

VIKTEN AV KROPP

Frågan om kött och människa i Maurice
Merleau-Pontys *Le visible et l'invisible*

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ABSTRACT

Helena Dahlberg: *The Weight of the Body. The Question of Flesh and Human Being in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's Le visible et l'invisible.* [Vikten av kropp. Frågan om kött och människa I Maurice Merleau-Pontys Le visible et l'invisible.] Ph.D. dissertation in Swedish, with an English summary, at Gothenburg University, Sweden, 2011. Department of Literature, History of ideas and Religion, Gothenburg University, Box 200, SE-405 30 Göteborg

This dissertation begins with a question: What is the meaning of 'flesh' [*chair*] in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *The visible and the invisible*? In answering this question, I try to grasp, not only the manifold meanings of flesh in *The visible and the invisible*, but also the reasons why the meaning of this concept cannot be neatly encompassed. Starting from Merleau-Ponty's understanding of philosophical language, I explore how the concept of flesh works as a linguistic concept, and how it is *meaningful* because of its ability to call already established meanings into question. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty asserts that the theory of the flesh is not an anthropology, and that he does not want to describe the being that man has, but rather the being that has man. I argue that the concept of flesh simultaneously speaks about human being and calls human being into question. Further, I claim that the flesh must be understood as the tension between the human and inhuman, between the proper and improper, between a shared history and language and a new expression.

This dissertation is written in the field of History of Ideas, and thus investigates Merleau-Ponty's notion of flesh from a historical perspective. I argue that the question of flesh should be understood in relation to the debates about the humanist question (i.e. what/who is human being?) that characterised the French humanist tradition in the 1940s. I bring to light why man, in this tradition, is considered as absent or missing, and why it is considered important to find him. I carry out a close reading of three texts from the 1940s by Henri Lefèbvre, Jean-Paul Sartre and Emmanuel Mounier, in order to show how they all share a certain ambivalence in the search for man. On the one hand, they want man to heal his inner cleavage and become one with himself. On the other hand, their search for man is a search for the very tension that human existence expresses, and a wish to remain within this tension. I claim that Merleau-Ponty's concept of flesh questions something that the humanistic tradition has taken for granted, and that one can read *The Visible and the Invisible* as Merleau-Ponty's *Letter on humanism*. Moreover, I argue that Merleau-Ponty's philosophy offers an alternative to humanism as well as to antihumanism, because it addresses that which gives rise to the question of man, rather than man's unambiguous beginning (as humanism) or his end (as antihumanism).

The concept of flesh articulates a specific structure of being; a chiasmatic connectedness and divergence. It is that which at once joins and separates the different parts of the body, the body and the world, the past and the future as well as the old and the new. We should understand the meaning of flesh; not only on account of what the concept refers to, but also based on its ability to serve as a border between things, and consequently on account of what it calls into question. Starting from Merleau-Ponty's depiction of an encounter between two fleshly bodies, I describe the flesh as the in-between space, and as the suspension between bodies. I understand the body as that which can arrest its own movement and thus make room for the flesh, and I develop this understanding into the notion of *the weight of the body*. The body's weight evidences man's inherence in the world, but also the possibility for a new beginning. When the body arrests its movement it experiences its own weight, in relationship with another body. The flesh is this suspension between one thing and another, between one meaning and another; a movement where the immediate aim has gone missing, a new beginning.

KEYWORDS: Merleau-Ponty, flesh, body, humanism, phenomenology, French philosophy, the post-war period, history of ideas.