

The Mystical Experience: A Re-Interpretation Through Merleau-Ponty's  
Phenomenology of Embodiment

Jacqueline Yarbro

Washington and Lee University

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## Abstract

Our bodies allow us to *be* in the world and form opinions about our experiences through perception and movement. However, this quality goes unnoticed by most because the body is considered a natural and normal part of experience. One of the best ways to uncover the fundamental nature of the body is it to look at the mystical experience. In this project I will focus on the mystical visions of Hildegard von Bingen. My analysis will examine the way Hildegard's body was crucial to her ability to interact with the Divine and make sense of her own encounters. Moreover, I will argue that without using the body to describe those visions readers today would not be able to find significant meaning in her mystical teachings. It is my contention that the only manner in which we are able to understand the language of Hildegard's visions is through our status as embodied individuals. Once we uncover the essential component our bodies play in our understanding of Hildegard we will then be able to discover meanings in her visions and our connections to those teachings.

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## Introduction

Our bodies, along with other elements of our beings, give us a fundamental connection to the world. Embodiment particularly enables us to engage with the world; we see through an intricate optical system, hear through physical vibrations, and utilize complex musculature to move through the space around us. We are incredible creatures and the systems making up our bodies still escape full understanding. While the body as physical material is a fascinating entity, it does much more than give us the ability to *be* in the world. Our bodies link us, as humans, together in ways that go much deeper than the skin. Embodiment is an aspect of one's self that we share with all others regardless of race, gender, age, or location. We are bound together as a human species through that basic commonality of experience—embodiment.

Our inability to tear ourselves away from bodies, to see what it would mean to exist without them, makes embodiment an especially difficult topic of study. Because of those difficulties, we usually live through a naïve consciousness, never examining exactly what it means to live in a body. Every second of the day is spent wrapped in musculature, barraged by physical vibrations, and flooded by firing neurons. Phenomenology as a method provides us with the ability to see through our naivety, through the subconscious workings of the body, to discover what it means to live embodied:

It is because we are through and through compounded of relationships with the world that for us the only way to become aware of the fact is to suspend the resultant activity, to refuse it our complicity...or yet again, to put it 'out of play.' Not because, we reject the certainties of common sense and a natural attitude to things...but because, being the presupposed basis of any thought, they are taken for granted, and go unnoticed, and because in order

to arouse them and bring them to view, we have to suspend for a moment our recognition of them.<sup>1</sup>

Phenomenology does not reject what is readily apparent and seems natural, like the world and others, but rather puts those assumptions aside by bracketing. Through bracketing we suspend the usual, the normal, to make it strange. The phenomenological method actively works to divorce analysis from automatic assumptions about the subject of analysis. By assessing these assumptions and putting our natural attitudes about the world out of play, phenomenologists can bring to light unseen elements about the world, our bodies and anything else made the subject of inquiry. Importantly, phenomenology does not turn away from what it hopes to describe but rather makes a Cartesian move to strip away preconceptions to allow the subject to appear as an experience. By putting embodiment out of play, phenomenology helps us to understand how our bodies help us be in the world.

This paper takes as its task to join a phenomenology of the body to an increased ability to understand Hildegard von Bingen's mystical experiences. As is particularly relevant to Hildegard, the underlying systems of patriarchy within the Christian church and women's entrance onto the mystical scene makes her story of Heavenly communion interesting to study. Hildegard (1098-1179) in particular distinguished herself in history because of her "efforts to reform the Church... and to install new forms of Christian life."<sup>2</sup> Hildegard made great strides in the sociopolitical context of the medieval Church while also maintaining status as a mystical influence on male members of the religion. She "procure[d] for herself the power and influence she could not otherwise hope to have"

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<sup>1</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, xiii.

<sup>2</sup> McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, 121.

through writing numerous letters to members of the church clergy and relating her visions (by writing or dictation) completely in Latin—a language in which she was not fluent.<sup>3</sup> All of these portions of her personal life taken together make Hildegard a crucial person of study for the fields of mysticism, women’s studies and history (just to name a few). But here it is salient that Hildegard’s correspondence with the clergy and her other written works make evident her own awareness of her status: she was a woman in a man’s world. In order to overcome the assumptions inflicted upon women because of their gender she “called upon her special status as a virgin, she manipulated language and image to invert the roles of feminine and masculine, and through her visions she assumed the voice of God.”<sup>4</sup> Hildegard as a person is a fascinating study for this project but it is the unique awareness of herself as a woman that makes her especially noteworthy for a topic engaging mysticism’s tie with embodiment.

As a woman in the Middle Ages, Hildegard was already more closely associated with her status as embodied human than the men around her: “In Classical Antiquity, and through the Middle Ages, it was believed that woman represented the senses and the created world, with all its attendant evil, whereas man represented reason and rationality.”<sup>5</sup> Hildegard, instead of running away from this connection to the world, used it to her advantage to achieve respect in her time, as we will see later in further discussion. She also suffered from frequent illnesses, which, instead of standing in her way, allowed her to realize the same ambitions. Hildegard, not only a master communicator but also an

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<sup>3</sup> Rapp, “A Woman Speaks: Language and Self-Representation in Hildegard’s Letters,” 3.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

efficient leader, utilized the debilitating illnesses she commonly experienced to get tangible results like financial independence from the monks at St. Disibod. In this manner, Hildegard turned the Medieval association between women and the created, embodied world into a powerful tool to accomplish goals: “In effect, when God’s very words are not enough to convince Hildegard’s adversaries to reverse their decisions, He makes His will manifest in Hildegard’s body through these illnesses.”<sup>6</sup> Even in its deficiencies Hildegard’s body was a crucial element of her ability to communicate with the world and achieve respect in her time. Hildegard’s experiences in her body were important to that end: “While it is clear from her writings that her illnesses were genuine, that is, not contrived to make her point, they seem to have occurred only when all other avenues of appeal have been exhausted.”<sup>7</sup> Not only did Hildegard make use of her femininity and bodily experiences in a social context, but she also used those tools as a way to achieve connection with God and to describe her visions.

In the course of this paper, I will examine the juncture of body and mystical experience by detailing an analysis of Hildegard von Bingen’s mysticism through the lens of phenomenology. The first section on literature will generally explain the integration between the female, embodiment and mysticism. The second section will outline key elements of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of the body as they relate to phenomenology applied to Hildegard’s mystical experiences. In the third section, I will combine the discussion of phenomenology and mysticism to describe how Hildegard accessed the Divine experience initially and how one can gain an understanding of Hildegard through

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 10-11.

the phenomenological method. It is my contention we will find the origin of intelligibility in Hildegard's mystical experiences by uncovering and explicating the underlying structure of embodiment because embodiment is the conduit through which we can understand the mystics' teachings.

## 1. Previous Literature on Mysticism, Body and Female Mystics

### 1.1 The Origins of the Body in Christian Mysticism

Many scholars who happen upon first hand accounts of mysticism, a unique vein of experience with the Divine, attempt to define it and set boundaries by which they can judge a variety of situations for mystical elements. One such scholar was William James, whose description of mystical experience has been canonized in this field of mystical study. Mystical experience has four characteristic qualities in James' perspective: ineffability, noetic, transiency, and passivity.<sup>8</sup> According to James, a mystical experience is indescribable, occurs for a short duration of time and overcomes a mystic while she is in a passive state. To have a mystical experience that qualifies under James' definition, a mystic must not seek out an experience with the Divine. James also believed "...there was nothing inherently theological in or about the mystical experience. On the contrary, he felt it legitimate to shear off the mystic's experience from the theological claims that the mystic—or anyone else—might attribute to it."<sup>9</sup> When combining this belief with the four qualities of mysticism we find the experience does not necessarily have to be bound up in a theological meaning or purpose to be mystical in nature. Notably James does not seem to

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<sup>8</sup> James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience; a Study in Human Nature*, 371–372.

<sup>9</sup> Harmless, *Mystics*, 15.



pay attention to or address the role the body might play in a mystic's ability to have an experience with the Divine. While there are a number of other definitions one could use to describe mysticism and the experiences a person might have, James' analysis provides several parameters, which become relevant as we turn our attention to the foundations of Christian mysticism itself and Hildegard's experiences particularly.

Moving from James to earlier writers, the body appears slowly as an object of concern and discussion. Looking towards Plato's texts, we find some initial interest in the body's role in the discovery of ideal Beauty in law and knowledge. In fact, Plato suggests through contemplation of "one beautiful body, [that] the lover must come to love all beautiful bodies" and then find herself open to the beauty of the soul.<sup>10</sup> The body here becomes a way by which an individual can find herself oriented towards a discovery of the beautiful soul. On a less traditional reading of *The Symposium* the body is a tool for Plato. However, not all of Plato's discussion of the body appears positive and we actually find a tension between the body and the soul develops in the course of his ideas.<sup>11</sup> The body does not drop out of Christian contemplation after Plato but rather seems to become a topic of increasing interest for early Christian mystics. Origen, taking a leap from the Gnostic tradition and Pauline texts, transforms the conversation around mystical experience by bridging "the gap between the inner and the outer person, between heavenly and carnal love, by means of the teaching about the spiritual senses of the soul."<sup>12</sup> The body can be

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<sup>10</sup> McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, 27.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 121; Gavriilyuk, *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity*. Unfortunately, I do not have enough pages to give justice to the idea of the spiritual senses. Because they will become the subject of renewed consideration as related to the physical

construed as positive for Origen because it contains senses that are analogous to those that we use to access and become closer to God. However, Origen also strove to get past the body to gain fuller access to the Divine. Even in Plato and Origen alone it is evident that the body is a major source of concern for mystical (and other early) writers. Mystics have to find *some* role for the body or, as we will see with Pseudo-Dionysius, reject it.

Pseudo-Dionysius, another early mystic, takes a similar, albeit more theoretical position, on the role of the body compared to Origen. Pseudo-Dionysius concerns himself primarily with the unknowability of God and how we can discover knowledge of God through apophasis. As Pseudo-Dionysius contends, “The symbolic theology depends on sense knowledge, cataphatic theology operates on the level of reason, while modes of apprehension that surpass reason are used in apophatic and mystical theology.”<sup>13</sup> Bodies, and more specifically the physical connection with the material world, must be sloughed off in order to achieve connection with God and proceed upwards towards “modes” of knowing beyond our human understanding. Pseudo-Dionysius gives several more important ideas for the development of mysticism by utilizing language of apophasis and cataphasis. Pseudo-Dionysius views the cataphatic tradition, using language to describe God, as limiting: “The fact is that the more we take flight upwards, the more our words are confined to the ideas we are capable of forming...”<sup>14</sup> God is not a conceptual being who is bound by time, space and human description so those who wish to know God in all of his indescribability must go beyond language. That process of moving past language,

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senses at various points in the paper, I hope my reader finds the second book cited here to be helpful if she finds herself wanting to learn more.

<sup>13</sup> McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, 163.

<sup>14</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 139.

apophasis, leads us to discover a nuanced, unbound God: "...so that now as we plunge into that darkness which is beyond intellect, we shall find ourselves not simply running short of words but actually speechless and unknowing."<sup>15</sup> Apophasis in essence is unknowing, unsaying and undoing in order to discover something about God that defies human restrictions on space, time and being.

With this general understanding of several trends regarding the body that characterize Christian mysticism we are now better equipped to see how these ideas manifest themselves in particular mystics. Many of these ideas will become important when we turn our attention to the body and its influence on the mystical relationship between person and Divine.

## 1.2 Literature on Female Mystics and the Body

Interest in the body only grew stronger as Christian mysticism spread from the male sphere of experience to the female. Mechthild, Hildegard von Bingen and Elizabeth of Schonau all tapped into their bodily conditions in order to not only experience the Divine but also to describe those interactions to others. Rather than distancing mystical experience from bodily experience, these mystics brought the bodily and the mystical together, describing their experiences in somatized ways. The contention surrounding the body in the early mystical world, and the diversity of documented experience by mystics, provides much insight into the importance of embodiment.

When looking at existing literature on the female mystical experience, there is some recognition of embodiment's role in the work of mystical women. Scholars like Caroline

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

Bynum, Simone de Beauvoir and Amy Hollywood stand out immediately as women who have written lengthy texts on the female body. Bynum, much like Beauvoir, spends a large number of pages focusing particularly on the female experience in the body. Turning specifically to Bynum's characterization of the body in mystical experience, we find "[t]he tendency of women to somatize religious experience and to give positive significance to bodily occurrences is related to what is generally recognized to be a more experiential quality in their mystical writings."<sup>16</sup> For Bynum it is apparent that female mystics recognize the effects their bodies have on mystical experiences and use that recognition to describe their relationships with the Divine. While the woman mystic can distinguish herself when documenting the mystical event by including her body's role in her experience (as Bynum suggests), Hollywood describes how the body is inherently involved with Christian mysticism before any documentation of the experience: "Salvation through bodily humiliation and suffering is possible because the savior himself operates through the body—he himself is a feminine figure, achieving transcendence through the immanence of the body..."<sup>17</sup> This idea itself, of the body as inherently feminine and involved in mysticism, finds its origin in the Aristotelian conception of sex differences as well as the medieval discussion of embodiment as related to the female. By placing embodiment in the feminine sphere it is evident that we must examine that body from which the feminine is derived—that is, the female body.

To support the idea of the body as contained in the feminine sphere, let us look at a theory of medieval gender conception. On this point, Aristotle asserted, on the basis of

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<sup>16</sup> Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 190.

<sup>17</sup> Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy*, 130.

scientific evidence, women were physically, intellectually and morally deficient when compared with their male counterparts and even went on to suggest, “the female was little more than an incomplete male.”<sup>18</sup> Here we might say that gender differences are largely based upon physical characteristics evident at first glance. In other words, the inferiority of woman is based primarily upon the structures of her body. In fact, many of Aristotle’s ideas about the relation of women to men were based in ideas of procreation. For him, men provided the spirit needed for a child to live while the woman only provided the ground upon which that child would grow. In this respect, women were tied more closely to the body than men because their use for reproduction was primarily located in the way their bodies participated in the reproductive process. Luckily, many did not fully agree with Aristotle’s definition of the female sex as incomplete male and instead maintained the female was simply *different* from the male.<sup>19</sup>

With this holding of difference rather than complete dichotomy, there is a creation of a gender spectrum and the development of a more complex understanding of the variety of experience across different types in the medieval period. Some theorists, like Jacqueline Murray, posit that chastity (i.e. the categories of eunuchs, clergy, dowagers, monks and nuns) constituted a third gender in medieval society.<sup>20</sup> Even with this third gender in play, women were still considered to be a lower form, rejected and encouraged to move away from their femininity: “The notion that men and women were not so much equal as capable of becoming more similar as they moved along the continuum was most frequently

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<sup>18</sup> Bullough, “Marriage in the Middle Ages, 5. Medieval Medical and Scientific Views of Women,” 487.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 488-489.

<sup>20</sup> Murray, “One Flesh, Two Sexes, Three Genders?,” 35.

used to suggest that women should, and would as they became more spiritual, move toward the masculine end.”<sup>21</sup> Becoming a better version of herself required the woman to move closer to the middle of the gender spectrum, to take on the masculine qualities, and to, as we have seen in the proto-mystical thinkers, reject her body due to its associations with the female. Even with a more complicated understanding of gender, male/female differences were still proposed as a series of dichotomies much like those originally posited by Aristotle: “intellect/body, form/matter, active/passive, rational/irrational, reason/emotion, self-control/lust, judgment/mercy, order/disorder, and, most important, perfection/imperfection.”<sup>22</sup> Taking these underlying ideas of Christianity into account, embodiment clearly falls into the side of the feminine, so much so that, when we go back to Bynum’s suggestion about Christ, the Savior himself becomes feminine because his body constitutes his contribution to the salvation of the world.

Now, looking closely into a conversation between Beauvoir and Hollywood we find that each engages a different project in the course of their writings. Beauvoir wants to do work on the ground in order to secure concrete freedom for women and in the process spends little time giving the female mystic her due. In fact, freedom steers the course of Beauvoir’s discussion and principally underlies her ethics. Freedom in the case of Beauvoir’s ethics has to do with the ability for a person to have an open future. It is on the basis of this desire for freedom that Beauvoir finds reason to critique the mystic. In essence, Beauvoir contends the mystic fails to engage with the freedom project without giving the mystic due credit for engaging in a freeing project within her own context.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 39.

Hollywood, in contrast, writes extensively about the mystical experience but seems to do little justice to the full experience of the body. Looking first towards Beauvoir, we find her opinion on the mystic clearly stated:

“They try to justify their existence within their own immanence, that is, to achieve transcendence through immanence. It is this ultimate effort—sometimes ridiculous, often pathetic—of the imprisoned woman to convert her prison into a heaven of glory, her servitude into sovereign freedom, that we find in the narcissist, the woman in love, and the mystic.”<sup>23</sup>

Because Beauvoir focuses heavily on the collective effort of women to raise themselves out of subservient and degraded positions, she finds the examples of the mystic, narcissist and woman in love to be especially illustrative of those who do no such thing.<sup>24</sup> Beauvoir posits that women who try to find transcendence through their own selves rather than the collective effort of all fail by necessity. For Beauvoir the female mystic only sees pearly gates of heaven instead of patriarchal prison bars.

Engaging Beauvoir on this point of transcendence through embodiment, Hollywood notes that perhaps “Transcendence... cannot be realized in and through immanence but only through its rejection... This claim seems to suggest that the body—at least as it is configured within the patriarchy—cannot be the site through which transcendent agency is attained.”<sup>25</sup> Much like in the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius and Origen, there is a rejection of the body as the point of transcendence for mystics. However,

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<sup>23</sup> Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 664.

<sup>24</sup> While the idea of solidarity figures heavily into Beauvoir’s criticism I will not be focused directly on addressing this concern. However, I do think that she is unjust to the female mystics of antiquity with her criticism and I hope that by addressing Hildegard’s context and work in her time, I will be able to at least provide one example of a woman who, through her work as a mystic, helped to lift up a group of women rather than herself alone.

<sup>25</sup> Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy*, 130–131.

interestingly, Beauvoir suggests the problem with achieving transcendence might not be due to the body in general but rather the way the female body is constructed by the patriarchal structure. On a different note, Beauvoir also gives us insight into the body's role for mystical experience when she writes: "the body is never the *cause* of subjective experiences, since it is the subject himself in his objective form: the subject experiences his attitudes in the unity of his existence."<sup>26</sup> It seems here Beauvoir maintains a separation between the body and the subjective self who lives in that body. This separation does not manifest itself as one which is total, or complete, but rather one which is permeable and allows the subject to gather together to experience the world as a unity of both body and subjective experiences. Ultimately, both body and immaterial parts join together to create an experience of the world.

Having already dealt with the claim of mystics as seeking totalization through transcendence, we can turn to the claim that mystics wanted to be seen as free, situated beings. While I do not generally disagree with Beauvoir's claim that persons want freedom in their encounters with others and beyond, if we look at her language we find that this desire for freedom in mystics always ends in failure. Beauvoir critically writes, "If a little beauty and intelligence are often enough for a woman to feel endowed with a holy character, it is even more so when she knows she is God's chosen; ...this allows her to effectuate... a thrilling multiplication of her personality..." and then this woman fails to achieve freedom because "either the woman establishes a relation with an unreal: her double or God; she creates an unreal relation with a real being; in any case, she has no

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<sup>26</sup> Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 712.



grasp on the world; she does not escape her subjectivity; her freedom remains mystified.”<sup>27</sup>

For Beauvoir the mystic ultimately fails not because of her body but mostly because she strives for freedom alone instead of freedom for all of womankind. Taking all of these portions of Beauvoir’s argument regarding the mystic into account it is evident that she does not give justice to how mystics are able to have experiences with the Divine in the first place and therefore ignores the underlying fundamentality of the body.<sup>28</sup>

Amy Hollywood, in *Sensible Ecstasy*, takes Beauvoir to task over her views on mystics. In order to understand Hollywood’s critique we must first interpret the way she understands Beauvoir. To this end, Hollywood first describes Beauvoir’s argument; “She claims that mysticism is an inadequate justification for women’s existence and the site of an illusory desire ‘to be everything’ through the agency of another...”<sup>29</sup> Here it seems that Hollywood specifically references Beauvoir’s claim that mystics grope for a “supreme source of values” through a male intermediary who cannot easily be removed from the Divine search.<sup>30</sup> Beauvoir’s point about male involvement in the mystical search for values parallels Murray’s discussion, as elaborated earlier in this paper, of the way in which women had to approximate the masculine roles in order to achieve higher spiritual status. Therefore, at first glance it seems that the medieval conception of gender supports Beauvoir’s claims of female dependence on the agency of another for transcendence. Hollywood continues

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 717.

<sup>28</sup> This critique of Beauvoir might be considered strange because Beauvoir spends hundreds of pages on the female body in *The Second Sex*. Here, I am only positing that she neglects a full exposition the body’s relation to the mystical experience and this, in turn, makes her critique of the mystic less strong than it could be.

<sup>29</sup> Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy*, 118.

<sup>30</sup> Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 711.

explaining that Beauvoir maintains, “mysticism partakes in both the desire for inauthentic totalization and the encounter with others as conscious, free, yet situated subjects.”<sup>31</sup> This seems to relate most closely to the idea of freedom which underlies all of Beauvoir’s theories about women in *The Second Sex*. Hollywood’s interpretation of Beauvoir is intended to support the overall point that “gender categories are only loosely tied to bodily differences; to say that the site of mysticism is feminine does not mean that men cannot go there.”<sup>32</sup> Here we see that Hollywood does not tend to privilege body differences, or the feminization of the body, in a way that would be productive to discovering the original accessibility of the mystical experience for Hildegard.

Caroline Bynum comes the closest to offering an explanation for how the body influences female mystics’ writings when she describes Marguerite of Oingt: “She then saw, written on the flowering branches of her self, the names of the five senses: sight, hearing, taste, smell and touch. It is hard to imagine a more pointed way of indicating that the effect of experiencing Christ is to ‘turn on,’ so to speak, the bodily senses of the receiving mystic.”<sup>33</sup> Bynum suggests the body serves to conduct the mystic’s communion with the Divine. But here once again Bynum jumps right over the question of how the body might exactly be the single thing that begins the mystical experience. She only notes “...visionary women themselves often did not bother to make clear where the events happened—whether in body, heart or soul, whether in the eye of the mind or before the eyes of the

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<sup>31</sup> Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy*, 123.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>33</sup> Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 192.

body.”<sup>34</sup> While these three scholars certainly recognized the body for its pivotal role in creating a historical and tangible difference in the writings of female mystics, they neglect to fully describe the intertwining of the body and mystical experience. It is clear that one needs to fully describe the underlying condition that allows for mystical experiences with the Divine—the *female* mystical experience—before addressing Beauvoir, Bynum and Hollywood’s concerns with the way women as a whole achieve other general goals.

But one might wonder—why the female mystical experience over the mystical experience in general? It seems in the mystical situation the female only becomes marked as relating to the body through historical accident. As Albrecht Diem states, “Women’s monasticism may, at times, have been almost equal in status, but they were seen as mere variants of a current male monastic mainstream, basically sharing its history, traditions and origin myths.”<sup>35</sup> There does not appear to be anything particular in the theology of the women’s monastic movement that makes it especially more interesting than the equivalent male movement. Moreover there does not seem to be anything within the female monastic tradition that makes it necessarily more or less challenging than the male monastic experience. There are few firmly documented examples placing the female monastic experience below that of the male. Furthermore, turning to the question of the body at hand in this analysis, it does not seem as though suddenly there was a conscious choice that the female was to be associated with the body or that the monastic traditions of women would become distinct from those of men. Rather the language surrounding the

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 191.

<sup>35</sup> Diem, “The Gender of the Religious: Wo/men and the Invention of Monasticism,” 435.

patriarchal structure<sup>36</sup> and woman's role in that system lent itself to the association between female-body and male-intellect. Still—why the female mystical experience over the general experience?

In order to answer this question I do not think we need to focus on the historical origins of the female-body association but instead the consequences of that association. Female-body association becomes especially important in the course of this discussion for several reasons: men were not asked to shed gender in order to progress upwards in the ranks of the Church, men certainly were not encouraged to become more like women and, in fact, women were encouraged to become masculine. Dyan Elliott addresses gender differences when writing, “There is early evidence that women were especially attracted to an ascetic life of dedicated virginity, perhaps looking to escape the dangers of childbirth, but also perhaps seeking a means of transcending the usual restrictions placed on their sex.”<sup>37</sup> Even if there are few documented primary accounts of the institutionalization of gender differences in mystical experiences, there were still tangible and historically recognizable effects of enforced gender norms and differences. Diem furthers this claim by asking us to consider if women marked in their times as great Christians were “allowed to retain their female gender and to what extent their achievements were either caused by or led to a change of gender”<sup>38</sup> In other words, there must have been something very particular about the female experience in the Christian church that makes their cases especially interesting to study over the male's. Hildegard herself worked within these

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<sup>36</sup> See the earlier discussion.

<sup>37</sup> Elliott, “Gender and the Christian Traditions,” 22.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

constructed gender norms because she used her sex to bolster her claims of credibility within the Church. Specifically, she claimed that “although women [were] the weaker sex, women [were] superior to men by God’s grace.”<sup>39</sup> The female case study within the mystical experience is intriguing for these reasons and many more. With this in mind, I will be focusing on the experiences of those female mystics in order to uncover the particular role their bodies played in their mystical experiences.

It is from this perspective of the feminine body as placed in a certain context that my paper takes the leap into describing phenomenologically what it means to be a situated subject. In order to address the lack of discussion in scholarly literature surrounding the importance of the female body to the possibility for mystical experience, I will apply a phenomenological account of the body to the study of mystical writings. It is in this application and subsequent explanation that we will be able to find the origin of intelligibility in the case of Hildegard’s mystical experience. As for the specific phenomenological account of the body, I have chosen to use as my primary source Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s various phenomenological accounts. To fully explain the value I find in Merleau-Ponty, I will now turn to describe his phenomenology of the body and the implications this will have for the study of mystical experience.

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<sup>39</sup> Dykeman et al., *An Unconventional History of Western Philosophy*, 95.

## 2. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Embodiment

### 2.1 The Body as Communion

Merleau-Ponty elucidates a view that assumes the organism functions as a whole; he utilizes this underlying framework as an avenue to understand the effect of stimuli and perceptions on that organism. Phenomenology utilizes the idea that there is a fundamental connection between the body and subsequent interaction with the world. In this there is no creation of a situation in which the body must be rejected for the soul to take flight, but rather the phenomenologizing of aspects of the body, like the senses, in order to reveal how we can be in the world. If we take Merleau-Ponty's premise, that the organism functions as a whole as true, it becomes impossible to fully describe how mystics react to stimuli coming from their communications with the Divine without first engaging the body as a whole. Moreover, it is impossible to determine how the mystics could have a mystical experience in general without looking first at elements of their embodiment.

Merleau-Ponty's method to reveal the fundamental nature our bodies play in our interactions with the world illuminates how this process might yield a better understanding of the way our bodies can impact the mystical experience:

“Reflection does not withdraw from the world toward the unity of consciousness as the foundation of the world; rather, it steps back in order to see the transcendences spring forth and it loosens the intentional threads that connect us to the world in order to make them appear; it alone is conscious of the world because it reveals the world as strange and paradoxical.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 86.

Here Merleau-Ponty suggests that we take a step back from all of our preconceived notions about the way the world and our selves work in relation to each other.<sup>41</sup> The method of stepping back and reflecting about that which we take to be natural and normal is best described as hyper-reflection. Through the hyper-reflective method of phenomenology we can then engage in a study of the pre-reflective body in which we live.<sup>42</sup> Thus, it is only from the phenomenological study into the pre-reflective and perceptual bodies that we can fully understand the way that body transcends and supersedes what we consider to be its natural consequences. To further explain this idea of a pre-reflective body, one which does not consciously make decisions about its interactions with stimuli in the world, Merleau-Ponty writes, “I find vision to be the gaze gearing into the visible world...”<sup>43</sup> Upon this understanding of the body, we do not consciously choose the way our bodies interact with the world. Our bodies— in this example, our vision— respond to a *call from* the world to look in a certain direction or at a certain object. Imagine yourself staring at a large blank wall in a relatively bare room. After your eyes meander around to take in the sparse furniture, you find yourself fixated on this wall. You begin to notice slight inconsistencies in the way the wall is painted; the paint spills onto the ceiling in the left corner, you can see the sheen of the previous color shining through in a ragged splotch in the upper right quadrant. There is something about the way the wall calls out to you from the world that draws your gaze towards the inconsistencies and captures your attention. It is evident from

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<sup>41</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 36.

<sup>42</sup> Pre-reflective body refers to the body that engages in the world without conscious direction from the mind. I generally use it synonymously with the perceptual body because pre-reflection necessitates an interaction with the world based on inputs taken up by the senses.

<sup>43</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 367.

living in a body that it makes decisions without conscious approval; we might not even realize we are staring at the wall or noticing it in such detail until our gaze is torn away by the entrance of something else new and stimulating. In this respect, our bodies *gear into* the world in a way that resists conscious choice.

Further explaining the nature of these perceptual bodies in which we live Merleau-Ponty describes how we must encounter the body in the course of a phenomenological analysis: “We must recognize that the body...is formed through a process of impoverishment beginning from a primordial phenomenon of the body-for-us, of the body of human experience, or of the perceived body.”<sup>44</sup> Here the body is not given to us as a fully formed, ready-made material. Instead, the body is a series of formations through our experiences in the world and our perceptions from the perspective in that body. We can then only become aware of the limits and foundations of our bodies by taking into account its formational qualities; its reliance on the world for creation through sensation.

Further complicating the phenomenological understanding of the body is the knowledge that we are not simply body parts perceiving the world but also consciousnesses constantly interpreting internal and external stimuli. For Merleau-Ponty consciousness then also comes secondary to our initial primordial reactions to the world: “With regard to consciousness, we must no longer conceive of it as a constituting consciousness and as a pure being-for-itself, but rather as a perceptual consciousness...”<sup>45</sup> Thus, consciousness is perceptual consciousness and therefore subject to its biases and limitations. Take for example the linguistic distinction between the words subjective and objective. We

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.



frequently refer to people as subjective beings because they are not privy to an objective, omniscient perspective on everything. We recognize that each human is situated in a perspective and subject to the limits of that perspective. It is impossible on some readings, especially in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, for us to transcend our individual perspective.<sup>46</sup> This is to say that "...the perceiving self enjoys no particular privilege" and in a way we are transcended by our world.<sup>47</sup> There is no objective privileged perspective to be had because then we would no longer be human, situated bodies.

With this understanding of the general presumptions of the phenomenological method and the body as a perceptual and pre-reflective, we can now turn our attention to the literature on the mechanisms of perceptions that allow us to study the body through a phenomenological lens. To first step into Merleau-Ponty's literature on the body we can turn to the senses and build up the body from that point of view. Merleau-Ponty, in *Phenomenology of Perception*, writes, "Sensations, or 'sensible qualities,' are thus far from being reduced to the experience...of a certain state or of a certain indescribable *quale*; they are presented with a motor physiognomy, they are enveloped by a living signification."<sup>48</sup> The senses take on a unique place in the working of the body because they are not simply the physical manifestation of an exterior stimulus assailing us. Rather the senses are the first place where the world and our bodies come together in a unique interweaving. This is

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<sup>46</sup> In numerous instances Merleau-Ponty does discuss the way that the body transcends the world without conscious considerations. This language of transcendence mostly comes into play with discussions of the Other. For example, we can feel the intentions or pains of others as though they are our own. This does not suggest an ability to fully transcend the unique situated perspective of the individual or an ability to feel the Other as though she were me. Rather, it is transcendence because we *recognize* the Other in our selves.

<sup>47</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 369.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

to say that movement, our “motor physiognomy,” is simultaneous to our sensation. As people who live in the world physically and interpret nearly simultaneously through that movement we are, in essence, able to sense by our movements; “...my body is a movement toward the world and...the world is my body’s support.”<sup>49</sup> The senses are alive and dynamic, filled with the breath of the world around us, inhaling and exhaling significance. Without the support of our surroundings in the world, along with our ability to engage in movement and our perceptions of the world, our bodies would be unable to determine and feel sensations.

Merleau-Ponty builds on this connection between sensation and movement by further explaining the singular importance of the senses for our way of being in the world; “...the sensible does not merely have a motor or vital signification, but is rather nothing other than a certain manner of being in the world that is proposed to us from a point in space, that our body takes up and adopts if it is capable, and sensation is, literally, a communion.”<sup>50</sup> The senses in this account become more than a simple reaction to the world from our “point in space;” the senses become the way that *we are in the world*. We are intertwined completely with our singular perspective proposed from our senses and this perspective constitutes our being. Another enlightening idea can be derived primarily from Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of the communion between our bodies and the sensations we have while being in the world. At first pass the use of “communion” has obvious religious connotations that immediately bring to mind our intertwining with the world. While religious at first glance, there are numerous other connotations that help us to understand

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 366.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 219.

what Merleau-Ponty intends to convey with his ideas about sensations. For one, we are inherently interactive with the world in all respects. There is no way for us to disconnect ourselves from the world in which we live and our reactions to that world. In this way, the idea of communion fully connects the pre-reflective body, and its uncontrollable physical relationship to its exterior, to the sensations produced by our bodies and the world.

Understanding our body's relationship to the rest of the world can help us to contextualize the mystical experience such that it reveals how we find mystical experience to be intelligible at all. It is clear that in the mystical experience there is a relationship between the sensing mystic and the Divine that she is sensing. Moreover the mystic only experiences a relationship with the Divine when she is passively open to communications from the other world<sup>51</sup>. As Merleau-Ponty notes: "In this exchange between the subject of sensation and the sensible, it cannot be said that one acts while the other suffers the action, nor that one gives sense to the other. Without the exploration of my gaze or my hand, and prior to my body synchronizing with it, the sensible is nothing but a vague solicitation."<sup>52</sup> The body and the sensible object work together in an exchange that forms our first experience and description of the world; it is first through the senses, through the opening of our eyes, that we expose ourselves to the exterior, that we see the world. In simpler terms, sensing does not exist without the sensible. The sensible solicits and the sensing subject answers by exploring the world and giving meaning to what it finds in the

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<sup>51</sup> It is not my intention to discuss or pass judgment on the veracity of any communications said to have been received from the Divine. It would take many pages to attempt to address whether claims of other-worldly communication exist. That being so, and to stay true to the phenomenological method, I will simply bracket claims of other-worldly communications for the purposes of this paper.

<sup>52</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 222.

process of sensing. We can directly translate the language of the sensible and the sensing to experiences described by many mystics. Specifically the relationship between sensible and sensing connects with William James' belief that an experience with the Divine can only occur for a mystic in a passive state. In this respect, the passive mystic attempting to sense the Divine does not actively work to understand or engage with the sensible Divine. The sensible Divine solicits the mystic's sensing by calling out to her from the other world. The mystic is then only able to meet the Divine in a mystical experience because she explores the call from the other world through her sensing.

It seems obvious that there is a reciprocal relationship between the world and our selves. I find it easiest to think of this relationship as one of world-building. For me, the world does not exist in a tangible sense without my sensing its existence. I only know the chair is part of my reality by running my hand along its wooden pieces. I cannot imagine a situation when I would say that I live in a world if I were to lack the ability to see, hear, touch, smell or taste that world, its objects and its Others. Merleau-Ponty offers a specific example of our world-building through the sensing process with the color blue: "I do not lay out in front of it an idea of blue that would give me its secret. Rather, I abandon myself to it, I plunge into this mystery, and it 'thinks itself in me.' I am this sky that gathers together, composes itself, and begins to exist for itself..."<sup>53</sup> Without trying, our bodies, our senses, look for ways to make "blue" intelligible. We expand our minds so that we do not *think* the color blue but rather *see* blue. Our experience of the world, and this example of apprehending the color blue, appears to be pre-cognitive and, when understood at this

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

level, much more complex and mysterious than it would be if we consciously became aware of our world. Attentiveness— physical, spiritual or mental mindfulness— comes from “abandoning” oneself to the world. Situations when I try to *think* the world into existence, when I *force* myself to be in the world, when I really *try* to see the exposed roots of a tree do not bring the world into focus.<sup>54</sup> Violence finds limited success. Instead I simply open my eyes, let them glance around without attention to my surroundings, and, suddenly, I see everything. Therefore, because of the pre-cognitive sensation process, we find a world already created and present when we open our eyes.

Not only does Merleau-Ponty give us a phenomenological understanding of our senses but he also gives us the ability to see how embodiment shapes our connections with each other. First, he helps us understand how our self-conception is integrally related to our unique placement in the world: “We have the experience of an I, not in the sense of an absolute subjectivity, but rather one that is indivisibly unmade and remade by the course of time.”<sup>55</sup> Here Merleau-Ponty corresponds closely to Beauvoir regarding our placement as “situated subjects” in culture, place and time. We are not completely subject to our own whims, or our own personal desires. For Merleau-Ponty, time works upon us and composes our very beings.<sup>56</sup>

Merleau-Ponty finds this same experience in the senses of the body: “Every sensation includes a seed of dream or depersonalization, as we experience through this sort

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<sup>54</sup> Sartre, *Nausea*.

<sup>55</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 228.

<sup>56</sup> Time is neither fully external nor internal for Merleau-Ponty. We produce time and give it meaning. Time is subjective.

of stupor into which it puts us when we truly live at the level of sensation.”<sup>57</sup> While our bodies are our own, and extremely individualizing, there is a level at which we are not fully in control of what it does or how it works when it encounters a radical exterior world. In fact this lack of complete control over our bodies allows us to engage in a communion with the world that does not necessitate our exact attention to every single detail. One might say that constant communion allows us to live in the world such that we usually maintain a general awareness of our bodies as wholes rather than a specific awareness of our bodies as finger, forearm, elbow, so on and so forth. For example, I am sure your toes are not at the forefront of your mind, but now that you have read this, you are suddenly aware that they are there, perhaps resting against the material of a sock inside your relatively restraining shoe. Taking for granted this relationship between our bodies and the world yields depersonalization and anonymity. The ubiquity of sensation fades into the background of our experiences even though it forms our fundamental ability to be in the world. We live in a society that largely assumes every person is capable of sensing the world and living in it at the pre-cognitive level we enjoy every day. It seems that to be able to see, hear, smell, touch, and feel the world is natural and given for the human experience. Thus, the importance of phenomenology reveals itself in that we no longer take these assumptions for granted.

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<sup>57</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 223.

## 2.2 The Diseased Body: The Body as "I Can't"

While scholars have levied criticisms against Merleau-Ponty's account of the body, most of which exceed the bounds of this discussion, one criticism affects its inclusion for the understanding of mystical experience. For Merleau-Ponty it seems as though the body is mostly experienced in a way that says "I can." In other words, the body in most sections describing the sensing qualities (explained above) is not seen as a limiting factor on one's ability to exist in the world.<sup>58</sup> In some instances (with a notable exception of Schneider's case) the sensations of the body function relatively well, imposing little to no impediment on the person using the senses to be in the world. But a fully working body is not a privilege experienced by everyone and the female mystics are no exception. Scholarly work on the lives of many female mystics provides evidence for the claim that they experienced their bodies in some respects as an "I can't." Specifically Hildegard von Bingen experienced a number of debilitating illnesses attributed to her mystical visions and tells us that these illnesses prevented her from sharing those visions with other individuals. Barbara Newman goes so far as to describe Hildegard's experiences of flashing lights and visions of circular figures as a charismatic illness.<sup>59</sup> Regardless of whether Hildegard's illnesses were "genuine or contrived" it can be noted that she "could not have succeeded had [she] not already been known to experience direct physical effects with her visions..."<sup>60</sup> Seeing that for Hildegard an experience of her body as unruly and deficient was relatively commonplace in

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<sup>58</sup> Importantly, Merleau-Ponty does spend significant time discussing disability. It is not my intent to describe those sections as that would take significant space to do them adequate justice. Rather I hope to point out a critique impacting my discussion of phenomenology's relationship to the mystical experience.

<sup>59</sup> Rapp, "A Woman Speaks: Language and Self-Representation in Hildegard's Letters," 10; Harmless, *Mystics*, 67.

<sup>60</sup> Rapp, "A Woman Speaks: Language and Self-Representation in Hildegard's Letters," 10.

the form of her illnesses, we must also identify the body as an “I can’t” and understand any implications this perspective shift might have on our understanding of embodiment for the mystical experience.

Caroline Bynum offers a number of ideas that correlate strongly to the need for a description of a body that does not function fully or correctly. She suggests that particularly in the time when Hildegard lived, “sickness and suffering were sometimes seen by medieval people as conditions ‘to be endured’ rather than ‘cured.’”<sup>61</sup> Suffering was a given of existence for the medieval person; sickness was misunderstood and medical care was primitive in its application. Not only did sickness afflict a large portion of the population but “illnesses were given different meanings depending on whether they occurred in male or female bodies. Illness was more likely to be described as something ‘to be endured’ when it happened to women.”<sup>62</sup> For the female mystic, who lived under the regime of commonly accepted male/female differences, illness was something expected and even praised in some instances. We have to look no farther than the existence and distribution of miraculous illnesses like stigmata or hysteria to find they afflicted women in much higher numbers than men.<sup>63</sup> The suffering body as dysfunctional burden plagued was taken by these women and turned into an “opportunity for their own salvation and that of others.”<sup>64</sup> It is in this context that we must understand the female mystic for she existed in the world, which expected this of her.

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<sup>61</sup> Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 189.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 187–188.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.



David Morris gives us a glimpse into what it must mean to live one's life dictated by illness as the mystics might have done in the medieval period. Morris engages in this task by describing the experience of diabetics. While Merleau-Ponty hones in on the way our bodies work together in a pre-reflective process with the world, Morris takes the body's relationship with that world to the next step by delving into the influence of illness on our physical abilities. He writes that "a dualistic objectification of the body" occurs when an individual with a chronic illness confronts the relationship between his body and his self.<sup>65</sup> In other words, the body becomes something to be wary of, something that is not completely under control or able to be trusted when interacting with the world once illness takes hold. Even simple interactions with abstract concepts like time take on new meaning: "...the diabetic's living of an improvisational temporality is upset by the need to explicitly clock provisional time... This is in contrast to just having the body freely flow in its own way as a vanishing background of one's free choosing."<sup>66</sup> A diabetic, or someone who suffers from any chronic illness, does not have the benefit of doing what she wants when she wants. If I were a diabetic in need of crucial medication every day I could not take off to the Tibetan mountains tomorrow—I would instead be forced to consult with my doctors, determine medical access, dosage information, and the answers to a number of other critical questions. I would not have the privilege of being fully in charge of my own body, my body would rule my desires.

The second part of the excerpt from Morris, the free flowing body, contrasts the way Merleau-Ponty describes the experience of a full functioning perceptual body. A

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<sup>65</sup> Morris, "Diabetes, Chronic Illness and the Bodily Roots of Ecstatic Temporality," 413.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 414.

disabled, or chronic, body is not able to engage in communion with the world in the same way as an able body because the functionings of that body are always at the forefront of one's consciousness. One cannot walk down the street with complete inattention to the cracks on the sidewalk if one is using crutches to navigate the world. A disabled body can only fade into the background of consciousness with difficulty and thus prevents that person from pre-reflectively interacting with the world in the same way that an abled-body person does. However, we do know from the accounts of individuals like Sunaura Taylor, discussed below, that the disabled body is not one that is, or remains, deficient for the person to whom that body belongs. All of us, in one way or another, find a way to make it through the world in various pre-reflective ways. It seems to make sense that each person finds a way to allow various portions of her body to fade into the background in order to find a way to exist, and hopefully thrive, in her given body. Ultimately, we all collect information from the world in a variety of ways and it is important, when looking at the body, to account for as many of these varied experiences as possible.

Both Taylor and Judith Butler give us insight into what it might be like to live in a disabled body. Taylor writes that, "somehow disabled people are perceived as more dependent, or that they are the ones that are dependent..."<sup>67</sup> While both women eventually conclude that this perceived dependence is not accurate, it is relevant that the perception of a disabled person is one which throws her into the category of "less able" without taking into account the true extent of her abilities. In fact, Butler and Taylor maintain that we are wholly dependent on each other, but some persons are given the luxury to forget their

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<sup>67</sup> Taylor, *Examined Life*, 187.

dependence on a regular basis. Looking at what Hildegard writes about her illnesses, we can imagine that she might have experienced her body more similarly to Morris' and Taylor's descriptions, as one which was perceived to be in the category of "less able." Bringing Morris back into the conversation of this perceived dependency directly, we know he also has a sense of how dependency might change the chronic's life: "To be diabetic is to sometimes experience oneself as living a life not one's own, since one's life is not opened by one's choices, but clocked by what must be biologically provided."<sup>68</sup> While, as far as I know, Hildegard was never in need of medication for her survival, Morris does seem to be speaking to a fundamental difference between being well and being sick. The life one leads does not necessarily fully belong to one's self when one is constantly concerned about health. Likewise, if one must always be worried about being viewed as dependent, or in some way deficient, one cannot grasp the possibilities of the perceptual body in the same way as an able-bodied person might perceive herself to be able to.

As a final thought on the perceived differences between the able-bodied and the disabled, Butler suggests that perhaps the biases towards disabled individuals occur because we wrongfully perceive the able-bodied person as "radically self-sufficient."<sup>69</sup> If we re-examine the underlying assumptions we make about which bodies are able and which are not, perhaps we would also find a different lens through which to see the works of the mystics and other people who currently live in our society with physical deficiencies. With these cursory thoughts in mind, it is important to recognize the underlying tendency in Merleau-Ponty to view the body as functional. Without a nuanced understanding of what it

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<sup>68</sup> Morris, "Diabetes, Chronic Illness and the Bodily Roots of Ecstatic Temporality," 412.

<sup>69</sup> Taylor, *Examined Life*, 187.

could mean to live with a body that is considered deficient in some respect, we cannot fully interpret the work of the mystics, especially Hildegard, in their socio-cultural context.

### 3. Hildegard von Bingen: A Phenomenology of Mystical Experience

Combining Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body with the writings of Hildegard von Bingen we find that female mystics in particular experience being in their bodies (on the most fundamental level) as a means for their communion with the Divine. Some might probe this claim by first asking the question: how can a phenomenologist like Merleau-Ponty, who adamantly keeps discussion within the realm of the physical world, help us understand claims about a woman's experience with the Divine? At first pass, this challenge does appear problematic—Merleau-Ponty might give us a lot to sink our teeth into with regard to the body *in* the world but how can he help us understand the way the body relates to something that by definition exists *outside* and beyond this world? Here it is crucial to bring back the discussion of the underlying phenomenological method. Phenomenology allows us to bracket aspects of the phenomenon that are not being analyzed. Here, I want to bracket any claim about the veracity of communication with the other world. This allows a fuller explanation and analysis of why Hildegard's embodiment was necessary for her mysticism, as well as how her use of the body is characteristic of an explanatory tool and method to connect with her audience. Through using the phenomenological method, it is possible to overcome the theoretical and systemic hurdle put forward by a skeptic's question and forge ahead to find the body's role in Hildegard's mystical experience.

### 3.1 The Body in Hildegard's Visions

It is vital, when engaging in an analysis of Hildegard's visions, to first understand her position both in her own time period and in the context of scholarly literature. Like I explained earlier, Hildegard gained notoriety throughout the Middle Ages, and again more recently, for her visionary communications with the Divine and her progressive views towards women in the convent. In the corpus of works written about Hildegard's life and writings, however, it seems that scholars have neglected an exposition about the use of the body as an underlying mechanism for her mystical experiences in general as well as in the *Scivias* and other texts. Work done on Hildegard has oriented the field of female mystical studies in the correct, forward-thinking direction. However, an expansion on the most fundamental question—what is the body?—might propel discussion towards discovering the underlying structure by which we first find meaning in Hildegard's visions and writings. By combining a phenomenological account of the body with Hildegard's mystical texts, we can gain a new, nuanced understanding of how the body— particularly the female body— influences communion with God.

Throughout Hildegard's *Scivias* there are numerous passages that make reference to the body and associated sensations. One of the most obvious references to the senses comes on the heels of her fourth vision on the Soul and Body in the explanation of her visual experience. From the minute one opens a book to read about Hildegard's *visions* the body has already wormed its way into her understanding of her own experiences. Most notably one is forced to engage in the idea, either explicitly or implicitly, that Hildegard experienced a connection with the Divine *visually*. There are several consequences of Hildegard's visual experiences with the Divine that, using the phenomenological method,

we can dissect from a naïve perspective, without taking for granted any assumptions about embodiment. First, Hildegard's body gives her the ability to be in the world like it does for all of us. Not only is she *in* the world through her body, in that she engages in the reciprocal relationship with the world, but the visions assail her through her bodily senses: "...I received them [visions] while awake and seeing with a pure mind and the eyes and ears of the inner self, in open places, as God willed it."<sup>70</sup> In this brief sentence, much exists for a phenomenological analysis. First Hildegard draws an analogy between the physical senses and the spiritual senses. She notes a definite distinction between the eyes and the ears of her physical body and those of her corresponding spiritual body. The physical senses, as she describes them, seem to be tools that act to explain how her "inner self" was able to interact with the Divine. The way the eyes and ears play into Hildegard's description suggests they are indispensable to her ability to communicate with and understand God. Moreover, there is a fluid transition between her sensing, how she senses, and what she senses. Folding in Merleau-Ponty's language to this discussion, the qualities that Hildegard uses to communicate with God interact with what she is sensing from God so closely that she is unable to fully describe what she experienced without involving that bodily language. Both literally and figuratively, Hildegard's relationship with God forms a fundamental communion through the bodily senses.

When we turn our gaze towards Hildegard's fourth vision language of the body and experiential language become vital to our ability to understand her descriptions. As readers we are first overcome with images that seems to have no relation to anything in our

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<sup>70</sup> Hildegard, *Scivias*, 60.

reality.<sup>71</sup> The most notable images first described in the course of the fourth vision are the “great and serene splendor, flaming, as it were, with many eyes” and a “form [which] moved with vital motion, so that a fiery globe that had no human lineaments possessed the heart of that form and touched its brain and spread itself through all its members.”<sup>72</sup> As we read these descriptions, it is within the nature of our attempt to understand Hildegard that we search for some element of commonality, something to latch onto to find meaning in her words. Because the images themselves are relatively nonsensical when imagined in reality, we find some respite, some understanding, with Hildegard in the references to “eyes,” “form,” and “motion.” As might be obvious, all of these words can be related to our bodies and the way that they work. Thus, our bodies, our understanding of how motions and eyes work in reference to our own beings, give us the first entry point to understand Hildegard. I also contend that without these bodily references Hildegard would not have been able to describe what occurred in her visions at all. I find it very difficult to even imagine how she would have been able to write down a single word explaining what she saw without reference to something common to the body. Moreover, it is noteworthy that she then chose the body or that the body was the element presented to her. It is only through relating the images given to her by the Divine to the body that she was able to write them down in a way that could later be explained.

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<sup>71</sup> It is not my goal to fully describe the meanings of Hildegard’s visions or her intentions in describing them. I hope here to only look at the ways in which the language she uses allows us, as readers, access to the visions and how embodiment plays a role in her ability to experience the visions at all.

<sup>72</sup> Hildegard, *Scivias*, 109.

In fact, when we expand our lenses we find that the entire fourth vision is colored with references to the body. Not only do we encounter the eyes, an element of the ways we initially experience the world, but we also find Hildegard discussing the brain, where the human capacity for reason resides. Looking back again at how the brain initially makes its way into the vision we see that it is in a way that is secondary to the body. Only after the fiery globe touches the heart of the human form, a form that has already been inspired with motion, does it make its way up to the brain and spread. The body becomes the entry point for the exterior globe, much in the same way that Merleau-Ponty describes the sensible body as the primary point in space from which we determine meaning in the world around us. Hildegard moves explicitly into referencing the human body when she writes, “But then this human form, in this way vivified, came forth from the woman’s womb...”<sup>73</sup> This vivid imagery goes hand in hand with our understanding of the general way a body works. In this case, even though the body is female (a notable quality in itself considering Hildegard’s time) all are able to understand, to varying degrees, the process of birth described. Because we share the quality of embodiment we are uniquely capable of finding meaning in the visions. Hildegard brilliantly builds a conceptual framework for our understanding through tapping into our common experience as creatures who live in bodies.

As a final example, at the end of her vision, Hildegard makes use of yet another bodily image. Hildegard writes that she sees whirlwinds batter the globe described above and “[bow] it down to the ground; but, gaining back its strength and bravely raising itself

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid.



up, it resisted them boldly and said with a groan...”<sup>74</sup> Throughout this excerpt the imagery of the globe’s battle only becomes intelligible because we understand what it means to bow down, raise up, speak and groan. Furthermore, the intelligibility of the images is only apparent because our bodies are also able to engage in the same motions as the globe. The motion imagery of “raising itself up” and speaking relate most clearly to embodiment and give us the framework necessary to move into deeper levels of interpretation: why is the globe speaking? Why speech? We can even get closer to understanding the meaning of the speaking globe by relating the manner in which it speaks (by groaning) to the body. The use of the word groan itself suggests physical exertion and is very expressive of something bodily. After our initial insight that the body allows access to the message of the vision, we are then able to come to conclusions: this vision suggests the globe has the ability to speak and thus the ability to communicate with others in the world and the Divine. With this grounding in the role of the body in Hildegard’s vision we can move on to her explanations.

### 3.2 Hildegard’s Explanation of Her Visions: The Senses

In clarifying the vision, Hildegard dives into a passage “On the senses,” asserting “[i]t is the senses on which the interior powers of the soul depend, so that these powers are known through them by the fruits of each work.”<sup>75</sup> It is here that we again see the need for a phenomenological account of the body. Hildegard herself seems to understand that the senses are necessary for the mystical experience because of their unique relation to the

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 123.

interior powers of the soul, the powers that give her access to the Divine. Through this passage we learn that the senses have a special power that relate to and, in fact, are the foundation for the “interior powers of the soul.” We might take the interior powers of the soul to refer to the soul’s ability to receive the Divine. The senses hold a special power with regard to the corporeal experience of the Divine in that, as Hildegard notes, we can only know the powers of the soul *through* the senses. The senses form an integral portion of the mystical experience and might be aptly described as one of the only ways in which mystical communions can happen while still maintaining intelligibility. This relationship between soul and senses further suggests that we need a phenomenological account of those senses, and the body in general, to fully grasp the import of Hildegard’s visions. Mystics like Hildegard see the honing of physical senses as a way that one can prepare for spiritual awakening. However, instead of her physical senses serving as a way to give herself over to worldly experiences, Hildegard fully commits to an experience of the Divine and spiritual awakening through those senses. It is in this state of vulnerability of the senses and a suspension of willfulness (James’ passivity), that she can come into contact with the Divine. Merleau-Ponty gives us a metaphor through which we might be able to understand the process Hildegard engages when he writes how we must suspend the visible in order to understand what is being seen. His metaphor is one which engages the philosopher as translator to parallel the meaning gathered from the visual world; he writes, “The philosopher therefore suspends the brute vision only in order to make it pass into the order of the expressed: that vision remains his model or measure, and it is upon that vision that the network of significations which philosophy organizes in order to reconquer it must

open.”<sup>76</sup> Hildegard takes part in this process when she attempts to interpret her visions through the senses. She suspends any preconceptions about what might be presented to her through those visions and examines them only insofar as she might build meaning from them. In other words, she finds intelligibility in the visions not to completely subsume them to her own understanding but rather to reveal something more for others. Hildegard does not ever turn a critical eye towards what the Divine presents to her, she rather builds from the visual to find embedded meaning.

Hildegard also seems to have a similar understanding to Merleau-Ponty of what it means to be a sensing being; “A person is recognized by his face, sees with his eyes, hears with his ears, opens his mouth to speak, feels with his hands, walks with his feet; and so the senses are to a person as precious stones and as a rich treasure sealed in a vase.”<sup>77</sup> In this passage Hildegard notes the dynamic between the body, our experiences with others, and our experiences in the world. She suggests we are recognizable *through* our bodies much in the same way that Merleau-Ponty sees us as *inseparable* from our perspective in the world. Hildegard continues to incorporate an intertwining of the body and soul when she writes “For the senses are the sign of all the powers of the soul, as the body is the vessel of the soul.”<sup>78</sup> I would suggest that this statement further incorporates the body into mystical theology because the soul cannot be comprehended by our intellect without the body and the senses to express it. An important difference between the phenomenological account that I utilize in order to explain Hildegard and her own view in this passage is the degree of

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<sup>76</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 36.

<sup>77</sup> Hildegard, *Scivias*, 123.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

influence the senses have over the mystical. Hildegard is careful to make the senses submissive to the powers of the soul, “The senses are subject to these powers, since they guide them to the work, but the senses do not impose work on the powers...”<sup>79</sup> Merleau-Ponty, on the other hand, assures us that our sensible experience of the world is so wound up in our ability to be in the world that we could not possibly be without those senses. But, focusing on the particular phrase “...since they guide them to the work...” it seems that Hildegard might veer towards something along the lines of Merleau-Ponty: the senses are necessary in order to give structure to the visions from God. It seems this is another place where the account of the body becomes pivotal to fully understanding what important thoughts come out of Hildegard’s mysticism. If we do not have an understanding of *how* the senses can guide the “powers” to work, then how can Hildegard be intelligible to others? We must first understand the manner in which the body works in order to get a full grasp of how that body functions with relation to mystical communion with the Divine.

While mystical experience and bodily experience have been set up throughout history as though they exist in opposition, there are not as many differences between the two as we might initially perceive. In fact there is a conjunction of experience in both mysticism and embodiment. In other words, it is the experiences Merleau-Ponty describes that allow individuals like Hildegard to be open to mystical experiences. Hildegard herself moves towards a body-oriented understanding of the origin for communication with God. For Hildegard, the state of mind in which one must receive the Divine’s gifts is

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

wakefulness: “But the visions I saw I did not perceive in dreams, or sleep, or delirium, or by the eyes of the body, or by the ears of the outer self, or in hidden places.”<sup>80</sup> At first glance, this certainly seems to stand in tension with many of the points made regarding the phenomenology of a physical body. However, when we read this sentence closer it becomes evident that, for Hildegard, the body must be prepared for mystical communion while also not standing in the way of that communication. In order to resolve this apparent discord, let us turn back to Merleau-Ponty himself:

The effective, present, ultimate and primary being, the thing itself, are in principle apprehended in transparency through their perspectives, offer themselves therefore only to someone who wishes not to have them but to see them, not to hold them as with forceps, or to immobilize them as under the objective of a microscope, but to let them be and to witness their continued being—to someone who therefore limits himself to giving them the hollow, the free space they ask for in return, the resonance they require...a question consonant with the porous being which it questions and from which it obtains not an *answer*, but a confirmation of its astonishment.<sup>81</sup>

Merleau-Ponty holds a perspective similar to Hildegard’s. He suggests the only way for us to genuinely encounter something separate from us is to let it be without intervention. In that respect we must not want to have something, to subsume it to our own wishes and understanding, instead we must allow it to be so that we may see it without then subjugating it to a violent attempt to fully understand it. In a letter to Bernard of Clairvaux Hildegard writes, “Wretched, and indeed more than wretched in my womanly condition, I have from earliest childhood seen great marvels which my tongue has no power to express

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>81</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 101–102.

but which the Spirit of God has taught me that I may believe.”<sup>82</sup> Hildegard clearly believes she has encountered the Divine, not through her own biases, but rather through the way in which the Divine chooses to reveal itself. She also finds the Divine encounter to be inexplicable at first pass. Hildegard, having taken into account her belief about the nature of the visions and her initial inability to express the content of those visions, becomes an example of a person who creates a hollow within herself to fully experience the Divine. In none of the letters or descriptions of the visions does she attempt to grasp the Divine gift with forceps to hold it still for analysis. Instead she turns to what she does find intelligible, the body, and relates the mystical experience to it. So, returning to the initial quote from which an apparent contradiction sprung, we can gather that Hildegard does not reject the physical senses in a total or complete way but she turns the physicality of those senses towards their spiritual counterparts to be able to receive the Divine more fully.

## Conclusion

Hildegard’s mystical experiences would never have achieved a status of meaning to her if she had not had the ability to use the body to describe them. Moreover, those visions would have been meaningless to us, her readers, without those references to common aspects of the body. To see how this is clear, let us walk through the elements I have laid out in my argument.

As I first explained when reviewing the existing literature on mysticism, women and the body, there has been a lapse in the scholarly literature surrounding questions of the body’s role in mystical experience. In jumping to questions of social action and the

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<sup>82</sup> Hildegard, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen*, 1:27.

enacting of social change, scholars like Beauvoir and Hollywood overlook the importance of the body as the basis upon which the female mystics were able to have mystical experiences at all. It is evident that we must first understand how these women garnered the abilities to enact social change before evaluating their impact on the culture in which they lived. With the basics of the mystical relationship to the body understood, it is then that scholars can turn their commentary towards the influence of the women generally.

In order to explain the mystical relationship to the body, I imported the phenomenological method as well as Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body into religious studies. I argued that Merleau-Ponty gave us a way to strip away our assumptions about the body in order to reveal the fascinating manner in which our bodies underlie the very mechanisms we use to engage with the world in a reciprocal relationship. The language of the body is one that we all understand because we move through the world as embodied beings. It was then in the final section that I tied the phenomenology of the body to Hildegard's mystical experiences to describe how her experiences were available to her, in the first instance, and then to us as readers, in the second. By translating the ineffable and transient into the tangible world of our bodies, we were able to find meaning in Hildegard's visions and explanations.

The effortlessness of everyday existence in the body is not so simple when we unravel our assumptions. On the most fundamental level, our bodies are inescapable except in the most absolute and irrevocable sense. We know, even if we are not always conscious of it, that our ability to be in the world is molded and formed by those bodies in which we live. Thus, it seems only natural that we give it its due analysis. Merleau-Ponty

wrote, "...it is this unjustifiable certitude of a sensible world common to us that is the seat of truth within us."<sup>83</sup> The body forms the basis of our ability to interact with that sensible world, to find the common ground on which we all stand, and to move freely towards the truth. Hildegard was able to make sense of that which we consider to be the highest truth—the Divine—through her body. And even if it felt as though we could not possibly learn more about what the body provided us, perhaps the greatest lesson Hildegard gave us was we could.

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<sup>83</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 11.



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