milieu. The global presence of one's situation, that is the immanent horizon of one's past and future, imbues things in the world with sense, it allows for things to appear to us ready for inspection. In this sense, Merleau-Ponty reveals, bodies and their spatial-temporal situatedness are "enveloped by generality,"

⁸² Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 265.

and memories of our situatedness in the past, may be examined or explicitly grasped by us given this “general adhesion to the zone of our body and of our life that they concern.”⁸³ The embodied subject is entirely different from other things in the world, as this generality negates the possibility of reducing the individual to any definite situation. The embodied consciousness cannot be examined from all sides, as one would examine a cube, for example, as it is constantly living in relation to the horizons of both its past and its future. The body and its global field of presence cause things to appear as a situation in a certain context, and our pre-objective perspective as organisms calls forth the creation of a sense with regard to the situation in which it is thrown. Our embodied consciousness makes use of the motor and perceptual possibilities with which it has been endowed.

Merleau-Ponty’s conclusions are significant to the investigation of the phenomenology of incest abuse, as they illuminate a flaw in the dominant view of trauma. The DSM trauma criterion, which is founded upon a dualistic philosophy, depicts survivors as bodies holding psychic trauma. This belief puts the onus on victims of abuse, demanding of them objective proof of the devastation they claim to have experienced and are currently experiencing. However, the objectivity this dominant tradition seeks, as Merleau-Ponty shows, is absent from the phenomenal field. The world in which we live is founded upon the ambiguity of our intersubjective experiences - senses created and shared with others. Moreover, one’s field of presence is constituted by the sensorimotor structures and capacities of the embodied consciousness, that is the body as one’s point of view upon the world. As humans, we don’t perceive people and things in an objective field, “just as we do not see the eyes of a familiar face, but rather its gaze and expression,”

⁸³ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 165.

as practical sense inseparable from its signification.⁸⁴ Every explicit perception of a thing is sustained by a previously implicit, embodied communication with a certain atmosphere.⁸⁵ Children of incest abuse, as I will later explore, typically cannot perceive the origin and onset of their abuse, as the shared sense created between the child and their abuser is one which rests on a confusion of tongues. Their perceptual and motor habits are primed since infancy so as to prevent a distinction between affection and abuse. For many survivors, this can result in immense distress, confusion, and self-hatred.

3. Child-Caregiver Relations

In order to grasp the significance of the damage caused by manipulative, incestuous relations, a brief examination of neuro-typical relations between children and their caregivers is required. For, as Merleau-Ponty states, “it is not because the child has the same blood as his parents that he loves them; it is because he ... sees them turned toward him, and this identifies himself with them, conceives of himself in their image, and conceives of them in his image.”⁸⁶ The child’s postural schema, in response to active parental care, experiences a close association with the caregiver, their embodied existence holds for the child a sense of comfort and security. The caregiver’s conduct expresses to the child something about her own embodied consciousness, the caregiver’s, and the way in which she is perceived by others. Here, I will investigate this phenomenon further, along with the scaffolding process that allows infants to achieve a sense of

⁸⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 294.

⁸⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 334.

⁸⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Man and Adversity,” *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*, ed. Ted Toadvine and Leonard Lawlor, (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 192.

flexibility and stability with regard to their motility, perception, and self-regulation. I will investigate the psychosomatic resources caregivers must provide in order to support the child's development as well as the way in which these early childhood relations impact the organism's global perspective and field of presence. For, as we've discovered, environmental phenomena exist for the organism as "poles of action" toward which the body is oriented. This chapter will illustrate the way in which the child learns to anticipate her future, orient herself toward the environment, and engage in relations with others, as well as reveal the significance of the extent to which the caregiver is attuned to their child's embodiment.

3.1 Attunement

As previously discussed, recent studies on early childhood behaviour and development align with Merleau-Ponty's understanding of embodied relations. In addition to Ruth Feldman's studies on affiliative bonds and active parental care, as discussed in chapter 2.2, Katharina Sternek's research finds that the workings of caregiver attentiveness "support the child to anticipate the behaviour of the [other], to regulate its own behavior, to establish happenings and to develop anticipation in the future."⁸⁷ These conclusions are based on numerous studies, including Mary Ainsworth's "Strange Situation" experiment, wherein a one year old child is left alone in a room for several minutes, the caregiver returns, and the child's psycho-somatic response is observed. From this experiment, it was concluded that "responsiveness and empathy of the parents are main factors for the development of secure attachment and the development of the reflective

⁸⁷ Katharina Sternek, "Attachment Theory and Gestalt Psychology," *Gestalt Theory* 29, no. 4 (2007): 311

competence.”⁸⁸ Caregivers displaying lower levels of affection and attentiveness toward their child were unable to comfort their child upon their return. Their children displayed disorganized behaviour and a sense of insecure attachment in one of two ways: either the child displayed great mistrust in the caregiver’s availability and support and showed a lack of emotion during parental detachment and return or, alternatively, the child strongly protested against detachment, yet was unable to be comforted by their caregiver’s return. On the contrary, children with highly attentive parents displayed organized behaviour and a secure sense of attachment. After protesting their caregivers’ initial detachment, these children accepted their parents’ return as a sense of comfort and were then able to return to a state of self-regulation. In essence, the embodied existence of a highly attuned caregiver holds for the child a practical significance. The child’s postural schema has organized its patterns of perception and motility around the caregiver’s presence. It evokes in the child a sense of completeness, safety, and familiarity, which she may then take up and, in turn, orient her conduct in accordance with this psycho-somatic sense.

That the caregiver provides for the child crucial development resources is further supported by Joel Krueger, who found that infants of “low-sensitivity” caregivers “maintained lower frequencies of gaze monitoring and ability to coordinate attention with attuned strangers” than did infants of highly sensitive caregivers.⁸⁹ They lacked the developmental support necessary for motor coordination and interpersonal engagement. Their environment, to the extent that it was absent of gesture, facial expression, touch, speech, and spatial proximity, failed to support the child’s embodied potential. It is important to note here Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological un-

⁸⁸ Katharina Sterneke, “Attachment Theory and Gestalt Psychology,” 315

⁸⁹ Krueger, “Merleau-Ponty on Shared Emotions and the Joint Ownership Thesis,” 516.

derstanding of the gaze, and the two-sided act of vision it entails. For, from this study, Kruger concludes that the “inner control of [gaze monitoring and] attention is a crucial constituent of self-awareness, the feeling of being a conscious subject.”⁹⁰ He observes an association between the development of gaze/motor control and one’s sense of self, which is also emphasized in Merleau-Ponty’s work. The very enigma of the self derives from the fact that vision is a two-sided act, “that my body is simultaneously seeing and visible.”⁹¹ By means of the gaze, the child opens onto the world, and their motor coordination, rather than “a decision made by the mind,” is but “the natural sequel to and the maturation of vision ... my body moves *itself*; my movement unfolds *itself*.”⁹² One’s gaze and motor coordination are both the sign and the signification of a self caught up in a world with others. Perspective and habit are instinctual styles of embodiment, influenced by the development and maturation of perception and motility.

Sterneke, Feldman, and Krueger’s studies all support Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of the child’s relations with others. Child-caregiver relations or affiliative bonds, previously defined as selective, enduring attachments, were found to effectively “set the framework for the infant’s emotional development and shape the lifelong capacity to regulate stress, modulate arousal, and engage in co-regulatory interactions, achievements that are central components of the child’s social-emotional growth.”⁹³ Without the critical environmental stimulus required for neurological, social, and emotional development, children are unable to learn how to effectively process hor-

⁹⁰ Krueger, “Merleau-Ponty on Shared Emotions and the Joint Ownership Thesis,” 516-517.

⁹¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*, ed. Ted Toadvine and Leonard Lawlor, (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 354.

⁹² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” 354.

⁹³ Ruth Feldman, “Parent-Infant Synchrony: A Biobehavioral Model of Mutual Influences in the Formation of Affiliative Bonds,” *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development* 77, no. 2 (2012): 42

monal, psychological, and behavioural phenomena. In healthy child-caregiver relations, the caregiver strives to achieve a sense of synchrony or *attunement*, a recognition of the other's embodiment. The sense of security that arises out of healthy affiliative bonds works in such a way so as to support the child's journey in developing a bodily recognition of one's primordial rights, needs, desires, aversions, and the like. A healthy child-caregiver relation is conditional upon the caregiver's recognition of the child's value and their capacity to encourage and support the child's exploration of both her body and her environment. In actively striving to become attuned to their child's needs, the gestures of a highly attentive parent will impregnate the child with a shared sense which continues to become articulated over time. The mother's attempt to console her crying infant, for instance, by holding her closely, slowly swaying her side-to-side, and singing her a soft lullaby, holds for the child a practical signification, a postural recognition of her worth. She feels secure in her mother's arms, cared for, and protected. By cultivating an environment in which the child's interoceptive state of well-being is recognized, valued and regulated, the mother teaches the child that she has permission to express her needs and that she may trust and rely upon her to fulfill these needs.

In light of these conclusions, it can be said that the child's body is a perceptual focus for the highly attuned caregiver, as they continuously seek to interpret for the child what she cannot yet articulate herself. In a recent study on toddler emotional regulation, it was found that "the ability to communicate our needs, wants, and intentions is pivotal in the development of emotion regulation" and, moreover, "teaching infant sign supports emotion regulation ... by helping children take an active role in their own emotional regulation before they have the words to express

how they feel and what they need.”⁹⁴ While teaching sign is not conditional for fulfilling the role of a highly attuned parent, I believe the phenomenological acts involved in such a practice, namely consistent, empathetic attention and engagement are, in fact, required for attunement. For example, in the attempt to decipher their child’s cries, the caregiver may examine the position of their child’s hands, as they express gestural meaning. When hungry, the child may suck on his fingers or display an attempt to latch onto the mother’s breast. When tired or uncomfortable, the child may rub his eyes with his hands. The recognition and decoding of gestural meaning requires, on behalf of the caregiver, an intensive focus on the child’s embodied experience and an earnest attempt to assist the child’s endeavour to both articulate and meet her needs.

3.2 Embodied Permissions and Rights

Primed by jointly owned experiences, children develop instinctual styles of relating to others and the world around them, and the capacity to which they explore their environment will largely reflect their faith in the empathy and responsiveness of their caregivers. Highly attuned caregivers willingly prioritize their children’s needs, despite knowing that such nurturance will not, perhaps until adulthood, be reciprocated. They challenge and encourage their children in eager anticipation of their developmental possibilities, and provide resources in order to support their children’s pursuits. In highly attuned child-caregiver relations, the caregiver’s conduct is shaped by their perception of the child as something innocent and valuable and, in turn, the child is impregnated with this gestural meaning. In order to positively affect the child’s development,

⁹⁴ Ashley E. Karsten, Tricia D. Foster, Kalli B. Decker and Claire Vallotton, “Toddlers Take Emotion Regulation Into Their Own Hands With Infant Signs,” *National Association for the Education of Young Children* 72, no. 1 (2012): 42.

the caregiver must consistently compete for the child's gaze in order to solicit and articulate a particular horizon, a field of presence in which the caregiver's embodied existence holds for the child a sense of security and comfort. The caregiver's embodied intention to recognize in the child certain needs, desires, and aversions works to create a shared field of presence, one in which the caregiver's embodied existence provides for the child a sense of safety, security, and comfort.

Children of highly attuned parents are given the benefit of the doubt; they can rely upon their caregivers to recognize and accept their weaknesses. They feel a sense of safety and protection in relation to their caregiver, as though they are always on their side. A highly attuned caregiver explores their child's embodied existence and recognizes in her grouchy mood, for example, a feeling of tiredness or a sense of fright. The caregiver's reliable, empathetic conduct, like a pole of action, provides for the child the investigative tools which she may use to explore her embodied existence further. The highly attuned caregiver will, for instance, teach their grouchy toddler how to regulate her emotions and understand her current field of presence. The caregiver will, perhaps, remind the toddler that she hasn't had a proper rest, empathetically explain, in a way that makes sense to her, the importance of sleep, and console the child in her moment of distress. The persistence of such conduct solicits in the child's postural schema a practical recognition of her permission to rest, to play, to have needs, and to be needy. The child learns through experience that she does not have to be a wholly "good girl," and that she is allowed to express her emotions. She learns to trust that her caregiver will, unconditionally, accept and be an aid in understanding her embodied existence.

For highly attuned caregivers, an integral part of teaching their children how to explore the world and their embodied existence is to introduce to them their sense of bodily autonomy and fundamental entitlement to safety. Newly adjusting to the phenomenal field of existence wherein there appears both the self and the other, toddlers have a strong desire to expand their horizons and push boundaries. They are eager to gain a sense of independence by venturing to engage in daily projects on their own. For instance, the caregiver's attempt to dress their toddler may result in a fit of temper, a resistance, and a struggle for power. The toddler may scream and shout, or even slap the parent's hand away. The highly attuned caregiver, in this case, would gently explain to the child that it is important to treat others kindly, and that we should always keep our hands to ourselves without others' permission. Moreover, rather than narrow-mindedly interpreting the child's behaviour as a personal retaliation, the caregiver globally perceives the child's embodied state, and considers it in a particular context. Thus, while reinforcing the importance of respect for physical and emotional boundaries, the highly attuned caregiver would recognize in the child her fundamental need and desire to express bodily autonomy and, in light of this discovery, they would encourage the child to participate in the clothing process. For healthy child-caregiver relations work to support the child's postural schema to regulate and organize its powers of perception and motility.

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology illuminates the significance of the development of perspective and instinct, and, more specifically, the importance of teaching children how to best make sense of their field of presence and regulate their embodied state accordingly. Like an unfolding melody, these embodied relations become articulated over time and, in later years, exist for the organism as the background against which all things appear - it inevitably colours their

field of presence. As creatures of habit, our postural schema, or the body's orientation to the world, adopts a familiar style of organizing psycho-somatic phenomena. The child-caregiver relation is like a horizon, a collection of things held together, "a being by porosity, pregnancy, or generality, and he before whom the horizon opens is caught up, included with it."⁹⁵ The child's motility and perception, his capacity to render himself present to something through the body, is sustained and nourished by the highly attuned caregiver, as they help him to discover and pursue new phenomenal possibilities. The emerging focus of the child's gaze, as well as their process of self-regulation, develops out of a "a latency ... a *flesh* of things," that is the postural schema's primordial orientation toward its environment.⁹⁶ Through the articulation of perspective and habits, one's embodied existence makes explicit what was once only implicit. The child's sense of embodied rights and permissions may be expressed, in later years, through her capacity to set healthy emotional/physical boundaries or, perhaps, in her ability to recognize and communicate her needs.

Through the phenomenological examination of the child's embodied relations, Merleau-Ponty illuminates the very "bond between the flesh and the idea, between the visible and the interior armature which it manifests and which it conceals."⁹⁷ Over time, the world which inhabits others, and from which we learn to distinguish ourselves, becomes rediscovered in us as the permanent horizon of all our perceptions and conduct, and "as a dimension in relation to which

⁹⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The Intertwining -The Chiasm," *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*, ed. Ted Toadvine and Leonard Lawlor, (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 407.

⁹⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The Intertwining -The Chiasm," 395.

⁹⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The Intertwining -The Chiasm," 407- 408.

[we are] constantly situating [ourselves].”⁹⁸ As embodied beings, we live in relation to both our past and our future, for the postural schema is an organic system never fully complete. The organism makes use of the psychosomatic resources which it has been afforded in order to best make sense of its current field of presence and project itself into the future. Perspective and habit, which arise out of our embodied experience, relieves us from the act of reflective judgment and orients us toward a certain way of taking a position to a situation whose contours are defined. In the same way that a cane, for example, ceases to be an object of exploration for the blind man and exists, instead, as a perceptual tool, our embodied powers of perception and motility, through the articulation of perspective and habit, provides us with a natural instrument. Like the blind’s man’s cane, one’s body, over time, becomes an object with which the organism is familiar, and rather than existing as spectacle for itself, the body instead becomes an instrument *with* which he perceives. The body, as a “grouping of lived-through meanings,” moves toward its equilibrium to the best of its ability given the psychosomatic resources with which it has been afforded.⁹⁹

4. The Phenomenology of Incest Abuse

In this chapter, I will present a number of case studies, each depicting a particular aspect of incest abuse which Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology helps to unveil. Through this investigation, I intend to illustrate the way in which incest survivors learn, on a primordial level, how to

⁹⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “What is Phenomenology,” *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*, ed. Ted Toadvine and Leonard Lawlor, (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 61.

⁹⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 177.

create and organize patterns of motricity and perception through interpersonal relations with primary caregivers. I will also further demonstrate the inadequacies of the scientific perspective and explain how Merleau-Ponty's understanding of primordial consciousness better addresses the relational nuances present in cases of incest abuse. First, using Fay Brown's book, entitled *How I Became A Person: A Counsellor's Therapeutic Process Laid Bare*, I will examine phenomenon of memory loss and embodied estrangement as postures adapted in response to abuse. I then will focus on numerous survivors' testimonies presented in Judith Lewis Herman's *Father-Daughter Incest* in order to understand the process and impact of grooming involved in both covert and overt cases of incest abuse. By applying Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological approach to the examination of incest abuse, I believe one can come to grasp a better understanding of the survivor's experience, as well as the self-negating habits and perspectives adopted in order to cope with the abuse which they must later struggle to unlearn. Unlike the dominant psychological perspective, which presents trauma as a past experience captured by the mind or the "psyche" alone, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological perspective acknowledges the lived communication we have with the world and, in turn, better understands trauma as an *ongoing relation* - one that is lived out through the body's powers of motricity and perception.

For many of us, it's difficult to conceive of a perspective absent of embodied rights and permissions, as the desire to play, or to rest, to say yes or to say no is often taken for granted - so natural they seem to us necessary. We stop and take breaks when we feel tired, we decide to eat when we are hungry, and we allow ourselves to cry when we get hurt. These instinctive acts require little to no reflexivity, as the postural schema has incorporated these embodied senses or gestalts into its organized powers of perception and motility. Embodied rights and permissions

impregnate the individual with a primordial sense of value and entitlement to safety, thereby encouraging the child to honour their body's history and experience in the world. As we have seen, children with highly attuned caregivers are encouraged to explore their environment, and this relation aids the child's attempt to recognize and make sense of her embodied existence in a healthy manner. It provides for the child self-affirming perceptual and motor possibilities. However, styles of embodiment differ greatly between individuals who have experienced highly-attuned care in childhood and those who haven't. Often, for the incest survivor, bodily safety and autonomy are not senses with which the child has been endowed, since motor and perception habits which includes such meanings would present themselves as obstacles for the child predator. Instead, victims of incest abuse learn that their body is not to be trusted. Their body becomes both the source of their pain and the object of their abuser's weaponized affection.

I believe it is important to emphasize the urgent need to address the phenomenon of incest abuse. For, despite the alarming frequency of this occurrence and the internal coherence of their stories, victims and survivors of incest abuse continue to be undermined and discredited. Recent studies suggest that one in ten American children (i.e. between 7-12% of children) will be sexually abused. More precisely, one in seven girls and one in twenty-five boys will be sexually abused before they turn eighteen.¹⁰⁰ Studies also indicate that the majority of individuals first experience the abuse as early as three years old.¹⁰¹ Moreover, in her book on father-daughter incest abuse, Judith Lewis Herman expresses there is sufficient reason to believe that the alarming

¹⁰⁰ Catherine Townsend and Alyssa A. Rheingold, "Estimating a Child Sexual Abuse Prevalence Rate for Practitioners: A Review of Child Sexual Abuse Prevalence Studies," *Darkness to Light*, (August 2013): 16.

¹⁰¹ Arceli R. Millan, Jocelyn B. Cruz, and Clarinda A. Reyes, "Incest Victims: A Case Study," *International Journal of Advanced Research* 5, no. 9 (2017): 573.

rates of incest abuse may be considered low when globally contextualized. According to the five largest studies on childhood sexual abuse and incest, “one fifth to one third of all women reported that they had some sort of childhood sexual encounter with an adult male. Between four and twelve percent of all women reported a sexual experience with a relative, and one woman in one hundred reported a sexual experience with her father or stepfather.”¹⁰² However, largely based on reports made by white middle-class women, these estimates fail to consider minority populations.

Furthermore, having focused her study on father-daughter relations, Herman’s analysis does not account for incest abuse experienced by male identifying and gender non-conforming individuals. Here, I believe it is important to keep in mind that Herman’s focus was most likely motivated by the fact that sexual abuse is a gendered issue, as consistently suggest by studies which indicate that the “female prevalence rate . . . is more than three times the prevalence rate of males.”¹⁰³ One could argue against the conclusions of these statistics by offering ones which suggests that females “participate in prevalence studies report 1.5 to 5 times more sexual abuse than males.”¹⁰⁴ However, regardless of gender, many victims of incest abuse harbour similar feelings of guilt, shame and fear and, because of this, fail to report their experiences. Lacking proper environmental support and caregiver attunement, children are often unable to learn how to make sense of their embodiment and communicate their needs, wants, aversions and the like and, therefore, are unable to make sense of the abuse itself. Painful emotional states soon become un-

¹⁰² Judith Lewis Herman, *Father-Daughter Incest*: 12.

¹⁰³ Townsend and. Rheingold, “Estimating a Child Sexual Abuse Prevaence Rate for Practitioners,” 16.

¹⁰⁴ Townsend and. Rheingold, “Estimating a Child Sexual Abuse Prevaence Rate for Practitioners,” 16.

bearable for the child, as they lack a relational home in which they can be shared and held. As a result, these survivors live with a sense of estrangement, and are unable to develop a sense of being *at home* in the world as a body. Unable to honour their body's history, many survivors suffer from depression, self-mutilation, and suicidal ideation.¹⁰⁵

4.1 Embodied Estrangement

“Inspired by humanity suffering in stigmatised-silence,” Fay Brown’s book, *How I Became A Person: A Counsellor’s Therapeutic Process Laid Bare*, depicts her experience as a survivor of incest abuse. Brown reveals that, throughout her childhood, the trauma she now attempts to communicate existed largely in the background of her experience. She often describes her memory as “hazy,” “patchy,” and containing “black holes” from the trauma. In fact, she explains to the reader that she has “no recollection” of many of the happenings in which she was said to have been present.¹⁰⁶

I had completely buried my whole childhood experience ... Sometimes I wondered if I was even real. Am I really here? I am here; but in a sense that doesn’t count at all, ever. We played ‘forget’, ‘be normal’, and I ‘forgot’...¹⁰⁷

The sense of embodied estrangement and self denial which her testimony displays, and which I will examine more closely in this section, is best captured through Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology due to his acknowledgement of a *lived communication* with the world. His conception of

¹⁰⁵ Millan, Cruz, and Reyes, “Incest Victims: A Case Study,” 573.

¹⁰⁶ Fay Brown, *How I Became A Person: A Counsellor’s Therapeutic Process Laid Bare* (Autonomy Counselling, 2017): 180.

¹⁰⁷ Brown, *How I Became A Person*, 180-181.

the body schema and the specular image, as modes of enmeshment or attunement with the world, shed light on the inner workings of this phenomenon in a way that the scientific account, as I will later argue, cannot.

As previously established, the postural schema, or the pre-objective sense of primordial unity which strives toward “the constant regulation of bodily equilibrium” is the power one has to realize with their body gestures that are analogous to those they see.¹⁰⁸ It allows for one to take up a situation as a self amongst others through the acquisition of a new dimension of experience, a new hold over the body. Through the development of the postural schema, one gains access to a sense of bodily ownership, a sense of *mineness*, which allows for the experience of the body as an *I*, as a specular image - something separate from the environment in which it originally finds itself. However, when exposed to incest trauma, the postural schema, flexible in nature, may actively neglect one’s sense of subjectivity. It loosens its grip on this hold over the body and estranges one from their experience of embodied subjectivity in order to endure suffering. The victim’s lived communication with the world as a self has been effectively disturbed.

In order to adequately capture Brown’s experience and, in turn, the phenomenon of embodied estrangement, I believe a brief context is necessary. Like many other survivors of incest abuse, both Brown and her caregivers experienced malattuned familial relations beginning in early childhood. Her mother’s parents, she expresses, were bereft of maternal/paternal instincts, and the generational transmission of emotional abuse/neglect she describes is not uncommon.¹⁰⁹ As children, we learn to make sense of the world and develop an understanding of our embodi-

¹⁰⁸ Merleau-Ponty, “The Child’s Relations With Others,” 173.

¹⁰⁹ Brown, *How I Became A Person*, 164.

ment through interpersonal relations. The body develops perspectival and motor habits, instincts which work to navigate one's experience of environmental and interoceptive phenomena. Having unresolved emotional wounds created in childhood, Brown's mother was unable to create with her own child a well-attuned caregiver relation. Her inability to home her own embodied state, which is itself interwoven with fabric of her childhood trauma, prevents her from being emotionally present and well attuned to her child's sense of embodiment. Furthermore, Brown's father, the youngest of five and the only son, was raised by a "spiteful mother" and a paedophilic father, "one that preyed on his own daughters," inviting them into his marital bed "to get aroused, then have sex with his wife. She was his co-facilitator."¹¹⁰ Despite knowing the families' history of abuse, "both [Brown's] parents had a deep respect for their parents, subjecting [her and her sister] to them, too."¹¹¹ The context of her incest abuse, which reveals an absence of parental attunement, contributes to the phenomenon of embodied estrangement as a trauma response. In addition to having endured the sexual abuse itself, Brown had not previously been given the resources that may have helped her to better understand and cope with such violations. Lacking caregiver attunement, Fay was unable to grasp the sense of her self as a unique, embodied subjectivity which is to be valued, protected, and freely expressed. Having been raised without the introduction of this fundamental sense of selfhood, Brown is then put at greater risk of being the victim of manipulation and abuse. For "consciousness can forget phenomena only because it can recall them."¹¹² Had Brown first been introduced to the sense of bodily rights and

¹¹⁰ Brown, *How I Became A Person*, 165.

¹¹¹ Brown, *How I Became A Person*, 165.

¹¹² Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 68.

the value of her embodied subjectivity through caregiver attunement, perhaps her life would have turned out differently. However, lacking proper caregiver attunement resulted in the following situation, neither inevitably nor voluntarily.

Brown's grandfather was aware of the power he had over his grandchild's perception and motility and used this to his advantage. He was cognizant of her vulnerability as the daughter of his deferential children, and as a young child lacking any sense of bodily rights or personal boundaries. He was, as Brown describes, a game player, "bursting in on [her] in the toilet and watching ... or randomly putting his finger in [her] knickers as [she] was playing."¹¹³ Early on in her development, Brown's perpetrator had introduced these gestures with a sense of normalcy. Gestures, Merleau-Ponty reveals to us, bring about, both for the perpetrator and the victim, "a certain structural co-ordination of experience, a certain modulation of existence."¹¹⁴ This embodied style of being in the world with others is then taken up and expressed through patterns of behaviour. In the case of incest abuse, such gestures invite a style of communication wherein the victim's body appears in the world as spectacle which is to be taken up and held by the other's gaze. Brown's grandfather, through his approach towards her, creates a spatial and temporal horizon wherein violating acts of perception and motility are, at the very least, passively permitted, if not internalized as entirely deserved. Like many other survivors, Brown is reduced to the status of an object through her perpetrator's gaze and learns early in her childhood that she is not to be seen as a subject, as an embodied *I*. Future situations are then lived out and unfold according to this stylized relation.

¹¹³ Brown, *How I Became A Person*, 168.

¹¹⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 225.

On one occasion, while preying on his granddaughter's vulnerability, Brown's grandmother walked in, excused herself for interrupting, and promptly left the room. Immediately afterward, Brown describes having "felt a moment of being 'saved' yanked from beneath [her]," as she "consigned [herself] to his wide fingers rooting around" inside of her body.¹¹⁵ In this instance, by virtue of her grandmother's compliance, Brown is once again taught that her body should not be considered hers to own and express. Rather, it is to be regarded as an object like any other. She learns that her body is to be perceived as a tool and, as such, it is to be valued for its capacity to support the other's task at hand. Like many other survivors of incest abuse, Brown is told during such acts of violation that she "liked it and that [she] shouldn't tell anyone [their] secret, because they would think [she] was the dirty one."¹¹⁶ As a vulnerable child, she is taught that she is not to trust her own embodied experience, and that she can rely on others neither for safety nor compassion. Thus, in order to survive repeated exposure to incest abuse, the postural schema's power to project oneself as an embodied subjectivity is diminished and, in turn, a refusal of co-existence is strengthened.

In his *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty first discusses this refusal of co-existence in relation to a patient, "a girl whose mother has forbidden her to see again the young man with whom she is in love, cannot sleep, loses her appetite and finally the use of speech."¹¹⁷ His investigations reveal trauma to be a disruption in the syncretic system itself, rather than a psychological memory originating from individual events and later manifesting in a longing to return,

¹¹⁵ Brown, *How I Became A Person*, 168.

¹¹⁶ Brown, *How I Became a Person*, 168.

¹¹⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 160.

or a reoccurrence solely in the form of individual flashbacks. The postural schema, flexible in nature, adjusts its powers of perception and motility and develops differently for those who experience trauma. He states:

In so far as behaviour is a form, in which 'visual' and 'tactile contents', sensibility and motility appear only as inseparable moments, it remains inaccessible to causal thought and is capable of being apprehended only by another kind of thought, that which grasps its object as it comes into being and as it appears to the person experiencing it, with that atmosphere of meaning then surrounding it, and which tries to infiltrate into that atmosphere in order to discover, behind scattered facts and symptoms, the subject's whole being, when he is normal, or the basic disturbance, when he is a patient.¹¹⁸

The scientific account of trauma fails to recognize the global *field of presence* in which things appear and, in turn, the context which influences the sense things are given. It objectifies the phenomenon of incest abuse by assuming the existence of a disinterested subject, detached from its living communication with the world, thereby reducing the body to a mere machine. In this way, science is a derivative form of knowledge, built upon an already experiencing subject. It holds sensation as a consequence of external stimulus, that is discrete, unambiguous things which exist 'out there,' separate from us. It posits the existence of a point-by-point mechanical correspondence between the external world and one's perception of it, which is decoded internally. However, as Merleau-Ponty reveals, we are not scientific tools decoding raw data. For the act of perception is grounded in a *lived* account of the world, an embodied communication. The postural schema, or the syncretic consciousness, exists as the background against which things appear. The very act of perceiving invests things with a *lived* value and holds a connection to the world by virtue of our being something *of* the world. For "to be a consciousness or rather to be *an* experience is to hold an inner communication with the world, the body and other people, to be

¹¹⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 120.

with them instead of beside them.”¹¹⁹ Thus, our understanding and perception of the world, our very essence, is inseparable from our embodied existence.

The denial of one's subjective experience or embodied estrangement can be explained by the very foundation of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. For it is the “the essence of consciousness to forget its own phenomena thus enabling ‘things’ to be constituted.”¹²⁰ In order for objects to appear, and for one to simply exist as a self amongst others, the postural schema must push to the background one's experience of primordial indistinction. The very nature of our perception requires self-deception through the medium of generality.¹²¹ When undergoing severe, incessant suffering, the postural schema may impoverish the sense of one's experience as a self amongst others by enveloping it in generality, thereby holding it at a distance. Such denial “places the subject in a definite situation and sets bounds, as far as he is concerned, to the immediately available mental field, as the acquisition or loss of a sense organ presents to or removes from his direct grasp an object in the physical field.”¹²² The postural schema closes itself off to a certain style of co-existence with others, one wherein the body is acknowledged as *mine* and its powers of perception and motility are valued as such. The survivor's “third-person” experience, that is the perspectival and motor hold over one's body as an *I*, is pushed to the background of one's field of presence. Painful memories regarding survivor's bodily history are, as a result, held at a distance:

¹¹⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 96.

¹²⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 68.

¹²¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 163.

¹²² Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 162.

I felt his hand creeping under the duvet and up my leg, sliding under my nightdress and lightly brushing my labia... Snap! The memory ends. I think my conscious saved me from experiencing it, my Self shut down and no recall has ever surfaced. I didn't tell anyone about it until I was an adult, why would I? I had been so utterly let down by the adults I sought protection from, it just felt futile and too risky for me to be even more dirty and bad.¹²³

Burdened with feelings of shame and guilt surrounding their trauma, survivors of incest are left feeling helpless and alone. Their “power of learning, of maturing, of entering into communication with others have become, as it were, arrested in a bodily symptom, existence is tied up and the body has become ‘the place where life hides away.’”¹²⁴ The loss of memory then, or the phenomenon of embodied estrangement, is the expression of the postural schema's refusal of co-existence, which is sought as a means of escaping an intolerable situation. The survivor's act of forgetting is the withdrawal from a mode of existence. She keeps the sense of her embodied experience at a distance, as one looks past a person they do not wish to see.¹²⁵ The loss of embodied subjectivity is not a choice made explicitly but is, rather, something that happens *to us*, much like sleep.

Sleep comes when a certain voluntary attitude suddenly receives from the outside the confirmation for which it was waiting. I am breathing deeply and slowly in order to summon sleep, and suddenly it is as if my mouth were connected to some great lung outside self which alternately calls forth and forces back my breath. A certain rhythm of respiration, which a moment ago I voluntarily maintained, now becomes my very being, and sleep, until now aimed at as a significance, suddenly becomes a situation.¹²⁶

¹²³ Brown, *How I Became a Person*, 172.

¹²⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 164.

¹²⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 162.

¹²⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 245-246.

The subject does not set trauma memories before her as singular and determinate conscious acts which are to be discarded or erased. Rather, these memories are implicitly enveloped in a generality, thereby allowing the survivor to hold them at a distance. The repression of trauma settles into the background, enveloping her embodiment, colouring her perspective and becoming a general feature of her reality.

The presence of incestuous relations in addition to the absence of environmental support result in a sense of shame and hopelessness, which work to further diminish the value and strength of one's embodied subjectivity. Brown's account of incest abuse demonstrates this phenomenon poignantly, as she describes an instance early in her childhood, sitting at her grandfather's piano, playing on the keys:

He brazenly slipped his hand underneath me and groped at my vagina, while I sat paralysed to the spot. Shame washed over me; everyone MUST be able to see it - and it must be what I deserve.¹²⁷

Out of the presence of abusive gestures and the absence of caregiver attunement arises a certain structure of experience whereby the victim's sense of embodiment is disparaged, both by herself and by others. She learns to regard her body as hostile, as the source of her pain. In order to endure the incest abuse, the survivor holds at a distance her embodied sense of *mineness* and, in turn, becomes estranged from her sense of self. Similar to losing one's visual apparatus and the powers that accompany this organ, the loss of bodily ownership results in a loss of subjectivity or agency. There is a disturbance in the postural schema's organizing powers. The victim is unable to access motor and perspectival possibilities which require a field of presence wherein the em-

¹²⁷ Brown, *How I Became a Person*, 173.

bodied self is valued. Instead, her field of presence is overwhelmed by feelings of estrangement, inadequacy, helplessness, and shame.

4.2 Covert Grooming

In this section I will explore what is to be referred to as *grooming* behaviour, that is the “systematic physical and psychological desensitization of a child through engagement in a behavior or set of behaviors used to develop trust, gain access to, build rapport, create opportunity, establish compliance, and ensure secrecy of a target victim.”¹²⁸ While some perpetrators, such as Brown’s grandfather, generally engage in *overtly* harmful grooming tactics (e.g. intimidation, threats, coercion, physical force, etc.), many perpetrators instead use covert, affirming strategies (e.g., flattery, bribery, attention, flirtation, tickling, bathing, seclusion, play, etc.) in order to establish a sense trust with the child. Of course, abusers may choose to engage in both covert and overt grooming tactics and, insomuch as as they work to distort and hinder the development of the child’s perception of normalcy, bodily rights, and freedoms, both are harmful. However, in many cases of incest abuse, the predator largely uses covert abuse tactics in order to create a relation wherein the victim idealizes the caregiver, sees the connection as a form of attunement, and considers exchanges between them to be a privilege, rather than a form of harm. Disguised as gestures of parental love, the ambiguity of the perpetrator’s affection is intended to cultivate within their victims an unhealthy attachment and dependency. In this section, I will present a number of survivor testimonies in order to illustrate the process of covert grooming, and describe

¹²⁸ Molly R. Wolf and Doyle K. Pruitt, “Grooming Hurts Too: The Effects of Types of Perpetrator Grooming on Trauma Symptoms in Adult Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse,” *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse* 28, 3 (2019): 346.

the ways in which these gestures affect the child's well-being and development. As an alternative to the scientific account as presented in the DSM-5, which fails to account for covert incest abuse, I will explain why Merleau-Ponty's conception of trauma, as a disruption in the postural schema, is a more effective lens for the analysis of incest abuse.

As previously established, the well-attuned parent willingly prioritizes their child's needs without expectation of reciprocation and encourages their child to explore their perception and motility with safe and healthy boundaries set in place. Perpetrators, however, aim to accomplish the opposite and are aware that this process is founded upon the child's gaze, which searches for embodied attunement. They actively work against the potential fostering of the child's sense of autonomy and attempt to desensitize the child in order to prevent the development of healthy boundaries. Overt grooming gestures may scare, threaten, or physically force a child into a dynamic wherein they lack autonomy and, in turn, are often regarded as more "objectively" abusive for this reason. Covert grooming tactics, however, create a dynamic which, upon first consideration, may appear to closely resemble child-caregiver attunement. Many abusers, especially those who adopt covert grooming tactics, capitalize on the "societal suspicion of victims claiming sexual abuse, especially when the accusation is against a relative or trusted community member."¹²⁹ As well, they may, for instance, use their relational title as leverage, and explain to their victim that, because they are their guardian, they are allowed to bathe them at any age, or claim that they are simply touching them because they love them. Covert grooming strategies, such as special attention and affection, are used to confuse incest victims.. They are meant to make the child

¹²⁹ Molly R. Wolf and Doyle K. Pruitt, "Grooming Hurts Too," 348.

feel special and loved, so as to offset the potential uneasiness they may instinctively experience during their exchanges. One survivor explains that her father often “secluded” himself with her:

Sometimes we'd have our meals separately from the rest of the family. I had to come straight home from school every day because he'd be waiting for me. We'd go for rides together and cuddle. I liked the attention, but sometimes I didn't want to come home right then. I wanted to play with the other kids.¹³⁰

While victims may crave connection outside the perpetrator, special attention is used to positively reinforce the abusive attachment, and the early onset age of grooming tactics contributes to its effectiveness. Most often these offenders “possess complex sets of skills that are utilized to plan, orchestrate, overcome victims’ protests about being assaulted, elude detection of, and maintain their offending behaviour over a number of years,” including isolation and special treatment beginning in early childhood.¹³¹ Without an alternative model of attuned child-caregiver relations, these children lack the environmental resources required for healthy development, including emotional regulation and arousal modulation. Their understanding of self has not yet developed and is, therefore, entirely susceptible to adopting perspectival and motor habits. By exploiting children’s vulnerability, impressionability, and basic state of dependency, perpetrators are able to ensure the child is unable to make sense of the abuse presented as caregiving.

Covert grooming initially involves seemingly innocent displays of affection, such as special attention, light rubs on the back, tickling, or assistance bathing. However, very slowly over time, the behaviour may begin to evolve as the perpetrator establishes greater trust with the victim. Covert grooming gestures may begin to include invitations to sit on the perpetrator’s lap,

¹³⁰ Judith Lewis Herman, *Father-Daughter Incest*: 116.

¹³¹ Tony Ward, “Competency and Deficit Models in the Understanding and Treatment of Sexual Offenders,” *Journal of Sex Research* 36, 3 (1999): 298.

massages, cuddling in bed, inappropriate displays of nudity, introduction to pornography and/or movies which display sexual acts, and the like. Often, only years later, once a sexual relation has been secretly established under the guise of child-caregiver attunement, will overt sexual violence begin to occur. The use of bribery, play, and special attention work to establish a relation wherein the child is encouraged to initiate contact with the abuser, and to perceive the perpetrator's initiation as a gesture of innocent affection. Offenders take advantage of the child's naivety and curiosity. They watch and discuss sex with the child, use "accidental touch" as a means of sexual desensitization, and engage in "games" involving inappropriate conduct. Making use of the familial tie as a pre-established bond, perpetrators create for the child a horizon which involves a presence of abusive gestures yet an absence of the sense of abuse. The perpetrator orchestrates a connection with the child wherein she is unable to perceive the exploitation present in their exchanges. In order to do so, the abuser teaches the child, through special attention and other covert grooming strategies, that inappropriate touch and seduction are forms of love. Consider this male victim's testimony, as recalls his experience of covert grooming:

My mother always insisted on washing my genitals, even when I was old enough to do it myself. Sometimes it was embarrassing; other times I enjoyed it. I didn't know what to think. Sometimes she'd give me kisses on then lips that seemed to last too long. I would often find myself sexually aroused when I looked at her ... To this day I feel like I was some kind of pervert, because I was sexually aroused by my mother's presence.¹³²

Through the use of covert grooming tactics, abusers create an unhealthy form of attachment whereby the child feels responsible for their abuser's well-being, as well as their own feelings of sexual arousal. The child's affection is craved and inappropriately sought out by the perpetrator,

¹³² Kenneth M. Adams, *Silently Seduced: When Parents Make Their Children Partners* (Florida: Health Communications Inc., 2011), 12.

and the child learns to find value through this form of exchange. The same survivor describes his commitment to his abuser whilst covert grooming tactics took place:

My mother and I fought a lot, but I would have killed anyone who put their hands on her — including my father. Sometimes I had jealous fits of rage when she paid more attention to my father or some other man. She was mine and I wasn't going to share her.¹³³

The attachment created for the child bestows upon him a sense of obligation to his abuser, as he holds the relation to be his only true source of love and affection. Victims often become the abuser's confidant, and receive information concerning their dissatisfied marriage, sex-life, and deep feelings of loneliness. By indulging such intimate details, the perpetrator creates in the child a sense of duty and commitment resembling that which is shared between spouses. Eager to continue receiving the only form of affection available to him, the child readily endures the abusive relation that was created. The child is eager to prove that he is deserving of that love, that he is his abuser's "good" boy. For this is how he is taught to receive any sense of self-worth.

Covert grooming gestures, which aim to resemble caregiver affection, fosters within victims a deep sense of confusion. The idealization of the perpetrator, as well as the internalized feelings of shame which arise out of this abusive relation often prevent disclosure. Thus, it is important to acknowledge covert grooming as a legitimate form of abuse in order to aid victims in their discovery and healing. In describing trauma as an "event(s)" involving "exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence," the DSM-5 fails to account for the covert grooming process, typically beginning early in infancy.¹³⁴ Moreover, the inherent assumption that all trauma amounts to easily identifiable, isolated events which are "re-experienced" in the

¹³³ Adams, *Silently Seduced*, 16.

¹³⁴ American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed.): 271.

form of nightmares and flashbacks dangerously oversimplifies the phenomenon of incest abuse.¹³⁵ Overt grooming tactics are typically regarded as objective events involving sexual violence and, therefore, in the eyes of diagnostic professionals, are held as valid reason for receiving a trauma diagnosis. However, the DSM-5 calls into question survivor's credibility in cases involving covert abuse tactics. According to the dominant psychological perspective, the psyche is incommunicable to others and, thus, there is no way of knowing, with absolute certainty, whether trauma is "real" or simply "imagined", and perpetrators using covert grooming tactics capitalize upon this fact. They use their relation status as well as the dogmatic assumption that, objectively, one is neither able to verify the abuser's psychical intent nor the victim's. Consider the previous survivor testimony: in response to the child's thought that his mother would give him "kisses on the lips that *seemed* to last too long," the perpetrator could state that it wasn't her intention to make him feel this way. Nor was it her intention to make him feel like "some kind of pervert, because [he] was sexually aroused" by her presence.¹³⁶

Years of covert abuse are neglected by the dominant psychological understanding of trauma, as they appear to lack actual or threatened exposure to sexual violence. It fails to acknowledge the body's lived communication with the world and the trauma that is inherent in these children's embodied relations. The postural schema, as an embodied system of global awareness, is "turned toward things," and this orientation towards the world allows us to "meet things in the actions of another and find in these actions a sense, because they are possible

¹³⁵ American Psychiatric Association. (2013). Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (5th ed.): 271-274.

¹³⁶ Adams, *Silently Seduced*, 12.

themes of activity for my own body.”¹³⁷ Through the use of covert grooming gestures, incest predators violate the child’s developing orientation. They create for the child possible themes of activity which are sexually exploitative in nature. These themes then elicit in the child perspectival and motor habits which work to further establish and disguise the abusive relation. Incest trauma cannot be reduced to individual acts of sexual violence. While overt grooming tactics are used in many cases and, without doubt, cause great harm, the traumatic relation itself, which is created for the child via covert grooming strategies, must be regarded as equally damaging.

Conclusion

Merleau-Ponty unveils a more fundamental mode of consciousness at work beneath our “third person,” dualistic understanding of the world. As an organizing power, the primordial consciousness makes possible a secondary mode of attunement, wherein the individual appears in the world as a self amongst others. The postural schema turns one’s awareness away from primordial indistinction towards a relation of co-existence, allowing one to explore interpersonal relations and perceive articulated figures against a background. Both the organism and the environment in which it finds itself are essential aspects of the postural schema, and its powers of perception and motricity develop habits over time. As organic bodies, we are affective objects *of* the world, made of the same fundamental material, *flesh*, which affords us with a living communication such that our perceptions of other’s gestures will which arouse in us an embodied sense related to it. Belonging to the child’s experience of the specular image exists a mode of con-

¹³⁷ Merleau-Ponty, “The Child’s Relations With Others,” 146.

sciousness that is altogether distinct from adult spatiality, an open field of non-duality which will eventually be reduced by an intellectual development.

Given these phenomenological conclusions, I believe Merleau-Ponty's philosophy proves the dominant psychological tradition to be naive in its commitment to objectivity. In positing the existence of an objective, psychical intelligence, the dominant psychological tradition fails to acknowledge the lived communication we have with the world as the original structure of our experience. This tradition takes "the objective world as the object of their analysis, but this one first neither in time nor in virtue of its meaning ... [it is] incapable of expressing the peculiar way in which perceptual consciousness constitutes its objects ... [and keeps its] distance in relation to perception instead of sticking close to it."¹³⁸ In this way, the psychological tradition espouses a derivative form of knowledge, built upon an already experiencing subject. It fails to examine the nature of perception itself, and the state of primordial indistinction experienced exclusively during childhood. Merleau-Ponty's investigations reveal that what the dominant psychological perspective holds as a judgment made by a psychic intelligence is, in fact, a bodily understanding, a style of attunement that is formed between the postural schema and its environment. His phenomenological project aims to return to things themselves, prior to scientific abstraction, and his conclusions have serious implications concerning trauma diagnoses and, more specifically, incest abuse.

In many cases of covert incest abuse, harm is presented to the child in the form of love, making it difficult for the victim to later divorce what many consider to be two very distinct senses: violence and care. Moreover, even if the victim is able to later grasp an understanding of

¹³⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 26.

the trauma inherent in this relation and unveil the abuse once disguised as parental care, she may nevertheless find herself unable to regain control over her sense of embodiment, as the confusion of violence and care remains embedded in her primordial field of presence. For the child's experience of her body and the other's "form a totality and constitute a 'form' or 'gestalt' which develops according to a law of *internal* equilibrium, as if by *auto-organization*" over time.¹³⁹

Meaning, the perspectival and motor habits established by means of the victim-abuser relation act as future horizons or styles of embodiment. Through manipulative, violent, and sexually objectifying gestures, which are first introduced to the child as the form of love, the child learns to crave their abuser's seduction, as it is the form of affection first perceived. Their patterns of behaviour may then carry out the traumatic relation in accordance with the horizons created, and their longing for abusive affection may become a source of guilt and shame. The child learns to perceive their value in accordance with this abusive relation, as well as to feel responsible for the ways in which she has been taught to accept and receive love. The dominant psychological perspective is unable to account for the way in which sexual predators create for their victims themes of perception and motility which work to subvert their embodied consciousness and its organizing powers.

In cases of overt incest abuse, the presence of abusive gestures works in tandem with the absence of caregiver attunement to create a particular structure of experience whereby the victim's sense of embodiment is disparaged, both by herself and others. As previously established, the phenomenon of embodied estrangement can be explained by the very foundation of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, as it is "the essence of consciousness to forget its own phenomena thus

¹³⁹ Merleau-Ponty, "The Child's Relations with Others," 150.

enabling ‘things’ to be constituted.”¹⁴⁰ In order for objects to appear and for one to exist as a self amongst others, the postural schema must push to the background one's experience of primordial indistinction. The very nature of our perception requires self-deception through the medium of generality. Thus, when experiencing ongoing violence and sexual abuse, the postural schema may impoverish the sense of one's experience as a self amongst others by enveloping it in generality, thereby holding it at a distance. This phenomenon, as a survival tactic, remains unaccounted for by the dominant psychological tradition, as it is unable to capture fundamental disturbances in the postural schema's organizing powers.

Perception, as an originary, pre-objective form of knowledge, exists as a lived logic, an immanent signification that is clear for itself, but only knows itself through experience. Contrary to the dominant psychological tradition's conclusions, motives are non-causal, as the primordial act of sensing invests psycho-physiological qualities with a living value. Science objectifies phenomena, and posits the existence of a disinterested subject, detached from its living communication with the world. It reduces the body to a mere machine, and analyzes the subject from a third person perspective. It assumes the body to be an external object which is to be contrasted by the individual's internal subjectivity. However, perception, as the organism's primordial mode of consciousness, must not be separated from that which is perceived. Perception is a two-sided act which works according to an object-horizon structure. The habitual body, or the postural schema's pre-objective mode of consciousness, hides behind our gaze as a way of being, colouring our perspective and becoming a general feature of our reality. It exists as an unperceived centre from which the lived body, or the specular image, may spring forth. Psychologists, in failing

¹⁴⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 68.

to admit these conclusions, take an impersonal, reductive approach, and treats the body as an object like any other. The living subject is reduced to a mere object, and the experience of the body is reduced to a representation of it. Psychological facts and abstract ideas take precedence over perception as an engaged, embodied process. However, enmeshed within space and time, the body is not an object like any other, but rather exists as a thing for itself, something *of* the world. Perceptual and motor habit, the fundamental powers of being, grounds our world and exists *as* this enmeshment. It takes up residence in things, dilates our being, and becomes attuned to the world. In this way, the body is our general means of having a world, it is our “anchorage” in a world.¹⁴¹

Insofar as our global awareness of the body, the fundamental mode of our being in the world, is absent from the dominant psychological tradition, conclusions made in accordance with the Diagnostic Statistical Manual must be considered inadequate and impractical. For this reason, I believe Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology to be a far superior lens through which incest abuse may be examined. Future directions of this research may include a closer investigation of abusive attachments, as well as the possible benefit of using phenomenology as an alternative approach to healing.

¹⁴¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 144.

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