MERLEAU-PONTY AND
THE PSYCHOGENESIS OF THE SELF

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We are born with bodies, but we are not born with selves. Thus, we acknowledge at the outset that to be a self is something more than it is to be a body. It is our thesis that selfhood is grounded in embodiment, that the first step in the genesis of selfhood is the recognition of one's body as oneself, and that, in subsequent phases of development, selfhood is articulated by processes of reflective transcendence in which we recognize ourselves as being something more than our actual bodily behavior (as witnessed by ourselves and others)—namely, as the possibilities we project in future goals, in interpretations of past experience and in decisions confronting us in the present. These possibilities are reflectively perceived as constituting an identity which goes beyond the de facto history of my incarnate being although remaining tied to that primordial ground. In sum, I am more than my body: I am what I make of my body, what I do with my body in being with others in the world.

For the infant, the recognition of his own body as his own is an accomplishment which is achieved only after months of development. Merleau-Ponty has offered a detailed account of the genesis of the body image (i.e., l'image specular, the mirror or specular image) from birth through the first three years of development. Our concern here is not to recapitulate this ac-
count, but to draw from it the generic features of the body image as the origin of one's sense of selfhood. We shall also find it necessary to criticize/modify some aspects of Merleau-Ponty's thesis.

During the first three months of life, the infant is incapable of perception, as we understand that term. The necessary neural connections have not been made; the infant has no muscular control of his eyes; he has not yet achieved the minimum of bodily equilibrium needed for perception. Accordingly, we may describe his experience as introceptive: the infant experiences bodily states, but he is not yet capable of correlating what he feels with what is going on around him. As myelinization (i.e., the development of neural paths occurring between the third and sixth months) take place, the infant becomes capable of extroceptive experience, or perception of the external world. However, this must be understood as a gradual process. Since perception requires bodily equilibrium, motility, control (in order to see, one must be able to control the movements of his eyes and establish stable visual coordinates), the infant's ability to perceive the world outside can progress only in conjunction with the development of a "postural (or corporeal) schema" (CRO 122) which is his sense of global orientation. Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the point that these two processes—the introceptive control of bodily motility and spatial orientation, on one hand, and the extroceptive perception of the world of external objects, on the other—are strictly correlative, form a "single totality" and are indistinguishable in reality. The corporeal schema is both a body orientation and a world orientation; it could not be one without being the other.

During this period when the infant is developing his corporeal schema and global orientation, he is in contact with other human beings. How does he experience them? Needless to say, the question is difficult to answer: this level of experience is lost from adult memory; the infant cannot express what he is living through; and there are serious doubts about the validity of applying concepts derived from adult experience to the description of infantile experience. Nonetheless, we can set forth and defend a description which attempts to do justice to the evidence available.

From the fact that the infant is not yet capable of perceiving the world around him except introceptively, that is, as it affects the state of his own body, we may state with some assurance that