TOWARD AN ETHICO-POLITICS OF THE POSTHUMAN: FOUCAULT AND MERLEAU-PONTY
Rosalyn Diprose

We live in an age where rapid developments in technologies and environmental catastrophes increasingly question the limits and meaning of the human and human "agency," the inevitability of human "progress," and the capacity of humanity to control its world. In response, there have emerged a number of different *ontological* ideas of the "posthuman." These continue a critical history emerging from nineteenth century philosophies, such as those of Hegel and Nietzsche, where conceptual reconsiderations of human "animality," critiques of the classical notion of human agency based in reason, free will, and/or conscious intentionality, and theoretical challenges to the classical subject-object culture-nature distinctions, combine to challenge conventional grounds for distinguishing the human from the non-human. Contemporary versions of these ontologies of the posthuman, such as in "actor's network theory" (ANT), aim at giving the non-human some kind of "agency," some say in opening new and more collective ways of thinking and living. The welcome consequence of this levelling out of human and non-human "life" is that it undermines the privilege afforded the human that has justified its dominance over everything else. A less welcome consequence is that we are left without the conventional basis of normativity underlying ethics and politics. It is this issue that this paper addresses.

If, in the wake of ontological definitions of the posthuman, "agency" is no longer viewed as the exclusive property of human beings with reason or "free will," then these capacities no longer provide unquestioned grounds for attributing moral worth to an entity (e.g. human "dignity"), or the source of conscience, moral judgment, or responsibility. Hence, the question arises: on what basis can humans be said to be any more responsible than non-human life for justice or the future of the planet? Moreover, from a political perspective, some would argue that the same kind of levelling out of "agency" of all forms of human and non-human life accounts for modern forms of oppression. Michel Foucault's analyses of disciplinary and biopower, for instance,

suggest that the source of domination and oppression in contemporary democracies is not human agency understood in the classical sense, but dispersed networks of power and governmentality that "regularize" and pacify human and non-human "life" effecting the subjection of both. In the light of this political account of the posthuman, how might we understand human "agency" in a way that provides a foundation of normativity and the means of redressing subjection, without recourse to classical notions? In answering this question, I draw on Merleau-Ponty's ontology of intercorporeality, especially his notions of "institution" and "passivity that is activity." This provides a way of restoring to human elements of "life," not control over life, but the burden of responsibility for keeping the world open for ethics.

For the purposes of this analysis, I am setting aside what I call the *technological* concept of the posthuman that tends to dominate popular debates about the ethics of bio—and other technologies.[1] One dominant technological view of the posthuman "configures human being so that it can be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines. In the posthuman, there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot technology and human goals."[2] On this account, we are "post" human in the sense that technological advances (in cybernetics, for example, but also nanotechnology, molecular genetics, artificial intelligence, and cryonics) potentially or actually enhance human capacities with the effect of liberating human existence from limitations associated with what is classically understood as human. This approach actually does little to challenge liberal humanist notions of the human and human agency. Technology is viewed in instrumental terms as that which is added to, or incorporated by, the individual human being. As a consequence, the ensuing debate about the ethics of these technologies involves either condemning or celebrating the power of these technologies to transform what is assumed to be either a natural or socially shared self-image of the human.[3] Given that both assumptions of the notion of the human are questionable, I begin the analysis instead with one of the more prevalent *ontological* approaches to the posthuman, that emerging from a combination of "actor-network theory" (ANT) and the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari. This takes seriously the way that technological developments and environmental challenges question the limits and meaning of the human and the human capacity to control its world.

1. THINKING THROUGH THE POSTHUMAN WITH THE ASTHMA INHALER.

This ANT account of the posthuman is ontological in that it redefines agency, extends agency to non-humans, and refigures the human-nonhuman relation (including relations with technology) in terms of a network rather than a hierarchy with human agents on top. Kay Anderson and Bruce Braun introduce their collection of classic essays in human geography with a graphic and wonderfully simple indicator of the ANT claim to the impossibility of clearly distinguishing between the "agency" of human beings, non-human life, and their physical environment: "evocative and symptomatic of this dense entanglement, the mix of human and non-human agencies [is] the row of 'puffers' [asthma inhalers] at the local pre-school," all labelled with the name of the child to whom they belong.[4] Their point is to demonstrate the coincidence of the human and the technical and the need to rethink the relation beyond an instrumental idea of technology. Thinking "with," rather than "about," the inhaler mixes the two: it "explodes the subject-object distinction that gives excessive primacy to humans" as observers of an environment from which they stand apart. With the help of Bruno Latour[5] and Deleuze and Guattari,[6] this tactic forces us to think the device, less as a thing that humans use, than an "agent" that "enrols heterogenous elements from the textual to the technical, the human to the non-human" in an *assemblage* (*agencement* or "actant").[7]

The agency afforded the inhaler through this idea of assemblage/*agencement* is not too ambitious. ANT ontology debunks the idea of agency as the exclusive province of human will or conscious intentionality. By "decentering … social agency" away from the human,[8] it positions the inhaler as one of many elements of an assemblage that *cause effects*. The inhaler is an agent only in the sense that it makes a difference: it can "generate[] *transformations* manifested by the many unexpected *events* triggered in the other mediators [elements] that follow [it] along the line."[9] But it does not cause effects by itself or according to some causal law of nature. Technology and

environmental elements generate transformations only by virtue of a dynamic assemblage of heterogeneous human and non-human elements and they do so in unpredictable ways.

The emphasis here is on the "event," or how these networks of posthuman becoming open new paths for thinking and living. This ontology of the posthuman also emphasises the *collective* aspect of perception, thinking, and living in a world: human agency and thought are decentred such that the social can be reassembled through a "network" or collective practice that gives non-humans a central role.

However, there is a problem with this notion of assemblage, at least in the way that Latour formulates it. I have no argument with this ontological questioning of the subject-object, human-nonhuman distinctions. And giving non-human elements credit for forcing open new paths for thinking and living is to be welcomed. But levelling out human agency, perception, and thinking as equivalent to many other multifarious elements in an assemblage that generates the "event," also *lets humans off the ethical hook*. Surely, if new paths for thinking are indeed opened through the "event," it is within humans, not inhalers or other non-human elements, that these openings are actualised. Moreover, the worlds of significance that are transformed through assemblages are also worlds of value—these are *ethical* worlds. It is human activity, thought, perception and agency (albeit in different forms to how these are conventionally understood) that render the world ethical. Hence it is up to human elements of assemblages to keep the world open for ethics.

This point can be arrived at in another way. The "event" matters as much for ethical and political reasons as it does for epistemological reasons. The event is "the event" because it consists in opening a gap in what may otherwise be a continuity between past and future. It therefore consists in the interruption of determinism that would predetermine the future of *all* the elements of an assemblage, including the human. In contemporary liberal-democratic worlds the risk of determinism that would foreclose the event does not come only, or even primarily, from the privilege afforded the human through the classical notions of human agency and intentionality as ANT seems to imply. Rather, determinism can be equally biological, technological, and/or political. Indeed, it is the combination of all three that best characterises the determinism and subjection that is the focus of Foucault's work. Individual human beings fall prey to this determinism alongside non-human elements, but humans are also in the best position to do something about it. The question remains: how?

Raising these ontological issues is not to return to naive humanism or a Kantian notion of the moral self based on autonomous practical reason, the supremacy of which is supposedly affirmed, rather than challenged, through the unsettling experience of the sublime (the experience of the absolutely great and powerfulness of "Nature"). Rather, it is to acknowledge that, just as things can "object to their social enrolment" in assemblages,[10] so can humans refuse to think "with" the thing. Habitual perception and sedimented modes of evaluation enframed by political contexts are at the core of such refusal. Considering the ethico-political dimensions of the "event," and the role of human perception/agency in it, puts the onus back on the human-perceptual elements of assemblages to remain responsive to, and "do the right thing" by, things, non-human life, and other humans. That is, thinking "with" the inhaler in the context of ANT's concept of "assemblage" does not attend to the question of "how we should conceive of ethical responsibility or political practice in this world" of biopoliticized amalgams of bodies, technologies, and other non-human environmental elements.[11] Nor does the technological understanding of the posthuman assist us here: it still assumes a non-technological individual human agent as its norm, to be enhanced or preserved depending on one's ideal of a moral human being.

Attending to the ethics and politics of the post-human requires also acknowledging that assemblages, as dynamic and transformative as they are, have a history, that the socio-political meanings that may be challenged through them are often specific to place, and that the transformations in "life" and ways of living that may result are not automatically "good" (or "bad") and they are not distributed equitably. To demonstrate the importance of considering the social-political context of "events" and the transformations they effect, I return to the example of the asthma inhaler.

If Anderson and Braun witnessed the inhaler-parade in Australia, then what it should have signified is the prevalence of a serious health problem. Asthma rates in Australia are high by international standards (10.2% of the population in 2005).[12] In many cases the condition is life-threatening (402 deaths in 2006)[13] and, because it inhibits breathing, in all cases asthma impinges upon quality of (human) life. The situation was worse thirty years ago. There was an "epidemic" of asthma in the 1960s and 1970s and the current morality rate represents a 70% decrease since 1989 when the mortality rate "peaked." While in the 1980s it was children, in various contexts, who died of the condition, it is now more likely to be the elderly and/or the socio-economically disadvantaged who may have other chronic conditions. Consideration of the current prevalence and distribution of asthma in relation to age, sex, indigeneity, and place turns up some surprising results that challenge simplistic explanations of cause (such as particular allergens, pollen or pollutants, in the environment) or assumptions that disease consists in non-human elements contaminating a universal body traversing a uniform earth. In other words, the condition itself, as much as the medical technologies mobilised to treat it, unsettles the human-nonhuman distinction by raising questions about belonging to place and about particular bodies, at particular times, being challenged by their socio-political and non-human environments. Space does not allow a detailed examination of the epidemiological studies and demographic aspects of the occurrence of the illness. Just one statistic helps to make my general point about the importance of considering the socio-political context of the technology-human-nonhuman relation. Surprisingly, asthma is the second most common self-reported illness affecting the Australian Indigenous population (26%) after eye and sight problems (30%).[14] Further, contrary to the rest of the population, the prevalence of asthma in the Indigenous population is higher in remote and inner-city areas than it is in areas in between (so-called "inner-regions").[15]

Even though the turnaround in asthma mortality rates since 1989 cannot be attributed to the inhaler alone, it has certainly played a major role.[16] Part of the attraction of this device is its simplicity, its immediate proximity just in case, and the independence from medical experts that its carriage allows. The inhaler does not thereby promote freedom from the medical gaze in any simplistic sense. As Kane Race has shown, self-administration in medicine is caught up in discourses of consumerism, self-responsibility, and the privatisation of health care.[17] Still, in terms of a more modest understanding of freedom and in ANT language, the inhaler has and does enrol human bodies in collectives with other forms of life, human and non-human, in ways that open different possibilities for living. That is, the inhaler has enabled "the event" that breaks with biological determinism. On the other hand, this is not true for everyone. It is hard to imagine these inhalers lined up in pre-schools in remote Indigenous communities (it is hard to imagine the pre-schools). The absence of "inhaler events" among Indigenous groups[18] is due to biopolitical factors in a basic sense: a scarcity of healthcare services in remote regions and, equally relevant, living conditions (remote and urban) unconducive to compliance with systematic asthma treatment regimes of which these inhalers are a large component.

There are at least two points to take from this brief excursion with asthma and its inhaler. First, the inhaler participates in what Foucault would call "political technologies of the body."[19] On this account, the development of biotechnologies is not itself a political or ethical problem. Technical devices, medication, and human bodies are always already entangled with political priorities, knowledges, practices, and measuring regimes. Given this, what matters on a Foucauldian account is the extent to which the inhaler is part of the political and medical normalisation and subjection of bodies (which would mean no "event," no break with political determinism, or not much). Second, there is a wider political context that parcels out meaning and value, thereby enframing assemblages. Political technologies of the body are not spread uniformly: the inhaler is not available for enrolment of all collectives of human and non-human bodies and elements in all places; nor is it necessarily appropriate that it participate in effecting transformations in the lives of everyone. In the case of Indigenous health in Australia, this wider context is provided, most recently, by the so-called "Northern Territory Intervention" of early 2007 where the (now former) Federal Government suspended parts of the Racial Discrimination Act and sent in the army and teams of medical practitioners to attend to the health of members of remote Indigenous communities. Despite the fact that asthma and eye and sight problems are by far the most common self-reported illnesses affecting Indigenous peoples, neither figured in the justifications for the Intervention, which was primarily in terms of a reported "epidemic" of sexual abuse of children. As

this claim, at least by the end of the first twelve months of the Intervention, appears to be a gross exaggeration, many view the Intervention to be little more than a spectacular exercise in demonising Indigenous Australians. As such, it falls squarely into the "regularization of life" that, according to Foucault characterizes "biopolitics."[20] On the other hand, if we consider the ethical side of biopolitics, it is clear that the long-term neglect of the social, economic, and health needs of Indigenous Australians requires urgent redress. It is to the following question then that I now turn: where does the "event" that breaks with *political* determinism fit into Foucault's characterisation of "political technologies of the body" and "biopolitics"?

2. FOUCAULT, TECHNOLOGIES OF SUBJECTION, AND BIOPOLITICS

Foucault is indispensable to the question of the relation between human bodies, non-human elements (including technical devices), and the politics of "life." In an advance on technological notions of the posthuman, Foucault's account of "*political* technologies of the body" proposes that human bodies are already technological (*techné*) by virtue of being enmeshed in the networks of power and circulating knowledges, quite apart from, and as a precondition to, being attached to particular technical devices (such as the inhaler). In an advance on ANT, Foucault, by formulating his revision of the human-technology-nonhuman relation in the context of the political, brings the question of political power to bear on an ontology of the posthuman. What he highlights is how human bodies—their capacities, powers, desires, and biological processes (rather than human agency understood in the classical sense as being centred on consciousness)—have become central to contemporary politics as the targets of both disciplinary power and biopower. Politics targets the corporeal domain of the posthuman and it is here that habits form and subjection takes place. On his account, disciplinary and bio-power render human bodies "docile," subjectivities compliant, and "life" regular. In other words, power within regimes of governmentality forecloses the "event."

Just as biotechnologies, including the inhaler, intervene into bodies at the muscular, neurological or molecular level to reorganize corporeal processes, disciplinary power operates at the micro-level of the body's movements, spatiality, and temporal rhythms to realign the body's forces and powers.

Discipline increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience). In short, it dissociates power from the body; on the one hand, it turns it into an 'aptitude', a 'capacity', which it seeks to increase; on the other hand, it reverses the course of the energy, the power that might result from it, and turns it into a relation of strict subjection.[21]

Subjection and docility, for Foucault then, turn not so much on rendering the self passive in the sense of negating agency, understood as free will or conscious intentionality. Rather subjection, through discipline, turns on the political harnessing of the body's "powers" and energy to form aptitudes and habits that serve social and economic ends.

Biopower, on the other hand, operates through political concerns about population health. It has "taken control of life in general—with the body as one pole and the population as the other."[22] Biopower does not so much aim at an individual human body to render it compliant; it aims at regulating the "species body" of the population. Nevertheless it forecloses the "event" in assemblages of power, biotechnologies, knowledges (including epidemiological studies), and biological processes by leveling out biological life. Through practices that attend to population health and welfare, biopower aims at curtailing "unpredictable," "random events" and "achieving overall equilibrium" in a population with the promise of protecting "the security of the whole from internal dangers."[23] It is in this "regularization of life" that biopower is as normalizing and "hierarchizing" as discipline—judgments about which biological disabilities, random events, and kinds of life present a "danger" to the population get aligned with discriminatory norms of race, sex, sexual reproduction, family, sexuality, body size, national identity, and so on. Biotechnologies may well save lives and enhance human capacities, but not without inserting us into totalizing and discriminatory regimes of government. It is in these terms that we can best understand what is "wrong," in part, with the Northern Territory Intervention and how it forecloses

the possibility of new ways of living for Indigenous Australians, with or without the inhaler. On the other hand, continuing to neglect the health needs and poor socio-economic conditions of many Indigenous communities is not a desirable alternative.

While Foucault has revolutionized the way we understand the operation of regimes of subjection in contemporary politics and population health, he fares less well on how to enable "the event," how to break with habitual perception and political determinism to open new ways of thinking and living within posthuman assemblages. The reason for this shortfall, I argue, is that he tends to assume an instrumental notion of political technology and, connected to this problem, he tends to assume that the body is a *tabula rasa* upon which socio-political norms are inscribed and that alongside this lie as yet unsocialized corporeal forces. He relies on this assumption of a realm of corporeal innocence to explain the "event" and, hence, the means of escaping the less savory dimensions of biopolitics. So, while Foucault calls for us to contest the kind of individualizing and totalising governmentality he describes, this is in terms of resistance to, or disruption of, the relatively stable "governmentalized" mechanisms and their "endlessly repeated play of dominations."[24] The emergence of corporeal powers and new assemblages of forces that would contest the status quo is, on Foucault's account, a matter of confrontation and accident. Moreover, while his account of the relation between power, knowledge, and human-nonhuman corporeal "life" implies, as in "actor-network theory," that resistance to totalising government would involve *collective* practice, this is not the path he takes. Instead, corporeal "points of insubordination" and means of escape provide the basis for an *ethics* of experimental *techniques of self* as practices of freedom that, while considerate of others (including non-human "others"), are only so as an afterthought.[25]

3. MERLEAU-PONTY'S ONTOLOGY OF THE POSTHUMAN

Formulating an ethics for the posthuman world requires a more considered ontology to supplement that which is apparently assumed in biopolitical analysis. The challenge is to better understand what kind of collective practices allow the emergence of the "event" within assemblages of human, non-human, meaning, and technical elements without ignoring the mediating role of (historically conditioned) human perception, receptivity, and responsiveness. Ignoring the latter risks falling back into a schema that privileges either the "thing" (including technical devices) or new "life," on the one side, and/or, on the other side, the figure of a pioneer at the frontier of life practicing freedom against normalisation. While Merleau-Ponty's ontology does not resolve all of these dilemmas, ideas centering on his concept of the divergence of "flesh" go some way toward providing the basis for an ethico-politics of the posthuman—his ideas of "institution" and "passivity that is an activity" in particular.[26] This ontology figures human perception and "agency" as based in intercorporeality characterised by a historicity of the intertwining of "life" and meaning (what Merleau-Ponty refers to as "existence already instituted"). It also highlights the receptive affectivity of entanglements of human-nonhuman existence. While the regularization of corporeal "life" is an ever-present possibility in this amalgam of vectorial matter, affectivity, and socio-political meaning, also central to this ontology is an idea of the "event" or the transformation of the institutions that condition "life" and its perception.

The first aspect of Merleau-Ponty's ontology to consider is the relation he posits between socio-political norms, scientific knowledge, and corporeal "life." Merleau-Ponty, in his lectures on *Nature*, says that socio-political meaning is not imposed on material "life" (human or non-human) by a perceiving subject and, yet, it "is only within the perceived world that we can understand that all corporeality is already a symbolism."[27] He is not replacing "agency" centred on human consciousness, will, or reason, with agency centred on a (symbolised and symbolising) corporeality (or human body) that thereby governs its world from which it stands apart. Merleau-Ponty's ontology is directed toward overturning this distinction between subject and object, immanence and transcendence, interiority and exteriority, and the related distinction between culture and nature. We cannot assume either that cultural meaning is imposed on "nature," as some forms of idealism or "social constructionism" have it, or that, conversely, "nature" (or even technical devices) determines "culture" (which would be naturalism or realism). As Leonard Lawlor explains, referring to Merleau-Ponty's lecture notes on *Nature*,[28] Merleau-Ponty advocates neither the separation nor the coincidence of these extremes of idealism

and realism, culture and nature; rather, "there must be 'a hiatus' *un écart*," or an intertwining of the "two."[29] So with Merleau-Ponty we find that the meaning of "life," while always socio-political and historical, is actualised and lived by human bodies entwined with other elements of "life." "Corporeality is already a symbolism" and already technological without meaning being simply imposed on biological processes or on sensible "nature" by either a socio-political order that comes before us, or by one's own conceptualising consciousness.

Second, on the issue of docility and political subjection with respect to perception and "agency": Merleau-Ponty claims that it is "possible to speak of passivity" with respect to a person's relation to her environment, cultural milieu, or past, providing we do not equate "activity" or "agency" with consciousness or "will" and "only on the condition that 'to be conscious' does not mean 'to give a meaning,' which one projects onto an ungraspable object of knowledge."[30] But nor should passivity be understood simply in terms of compliance with outside forces, a formulation that then views political "agency" as a *struggle* against those forces.[31] For Merleau-Ponty, within the hiatus of meaning, human and non-human "life," human life "continues a vortex of experience which was set up at our birth, at the point of contact between the 'outside' and he who is called to live it."[32] While, like Foucault, for Merleau-Ponty, this "point of contact" with the "outside" is a body, Merleau-Ponty's body is not an assemblage of active forces and powers in a relation of struggle with the powers of normalisation that would tame it. Rather, the human body is "called to live" by elements that are not itself: this is a "non-decisionary project" where I am "inspired" and "overcome" by the "thickness of the sensible," which may include technical devices.[33] But, in this project of living, the body is neither simply active or passive, dominating or docile, in relation to the "outside" that calls it to live, whether the "outside" is understood as the norms and meanings embedded in forces of governmentality, consciousness, asthma inhalers, or the rest of material life. This is because, as Merleau-Ponty puts it later in *The Visible and the Invisible*, there is a "double belongingness" to human "life:" "the body sensed and the body sentient" are "two phases" of "flesh," and between the world and my body "there is reciprocal insertion and intertwining of one in the other."[34] Hence, as perception or experience is "a feeling that is felt", a seeing that is seen,[35] then "*my activity is equally passivity.*"[36] Conversely, *passivity is equally activity*; human corporeality intertwined with the rest of "life" is not alternatively active and passive, but both, simultaneously. In passivity, whether in sleep (Merleau-Ponty's most extreme case) or enacting habits and trained capacities, with or without the assistance of technical devices, power is not dissociated from the body, as Foucault would have it. Rather, what we view as passivity or docility is "a certain variation in a field of existence already instituted, which is always behind us and whose weight, like that of an object in flight, only intervenes in the actions by which we transform it."[37] The apparently passive incorporation of social norms through, for example, disciplined or compliant behaviour, is simultaneously an activity by which those norms and meanings are not only actualised, but also transformed. It is not that some corporeal powers are tamed and biological processes "regularized" and that these coexist with other corporeal forces that remain free and a means of escape. Even in sleep or habit, which are "cluttered with the debris of the past and present," the body "plays among them."[38]

Third, in elaborating how this play of activity and passivity is related to the historicity of human existence ("existence already instituted"), Merleau-Ponty introduces his notion of the "event" that disrupts determinism (whether political, biological, or technical). Here, without re-centring "agency" back upon human conscious intentionality, he nevertheless puts the onus back upon human poles of intercorporeal assemblages to keep the world open for the "event," and, therefore, as I will shortly argue, for ethics. In his lectures on "Institution in Personal and Public History," Merleau-Ponty equates "activity-passivity" (which is the closest he gets to an idea of "subject" or "agency") with the idea of complexes of human-nonhuman life being simultaneously "instituted and instituting."[39] This is decidedly "not a constituting subject," which would imply that my consciousness constitutes the meaning and value of my world.[40] This concept of "institution-instituting" also adds consideration of temporality to activity-passivity—the historicity and futurity of intercorporeal intertwinings. The vortex of experience lived by a human body always involves a past, a tradition, that is, encounters within a social milieu "which sediment in me a meaning" such that I will tend to perceive and respond to my world in a similar way to how I have before.[41] Indeed, every level of existence, the "animal," the "biological," the interpersonal, carries, from the time of our birth, an element of "existence already instituted," where "institution" refers to

"those events in experience which endow it with durable dimensions."[42] On the other hand, sedimentation is not just meaning surviving as a residue in an activity that repeats the past or that duplicates a social convention. "Institution" also involves beginning something new, initiating, innovation. Every experience involves "a simultaneous de-centering and recentering of the elements in our personal life, a movement by us toward the past and of the reanimated past toward us."[43] In other words, institution itself, "being exposed to …," or receptivity to elements and significances, initiates the present and simultaneously "opens *a* future."[44] This is Merleau-Ponty's idea of the "event," the break with determinism that opens a gap between past and future and transforms meaning. Being "exposed to …" and "overcome by" that which is not oneself inspires "those events which sediment in me a meaning as *the invitation to a sequel, the necessity of a future.*"[45] This institution-instituting aspect of the thickness, intertwining, and divergence of bodily being prevents me from coinciding with myself, or the present with past and future, or me with the other in any form. It is within this "divergence" of "sense" and "flesh," this "deformation, which is proper to institution," that "*a* future," new concepts, and therefore new paths for thinking and living arise.[46] This intercorporeal opening of "*a* future" is the basis for ethics.

4. TOWARD AN ETHICO-POLITICS OF THE POSTHUMAN

As Merleau-Ponty emphasises that "being exposed to …" is central to the "event," he would agree with contemporary "actor-network theory" (ANT) that any element (human, non-human, or technical) can generate transformations in meaning and being through its impact on other elements of an assemblage. But, unlike ANT, for Merleau-Ponty such transformations are only actualised in any meaningful way through the human poles of intercorporeal assemblages. It is within humans, not inhalers, that a transformation of meaning takes place and it is humans, not inhalers, who care that they have a future and that this future is not determined. While animals are futural and may also care about their worlds,[47] this would be in ways and temporal flows that humans cannot control and can only access by being receptive to ways of becoming that we pick up from dwelling in animal worlds. From the perspective of a human world it is human corporeal poles of entanglements (with non-human organisms, animals, and things) that keep the world open for ethics. This point is not lost on an earlier Foucault who, in "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," indicates some agreement with Merleau-Ponty about both the historicity and futurity of the "event" and its emergence through the human body.[48] Genealogy is a political practice in that it targets historical determinism that is aimed "at dissolving the singular event into an ideal continuity—as a theological movement or a natural process[49] But even in this earlier work we can see signs of Merleau-Ponty's departure from Foucault: the "event" that emerges to disrupt descent is, for Foucault, accidental and born of a struggle of forces. So, while, like Merleau-Ponty, Foucault gradually locates the human body and biological "life" as the sites where the "event" emerges, for him, unlike Merleau-Ponty, keeping the body open to the event will become an ethics of individual practice (of techniques of self or care for self, mentioned earlier) rather than collective practice.

What then does Merleau-Ponty's ontology of "institution" and "passivity that is activity" say about an ethics of the posthuman in the context of biopolitical regularization of life? On Merleau-Ponty's account, "resistance" to normalization and regularization is built into the very structure of the affective intercorporeality of existence, which is indeterminate or ambiguous to its core. As the human body is always embedded in a material and semiotic world, human existence is at once biological and socio-political-historical. This means that social norms, value judgments about preferred forms of life, and prohibitions, come to us in incarnate fragments from the bodies of others—"through gestures that condemn by the curl of a lip or through words that shame by timbre and tone"[50]—others who mediate one's reception of biotechnologies and other non-human elements, whether at an interpersonal or macro-political level. To the extent that I take up these significations and make them my own, I will develop a style of becoming that responds to the impact of the world in familiar ways. But no body is thus rendered docile, reduced to biological processes, or engulfed by sedimented meanings. Passivity that is activity is always in play, as is the receptivity and transformation of meaning and being that this play involves.

Nevertheless, Merleau-Ponty's ontology does allow for human bodies to refuse a transformation by the sensible (my body may not be receptive to the inhaler, for instance). This is less about "resistance" to normalization (which, for Merleau-Ponty, is not the salient issue) or an ethical stance (no technical device or biotechnology is 'good' or bad' in itself) than an indication of variations in habitual comportments toward a world and attendant limitations on what transformations individual bodies are open to. Although, even in that refusal I am transformed and, once a technical device or biotechnology is encountered, I would continue to be situated in terms of what it means.[51] More central to my concerns here is how Merleau-Ponty's ontology acknowledges the possibility of subjection or socio-political discrimination. It is at this level of political enframing of assemblages that Merleau-Ponty's ontology can provide a foundation for an ethics of the posthuman. Subjection would result, not from "normalization" in Foucault's sense, but from the way some forms of political enframing of material-semiotic environments impact on bodies (human and non-human) to foreclose the "event" and, hence, the opening of "*a* future." Conversely, it is by way of asserting the existential necessity that human poles of entanglements remain open to the "event" that Merleau-Ponty's ontology provides politics and ethics with a normative basis. Human "institution" (public as well as personal) and, therefore, ethics and politics should be geared toward that which things and animals may not be capable of doing alone: making a situation "indefinitely open" thus reversing what may otherwise seem like "irreversible duration."[52] And only if human bodies are open to the "event' can they refuse an encounter or make value judgements.

While Merleau-Ponty does not lay out an ethics of the posthuman in any systematic way, he does point toward this fundamental basis of one. For instance, he consistently objects to philosophical, social, and political regimes that tend to reduce human existence to one of two extremes: either mere biological life or active constituting consciousness (idealism). The former would amount to determinism while the latter detaches human existence from its environment and (unjustifiably) grants it unconditioned freedom. He objects to political regimes that are totalitarian for the way they pre-determine the future of the lives they govern (which amounts to foreclosing the possibility of the "event"). And he objects to perceptual "rigidity" born of treating others as either "absolutely other" (some forms of idealism) or "identical" (some forms of liberalism).[53] Alternatively, on the basis of Merleau-Ponty's intercorporeal ontology, we could practice collective openness to the "event." Initially, he describes this practice as exercising "good ambiguity" in relation to others, whether human or non-human.

There is a "good ambiguity" in the phenomenon of expression, a spontaneity which accomplishes what appeared to be the impossible when we observed only the separate elements, a spontaneity which gathers together the plurality of monads, the past and the present, nature and culture into a single whole. To establish this wonder would be metaphysics itself and would at the same time give us the principle of an ethics.[54]

Given his idea of the "divergence of flesh," Merleau-Ponty is unlikely to mean to base an ethics of "wonder" on gathering existence into a "single whole" in the sense of a homogeneous unity. According to Merleau-Ponty, in his discussion leading up to this passage, the only shared fact in any culture is the "thought" of a "plurality of beings" and "wonder" is receptiveness to this plurality.

While Merleau-Ponty does not elaborate, we could conjecture that, as an ethical principle, "wonder" involves being receptive to the multiplicity of becomings encountered in our entanglements, and, to take up his work on the "event," being receptive to the transformations other entities or persons effect in us. But this could also imply politico-ethical quietism or indifference to the plight of others.[55] There are at least two indications in Merleau-Ponty's lectures on "institution" and "passivity" that, on the contrary, an ethics derived from his ontology *compels* human existence to preserve the world for the expression of multiplicity and therefore for the other to express their uniqueness. The first indication is the emphasis he places on affective responsiveness to what one is "exposed to …" in the opening of the "event." There is a kind of compulsion toward the other, or "communication through lateral enthusiasm," inspired by this exposure, an affective compulsion that also drives the resulting divergence or deformation of meaning that opens "a future."[56] Second, in a move that foreshadows Emmanuel Levinas' ethics, Merleau-Ponty suggests that this responsiveness to the dynamic multiplicity one is exposed to makes one *responsible for the other*. With regard to this point, he makes the following criticism of Sartre's

ethics, in particular his notion of freedom, a criticism that could equally be directed against the individualism apparent in Foucault's later aesthetic ethics and technological notions of the posthuman:

Here [in the relation Sartre posits between the For-itself and the For-others] there is a bond that is distance because it is created by me, where there needs to be distance that is a bond; [rather than] a "respect" for the freedom of the other [that] is non-intervention of others in me, … what is needed is to take responsibility for the other, not as infirm and impotent, but without rejecting everything that one thinks. This is because … I am also others and that they are also me. The relation to conceive is like that of coupling *<l'accouplement>*, or like that of gestation, or like that of projection and introjection, or like that of speaking and hearing (Lagache, *Hallucinations verbales*), or like that of writing and reading, the relation of "transcendence in my sense" or of "transcendence in his sense" of me by others or of others by me.[57]

An ethics based on "taking responsibility for other[s] … without rejecting everything one thinks," provides no prescription about what sorts of biotechnologies, technical devices, or organisms would be "good" or "bad" for humanity as a whole. Nor does it either celebrate or warn against the medicalization of the body or political regulation of technological development or of population health. Nor could such positions be taken in any absolute way without remaining blind to the multiplicity of becomings that make up assemblages and without imposing one's values or what one thinks on the ways of living of those with whom one dwells. What this ethics does warn against is precisely that: *forcing* one's convictions, oneself and what one thinks, or particular technical devices on others, human or non-human. On the other hand, and more positively, this ethics compels us to take up the call of "life," the invitation to live with others and things in such a way that attempts to keep all existence open to an undetermined future. This principle supports forms of government regulation and social services that attend to the health and welfare of all, providing this does not demonise any particular group ahead of or during the "event" and providing those being cared for have some say in how. Perhaps most important, taking responsibility for others and a world without rejecting everything one thinks implies a commitment to dynamic collectivity. Central to collective existence that keeps open an undetermined future is a dialogical practice (central to public and personal institution) that heeds the uniqueness of others (human and non-human) without giving up everything that one thinks.

This is not as easy as ANT seems to assume. On the basis of Merleau-Ponty's ontology, "wonder" that also takes responsibility for the other must involve a kind of speaking and hearing, touching and being-touched that is also self-criticism. It involves what Merleau-Ponty finally calls "hyper-reflection:"[58] an awareness of the pre-reflective play of "activity that is passivity" (or "instituted-instituting") discussed above without knowing what ideas come from the other or the world and what comes from me. Hyper-reflection "plunges into the world instead of surveying it" and takes into account "the changes it introduces" into the entanglements and perceptual field with which it is engaged.[59] This ethical principle is hopefully in play among those medical practitioners, health-care workers, and Indigenous peoples currently participating in the so-called Northern Territory Intervention. But it was noticeably absent from the way the former Federal Government instituted, initiated, announced, and first implemented the policy ■

NOTES

1. It is generally accepted that the contemporary technological definition of the posthuman began with Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" first published in *Socialist Review* in 1985 and reprinted in Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*. New York: Routledge, 1991.

2. Katherine N. Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999, 3.

3. Jürgen Habermas takes the view that the ethics of genetic engineering, for example, should be guided by the extent to which such technologies damage our shared self-understanding as moral beings. See Jürgen Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature.* Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003.

4. Kay Anderson and Bruce Braun, eds, introduction to *Environment: Critical Essays in Human Geography*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009, xii.

5. Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

6. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987.

7. Anderson and Braun, xii & xv

8. Sarah Whatmore, *Hybrid Geographies: Natures, Cultures, Spaces*. London: SAGE Publications, 2002, 4.

9. Latour, *Reassembling*, 107.

10. Whatmore, *Hybrid*, 5. The point is elaborated by Bruno Latour in "When Things Strike Back" *British Journal of Sociology* 51:1 (2000), 107-23.

11. Anderson and Braun, xiii.

12. *Asthma in Australia 2008*, Australian Centre for Asthma Monitoring (ACAM), 2008. AIHW Asthma Series no.3, xii. All information and statistics about asthma rates in Australia are taken from this comprehensive report. It is available at http://www.asthmamonitoring.org, (accessed 30 Nov 2008)

13. *Ibid.*, 50.

14. *Ibid.*, 5.

15. *Ibid.*, 4. "Inner regional" is an Australian Standard Geographical Classification (ASGC) of the remoteness of a place purely in terms of geographical accessibility, and excludes urban/rural, socio-economic and related considerations. "Inner regional" refers to places where "geographic distance imposes *some restriction* upon accessibility to the widest range of goods, services and opportunities for social interaction." *Ibid.*,189. Hobart for example is classified as "inner regional." Asthma rates are also much higher among Indigenous women (not men) aged 15-54 (compared to the non-Indigenous women) and higher among Indigenous men over 55 compared with everyone else. *Ibid.*, 6.

16. While the first modern form of the asthma inhaler appeared in the US in 1956, courtesy of 3M HealthCare, it was not until the 1970s that it came with a safe and relatively effective asthma medication. See Graham Crompton, "A brief history of inhaled asthma therapy over the last fifty years" *Primary Care Respiratory Journal* 15:6 (2006), 326-331. It was available in Australia by 1975, in a primitive form called the "spinhaler," although only by prescription to those in the know. I am leaving aside the question of "events" in the development of the asthma inhaler. Presumably that would be a very long story involving many dynamic assemblages.

17. Kane Race, *Pleasure Consuming Medicine: The Queer Politics of Drugs*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2009.

18. *Asthma in Australia*, 122.

19. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of a Prison*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979, 26.

20. Michel Foucault, *Society Must be Defended: Lectures at the Collége de France 1975-76.* Trans. David Macey. Eds Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana. New York: Picador, 2003, 239-64.

21. Foucault, *Discipline*, 138.

22. Foucault, *Society*, 253.

23. *Ibid.*, 249.

24. Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" *Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954-1984, Vol.2: Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*. Ed. J Faubion. London: Penguin, 2000, 377.

25. For Foucault's answer to the question of the place of others in his ethics of "care for the self" see, for example, "On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress" and "The Ethics of the Concern for the Self as a Practice of Freedom" *Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954-1984, Vol 1: Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*. Ed. J Faubion. London: Penguin, 2000.

26. Merleau-Ponty develops these two ideas in two lecture courses at the Collège de France (1952-1960), the notes from which have only become available in French in 2006. I am grateful to Leonard Lawlor for making his English translation of these available to me ahead of publication. See, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Institution in Personal and Public History and The Problem of Passivity: Sleep, the Unconscious, Memory. Course Notes at the Collège de France (1954-55)*. Preface Claude Lefort. Text established by Dominique Darmaillacq, Claude Lefort, and Stéphanie Ménasé. Trans. Leonard Lawlor and Heath Massey. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2009. My analysis also draws on the summaries of the themes of these courses, which have been available in print since 1968. See Merleau-Ponty, "Themes from the Lectures at the Collège de France, 1952-1960, *In Praise of Philosophy and Other Essays*. Trans. John Wild, James Edie, and John O'Neill. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988.

27. Merleau-Ponty, "Themes", 166. See also his discussion of "institution and life" in Merleau-Ponty, *Institution and Passivity*, 49-50.

28. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Nature: Course Notes from the Collége de France*, compiled with notes by Dominique Séglard. Trans. Robert Vallier. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2003, 157 & 121.
29. Leonard Lawlor, *The Implications of Immanence: Toward a New Concept of Life*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2006, 113.

30. Merleau-Ponty, "Themes", 115.

31. Merleau-Ponty, *Institution and Passivity*, 160-1. Merleau-Ponty directs this criticism at Sartre's idea of passivity and bad faith, where the For-itself is engulfed by the In-itself or by the For-others and "agency" is understood in terms of the For-itself struggling against and transcending the In-itself and being-for-others. However, his point about a struggle between passive (tamed) and active forces could also be directed against Foucault.

32. Merleau-Ponty, "Themes", 115.

33. Merleau-Ponty, *Institution and Passivity*, 34.

34. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968, 137-8.

35. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind" *The Primacy of Perception*. Trans. Carleton Dallery, Ed. James M. Edie. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964, 162-3.

36. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible*, 139 (emphasis added).

37. Merleau-Ponty, "Themes", 115.

38. *Ibid.*, 116.

39. Merleau-Ponty, *Institution and Passivity*, 35.

40. *Ibid.*, 35 & 37.

41. Merleau-Ponty, "Themes", 108.

42. *Ibid.*, 108.

43. *Ibid.*, 112.

44. Merleau-Ponty, *Institution and Passivity*, 35.

45. Merleau-Ponty, "Themes", 109 (emphasis added).

46. Merleau-Ponty, *Institution and Passivity*, 36 & 41.

47. *Ibid.*, 49.

48.Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History." Foucault laid out this definition of genealogy (which is also a critical appropriation of Nietzsche) in this paper in 1971 prior to his accounts of disciplinary power, biopower, and the practices of freedom that he hoped would serve as an antidote.

49. Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History", 380.

50. Rosalyn Diprose, *Corporeal Generosity: On Giving with Nietzsche, Merleau-Ponty, and Levinas*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002, 104.

51. I explore this issue of localised refusals and prohibitions in more detail in *Corporeal Generosity* (chapter 5) and I provide a more detailed analysis of the complexities of the politico-ethics of a particular biotechnology, RU486, in Rosalyn Diprose, "The Political Technology of RU486: Time for the Body and Democracy" *The Stuff of Politics: Technoscience, Democracy and Public Life*. Eds Bruce Braun and Sarah Whatmore. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009, 216-64.

52. Merleau-Ponty, *Institution and Passivity*, 57 & 50.

53. Merleau-Ponty, "The Child's Relation with Others," *The Primacy of Perception*, 103-6.

54. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "An Unpublished text by Merleau-Ponty: *A Prospectus of His Work*" *The Primacy of Perception*, 11. This statement ends the prospectus of Merleau-Ponty's work up to 1952 (which he submitted at the time of his candidacy at the Collége de France). It therefore frames his later philosophy that I have drawn on for my analysis.

55. Levinas criticises Merleau-Ponty on precisely this point—that his ontology is marked by indifference to difference. For my defence of Merleau-Ponty against this criticism see Diprose, *Corporeal Generosity*, chapter 9.

56. Merleau-Ponty, *Institution and Passivity*, 35 & 52-3.

57. *Ibid.*, 162-3 (emphasis added).

58. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible*, 38.

59. *Ibid.*, 38-9.