DISTURBING RHYTHMS:
JAMES, MERLEAU-PONTY, MUSIC AND SELF-TRANSFORMATION

BY

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THESIS
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Religion in the Graduate College of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2013

Urbana, Illinois

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ABSTRACT

One often interprets one’s selfhood in a Cartesian way. That is, the everyday self is a clearly demarcated individual that is separate from others and from the world around it (including, to a large extent, its own body). Although this is the most common understanding of one’s ipseity, there are contexts where this Cartesian self is overthrown and an alternative identity emerges. Such states of transformation, as I will call them, are often induced in contexts where music plays a prevalent role. Indeed, musicians and their audiences have reported experiencing a new kind of connection, a new found unity with others and the world around them when creating/appreciating music. Historically, many of these transformations have taken place in religious contexts and have, therefore, been construed as religious experiences. For example, the initiate of the Dionysian mystery cult would dance to music on the mountainside in order to enter into an ecstatic state and meet her god face to face. This paper will explore music’s role in inducing such states of transformation. Its starting point will be William James’ analysis of such states in his The Varieties of Religious Experience. Here, James continues his phenomenological task of cataloguing all forms of consciousness. Unfortunately, this highly fecund project was ignored by prominent European phenomenologists during the 20th-century and the French phenomenologist Maurice-Merleau-Ponty was no exception. However, this paper will show that both Merleau-Ponty’s early phenomenology and his late ontology (in conversation with James’ earlier analysis) offer significant theoretical tools with which to explore such states and their relationship with religious experience.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my family for their support and patience during my studies at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. I would also like to thank my advisor Dr. Bruce Rosenstock for his helpful comments and guidance while writing this thesis. Finally, I offer my appreciation to the Religion department at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. I hope that their new graduate program flourishes.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. Introduction.......................................................................................................................1

II. The Phenomenology of Perception..................................................................................4

III. States of Transformation...............................................................................................7

IV. The Flesh of the World: Alterity at the Heart of Ipseity..............................................21

V. Conclusion.......................................................................................................................39

REFERENCES........................................................................................................................41
I. Introduction

“O
Blessed, truly happy is he
Who knows the rituals
Of the god, who joins his spirit
With the holy worshipers in the mountains,
Who through the holy purifying rites
Becomes one of the Bakkhai”

In a well-known passage from *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James suggests that

“…our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different. We may go through life without suspecting their existence; but apply the requisite stimulus, and at a touch they are there in all their completeness, definite types of mentality which probably somewhere have their field of application and adaptation. No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded. How to regard them is the question,—for they are so discontinuous with ordinary consciousness. Yet, they may determine attitudes though they cannot furnish formulas, and open a region though they fail to give a map. At any rate, they forbid a premature closing of our accounts with reality…”

William James’ analysis of altered states of consciousness in *Varieties* was part of his overarching project of giving a phenomenological account of all forms of consciousness. Cognizant of the pioneering work being done by German proto-phenomenologist (that is, pre-Husserlian phenomenologists) like Carl Stumpf and Franz Brentano, James wished to go

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3 Indeed, not only was William James cognizant of what I have called proto-phenomenology, he may have well had a large influence on Edmund Husserl’s thought. For example, Husserl only gave up psychologism after having read James’ *The Principles of Psychology*. On this and other potential Jamesian influences on Husserl’s thought, see Wilshire, Bruce. *William James and Phenomenology: a Study of *The Principles of Psychology*.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968.
beyond a phenomenology of “waking consciousness” to an analysis of extraordinary states of mind. Unfortunately, this fecund project was ignored by European phenomenologists, the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty being no exception. However, this paper will show that, without misappropriation, Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of the lived body can help elucidate altered states of consciousness by examining their mode of production, viz. changes in the body’s relationship to the world. His early philosophy set to explain the primordial subject (the lived body) and its innate relationship with the world. As Gary Brent Madison points out, for Merleau-Ponty “All bodily or perceptual experience, then, does not depend on intellectual function which would structure it in accordance with certain norms or criteria possessed by virtue of its own nature; on the contrary, it is intelligence or reason which is supported by perceptual life (p. 52; my emphasis).” Although intellectual life or the Cartesian cogito cannot be reduced to the body, the latter, qua primordial subject, is the foundation upon which the former develops. This invites the task, then, to explore the ways in which the body’s relationship with the world can be changed to such a degree that altered states of consciousness can arise. In analyzing such states, we will explore the theoretical framework that William James offers by explicitly contrasting it with that of the early Merleau-Ponty. The latter, I will argue, provides an interpretation of such experiences that is ultimately reductionist. On the other hand, although remaining agnostic, James allows for the possibility of a genuine encounter with external forces or agents. Throughout the paper, I will explore some prominent features of states of transformation and those settings that tend to induce them. In particular, this paper will address the importance of musical appreciation (listening, dance, etc.) and musical creation in fundamentally changing the body’s perception of the world and therefore the individual’s self-
understanding and her understanding of the world. For example, when asked about the rave experience, an interviewee had this to say:

“Fundamentally, there’s this sense of, I want to say dissociation of the self, but a loss of ego is what I had been referring to before. The sense of there’s no separation between you and everything else. Like you are not you, like you are not this individual that has this stuff that is about this thing that happened three years ago, you know, all the things that come with individuation—your ego, your fears, your hopes, your dreams, all this stuff that is identified as self.”

Such unusual experiences demand a phenomenological analysis. Towards that end, I will seek to show music’s ability to fundamentally change not only the phenomenal field, but also the self’s relation to itself; that is, I will explore music’s ability to produce these states of transformation. Finally, I contend that the differences between James and the early Merleau-Ponty (most importantly, the difference between the former’s openness to alterity and latter’s reductionism) are lessened as the latter’s thought matures into his ontology of the flesh. Before looking at some examples of states of transformation, however, it would be prudent to become familiar with Merleau-Ponty’s early thought.

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II. The Phenomenology of Perception

Since the beginning of his career, Merleau-Ponty argued against a modernist conception of the self. For this thinker, the idea that there is a clear ontological distinction between consciousness and the body is rooted in a Cartesian delusion. In order to adequately describe human experience, the phenomenologist needs to recognize the fundamental connection between these two aspects of one’s being; that is, the phenomenologist has to recognize that one is an embodied consciousness. The philosopher needs to recognize that one is conscious of the world through one’s body. The body is the primordial subject that reaches out to the world. For Merleau-Ponty, however, studying the body’s relation to the world is not to take up the task of the biologist. The objective body (the body that can be accessed equally by everyone) of the scientist is a derivative conception of embodiment. Instead, Merleau-Ponty posits the lived body, the body as conscious actor in the world, as primordial. He states that, unlike objects that present themselves through diverse perspectives, the body presents just one perspective to the subject. Furthermore (and perhaps more importantly), one’s body is never in front of one (as an object can be); instead, it is with one. That is, it is that with which one explores the diverse perspectives of objects and thus the world. It provides the point of view from which one engages with objects. This relationship is magical, Merleau-Ponty says since one’s body moves “directly” or, rather, the movements of one’s body are concomitant with one’s decision to move.

In seeing an object, one’s gaze reaches out to the object to envelop it; to interrogate it (the same is true of the other senses). The body is the being that, through its openness to the world, can navigate and unfold the world. This should not be understood, however, as a one-sided activity.
“[M]y gaze pairs off with colour, and my hand with hardness and softness, and in this transaction between the subject of sensation and the sensible it cannot be held that one acts while the other suffers the action, or that one confers significance on the other. Apart from the probing of my eye or my hand, and before my body synchronizes with it, the sensible is nothing but a vague beckoning.”

Far from privileging the subject’s role in perception, Merleau-Ponty writes “…I give ear, or look, in the expectation of a sensation, and suddenly the sensible takes possession of my ear or my gaze, and I surrender a part of my body, even my whole body, to this particular manner of vibrating and filling space known as blue or red…” As Kearney stresses, Merleau-Ponty believes that there is a communion between the body and the world. This communion is facilitated by the body’s ability to adopt habits which are ways of acting or reaching out to the world that it has learned and that are now engrained in it. Crucially, however, Merleau-Ponty does not think that one’s body is fixed within prescribed physical parameters. Instead, he argues that, through habit, an individual can extend her lived body. Instruments can be “…incorporated into the bulk of our own body.” This is described, most famously, with the account of the blind man and his stick.

“The blind man’s stick has ceased to be an object for him, and is no longer perceived for itself; its point has become an area of sensitivity, extending the scope and active radius of touch, and providing a parallel to sight. In the exploration of things, the length of the stick does not enter expressly as a middle term: the blind man is rather aware of it through the position of objects than of the position of objects through it.”

The stick becomes an extension of the blind man’s body; it becomes a substitute appendage with which he can navigate through the world. Similarly, a car can become an extension of one’s self. It is a vehicle that one controls (with the original “vehicle” or body that

6 Quoted in Abram, p. 55
one is) to navigate through the world. “Habit expresses our power of dilating our being-in-the-world, or changing our existence by appropriating fresh instruments.”

The body, then, is the point of departure for one’s experience of the world. It is the point of view from which the world is experienced. Yet, how do we account for this primordial relationship? To explain the body’s fundamental relation with the world, Merleau-Ponty posits a “tacit cogito” which he describes as the primordial wisdom between the body and the world. This tacit cogito is also that which serves as the ground upon which reflective consciousness grows. Madison writes

“It is thus necessary to recognize, beneath all active or thematic intentionality, an ‘operative intentionality already at work before any positing or any judgment, a ‘Logos of the aesthetic world’” which is the very ‘condition of possibility’ of all constitutive operations on the part of the thinking subject. Before any intellectual operation of signification, existence is already fully significant and thus, if the Cogito or reflective consciousness is undeniably a fact, it is in a way a secondary fact, that is, a founded fact...”

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8 Ibid. p. 165-6
9 Ibid.
III. States of Transformation

Now that we are familiar with Merleau-Ponty’s early phenomenology, we can begin to examine states of transformation and William James’ analysis of them. As is well-known, James’ own description of religion and religious experience in *Varieties* is carefully circumscribed. To start out, he explicitly notes that he will not be talking about the institutional manifestations of religion.\(^{11}\) That is, he will not be discussing the papacy, caste systems, etc. Instead, what interests James is the individual’s religious experiences; that is, he is interested in the phenomenology of religious experiences. Yet, circumscribing his task in this way does not eliminate all potential problems. For example, he notes that “…the word ‘religion’ cannot stand for any single principle or essence, but is rather a collective name.”\(^{12}\) Further, he denies that there can be any single religious emotion. In his discussion about mysticism, therefore, he finds it prudent to offer four criteria (the first two of which are both necessary and sufficient to constitute a mystical experience for James, while the latter two “…are usually found”\(^{13}\)):

1) the ineffability of the experience,

2) a noetic quality that characterizes the experience as offering genuine, deep insight into the nature of reality,

3) the transiency of the experience, and

4) the passivity of the recipient—as if an external being or force were the active agent.

Clearly, these criteria do not of themselves have anything exclusively religious (as this term is usually understood) about them. In discussing Emersonianism, for example, James writes

\(^{11}\) Ibid. p. 41
\(^{12}\) Ibid. p. 39
\(^{13}\) Ibid. p. 293
“We must therefore, from the experiential point of view, call these godless or quasi-godless creeds ‘religions’; and accordingly when in our definition of religion we speak of the individual’s relation to ‘what he considers the divine,’ we must interpret the term ‘divine’ very broadly, as denoting any object that is godlike, whether it be a concrete deity or not.” So, determining what kind of experiences should be considered ‘religious’ as opposed to, for example, ‘aesthetic’ can be a difficult task. In responding to this difficulty, James is forthright: “Rather than prolong such a dispute [about names], I am willing to accept almost any name for the personal religion of which I propose to treat. Call it conscience or morality, if you yourselves prefer and not religion—under either name it will be equally worthy of our study.”

Because of this, it is useful to subsume James’ subject matter in Varieties under a larger category or genus of which “religious experience” will be but one species. This larger category, as Sonu Shamdasani says, can be labeled “states of transformation” some of which can be interpreted as religious. Just what is being transformed, however? This paper contends that such states involve the breakdown of the Cartesian self. This breakdown of the Cartesian, reflective self can happen in several ways. Two of these ways will be discussed here. First, consciousness can empty itself of all contents (and experience what Robert Forman refers to as a “pure conscious event” or PCE). As will be argued below, such an event can be understood through a Merleau-Pontean lens: in such states, the “tacit cogito” experiences itself qua consciousness. On the other hand, this breaking of the Cartesian self can occur through a new kind of reflective self or identity, a new kind of conscious life, coming to awareness. Such states

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14 Ibid. p. 44
15 Ibid. p. 41
are marked by an opening to alterity, a melting of the ordinary self into a larger self, the Cartesian self (hermetically sealed, non-bodily) being subsumed or sacrificed. Interpreted with a Jamesian lens, such states can be explained (though not explained away) by James’ idea that the unconscious, serving as a possible gateway to other realities, harbors several distinct, non-ordinary selves that may be able to interact with said realities. All of this will be explored further below. First, let’s look at some of these latter forms of states of transformation.

The recording of such losses of self, of course, is very old. For example, E.R. Dodds points out such openings of the contained self in Homer. For example, “ate is a state of mind—a temporary clouding or bewildering of the normal consciousness. It is, in fact, a partial and temporary insanity; and, like all insanity, it is ascribed, not to physiological or psychological causes, but to an external ‘daemonic’ agency.”\(^{18}\) Another example of such ‘psychic interventions’ is when a god imbues a warrior with power or energy. That is, when a god creates a certain state of mind where an abundance of excess strength flows out of the warrior. As Dodd points out, such strength is attributed to a foreign (and often supernatural) agent: “…all departures from normal human behavior whose causes are not immediately perceived, whether by the subjects’ own consciousness or by the observation of others, are ascribed to a supernatural agency…”\(^{19}\) Finally, when someone has a particularly brilliant (or a particularly foolish) idea, the latter is said to have been put into him by something outside of himself. “When [the individual] acts in a manner contrary to the system of conscious dispositions which he is said to ‘know,’ his action is not properly his own, but has been dictated to him. In other words, unsystematised, nonrational impulses, and the acts resulting from them, tend to be excluded from

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\(^{19}\) Ibid. p. 13
the self and ascribed to some alien origin.”20 Strikingly, such descriptions are quite similar to James’ analysis of the experience and evolution of the Greek gods: “It is as if there were in the human consciousness a sense of reality, a feeling of objective presence, a perception of what we may call ‘something there,’ more deep and more general than any of the special and particular ‘senses’ by which the current psychology supposes existent realities to be revealed.”21

Of course, in the ancient world there were other, more ritualistic experiences of such states. The various mystery cults allowed their votaries to see their respective gods face to face, as it were. According to Hugh Bowden, such rituals do not fit into the anthropological category of “doctrinal” modes of experiencing or understanding the divine.22 This mode is characterized by sacred scripture and frequent, low-intensity religious experience. The Catholic Church, with its Holy Bible and weekly Mass, for example, is a good representation of this mode of religious experience. A different way of understanding and experiencing the divine, however, is represented by the “imagistic” mode. The latter is characterized by high-intensity, infrequent religious experience. Such high-intensity experiences characterize the mystery cults.

“What [the mystery cults] had in common is that they usually took place at night, and in secret. They were carried out by or for individuals or groups. They were, as far as we can tell, frightening and disorienting, involving rapid movement between darkness and bright light, with loud music and other noise. Participants may have been blindfolded, and probably little if anything of what they experience would have been explained.”

20 Ibid. p.17
21 Ibid. p. 61
Such rituals were “…designed to disorientate the initiate by overwhelming their sight and hearing, and possibly other senses…” Often disorienting and at times very frightening, such experiences are “burned into the mind” of the initiates.

As is well-known, the Dionysus cult was one prominent example of such mystery cults. This god is associated with wild states of transformation.

“The link between Dionysus and uncontrolled behavior is not difficult to understand. He is the god of wine, and wine breaks down restraint, leading to wild uncontrollable actions. One of Dionysus’s titles in Athens was Eleutherios, ‘the liberator’, and this is taken to refer, among other things, to the effect of wine…”

“Dionysus was also associated with masks…The purpose of the mask is to hide the identity of the person wearing it, so Dionysus is normally seen in disguise…Bacchic rites give bacchants the opportunity to see the god without his mask. To do this they abandoned the trappings of civilization, represented by hearth and house and woolen clothes, and went out into the wild landscape beyond the city and beyond cultivated land around it, up into the uncultivated mountains and hills, dressed in animal skins. This journey would have been disorienting in itself. Once there they would sing and dance wildly, actions usually associated with ecstatic cults, and seek to achieve a trance state in which they might meet Dionysus unmasked.”

As this description of the ritual indicates, the disappearance of the ordinary self into the ecstatic where the god can be seen unmasked is intricately bound with the disappearance of a socially-constituted individual. The rites take place in the uncultivated mountainside and the participants are dressed in animal skins as they sing and dance. Thus, “One way of explaining [this]…is that [the participants] are transported from civilization to wildness, both in location and in behavior.”

23 Ibid. p. 215
24 Ibid. p. 134-6
25 Ibid. p. 123
To say that the participants are transported from civilization to the wilderness or that the socially-constructed individual disappears \textit{completely}, however, would be misleading. This is so since, \textit{qua} ritualized, in these states the participants of the Bacchic cult, for example, came into contact with \textit{Dionysus}. The participants of the Eleusinian Mysteries, on the other hand, would have come into contact with Demeter and Persephone. Thus, although these rites take place “outside” of civilization, the mental states associated with these rites are still mediated, indeed, \textit{saturated}, by cultural interpretation. Thus, in interpreting these states, we need to follow the constructivists: experience, including experiences in altered states, is constructed by language and culture.\textsuperscript{26}

How do we explain the emergence of these new selves? In the \textit{Varieties}, James concerns himself with what he takes to be a psychological discovery of supreme importance that had recently been uncovered. This was the discovery of the \textit{unconscious}. James was following the recent work of Myers who concluded thus

“\textit{I suggest, then, that the stream of consciousness in which we habitually live is not the only consciousness which exists in connection with our organism. Our habitual or empirical consciousness may consist of a mere selection from a multitude of thoughts and sensations, of which some at least are equally conscious with those that we empirically know. I accord no primacy to my ordinary waking self, except that among my potential selves this one has shown itself the fittest to meet the needs of common life. I hold that it has established no further claim, and that it is perfectly possible that other thoughts, feelings, and memories, either isolated or in continuous connection,}

\textsuperscript{26} \textit{It should be pointed out that the conclusion that cultural categories still play a large role in altered states does not follow merely from the fact that those initiates of the Bacchic rites came into contact with Dionysus while those of the Eleusinian mysteries came into contact with Persephone or Demeter. This only follows if we assume a post-Kantian epistemology where cultural categories are superimposed on a singular, unknowable reality \textit{and} that, in case of religious experience, there is only \textit{one} such reality. That is, this conclusion follows from an implicit monotheism. However, if we adopt a polytheistic stance (the kind of stance to which such initiates were committed) then it could be the case that no cultural categories come into play: the reason the respective members are coming into contact with different gods is because there are multiple gods with whom it is possible to come into contact! Though the polytheistic interpretation is possible, I do not find it compelling (though I cannot argue for that here) and continue to assume an implicit monotheism.}
may now be actively conscious, as we say, ‘within me’,--in some kind of co-ordination with my organism, and forming some part of my total individuality.”

This has important consequences since, as the historian of religion Ann Taves notes,

“By placing the pathological, the normal, and the potentially supranormal within a common frame of reference, Myers created a theoretical space (the subliminal) through which influences beyond the individual, should they exist, might be expected to manifest themselves. In explaining spirit possession as a ‘shifting of the psychical center of energy within the personality of the automatist himself’ without ruling out ‘the possibility that some influence external to the [automatist] may at times be operative,’ Myers modeled the open-ended approach to explanation that James later adopted in Varieties.”

Therefore, by the time the Gifford Lectures came around, James had adopted the view that multiple selves are latent within the individual and that such selves could be released, that such selves could be brought to conscious awareness. This is a clear departure from Descartes’ conception of subjectivity. Indeed, for Descartes, consciousness is equated with self-consciousness or self-awareness of a single substance. Thus, not only does Descartes appear to ignore everyday, pre-reflective awareness that the phenomenologists describe so well; he also has no conception of an unconscious that influences the cogito, nor would he be able to even fathom the idea that this unconscious harbors multiple, alternative selves. Further, for James these multiple selves are not seen as necessarily constructs of the unconscious, mere creations of the mind that is closed to itself. This mind is not sealed off from the world and others. In fact, as noted above, James suggests the possibility that the unconscious could be the doorway through which the other (including the religious other) makes itself known.

28 Ibid. p. 61
“Let me then propose, as an hypothesis, that whatever it may be on its farther side, the ‘more’ with which in religious experience we feel ourselves connected is on its hither side the subconscious continuation of our conscious life. Starting thus with a recognized psychological fact as our basis, we seem to preserve a contact with ‘science’ which the ordinary theologian lacks. At the same time the theologian’s contention that the religious man is moved by an external power is vindicated, for it is one of the peculiarities of invasions from the subconscious region to take an objective appearances, and to suggest to the Subject an external control. In the religious life the control is felt as ‘higher’; but since on our hypothesis it is primarily the faculties of our own hidden mind which are controlling, the sense of union with the power beyond us is a sense of something, not merely apparently, but literally true.” 29

He also says

“But just as our primary wide-awake consciousness throws open our senses to the touch of things material, so it is logically conceivable that if there be higher spiritual agencies that can directly touch us, the psychological condition of their doing so might be our possession of a subconscious region which alone should yield access to them. The hubbub of the waking life might close a door which in the dreamy subliminal might remain ajar or open.

Thus that perception of external control which is so essential a feature in conversion might, in some cases at any rate, be interpreted as the orthodox interpret it: forces transcending the finite individual might impress him, on condition of his being what we may call a subliminal human specimen.” 30

Although James remains agnostic about whether or not on the farther side God/gods/the Ultimate can be found, he leaves the possibility open that the subconscious ends not with one’s own mind, but with something ‘higher’. In this way, in going beyond Descartes’ self, James offers the possibility to go “backwards”, viz. to Augustine’s self where ipseity is open to alterity, even to divine alterity.

29 James, p. 386-7
30 Ibid. p. 195
“For what Augustine discovered by going ‘inside’, into his innermost self, was nothing other than Otherness itself: the truth (the presence) of that which is most real, the reality (presence) of other (human) selves and, above all, the reality of that supremely Other Self, that Alter Ego which is ‘more me than me myself,’ the ens realissimum, God. The Supremely Other (le Tout Autre) is discovered in the innermost reaches of the presence of the self to itself: it is, quite simply, intimior intimo meo (‘deeper than my inmost understanding’).”

So, James believed there were multiple selves within a single organism. Many of these selves were kept below the level of conscious awareness. This has interesting possibilities when it comes to connecting Merleau-Ponty’s with James’ thought. Although Merleau-Ponty does not explicitly deal with a conception of unconscious selves, his theory could help explain their existence because

“The new theory [i.e. Myer’s], in effect, postulated that chains of bodily memories, if sufficiently extensive and elaborate, could in turn constitute distinct selves or personalities. These dissociated memory chains, which could be tapped and extended by means of hypnosis and automatic writing, offered a theoretical model whereby two ‘selves’ could coexist in one body.”

This is a Merleau-Pontean way of seeing the creation of these different reflective self. Based on bodily memories, new selves could be formed. As the tacit cogito’s ordinary relationship with the world founds “ordinary waking consciousness,” different kinds of bodily movements or actions (for example, in dancing when the body’s motility is fully extended, in fasting, in self-mutilation) could constitute different selves. It is important to point out, however, that Merleau-Ponty’s tacit cogito is not the same thing as James’ conception of the subconscious. The tacit cogito is the ground upon which all reflective selves grow; it is

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31 Madison, Gary Brent. “Flesh as Otherness.” *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty.* Eds. Galen A. Johnson and Michael B. Smith. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1990. p. 29 Madison’s article was written about Merleau-Ponty’s later conception of ipseity. We will see, therefore, that the latter has much in common with Augustine’s/James’ openness to the other. In fact, Merleau-Ponty’s late ontology was motivated by precisely this understanding of alterity at the heart of ipseity.

32 Taves, p. 53
consciousness as such. So, because the tacit cogito is at the heart of self formation at the reflective level, one could interpret these reflective selves as merely epiphenomena rooted in, and ultimately reduced to, the tacit cogito (that is, reduced to the subject side, as it were, of the body-subject’s relationship with the world). If this is the case, a reductionist, naturalistic reading of other selves, as opposed James’ openness to an external agency, is suggested. Therefore, we appear to reach an impasse between these two thinkers. We will return to this impasse below.

To return to states of transformation, since the ancient mystery cults were religious cults (that is, concerned with the traditional gods of the city-state and, many times, concerned with an afterlife), the experience was interpreted as religious. Clearly, however, such overtly religious contexts can be absent when states of transformation are experienced. Indeed, Bowden himself points to the similarities between the experiences that were induced in these cults and modern rave culture. Both are characterized by loud, rhythmic, repetitive music as well as visual and other sensory disorientation.

“Techno music, stretched across high-frequency oscillations, waves, bleeps and low-end incessant thumping, also modulates consciousness in a specific fashion. Techno proves to be a truly efficient sculptor and architect of time, while space becomes thick or aerial in accordance. Through its insistent and repetitive beat structure, techno constantly reiterates a present, a new foundation, a Nietzschean eternal differential return, a new event of meaning—as though it were some sort of relentless immediacy machine.”

Many ravers have experienced the loss of their ordinary self, a sense of oneness or of eternity, while raving. Like the ritualized contexts before them, such raves offer a place where loud, repetitive, experimental music is played; dancing is prevalent; and psychotropic substances are often used. Indeed François Gauthier believes that the popularity of rave culture is due to its

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religious nature. This claim needs to be analyzed since, as James reminds us, the words “religion” and “religious” are highly ambiguous. First, Gauthier needs to explain what he means by “religious nature.” James has already shown that terms like “religion” are highly ambiguous and open to many meanings. Surely Gauthier does not mean that all ravers are part of a particular religious organization and believe that raving produces a homogenous experience that gets them into contact with their respective God or Ultimate. Although using the word “religious” in this case would be uncontroversial, it is clearly inapplicable to the rave experience (there is no universal religious affiliation among ravers, nor is there a homogenous experience, not to mention a homogenous religious experience). If, therefore, Gauthier means that such imagistic experiences can be interpreted as religious in the sense that some ravers may interpret their experience as having religious import and interpret said experience with their culturally/religiously-inherited language and traditional theological presuppositions, then this is surely plausible. Also plausible, however, is the idea that some of the participants will break from traditional theological interpretations and perhaps even traditional religious language. Such individuals create their own “religious” language in order to think about and describe their experience. The fact that language is needed both to describe and to understand such experiences reminds us of an important point, however: thinking about such experiences, even from the first-person perspective, requires interpretation and is thus created by the cultural forces (among them political and social) that shape language. As Grace Jantzen remind us, experience is embedded in a cultural and political context.\(^\text{34}\) This is not to say, if one were to come into contact with a divine other, that this other can be reduced to a cultural construct; it simply says that in order to

think about this other, the other’s presence must be interpreted. We have seen this above in the case of the mystery cults: the bacchants encounter Dionysus while the initiates of the Eleusinian Mysteries encounter Demeter or Persephone. James concurs that this constructivist aspect of non-ordinary experiences is often necessary. “The monarchical type of sovereignty was, for example, so ineradicably planted in the mind of our forefathers that a dose of cruelty and arbitrariness in their deity seems positively to have been required by their imagination. They called the cruelty ‘retributive justice’ and a God without it would certainly have struck them as not ‘sovereign’ enough.”35 For James, “The gods we stand by are the gods we need and can use, the gods whose demands on us are reinforcements of our demands on ourselves and on one another.”36 Here we see, and briefly set aside for later, the connection between pragmatism and constructivism.

James adopts a constructivist position when it comes to interpreting these experiences. In many ways, such a position is largely unavoidable. After all, how can one think of one’s experience without thought which is conditioned by language? However, Robert Forman has argued for the existence of at least some type of mystical experiences, what he calls the “pure conscious event” or PCE, where inherited cultural categories and even language are transcended.37 In such states, characteristic of Buddhist and Advaita Vedantist meditation, consciousness simply experiences itself. James Landau agrees that PCEs are possible and has argued that, because mystics and ravers alike speak of the ineffability of the experience, there may be room for a ‘pure experience of ecstasy.’

36 Quoted in Bruner, p. 76
37 Indeed, Forman stipulates that the pure conscious event is the mystical experience and that other kinds of mystical experiences (seeing visions, for example) should be labeled “visionary experiences”. I fear that reserving the term “mystical experience” for the PCE makes his arguments against the constructivists too easy since the latter are often dealing with, and thus arguing about, what Forman would call “visionary” experiences.
“A state ‘beyond’ language, ecstasy opens up a breech, an epistemological gap, between itself and its subsequent discursive products. Because of this, all testimonials and other experiential accounts must be seen as retroactive renderings, as attempts after the fact (perhaps mere seconds after the fact) to make sense of, to conceptualize, what is inherently ineffable: a desubjectified cognitive state that can best be understood as a corporeal style of being, i.e. a non-reflective awareness autonomous in its ‘freedom’ from ideology, language and culture. An ‘experience’ only after the fact, ecstasy is opposed to rationality and higher-order thought. Ultimately, it is indeed the ‘transcendence’ of the thematic, Cartesian cogito, albeit in a manner distinct from the idealistic formulations of traditional religion.” 38

Although language is needed to think about the experience afterwards, there may be “an epistemological gap” that allows for pure experience. In this state, different discursive selves are not experienced. Instead, what can be characterized as a return to the tacit cogito, before reflection, is effectuated. This is consistent with Merleau-Ponty’s claim that

“…language presupposes nothing less than a consciousness of language, a silence of consciousness embracing the world of speech in which words first receive a form and meaning. This is why consciousness is never subordinated to any empirical language, why languages can be translated and learned, and finally, why language is not an attribute of external origin, in the sociologist’s sense. Behind the spoken cogito, the one which is converted into discourse and into essential truth, there lies a tacit cogito, myself experienced by myself.” 39

In returning to the tacit cogito, the subject goes beyond language (if only for a short while). Merleau-Ponty would concede that, in such experiences as rave and certainly in ritualistic settings in which the self is offered as a sacrifice an experience of the tacit cogito is possible. “The tacit cogito, the presence of oneself to oneself, being no less than existence, is anterior to any philosophy, and knows itself only in those extreme situations in which it is under threat: for

39 Merleau-Ponty, p. 469
example, in the dread of death…”  

In the fête, when the everyday self is given up, that is “in the dread of death”, the tacit cogito could be experienced.

And yet, as has been conceded, in order to communicate such experiences (even to think about them oneself), language is needed. In this way, even PCEs will always be constructed, at least to some degree, after the fact. Thus, both PCEs and trance-states will have to be interpreted. Although, as James says, such experiences (and their interpretations) are authoritative for the one who has experienced them, others need not accept, and may have to look for external support for the truth of any particular experience/interpretation. What would this external support be? Here, James again offers help. Such external support is grounded in pragmatic considerations:

*outsiders must determine the value of any of these states (and/or of their subsequent interpretation) by the ‘fruits of the soul’ that they produce.*

“Our spiritual judgment, I said, our opinion of the significance and value of a human event or condition, must be decided on empirical grounds exclusively. If the fruits for life of the state of conversion are good, we ought to idealize and venerate it, even though it be a piece of natural psychology; if not, we ought to make short work with it, no matter what supernatural being may have infused it.”

Therefore, if more altruistic individuals are generated from these mystical experiences, outsiders can judge them to be valuable. In fact, James says that *even if there is an external source* that is inducing certain mystical states but that do not generate fruits of the soul, then “we ought to make short work with [them].”

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40 Ibid, p. 459  
41 James, p. 191  
42 Ibid. p. 191
IV. The Flesh of the World: Alterity at the Heart of Ipseity

A. Later Thoughts

As we have seen, the early Merleau-Ponty’s idea of the tacit cogito provides us with a reductionistic theoretical framework with which to examine these states. However, as his thought matured into his late ontology, as Merleau-Ponty began to dig deeper into the miracle of perception itself, the tacit cogito becomes subsumed into what he calls the flesh of the world.

“...the ‘there is,’ sensation, must...be thought of as an ontological function, as an ‘attribute’ of Being. The sensing-sensible chiasm which constitutes sensible consciousness is a paradox, Merleau-Ponty says, not of man but of Being. The ‘there is’ thus belongs to Being, to the flesh, and not to man. The essence of man as a sensible consciousness is precisely to be the ‘there is’ of Being. It is not to man that Presence, sensible consciousness, belongs; it is, on the contrary, Presence which possesses man.”

Merleau-Ponty speaks of oneself and the other, both as “invisible” consciousnesses perceiving the world, as being part of the same l’être sauvage or wild being; that is, as being part of the same flesh of the world. In this way, there is a fundamental continuity between the world, the other, and oneself. Indeed, sometimes the borders between these different variations of this Being are not very clear.

“What the flesh ‘means’ is that, when I engage in reflection, I am already for myself an other. Because of this, otherness is inscribed in my very flesh. It is precisely because the flesh, which introduces otherness into me, is also ‘my’ flesh that there are for me other egos, other ourselves, such that I am always for myself the other of the other of me. The other, in order to be for me, does not have to ‘encroach’ on me; when I begin to reflect, he or she is

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43 The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty... p. 179
already ‘in’ me, as a constitutive dimension of my flesh. I do not ‘project’ the other; the other is what I discover when, in moments of reflexivity, I seek to lay hold of myself.”

The malleability of the *principium individuationis* within the flesh is best expressed through Merleau-Ponty’s idea of reversibility. What is this? For Merleau-Ponty, one is able to perceive the world because one is a perceivable entity. One is able to bump into things because one is also a being that is solid and that can serve as an impediment to others’ movement. The most famous articulation of this principle of reversibility is the example of the two hands.

“There is a relation of my body to itself that makes it the *vinculum* of the self and things. When my right hand touches my left, I am aware of it as a ‘physical thing.’ But at the same moment, if I wish, an extraordinary event takes place: here is my left hand as well starting to perceive my right...Thus I touch myself touching; my body accomplishes ‘a sort of reflection.’ In it, through it, there is not just the unidirectional relationship of the one who perceives to what he perceives. The relationship is reversible, the touched hand becomes the touching hand, and I am obliged to say...that the body is a ‘perceiving thing,’ a ‘subject-object.’”

In this case, the caressing and the caressed are one body. However, Merleau-Ponty claims that in this situation, one can only be in one mode at a given time. That is to say, one can either focus on being the caresser in which case one is active and reaching out to the world, or one can focus on being the caressed in which one is passive and being acted upon. This example gets extended beyond the human body, however, and represents the reversibility of all things. This reversibility points out another fundamental feature of the flesh: the notion of *écart*. Even within this uniform flesh of the world, what was earlier characterized as one’s point of view, one’s own “invisible” consciousness, is still present. As the hand example shows, there is a fundamental

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gap that is always present between things. One cannot both be the hand caressing and the hand caressed at the same time.

“It is time to emphasize that it is a reversibility always imminent and never realized in fact. My left hand is always on the verge of touching my right hand touching the things, but I never reach coincidence; the coincidence eclipses at the moment of realization, and one of two things always occurs: either my right hand really passes over to the rank of touched, but then its hold on the world is interrupted; or it retains its hold on the world, but then I do not really touch it—my right hand touching, I palpate with my left hand only its outer covering.”

B. Art’s Role: Painting and Phenomenology; Music and the Ecstatic

i. Eye and Mind

Merleau-Ponty stresses the importance of painting in many of his writings. This is because of the painter’s ability to examine the phenomenal field. It is only when one really examines what one sees that objects appear in their full richness. It is when one notices the lines, the shadows, the depth, etc. that one recognizes how objects present themselves. These hidden or “invisible” aspects of the world are fundamental to one’s perception of physical objects. For example, it is precisely the shadows painted on the canvas that make Rembrandt’s The Night Watch so convincing. As Merleau-Ponty puts it

“We see that the hand pointing towards us in The Night Watch is truly there only when we see that its shadow on the captain’s body presents it simultaneously in profile...Everyone with eyes has at some point or other witnessed this play of shadows, or something like it, and has been made by it to see things and a space. But it worked in them without them; it hid to make the object visible. To see the object, it is necessary not to see the play of light and shadows around it.”

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47 As quoted in Hass, p. 66
These invisible aspects, then, are what allow one to see objects in the first place. They bring the visible forth and do so by remaining largely undetected themselves. As Merleau-Ponty suggests, this interplay between the visible and the invisible is not merely a painter’s trick. The painting is so convincing because of its faithfulness to one’s perception of the world. By recognizing and bringing out these overlooked aspects of the phenomenal field, the painter is able to elucidate one’s lived experience. This, however, does not mean that Merleau-Ponty favors mimesis, as it is traditionally understood, above all else. Indeed, although he thinks art can aid the phenomenological project, he thinks that modern art is more geared to the task than classical or Renaissance art.\footnote{Johnson, Galen. \textit{The Retrieval of the Beautiful: Thinking Through Merleau-Ponty’s Aesthetics}. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 2010. P. 14} His fixation on Cézanne is indicative of this. If one thinks of Cézanne’s paintings one recognizes that what one perceives often needs to be expressed through what mimetic artists would consider to be exaggeration or manipulation. Monet’s lilies, Renoir’s cafés and déjeuners, Van Gogh’s skies, all refer to one’s experience in a unique, non-traditional way. That is, it refers to them in a way one is unfamiliar with in painting, but also that one recognizes as phenomenologically valid or true.

Yet, in \textit{Eye and Mind}, Merleau-Ponty does not just focus on the enjoyment of paintings. Instead, he thinks that an analysis of the painter and his craft can illustrate and confirm some of his later ideas. This is particularly true of his concept of the flesh of the world. The artist is able to see, and thus to paint, because his eye is of the same material as the world; they are of the same flesh. As Merleau-Ponty points out at the beginning of section 2 of his essay, “…we cannot imagine how a mind could paint. It is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the
world into painting.”\(^{49}\) Again, the body that creates these “transubstantiations”, of course, is not the body as the biologist explains it, but the lived body, the “intertwining of vision and movement.”\(^{50}\) So, the reason the eye can “take in” objects is because of a fundamental connection between the eye and the world. Although there is always an \(\text{écart}\) or gap between the painter and the painted (that is, there is always a recognition that what one is painting is \textit{separate} from one’s body), there is also a \textit{reversibility}; there is always a folding over of the perceived and the perceiver. The body both sees and is seen. It is a thing “caught in the fabric of the world,”\(^{51}\) but it also moves through things and is able to perceive them; it can do this not because the eye is a receptor of light and can send information to the brain for processing. It can do this because the body is a particular incarnation within an incarnate world. Because of this, the artist can become incorporated into the painted itself; the painted can \textit{stare back} at the painter.

\textit{ii.  Phenomenological Analysis of Music}

So, the value of the phenomenological analysis of both the enjoyment of painting and the painter at work is clear. What about, to begin with, the enjoyment of music? What would a phenomenological analysis of this reveal and how can it further the study of states of transformation in particular? Most importantly, I think, such an analysis would have to bring out the \textit{magical} properties of this phenomenon. What does “magical” imply? First, it refers to the remarkable way in which music can alter the phenomenal field or, in Merleau-Ponty’s later terminology, its ability to provide a new (and predominant) layer of flesh to the world. To see this, consider the following passage from \textit{Eye and Mind}.

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\(^{50}\) Ibid. p. 162

\(^{51}\) Ibid. p. 163
“When through the water’s thickness I see the tiled bottom of the pool, I do not see it despite the water and the reflections; I see it through them and because of them. If there were no distortions, no ripples of sunlight, if it were without that flesh that I saw the geometry of the tiles, then I would cease to see it as it is and where it is—which is to say, beyond any identical, specific place. I cannot say that the water itself—the aqueous power, the syrupy and shimmering element—is in space; all this is not somewhere else either, but it is not in the pool. It inhabits it, is materialized there, yet it is not contained there; and if I lift my eyes toward the screen of cypresses where the web of reflection plays, I must recognize that the water visits it as well, or at least sends out to it its active essence, living essence.”

So, the water, as an aqueous power, becomes the most salient part of the flesh of the world in this situation. It stretches over everything and changes the objects as it does so. This characteristic of the flesh is important for understanding music’s ability to reshape the phenomenal field. Imagine walking outside while wearing headphones. In this situation, the music monopolizes the ears and forces the world to become unified in a peculiar way: the objects seem to revolve around the music. That is, their movements are perceived only in relation to the piece being enjoyed: the trees sway with the rhythm; the cars cruise by as if the legato of the strings were the energy behind the locomotion; the loud, unexpected accents transform a serene park into a chaotic, unsettling place. Even the recalcitrant objects, those that do not seem in accord with the music by going against the beats, for example, are seen as rebellious. Just like the water, this aqueous power, creates a new “layer” of flesh in which other objects are perceived, the music, this sonorous power, creates new contours in the flesh of the world. Its overflow extends, however, far beyond the reflections of the pool on the cypresses; it extends everywhere. Indeed, it would be more correct to say that there is no “overflow”; the whole of the music extends everywhere equally. This is an important point for understanding music’s ability to change ordinary perception and to induce states of transformation. As Ruth Herbert has

52 Quoted from Johnson, p. 32-3
argued, absorption and dissociation are common even in everyday enjoyment of music. Writing about an experience of one of her test subjects, Herbert says

“Sophie describes a familiar practice of choreographing her surroundings with music, in which music blends with environment so as to elicit a selective external awareness…and an enhanced visual sense as music blends with environment…Music appears to unify and make extraordinary an experience that would otherwise be ordinary (my emphasis).”

Music can “…make extraordinary an experience that would otherwise be ordinary.” It can completely restructure an experience. Thus, there is no wonder that music is often associated with contexts, whether Dionysian revelries or modern raves, that facilitate the reshaping or sacrifice of the ordinary self. Music in such contexts helps to reorient the body’s everyday relationship with the world. This relationship is transformed into something uncommon or unfamiliar and, in turn, phenomenal experience becomes extraordinary.

Music can alter, through substitution, the natural unity of the world. One can see this more clearly when it is incorporated into another art form, viz. film. At the end of Stanley Kubrick’s Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb, one sees a series of images, each showing an atomic bomb detonating with a mushroom cloud slowly stretching overhead. Some shots are very close to the detonation site, others are relatively removed. Not only is the verisimilitude removed, but the natural emotional or psychological response is suppressed by what is happening on the soundtrack: as the images pass by, an old-time pop song is playing (lyrics: “we’ll meet again/don’t know where/don’t know when!”), fundamentally changing one’s experience of the horrific event. The sound of the massive object

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falling through the air; the roar (or silence, depending on where one is) of the explosion; in a sentence, everything that would make the object real, that would make the horror fully present, is removed. Instead, this pop song colors the images, forcing a restructuring of ordinary experience, and therefore forcing the viewer to rethink her understanding of the phenomenon on the screen. Indeed, this constitutes the artistic merit of the scenes. Or take scenes from the same director’s 2001: A Space Odyssey. The very first images of space are accompanied by Johann Strauss’ Waltz. With this accompaniment, the spacecraft one sees appears to float with the ¾ time signature, as if dancing. The movement appears light, coordinated, and cheerful. This is clearly a result of the music’s spell. If the soundtrack were turned off, if verisimilitude were maintained, the same images would be fundamentally transformed. The spacecraft, previously so full of life, would transform into mere vessels, mere machines, floating through dead space. For another famous example, consider the torture scene from Tarantino’s Reservoir Dogs. Obviously influenced by Kubrick’s techniques, this scene juxtaposes a horrific spectacle of torture with the bubblegum sounds of Steely Dan’s “Stuck in the Middle with You.” This presentation of the scene evokes a grotesque response from the viewer as one struggles to reorient oneself. Finally, consider Godard’s use of music in some of his early films. In particular scenes, the music will abruptly come on the soundtrack (almost as if the editing had been poorly done) changing the viewer’s experience of the scene; but it will just as abruptly disappear from the soundtrack allowing the natural sounds to reemerge, only to reappear (and again disappear) in staccato fashion. All of this fundamentally shapes the viewer’s experience of the films.

In Phenomenology of Perception, Merleau-Ponty points out that synesthetic experiences are much more common than is ordinarily recognized; indeed, he even says that “Synaesthetic
perception is the rule…”54 Hues of color have specific sounds that resonate from them. Words and letters invoke seemingly unrelated images. Whether or not these experiences are as frequent as Merleau-Ponty claims, the power of music in going at least some way to confirm this claim should be recognized. With eyes closed, the soft, oneiric sounds of Chopin’s Nocturnes, for example, seem to float over one’s skin ever so gently. Or, the objects surrounding one, perhaps once seen as vibrant, suddenly become somber or bluish in hue, as the sounds of Radiohead’s Kid A wash over them. “It is as if one could sometimes see the occasional collapse of the barriers established…between the senses.”55 The power of music in this respect is fascinating and, once recognized, also plays an elucidatory function: *it reveals the importance of sound in our experience of the world*. Just as painting shows us the necessary yet invisible aspects of our world, so too can music show us the silent (as it were) aspects of our world. The sound of wind is essential to the reality of the breeze on the beach. The crashing of the waves not only expresses the power, the force, of the water before me; it is this power (it is an essential feature of it). This sound is not an afterthought, a mere emission of something physical (i.e. sound-waves). It is *part* of the waves; *it is the waves themselves*. Further, this sound brings forth a synesthetic experience. One can feel (tactilely) the splashing of the waves on one’s face with these sounds. It is music’s ability to alter these sounds, to block them out and to set up new ones, that makes the world appear so strange, so new; and correspondingly, it can show one how “ordinary” sounds are an essential part of the world as one lives it.

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54 *Phenomenology*, p. 266. He goes on to say “…, and we are unaware of it only because scientific knowledge shifts the centre of gravity of experience, so that we have unlearned how to see, hear, and generally speaking, feel, in order to deduce, from our bodily organization and the world as the physicist conceives it, what we are to see, hear and feel.” Merleau-Ponty believes that painting can help us to see differently. I am suggesting that music’s ability to do so should not be underestimated.

55 Ibid. p. 265
Thus, music can bring about profound shifts in the phenomenal field or in the layers of the flesh of the world. So far, however, music’s effects on the body’s motility haven’t been analyzed. This is an important feature of music’s phenomenology. The first thing to recognize is that the lived body incorporates music into itself. It does this because music beckons the body. Here is another magical aspect of music: it acts as an incantation. The rhythm of the music calls the body to sway with it; to move in accord with it. Just as the object being painted calls something within the painter (that is, effectuates a renversement—the trees stare back at the painter), music touches something within the body and the body responds to the music through movements: taps of the feet, bobbing of the head, or full-fledged dance. The latter, where the entire body responds to the music, is the fullest expression of the body’s responsiveness to the art, to this uncanny force. Unlike in ordinary engagement with the world, the dancer does not move in order to appropriate, to manipulate, or to explore objects. Instead, music beckons the body to express its potential, its power, its capacity to move. It beckons the body to express pure motility. Conscious thought, as exemplified through the Cartesian cogito, is removed; the bodily movements express that primordial connection to the world that permeates all of one’s interactions with the world. Not for manipulation; not by necessity. Instead, the dance is taken up for expression; to express the joy of motility. When this is done, strange things happen on the reflective level.

“We all hold hands and breathe together in unison. With eyes closed we centre ourselves, focusing our concentration directly on the present…One deep breath and then it begins…Within every moment of this dance is a piece of me. I am dancing Laita and Laita is dancing me. I enter the stage, embraced by the energy of the dance washing across the space. It moves through me and carries me, becoming more and more intense as the pace of the piece continues to speed up. My body is moving without instruction, for the movements are so ingrained they are known on a cellular level. This frees me to become one with the dance…An overwhelming sense of joy engulfs my
body. It begins at my centre and spreads upward, downward, forward, and backward until every last molecule of my self is saturated…Time has stopped functioning in its normal fashion.”

In this fête, the self is offered as sacrifice. The dancer participates “…in an inflated social body and, both intimately and ultimately, the recognition of the need for others.” The Cartesian self is dissolved into something greater. James Landau warns us, however, of going too far with this “rhetoric of unity.” He writes

“Ravers, even as their egos melt, even as their bodies dissolve into a larger ‘organism’, still speak of something apart, of some undefinable ‘thing’ distinct from the crowd. Ask them if they completely disappear into this unity while ecstatic, and they will often vacillate, equivocally answering both ‘yes’ and ‘no’ as they search for the terminology to describe, to produce, their ‘experience’.59

Thus, there is a reversibility, a melting of individuals, but also an écart. This is an important point that will return in Section II, part iii.

The lived body tends towards regularity; towards familiar, sedimented movements. Music can change this. It can act as an educator, forcing the body to adopt new habits of movements. This is especially true of unfamiliar music. Strange rhythms, odd-time signatures, etc. all force the body into new movements, as it tries to follow this lovely pedagogue.60 At times, one can try

57 See Gauthier
58 Ibid. p. 77
60 As Alicia Penalba Acitores writes, “Listening to music affords mimicking the performer’s gestures and simulating a wide range of physical feelings derived from the projection of image schemata: going up and down with melodies, travelling along a path with themes, and so on. Bodily actions (internal simulations) filter the stimuli that give rise to our perceptions, and those actions cause us to perceive certain aspects of reality and to overlook others. In doing so, we become conscious of music as a result of being aware of the simulated actions we perform when exploring musical features.” See Acitores, Alicia Penalba. “Towards a Theory of Proprioception as a Bodily Basis for Consciousness in Music.” Music and Consciousness: Philosophical, Psychological, and Cultural Perspectives. Eds. David Clarke and Eric Clarke. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. p. 218
to put one’s movements in accord with the rhythm or the time-signature of the piece, yet the body, due to unfamiliarity, seems gauche. It is necessary to incorporate new habits of movement to synchronize with these sounds (a drummer, for example, needs to incorporate different time-signatures into his arsenal of movements). This unfamiliarity, these foreign sounds already endowed with a transcendence (the motility of the other), reminds the listener of the intersubjective world. For one sees, at live performances, the bodies on the stage, those structures that are so like one’s own, move in such a way that produces these new sounds. That is, their bodies have encompassed, through habit, these new rhythms, for example, and demonstrate a new possibility to one’s own body. Indeed, one need not even look at the bodies on stage to know this: the music itself is the expression or, rather, an extension of the body of the performer. What does this mean? It means that the music that is beckoning one is nothing but the beckoning or demands of the other’s body. Through the air, across the space that separates you, the other can still touch one. Dance, like language or Sartre’s Look, is a phenomenological refutation of solipsism. This is all well and good, someone may object, yet it doesn’t get us that far; after all, the existence of other minds was never a problem for Merleau-Ponty. What is of more interest is what this tells us about the nature of one’s relationship with the other. The ontological problem of alterity needs to be addressed: What are the essential features of this relationship? What are the necessary limitations on one’s relations with others? It is to these questions that I now turn. In examining the relationship between individual band members as they are playing music, surprising intersubjective possibilities arise.

iii. Considerations on Musical Performance and Alterity

Let us consider the interaction between the members of those bands that favor improvisation. For example, many “jambands” cut from the same cloth as the Grateful Dead use
songs as skeletal structures in which long, improvised “jamming” can take place. A three-minute song can last up to thirty-minutes with these bands. This paper is not going to defend (nor attack) the value of such an aesthetic. Instead, I want to examine the phenomenology of what goes on in these longs “jams”. If the reader has ever played music with a band, especially improvisational music, she will know that, at the best of times, the musician’s performance ceases to be a conscious action. Instead, it turns into a trance-like experience. One no longer chooses to play specific notes, to create certain rhythms, certain sounds. Indeed, the body simply produces them according to the musical situation. Ebbs and flows, tempo or intensity increases, all happen spontaneously or non-reflectively. Indeed, if one tries to force such things, if conscious thought enters into it, it can appear artificial. To create a good “groove,” that is, a complex musical wave (we can call this a wave of flesh) made up of all the particular sounds of the individual instruments that seems to float between the band members (and on which the soloist improvises), it appears that conscious choice needs to be extinguished. Merleau-Ponty, in his later writings, acknowledges that when playing a sonata, for example, the player can be so immersed that a loss of self results: “The performer is no longer producing or reproducing the sonata: he feels himself, and the others feel him to be at the service of the sonata; the sonata sings through him or cries out so suddenly that he must ‘dash on his bow’ to follow it.”61 As Galen A. Johnson put it, “…in musical performance and appreciation, as in love and beauty, we experience a dissolution of the self.”62 In these situations, the body has to take up this new world of sound. Just saying that the body takes up this world, however, is not exactly right. It is also actively creating it. So, the relationship between the body and this world is participatory because the body is bringing forth the music as well; notes are played or not played according to the current musical situation. That

61 Quoted from Johnson, p. 151
62 Johnson, p. 165
is, the body, the creator, seems to be moved by the music itself, the creation; there is a
reversibility between musician and music. What is happening here?

As pointed out above, Merleau-Ponty argues that one can dilate one’s being-in-the-world.
Through acquired habits, one can take up tools and have them become extensions of one’s body.
In addition to the blind man example, Merleau-Ponty gives an example of the organist.63 The
organ has become a part of the organist’s body. The keys are seen as representing potential
sounds or, taking into account Merleau-Ponty’s emphasis on synesthesia, potential colors, tactile
feelings, or affects. His body can now literally paint the world with sonorous colors. In this way,
every band member’s body has become elongated; the members’ bodies, not their bodies plus the
instruments, are creating a newly colored world. In doing this, they are creating, if the above is
correct, a new layer of flesh. The bodies respond to each other to create this expression; this
unified sound. Each player is like an individual organ within a new body or a new, expressive
being. At times, the players can be so attuned to each other, responding to the slightest
expression of each member and adjusting themselves accordingly that it is as if one body were
playing the music; one body navigating the musical world. This is the last magical property one
should recognize: a fusion of subjects into a larger body, with multiple conscious centers. These
various conscious centers are not at the level of the cogito; in this state, they are all at the pre-
personal level. In this case, one is able to clearly see what Merleau-Ponty is referring to when he
writes

“Henceforth, as the parts of my body together comprise a system, so my body and the other’s are one
whole, two sides of one and the same phenomenon, and the anonymous existence of which my body is the ever-

63 Phenomenology, p. 167-8
renewed trace henceforth inhabits both bodies simultaneously. All of which makes another living being, but not yet another man.”

The band members remain tied together by this sonorous power; remaining in that primordial connection (the pre-personal self) with this new musical world. A new being arises, yet not a new human self (that is, not a subject at the reflective level). We can see that Merleau-Ponty’s conception of flesh, as Johnson points out, is a

“…conception of Being itself that is prior to the split between self and others, between nothingness and the world. [Merleau-Ponty] speaks of a ‘single Vision’ in which I and others participate, in which others appear not as negations but as ‘outlines, deviations, and variants of one sole Vision…’ This single Vision that is pre-Being, prior to the division between self and others, is the ‘flesh of the world’”,

Both oneself and the other participate in a single vision. In the music example, the understanding of this vision is acquired by participating in, and being moved by the creation of music. In being connected with one’s fellow band members in a new body tied together by a sonorous flesh that one is unreflectively creating, the distinction between oneself and one’s band members begins to loosen. When music is performed in a religious setting, not only does the distinction between band members loosen, but the possibility of an encounter with the divine other is also made available. Although, following James, we must remain agnostic, we can conjecture that in religious contexts, such performances allows one to slip into a state of mind that provides an opening to alterity; an opening to both the human and divine other. Such an interpretation of these states is, therefore, far beyond the reductionism of the tacit cogito.

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64 Ibid, p. 412
65 Johnson, p. 153-4
In *Eye and Mind*, Merleau-Ponty almost complains that music focuses too much on or is too closely connected with pure Being. Yet, why is this lamentable? Does it not show the fundamental features of incarnation? Just as the body can both touch and be touched, this new musical body can both affect (or, to stick with a metaphor from above, paint) and be affected (be painted). This again is fundamental to the nature of the flesh; as Madison has pointed out, the conception of the flesh is meant both to overcome the subjectivism that modernity had bequeathed to philosophy and to posit alterity within ipseity. This shows why I am not suggesting that in this state the distinction between one’s consciousness or point of view and that of the other vanishes (this is consistent with the phenomenological reports of the ravers above).

As Madison writes, “The flesh is the trace of the other, the inscription of the other, in the subject’s own selfhood—in its very flesh. What ‘flesh’ ‘means’ is that the subject is for itself an other.” Now this is precisely what is happening in the band case. When one encounters this new flesh of the world, this new sonorous power, one is both encountering that which one is—the music, as argued above, is an extension of one’s body—and that which is foreign or other—it is also the extension of one’s alter-ego. The traces of the other are undeniable: there one is, folding over and being enfolded by the other’s extended body. Thus, this other is not violated; that is, the

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67 If one thinks that Merleau-Ponty’s later analysis of alterity strays too far from his original phenomenology, consider his views from the chapter on sense experience in Part II of *Phenomenology of Perception*. This chapter explores the “true subject of perception” which is something that empiricism and intellectualism forget. The subject isn’t something that is passive; something that merely takes in external stimuli (as the empiricist has it), nor is it a transcendental ego (à la intellectualism). Instead, Merleau-Ponty talks about the primordial perceiver. He maintains that perception is always general; it is not personal. That is to say, I can never say that “I” perceive. Instead, it is more appropriate to say that one perceives. The subject of perception is not the “I” that chooses to go listen to music or who chose to go to graduate school. Instead, my body is the fundamental perceiver. Its connection with the world is primary. This accords with Ariel Glucklich’s observation that in states commonly referred to as mystical the sense of self evaporates, and that the self’s sensations seem to belong “to someone or something else”: a general observer; a single vision. See Glucklich, Ariel. *Sacred Pain: Hurting the Body for the Sake of the Soul*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001.
other remains the alter-ego. There is no taking up of the other’s subjectivity. Instead, what one finds is best expressed when Leonard Lawlor writes

“…the flesh…is sympathy. It is the feeling of sympathy, therefore, that leads Merleau-Ponty in all of his last writings to speak of flesh as ‘indivision’ (VI 262/208), as ‘anonymity’ (VI 254/201), as the Ineinander (VI 234/180), and, of course, as the chiasm (VI 252/199)—instead of speaking of consciousness and subjectivity. But, all of these ways of speaking, including the flesh, describe inter-subjectivity. So, while the chiasm leads Merleau-Ponty to speak of ‘rejecting…the notion of the subject’, it is precisely the chiasm of sympathy that brings about the resurrection of the subject.”

Thus, we have an anonymity. Yet, this does not erase the distinction between she who touches and she who is touched. Insofar as one is anonymous, however, the other as another anonymous being becomes closer. There is a distinction and yet there is nothing that one can point to (qua invisible) that would do the distinguishing. The other is an anonymous subjectivity, an alter-ego. Surely this recognition is best understood as sympathy in a metaphorical sense, and is the source of sympathy in everyday life. Indeed, this is the starting point for a fecund phenomenological ethic and possibly a renewed relationship with that which is beyond all particulars.

“…One might compare the feeling of sympathy with the Kantian feeling of the beautiful. What the feeling of the beautiful, like sympathy, responds to is the body…Merleau-Ponty defines the flesh by the reversibility of the double sensation. One must always recall that the experience of the double sensation—one hand touching the other—can take many forms, one of which is the hands folded together for prayer…From one’s solitude—indeed, from one’s ‘radical separation’—one implores the other to be there; one believes in the other, and the other confirms your belief when a person, when someone, reaches down and offers you a hand. Hands reaching out for hands establishes peace. The handshake is always, in Merleau-Ponty, a symbol of salvation. Through sympathy, everyone

is saved, even the weak. Therefore, sympathy is conservative feeling; the flesh is the mystery of the incarnation; and the chiasm is the sign of the cross turning into the vicious circle in which God is resurrected.\textsuperscript{69}

As Lawlor argues, the resulting description of intersubjective relationships as characterized by sympathy arise from Merleau-Ponty’s starting point: that is, Merleau-Ponty, following Heidegger, starts with Being. That is, in using the phenomenological reduction, Merleau-Ponty brackets \textit{beings} in order to discover what they are not—\textit{viz.} Being. This bracketing is a \textit{via negativa} towards Being. For Merleau-Ponty all ontology needs to be “indirect.” One cannot get to Being in-itself; one can only experience it indirectly through sympathy. It is interesting that Merleau-Ponty compares this indirect ontology to negative theology.\textsuperscript{70} In Lawlor’s estimation this Merleau-Pontean “diffraction of ontology” leads to \textit{religion}.\textsuperscript{71} That is, it leads to the questioning of that which is always on the horizon; the flesh as at once sustaining and yet always \textit{beyond} beings. It involves, that is, an openness to the Being that is at once immanent \textit{qua} flesh, and yet surpasses all particulars, transcending them all \textit{qua} the ground of beings.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[69] Ibid. p. 106-7
\item[70] Ibid. p. 99
\item[71] Ibid. p. 108
\end{footnotes}
V. Conclusion

Throughout history, from mystery cults to Grateful Dead concerts, the Cartesian self has been overthrown, sacrificed in ecstatic states of revelry. In the case of Dionysiac fervor, for example, the dissolution is often given a religious significance: the divine other, Dionysus, has entered into the maenad; the two have become one. In the case of the raver or the Grateful Dead fan, since states of transformation are the genus of which religious or mystical states are a species, such states need not be deemed religious though they could very well be deemed so. This paper has analyzed such states (especially those connected with musical creation and appreciation). In doing so, it has used William James’ analysis of mystical states in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* as a guide. Indeed, despite the title, James appears to be examining the genus as much as the species in this work. In doing so, he offers a theory of selfhood that allows for multiple selves, only one of which is usually at the conscious level, though all of which have the potential to reach that level. Further, he argues that the subconscious could serve as a gateway for ‘external’ interaction with the human. In proposing such a theory, he allows for the possibility of genuine encounters with the divine. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, on the other hand, offers a phenomenology of embodied consciousness. Underlying this embodied consciousness is the tacit cogito upon which reflective consciousness grows. This paper has argued that changes in the body’s ordinary relationship with the world allows for, like Jamesian subliminal selves coming to the conscious level, the creations of new, unordinary selves (selves on the reflective level and that require interpretation). Further, I have argued that it is at least possible to have a pure experience of the tacit cogito, before all language. However, explaining such states by an appeal to the tacit cogito renders such non-ordinary selves epiphenomenal and the experience of the tacit cogito as a merely interesting psychological fact. When Merleau-Ponty goes beyond his
earlier thought and introduces the ontology of the flesh of the world, on the other hand, his thought allows for a genuine encounter with the other, perhaps even the divine other, *le Tout Autre*.
REFERENCES


