

For the Time Being: Ambiguity and Joyful Loss of Certainty

To be alive is to take risks. The alternative is not terribly attractive: you do not find rocks enthusing about how wonderfully safe their existence is. But Darwinian evolution — survival of the fittest — means that every living creature has a vested interest in minimizing risks wherever possible.

— Ian Stewart, *The Calculated Risk*

Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going? painted by French artist Paul Gauguin seemingly posits the ultimate interrogation in front of its beholders and elicits imaginative responses from them. On the canvas situates almost the whole lifetime journey of the human species from merely a screenshot. Hence, Gauguin captures the uncapturable by visualizing an impossible landscape from his experienced perceptions and embodied vitality. His interpretation of being lives between shapes and colors from multiple layers of his artwork. The inscription on the original painting, however, has no question marks and all words are capitalized. Such inquiries about *We* echo themselves from a self-responsive manner and thus offer a novel perspective of thinking about *Us*. As Edmund Husserl (1968) proposed in the phenomenological tradition: “Wir wollen auf die ‘Sachen selbst’ zurückgehen [We must go back to the things themselves]” (6). This tradition leads to the development of careful descriptions of the structure of our lived experience as embodied subjects. The purpose of this essay is twofold: firstly, to cast some light on the relationship between body and world through my experiences and then, to pursue the way of seeking depth of being, using Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*.

Gauguin's painting speaks to itself, reacts to its own questions, and fulfills its own meanings; so does our lived body.

1. LITTLE CRASHES EVERYWHERE

It finds me and I bring it home. One of the taglines from Paul Haggis' 2004 movie *Crash* reads: "Moving at the speed of life, we are bound to collide with each other." However, it didn't dawn on me how fascinating this concept of collision was until I reencountered this movie again and watched it the second time in the midst of studying phenomenology. About a decade ago, I searched this movie as a fan of actress Sandra Bullock, and my focus was naturally all about her performance the first time I watched *Crash*. At that time, the story didn't leave much impression on me except for Sandra's dress and some of her dialogues. Thus, I didn't even recognize the movie title at first when the professor brought it up in our class discussion. The next day after that class, when I was hanging around in a local thrift store with a touch of memory slightly bearing a bit of scene in *Crash*, a DVD version of *Crash* immediately popped into my sight. It was right under my nose when I stopped at a boxed collection of disks. The movie case was on top of everything. Holding it in my hands, I speechlessly wondered about the odds of a so-called twist of fate, standing there one blink after another as if time were frozen for that moment. Then, I purchased the disk and brought it home. This unique encounter with *Crash* spurs me on to a reevaluation of what I would generally have taken for granted.

On my way home after leaving the store, the air smelled somewhat sweet, the grass looked greener than before, the sunlight delivered such a creamy, engulfing comfort in a delightful sense of occasion. All seemed the same but in a different rendering that challenges my entire sensation. Sensing, contrary to knowing, is a "living communication with the world that makes it present to us as the familiar place of our life" (Merleau-Ponty 53). The presence of that DVD case disrupted

my status quo constituted from familiarization. Instead, it retrieved the whirlwind of defamiliarization and changed each of my learned confirmations into a curious question mark. Thus, sensing invests the perceived world with meanings and values that refer essentially to our bodies and lives (Toadvine “Merleau-Ponty”). This DVD not only proves the mutual dynamic relationship between the body and the world but also signifies the influential impact of such a communication. The power of this mysterious coincidence amazes me and drives me to think: why is it?

No such a thing is called a sure thing. “Life is a risky business” (Stewart 155). At the beginning of *Crash*, there might be no impulsive crime by car thieves at all if Jean had not shrugged her shoulders and acted as if she were colder in front of these black people. At the very least, the victim might be somebody else. Once Jean’s behavior was perceived by these two black people as offensive, this kind of sentiment created new possibilities by directly fueling the anger of the offended and motivated their vengeful response, in this case the robbery. It is not so much why Jean and her husband got hijacked as how they led hijackers to their vehicle that helps understand this accident. By the same token, Farhad and Dorri, the Persian father and daughter, went to a gun store and attempted to purchase a gun. However, it turned out that the conversation between the store owner and Dorri’s father didn’t go well. Her insulted father became irate and left the store before the deal was settled. When asked which bullet she wanted, Dorri picked one in the red box, which later in the movie turned to be the blank cartridge that became one of the turning points in her family. In a broader sense, either in or beyond *Crash*, nobody would expect to be involved in any car accident while driving. However, when the accident occurs, anyone has a chance to be in that situation.

“If we examine an event up close, then everything appears to happen by accident at the moment it is lived; that person’s ambitions, some lucky encounter, or some isolated circumstance seems to have been decisive” (Merleau-Ponty lxxxiii). In this sense, not only does every moment has the potential to be a crash but also is indeed a crash. It is what Merleau-Ponty called “intentionality” that “establishes the natural and pre-predicative unity of the world and of our life” (lxxxii). Following Merleau-Ponty’s concept of intentionality, “to understand is to grasp the total intention” — “the unique manner of existing” (lxxxii); phenomenology thereby expresses the emergence of reason and meaning in a contingent world (Toadvine “Merleau-Ponty”). A series of events in *Crash* successfully depict the fact that accidents can happen and accentuate the consequences of such happenstances to their stirring manifestations. Such uncertainty resulted from intentionality also triggers my nerves to reflect my experience through questioning the past, presence, and future. What if I didn’t visit that store on that particular day? What if I didn’t have enough cash to pay for that disk? What if the store wasn’t even open at that time? If any of these hypotheses had been true, the existence of this essay that I am struggling to compose to meet its deadline and to earn my credit, would not happen. “What if…” questions are not helpful in coping with the current situations if we fall into a vortex of fantasy where the best presence always lives in the past. In *Crash*, Jean’s overreaction to frustration after the robbery attacks her sense of insecurity and drives her so mad that she starts to project racial discrimination on every minority around her, including the housekeep and the man who fixed her lock. Suddenly, everybody becomes suspicious in some way that might threaten her. Her vulnerability escalates to a level where the tolerance of contingency is almost zero. Jean’s rejection is in vain because such a phenomenon is inescapable. Husserl argues that our body is both experienced from within and outside (Abram 37). We are the world when we have a “living communication” with the world

through our body (Merleau-Ponty 53). Jean's escape exposes her existential crisis of punishing herself against witnessing the light of kindness at present by blaming the bad memory that haunts her from the past. However, refusing to accept all the possibilities that crash into you not only denies the nature of the ritual of living but also fails to seek the depth of the world by not having a real intimacy with it. "The unfinished nature of phenomenology and the inchoative style in which it proceeds are not the sign of failure, they were inevitable because phenomenology's task was to reveal the mystery of the world and the mystery of reason" (Merleau-Ponty lxxxv). The ongoing "radical" or self-referential reflection on its own possibilities in Merleau-Ponty's demonstration reveals the nature of the phenomenological task (Toadvine "Merleau-Ponty"). This way, the mystery of crash inspires me to elucidate what a crash means.

It is what it is. what is it? Confronted with a great number of mysteries in our daily life, we get used to being less sensitive in respond to these things that gradually seem more ordinary and familiar than when we initially experienced them. Such an extensive familiarization of the world benefits from the growing repository since our childhood. If you are asked why there is a sunrise in every morning, you probably wouldn't bother to answer but briefly make a comment: it is what it is. For some natural phenomena, modern science has already provided a plethora of rational and well-established explanations which people often refer to as the common sense. When *it* relates to scientific facts, *it* indicates unchangeable and is defined by explanations. Therefore, *it* lives in our perceptions. However, our perceptions do not only include these explanations. For instance, how can we use the same mechanism to explain my encounter with the *Crash* DVD? It is possible to guess how it might work with the similar mindset we have learned from scientific thinking.

If someone picked that disk before me and left it on top of the box and then nobody moved it before my arrival, it is highly possible that I would see it when I got there. However, similar to my

previous “what if...” questions, this hypothesis as an option among millions of imaginations is hardly meaningful to the thing itself if such a speculation serves as my only intention. Trying to make sense of our experience from God’s eye by hypothesizing various possibilities as above violates the nature of studying things themselves and shows the impotence to go beyond the capacity of the human body. On the other hand, such a conclusion is poorly prepared to be welcomed into the known world and accepted as a piece of common sense. This might mislead us to call for help from the probability inquiry. As probability cannot guarantee the result of lottery, neither can it promise my encounter with that disk.

By comparing *it* with some familiar experiences, I realize that *it* is not the complete science but still part of my perceptions. “One’s own body is in the world just as the heart is in the organism” (Merleau-Ponty 209), and its expressive unity helps to define our sensible world. To me, the reason why my encounter with this disk stood out is because it played a role that crashed into my life and that moment of crash reminded me *it* is not what *it* is. By rippling the mind of my heart, it becomes the new member of my bodily rhythm and breaks the spell of the false parallels between *it* and *its* reflection in my eyes.

It can only be perceived from my experience. It can hardly be put on the same page in different eyes unless they share the same perception. In *Crash*, the discussion of the lock and door highlights the differences that resulted from different experienced perceptions. When Daniel, the locksmith, insisted Farhad to change a door instead of fixing his lock, Farhad refused to accept this statement by arguing the lock’s problem was none of the door’s business. Repeating themselves undoubtably would not make any progress unless they started to listen to each other and put themselves in the other’s shoes. The lock is the same lock as the door is the same door. However, the lock in Daniel’s eye is not the same one in Farhad’s eye.

2. THE AMBIGUITY OF INTIMACY

With experience comes intimacy. Regarding the ambiguity of intimacy in the vampirical world, Mazis argues that “vampires are hungry for experience and fear intimacy” (87). This ambiguous situation also happens to human beings when it comes to the discussion of intimacy. In a reverse manner, humans are hungry for intimacy but fear experience. There are at least three levels of intimacy that are intertwined in our embodiment dealing with the Self and Other. Firstly, the world can be perceived from our body at a distance which enables the possibility of developing the intimate relationship. As Merleau-Ponty writes in a working note from November 1960,

[T]he idea of chiasm, that is: every relation with being is simultaneously a taking and a being held, the hold is held, it is inscribed and inscribed in the same being that it takes hold of. Starting from there, elaborate an idea of philosophy... It is the simultaneous experience of the holding and the held in all orders. (266)

This holistic view of perceiving our flesh in this world not only echoes the “living communication” between the body and the world but also reflects a sense of response as we live together with the world by having a “simultaneous experience.” All we have experienced is always held by this world. “The living world — this ambiguous realm that we experience in anger and joy, in grief, and in love — is both the soil in which all our sciences are rooted and the rich humans into which their results ultimately return, whether as nutrients or as poisons.” (Abram 34)

Secondly, the intimate tensions lie between our body and other bodies. In *Crash*, the sense of touch navigated the networked relationship between people and events. Although people, walking down the same street, might have a close distance to each other, their sense of intimacy can vary. Jean and her housekeepers lived close when the maid took care of her family’s life, but Jean would never let her step into her personalized private space. Nevertheless, “no man is an

island entire of itself.” Jean eventually accepted her housekeeper because she was moved by the warm acts from her maid. A different experience changed Jean’s perception about her housekeeper and also taught her a lesson about what the genuine intimacy is and why that matters.

The third intimacy illustrates the relationship between people and their own bodies. In contrast to the “positional spatiality” of things, the body has a “situational spatiality,” which Merleau-Ponty introduces as “body schema” — “The body’s existence as ‘being-toward-the-world’, as a projection toward lived goals, is therefore expressed through its spatiality, which forms the background against which objective space is constituted” (Merleau-Ponty 102). Such a kinesthetic awareness is the key to achieving an inner balance through the peaceful communication with our bodies.

With intimacy comes expectation. Since intimacy is the byproduct of human perceptions, these expectations from different levels are always personal, particularly in temporal and spatial senses. Even though intimacy and experience are interdependent, we usually either fear or desire intimacy.

“Risks are all around you all the time; if you go for a walk, car might mount the pavement and knock you down; you might be struck by lightning; a gas pipe beneath your feet might explode; a thief might mug you; a building might collapse on top of you; and an accident at a chemical factory you do not even know exists might engulf you in a wave of deadly gases; a pig might fall off a lorry on to your head. You do not normally worry much such possibilities but every one of them has happened to somebody.” (Stewart, 155)

Stewart regards some intimacy as a form of risk from the perspective of *protention*. In other words, anything is possible before it happens. The anticipation of the future allows us to prepare for the worst. In this case, we use “what if...” questions to imagine the future risk rather than to make sense of the past. In Abram’s narrative, he provides a different landscape of intimacy.

“My life and the world's life are deeply intertwined; when I wake up one morning to find that a week-long illness has subsided and that my strength has returned, the world, when I step outside, fairly sparkles with energy and activity: swallows are swooping by in vivid flight; waves of heat rise from the newly paved road smelling strongly of tar; the old red barn across the field juts into the sky at an intense angle.” (Abram 33)

While it is inevitable for us to reject the intimacy with the world when our body inhabits it, it is equally important to keep a good intimate relationship with the world. “Projects around us: our past, our future, our human milieu, our physical situation, our ideological situation, and our moral situation, or rather, that ensures that we are situated within all of these relationships” (Merleau-Ponty 137).

With expectation comes decision. Every perception is obtained from our bodily experience and, in turn, influences our experience.

Human sensing of another is not registering ‘artifacts’ about separable entities in space. It is not collecting ‘data’ about them, as we now attempt to simulate human perception in computer fabrications, but since we are out bodies, these perceptions are ways of ‘entering’ others, moving into the whirl of a space that is the pulsation of energies of which we are all a part. (Mazis 91)

Mazis stresses the unity of human body and the world by differentiating human body from the vampirical existence. “The vampire just moves through things and past them, whether the air or into other’s thoughts without struggling, but also without enmeshment and engagement.” (Mazis 93). In the face of each level of intimacy, as human beings, we should avoid being like vampirical passersby, ignoring the appearance of intimacy. To embrace intimacy is to be open to the world and people and accept yourself fully from top to bottom as well as from inside to outside.

3. THE BLIND FEAR FROM EVE TO DAWN

Patience helps. Uncertainty can be scary because no one knows what we will confront in the next moment. A recent example is the COVID-19. It suddenly entered our view and caused the pandemic, which has changed our way of living for a period of time. “Our innate perceptions of risk are strongly influenced by a quantity known as ‘dread’: how much we fear the harmful outcomes involved.” (Stewart 156). Our imagined threats may not happen in reality but are convincing enough to affect our bodies and perceptions. “[The Vampire] Its priority is to stay in control, and it is often portrayed hiding out in castles or refuges where it can be the master of its realm and exact a kind of tyranny among its missions” (Mazis 90). Although blind fear is out of questions for vampires, most of their certainty is at a cost of intimacy with the world, other creatures, and even themselves. They take advantage of the darkness from eve to dawn in order to anesthetize their isolated rage and cover emptiness. Vampires are islands and have no attachment to anything, floating above the world and lost in the sense of time where they are imprisoned. For us, it is only a matter of time before our number comes up; for them, it is an abyss where no echo ever travels back, nor do they care about it.

Faith illuminates. As cultivated creatures, the abundance of human cultures symbolizes the wonder of faith in our hearts. Such a faith unites people in an intimate manner no matter where they are.

“If as earthbodies, the faith we really need is in ourselves as part of the interplay of rhythms to the depth of the sensual such that we experience the shared vitality, meaning, and compassion (s) moving through the materiality of the earth and our bodies, then to lose this faith is to excommunicate ourselves from this available shared sense.” (Mazis 88)

This faith springs from the primitive worship of the body within the world and gives us courage to continue our bodied experience. Such an embodiment itself is a form of faith because

it provides a solid “living communication” with the world of certainty. Meanwhile, it offers an open-ended channel to carry out all the possibilities that might be held by our embodied experience. Realizing that the nature of embodiment is a matter of faith also represents the discovery of its rhythm. The rhythm in time is multi-dimensional. When we utilize our body to bear the rhythmic melody in time, it dispels the blind fear over us. The embodied faith illumines our sensing and provides us with the sense of security. Such an awakening is fundamental to having an authentic inhabitation of our body and this world.

4. THE EXPLAINABLE AND THE IMAGINABLE

It is certain that the world is full of uncertainty. What will the weather be like tomorrow? Who is going to be on the obituary page next week? What will the topic of my next paper be? And what will this paper be look like when I actually finish it? These questions bear every bit of my wishful imagination for the future.

“The world is seen as becoming fragmented and impoverished as a result of the lack of the entertaining of pure possibilities in imagining” (Mazis, ii). The world without embodiment lacks the vitality of imagination, which is even worse than vampirical world, only quiet and empty; it is not an island but isolated from meaning and intimacy. Certainty is its own gravestone where grows no grass but only coldness and silence.

In an embodied world, “you do not know beforehand what good or bad you are capable of; you do not know beforehand what a body or a mind can do in a given encounter, a given arrangement, a given combination” (Gilles Deleuze 627). Uncertainty, as a primary theme in *Crash*, speaks to its characters. Anthony, one of the carjackers, released a van of Asians from human trafficking; Officer Ryan who molested Christine, the television director’s wife, also saved her life in a car crash at the end; Officer Hansen, Ryan’s former partner, who used to be a good cop

accidentally killed a man in his car escape from the crime scene; Jean became closer with her housekeep after an accident. Confronted with all the possibilities, those characters made their decisions and thus took the consequences accordingly.

Regarding decision making in front of an uncertain future, mathematician Stewart states: Psychologically, the most importance thing about a decision is not that it should stand the best chance of being right but that you should not have any regrets if it goes wrong. A popular method of handling this is to let somebody else take the decision for you: your government, priest, doctor, psychoanalyst or astrologer. Then if everything falls apart, you can always blame them” (157)

Apparently, by giving up the choice of making a decision, you not only fail to escape the uncertainty but also lose the autonomy and freedom of your body. In response to this inescapable situation, it seems that the explainable part of our perception overshadows whereas the imaginable fulfills our freedom. “Imagining is seen as a light-hearted activity in its freedom of movement, rhythm, insularity, self-justification, and blitheness” (Mazis, iii). As the explainable extends the width in our embodied world, the imaginable seeks the depth.

Sensing acts as the “co-existence” or “communion” of the body with the world that Merleau-Ponty describes as a reciprocal exchange of question and answer:

“A sensible that is about to be sensed poses to my body a sort of confused problem. I must find the attitude that will provide it with the means to become determinate ... I must find the response to a poorly formulated question. And yet I only do this in response to its solicitation.... The sensible gives back to me what I had lent to it, but I received it from the sensible in the first place. (222)”

By seeking the meaning of the world, we must be open to the world with our bodies first. This reciprocal exchange does not change the existence of uncertainty, but it allows us to use senses to enjoy perceiving the embodied world by experiencing it. “Whether it is a question of my body, the natural world, the past, birth or death, the question is always to know how I can be open to phenomena that transcend me and that, nevertheless, only exist to the extent that I take them up and live them” (Merleau-Ponty 381). Going back to things themselves enables us to further seek the depth in them and therefore develop meanings from them. The meaning of my encounter with that disk cannot be expanded if I only reserve my past to the past and shut down the fluidity of time.

Meanings dwell in uncertainty because it unlocks a whole terrain of possibility. The sense of uncertainty poses its direction towards the future where things are undone and meanings are hidden. Phenomenology guides us to fully embrace the world by seeking its depth through our bodies. In other words, these depths are indeed meanings and so are our bodies. By living our body in an embodied way, our life is indeed meaningful. With the guidance of the imaginable, *Crash* teaches us turning left or right is not a question; the question is how we can manage to make it a meaningful turn toward a promising direction.

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