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Sensation & Hesitation: Haptic Scepticism as an Ethics of Touching

It is said that seeing is believing. Typically, this adage is taken to mean that sight is the strongest empirical affirmation of what we believe to be true. And yet, as the adage also implies, although sight may strengthen one's belief, it does not guarantee certain knowledge. In opposition to sight, touch presents itself as proof for what is real. Touch can serve as a reality check that awakens an individual from her slumber. We pinch ourselves to confirm we are not dreaming. We slap a comrade across the cheek to bring him to his senses.¹

This volume traces an alliance drawn throughout the history of Western philosophy and religion between belief and sight on one side and doubt/certainty and touch on the other. In everyday speech, the sceptic is often associated with the figure of "Doubting Thomas": the disbeliever with the compulsion to touch what others accept on appearance alone. Whereas the dogmatist may be satisfied with believing what she sees, the sceptic is not satisfied until she has thrust her finger into the very site of her uncertainty.

Although the sceptic has been framed as the doubter with the compulsion to touch and thus overcome doubt, the history of philosophical scepticism questions the reliability of the senses, giving particular attention to touch. We find sceptical accounts of touch in Pyrrho's modes, which describe the inconsistencies and idiosyncrasies of our tactile sensations (our pleasure and pain, our sense of coolness and warmth).² We may also consider René Descartes's suspicion of the parchment that he holds in his own hands (not to mention the existence of his own hands), which he performs as an exercise in scepticism.³ Other classical sceptical arguments about touch abound: Perhaps I am dreaming (dreaming even of the sensation of pinching myself awake). Perhaps I am not the active knower—the one who touches—perhaps I am instead the one who is touched—by spirits, by an evil genius, by illness, by madness.⁴

1 Throughout this chapter I alternate between different pronouns: she, he, they. My pronoun choice reflects both a critical and playful perspective on gender.

2 Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, trans. Julia Annas and Jonathan Barnes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994): haptic sensation as subjective and situational (I.56, 80–87, 109, 210–11; II.52); haptic sensation as contradictory or paradoxical (I.91–94; III.194–97).

3 René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993).

4 Plato's *Theaetetus* addresses debates surrounding the reliability of sensation in connection to the characterization of knowledge itself as a dream (Plato, *Theaetetus*, in *Theaetetus and Sophist*, trans. Christopher Rowe [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015], 201d8–6c2). The sceptical trope of questioning sensation as a product of dreams, illness, or madness stretches from Platonism to mod-

Sometimes, the sceptic openly confesses to her compulsion to touch or to be touched; at other times, this accusation is made against the insatiable sceptic who is not content with faith alone. This leads me to the questions that inspired the topic of this volume: How did the sceptic gain the reputation not only as the doubter, but also as the toucher? Has she been falsely framed? Or is there some truth to the characterisation of the sceptic as one who pokes holes in every dogma with which she comes into contact? Why does the sceptic get off on sticking her hands into the sticky cracks of reason itself? Does the sceptic get her hands dirty in order to overcome her doubt, or does touching only complicate the matter at hand further?

In order to pursue these questions, the Maimonides Centre's research team on Jewish Scepticism at the University of Hamburg joined powers with a research team oriented in the Ljubljana School of Psychoanalysis called "The Language of Touch: Linguistic Perspectives in Haptic Studies." This most unusual collaboration gave rise to a series of workshops and lectures held in Germany, Slovenia, and the United States. It also inspired several unconventional research initiatives, such as an international project in philosophy and film called *Haptic Cinematography* and an interactive installation called *Hegel's Begriff*.

Our investigations led us to identify the prominent theme of touch throughout the history of philosophical scepticism and its intersections with religion, politics, art, and culture. We go so far as to claim that the theme of touch—shaped by shifting cultural attitudes towards touching—drives major shifts in the questions posed by philosophy. And yet, despite the persistent question of touch at each philosophical stage, this key aspect of scepticism had not yet been named or acknowledged in mainstream philosophical scholarship or in haptic studies.

I coin the term "haptic scepticism" to mark touch as a site of epistemic and ethical questioning and crisis. Haptic scepticism denotes experiences of touch that call touch itself into question and a possible response to this experience. The study of haptic scepticism thus pursues two questions: What kinds of personal or shared haptic experiences throw us into crisis? What kinds of responses to the crisis of touch allow for transformation: the transformation of those who experience crisis, of those we touch, and of touch itself as a mediator between self and others?

In addition to "haptic scepticism," I introduce "haptic dogmatism" to identify unquestioned beliefs and practices involving touch. Haptic dogmatism is embedded in personal and cultural values, rituals, and habit. It is also expressed by those who cling to their "right" to touch or the rightness of their touch. Haptic scepticism disrupts haptic dogmatism, creating the opportunity for transformed ways of coming

ern psychoanalysis. Freud, notably, claims that our inability to draw a clear line between wakefulness and dream-states can yield excessive doubt akin to neurosis, while dogmatic certainty in what one senses to be true is a kind of psychosis. A classic case of doubt as obsessional neurosis is found in Freud's analysis of Rat Man: see *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. Volume X (1909): Two Case Histories (Little Hans and the Rat Man)*, trans. James Strachey and Anna Freud (London: Hogarth Press, 1962).



Fig. 2: Zack Sievers, film strip from *Haptic Cinematography*, 2018.

Haptic Cinematography explored the themes of “touching concepts” and “conceptualizing touch.” Philosophers, students, and artists experimented with different stages of haptic experience and representation, translating haptic experiences into philosophical concepts, concepts into performance art, and haptic performance into film.

into touch with others and the world. But such transformation depends on our response to crisis. Whereas the dogmatic response to the question of touch closes the possibility for transformed relations, the sceptical practice of dwelling with the experience of uncertainty is where an ethics of touch begins.

The identification of “haptic scepticism” demanded that we go into experimental territory. In the context of this collection, my collaborators reflect the novelty of the content of our investigation in their formal approach. Some chapters take the form of poetic vignettes, while others draw heavily on the arts (literature, film, performance art, painting) to animate touch within the two-dimensional form of a philosophical text. This volume is packed with haptic puns and metaphors to unsettle philosophy’s dependency on sight-oriented figures of speech, a dependency that tends to conceal the role of other senses and sensations within our thinking and being.

We initially approached haptic scepticism as an area of inquiry at the intersection of epistemology and psychoanalysis, exploring the desire to know what lies beyond one’s reach. Drawing on aesthetics to illustrate our topic, haptic scepticism yielded an ethics of touching. *When we weren’t looking, or when we were looking elsewhere, this ethics of touching snuck up behind us and tapped us on the shoulder.* This is not the first time that scepticism has surprised me with this move. I find this behaviour to be the delight and terror of scepticism. Despite scepticism’s insistence on having nothing to offer ethics (Sextus Empiricus), the activity of probing the shortcomings of epistemology places us squarely within the difficult and delicate work of

ethics, which demands that we respond to the other without knowing how. Sextus had it backwards.⁵ Our inability to know with certainty the best course of action does not prevent scepticism from having an ethical response to our social and political landscapes. Our uncertainty with regard to knowing how to act—and the moment of crisis that this uncertainty inspires—is where ethics begins. The object of our epistemic desire withdraws from the horizon of our vision and taps us from behind to request a different sort of engagement. In response to this ethical call, haptic scepticism does not seek to overcome the ambiguities of touch relations by stepping assuredly towards what is certain and shrinking away from risk. This ethics of touching instead identifies the combination of *erotic curiosity* and *erotic doubt*—*promiscuity* and *hesitation*—as two sides of sensation that allow for the mutual transformation of desiring subjects that come into touch, sometimes unexpectedly, sometimes without touching at all.

Framing the Sceptic as the Compulsive Toucher: The Origins of Haptic Scepticism

This collection engages the many nuanced varieties of haptic scepticism belonging to Platonism, German idealism, phenomenology, psychoanalysis, structural linguistics, and postmodernism. For the purpose of introductions, however, I offer two provisional caricatures of the sceptic. The first model of the sceptic may be seen as one who takes a step back from the familiar or new to gain a critical stance; the second model is found in one who immediately takes an eager step forward, walking directly into a new encounter. The first model can be located in early modern thought. This is the variety of scepticism that Descartes performs in the first books of his *Meditations*, when he employs a method driven by a hyperbolic doubt that casts everything under suspicion. When most people think of the sceptic, they may imagine someone with crossed arms and a furrowed brow, someone who approaches all subject matter with a hesitant reluctance even before a new proposal has been introduced. The second model, which we can find in ancient scepticism, however, arguably has little to do with doubt. The sceptic provisionally welcomes every new encounter, thoroughly following each new suggestion or experience to its own logical end: a dead end (*epochē* or suspension) that was implicit in the beginning. These dead ends, however, are not fruitless, but rather lead to the possibility of affective transformation. The experience of impasse (*aporia*) transforms the crisis of indiscernibility into tranquillity (*ataraxia*) in the face of the unknown.

⁵ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, III.168–279: without the capacity to know what is good or bad by nature (or if these categories exist in nature), we cannot arrive at an ethics. In the absence of ethical judgement, it is advisable to adhere to the customs and laws of one's land. See also Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Ethicists*, trans. Richard Bett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

It is possible to identify this second kind of scepticism with colourful figures like Socrates, Pyrrho, Apuleius, and the young Augustine: philosophers who wandered outside of the city walls, moving from town to town, enthusiastically entertaining the views of each new companion whom they encountered along the way to nowhere in particular.⁶ From this perspective, the sceptic is someone who is willing to occupy an interlocutor's narrative for the length of their shared journey. I adopt this image of the sceptic as a temporary travelling companion from John Winkler's reading of Apuleius's protagonist Lucius.⁷ Winkler reads the opening scene of *The Golden Ass* as a dialogue between a cynic and a sceptic. Continuing with my characterisation of two kinds of sceptics (the one who takes a step back and the one who takes a step forward), we may also read this scene as the tale of two sceptics who meet along the road: the incredulous sceptic and the curious sceptic. The second model of scepticism is found in our protagonist Lucius, whom Apuleius arguably models after himself. Lucius is travelling alone on the road to Thessaly when he comes upon two travellers. He quickens his pace in order to eavesdrop on their conversation. In Lucius's words: "I was just adding myself as a third party to two travellers who were a little ahead of me on the road. Just as I turned my ears to the subject of their discussion, one of them, with a jolt of loud laughter said, Stop! This is all impossible, outrageous lies!"⁸ The incredulous traveller, reflecting the first model of scepticism, begs his companion to bring his narrative to an end. But the incredulous traveller's protest makes Lucius all the more interested. He continues, "When I heard this, I became thirstier. [...] I said, 'On the contrary, share your talk with me—not that I'm one to pry, but I am one who would like to know a little something about everything, or

6 Although Socrates preferred to engage his interlocutors in Athens, Plato offers one account of Socrates seducing his walking companion beyond the city walls (Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff [Indianapolis: Hackett, 1995]); some say that Pyrrho entertained every person who crossed his path for hours on hours (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers, Volume II: Books 6–10*, trans. R.D. Hicks [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1925]). I read Apuleius, a student of Plutarch, as a sceptic, although he is too much of a sceptic to commit to any doctrine, even one that denies having a doctrine. Apuleius, much like his protagonist Lucius from *The Golden Ass*, was happy to adapt to the customs of the places that he passed through on his travels. He was accused of picking up some bad habits along the way (Apuleius, *Apologia; Florida; De deo Socratis*, trans. Christopher P. Jones [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017]). Augustine recounts his participation in the foreign ideas and customs of the groups of which he was a temporary member (Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Garry Wills [New York: Penguin, 2006]).

7 John J. Winkler, *Auctor & Actor: A Narratological Reading of Apuleius's Golden Ass* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

8 Apuleius, *The Transformation of Lucius, Otherwise Known as the Golden Ass*, trans. Robert Graves (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), 1.2: I take up this same passage in several articles through which I develop these two sides of scepticism: see Rachel Aumiller, "Epoché as the Erotic Conversion of One into Two," *Yearbook of the Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies 2017*, ed. Bill Rebigier (Berlin: De Gruyter: 2017), 3–13, and "The Virtue of Erotic Curiosity," *The Journal for Philosophy and Literature*, forthcoming.

at least a little something about most things.”⁹ The incredulous sceptic’s command to stop is heard by the curious sceptic as an invitation to trespass. As Winkler argues, when this sceptic approaches a stop sign, she is compelled to take at least one step further.

Scepticism may be viewed as the process of keeping the other at an arm’s length. However, scepticism can also be seen as the practice of provisionally giving oneself over to the other. The practice of yea-saying, without committing oneself to any one thing completely. Ironically, this second sceptic, who is marked by a refusal to assent to anything absolutely, is the most likely to say “yes” to the invitation of another (at least for the sake of experimentation). Her refusal to commit to anything in particular allows her to be open to the equal consideration of everything that happens to come her way.

Attending to the role of touch teases out a kind of promiscuity at the heart of scepticism. Robert Pfaller takes the accusation of the sceptic as a toucher one step further, claiming that there is something obscene about the relationship between touch and scepticism (“When to Touch and What to Doubt: Zeroing In on the Tactile Surplus,” pp. 58–77). This obscenity, however, is not a result of the sceptic’s imprudent judgement in touching. Rather, the obscenity is due to an excess inherent to touch itself. The excess of touch gives rise to doubt. The excess of touch is quite different from the excess of sight, he argues. With sight, we tend to add more than what meets the eye. We complete an image on our horizon by imagining the other side, what is more, by imagining what lies past the horizon. Sight, with the help of the imagination, offers the illusion of unity and wholeness to knowledge that is partial. *The sceptical takeaway is that we can only ever see one side of a position at a time.* Our imagination, which fills in the gaps, is the culprit of visual excess.

A greedy touch, however, allows us to grasp a body from all sides at once.¹⁰ In this sense, touch would seem to be more certain, or at least more thorough, than sight. In contrast to sight, touch can leave very little to the imagination. And yet, touch gives us more than what we had bargained for. Every touch is a bit like poking a bear. Touch at your own risk. *The sceptical takeaway is that there is always more at hand than what meets the eye.* The excess is a result of how the touch of the other disrupts our fantasy of the other. Whether this disruption takes the form of a pleasant surprise or a disappointment, it nevertheless disrupts our projected image. As Pfaller writes, “Touching’s surplus [...] does not contribute to completing such an image. Instead, it adds itself as an obscene supplement to what could otherwise have passed

⁹ Apuleius, *Transformation*, 1.2.

¹⁰ For a mythical reference to an omni-haptic being, we may consider the Hecatoncheires (Hundred-Handed Giants) from Hesiod’s *Theogony* (in Hesiod, *Theogony and Works and Days*, trans. M.L. West, repr. ed. [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008]). For a philosophical reference to our own omni-haptic being, see Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, trans. Victor Lyle Dowden, rev. and ed. Hans H. Rudwick with introduction by Frederick P. Van De Pitte, new ed. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996), 41.

as a consistent image. Such a surplus causes us to question whether things were really as they previously seemed to be” (pp. 61–62). Whether we are in the role of the promiscuous toucher or in the position of the one who is touched, touch disrupts what we envision to be true. An image allows us to imagine what we desire to be true, for example, what we might desire to touch and how we might imagine it to feel. But touching disrupts our desire by offering us something more or less or otherwise than what we envisioned.

We are caught daydreaming while standing in line. As the line begins to move, a stranger nudges us from behind and without thinking, we take a step forward: “A funny little push sets things in motion. [...] A little touch thus again brings about an obscene surplus over acceptable knowledge; a surplus that puts this knowledge into question. [...] a sceptical triumph” (p. 62). The sceptic may be framed as the one who initiates touch. What is more, touch may be framed as an agent that nudges the process of perpetual inquiry into motion.

Our two models of the sceptic point to two general methodologies: scepticism as modes of suspension (reached by overstepping and encountering an impasse) and scepticism as modes of doubt (a backing away that opens up a space in between oneself and another). Although the latter is usually connected with forms of modern scepticism, we can find much earlier characterisations of the sceptic as the doubter. In the *City of God*, for example, Augustine addresses himself to the sceptics as doubters. In other texts, he equates the sceptics with the academics, who had no doubts about the limits of their knowledge, which is to say, they were quite certain of these limits.¹¹ But here, he uses scepticism more generally to refer to all disbelievers, especially those who doubt what cannot be tested: miracles and a world beyond. He challenges the sceptic to contemplate the earthly wonders, not only before her very eyes, but underneath her fingertips. He lists a handful of *haptic marvels* that travellers speak of. Take, for instance, he says,

the salt of Agrigentum in Sicily, [which] when thrown into the fire, becomes fluid as if it were in water, but in water it crackles as if it were in fire. The Garamantae have a fountain so cold by day that no one can drink it, so hot by night no one can touch it. [...] Then there are the apples of Sodom which grow indeed to an appearance of ripeness, but, when you touch them with hand or tooth, the peel cracks, and they crumble into dust and ashes. The Persian stone pyrites burns the hand when it is held tightly and so is named after fire.¹²

Augustine attempts to challenge what he identifies as the sceptic’s doubt in the beyond by shaking her certainty in her own experience of the here and now. And yet, this characterisation is strange since the ancient sceptics, as Augustine knew, did not

¹¹ See, for example, Augustine, *Against the Academics*, trans. Michael P. Foley (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019) and Augustine, *The Retractions*, trans. Sr. Mary Inez Bogan R.S.M., reprint ed. (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1999).

¹² Augustine, *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*, ed. Gill Evans, trans. Henry Bettenson, new. ed. (London: Penguin, 2003), 21.9.

need to look to a world beyond to highlight the unexplainable. Paradox, for them, was something that could literally be found within one's grasp. If these "doubters" took a step back from the beyond, it was out of an eagerness to attend to the curiosities with which they came into immediate touch. The haptic experience of contradiction itself was the one thing of which the sceptics could be certain.

Scepticism not only questions the reliability of the sense of touch as a tool to test what we can know. It equally investigates how haptic encounters—experiences of coming into touch with other people, things, or ourselves—can cause us to radically question what we believe to be true (*doxa*). Pyrrhonian scepticism in particular describes the deeply personal crisis that can result when our sense experience comes into conflict with our cultural values. The experience of touch can lead us into the crisis of being split between two equally compelling but contradictory positions. The Pyrrhonian sceptics called this crisis "equipollence" (*isostheneia*), often referring to the experience of undecidability between two epistemological or metaphysical propositions. However, equipollence may also be bodily: the experience of two contrary sensations that are equally powerful.

In his writing on Pyrrho, Sextus attends to the paradox of pleasure and pain.¹³ In *Phaedo*, Socrates observes that pleasure and pain are like a two-headed monster, one always at the heels of the other.¹⁴ However Sextus takes this line of thought further. Touch can be both painful and pleasurable in the *same moment*.¹⁵ Socrates finds relief from the removal of his chains while others find haptic pleasure in the discomfort of being bound; in the first case, pain chronologically engenders pleasure; in the second, pain engenders pleasure simultaneously without ceasing to be painful. Touch can split subjective experience into two equally powerful and contradictory sensations. The sceptics were indeed preoccupied with touch much more than with matters of the beyond. But this is not because that which can be touched is more believable than the intangible. Instead, touch shows us that we do not need to travel very far to experience *aporia*. Touch may be employed as an epistemological tool to test our initial suspicions by verifying the properties of an object at hand. The kind of scepticism we chase in this collection instead seeks to affirm the materiality of paradox and contradiction (even in the form of negation). In Augustine's attempt to challenge the doubter with curious experiences of touch, we find a stunning thesis for haptic scepticism: *Paradox is a haptic marvel. We can cup paradox in our palms, press paradox against our lips, dip our toes into its coolness, and, if we are not careful, we may even burn ourselves on its surface.*

At this point, one might protest that the sceptic has been falsely framed as the toucher. It is in fact the anti-sceptic, Augustine, who attempts to seduce the sceptic

¹³ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*.

¹⁴ Plato, *Phaedo*, trans. G.M.A. Grube, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1977), 57a–61c

¹⁵ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, III.194–97: it is not only the case that pain produces pleasure and pleasure produces pain. "Every pleasure is affixed with pain." A pleasurable experience (for example, overeating) can be painful and gratifying at the same time.

into touching, just as Christ attempts to seduce Thomas into touching his wound. Then again, *perhaps* Augustine's haptic lust is a symptom of his lingering attachment to scepticism, harking back to the days when he participated in his fair share of touching. *Perhaps* Augustine employs a sceptical method in order to shake scepticism to its haptic core, a common move employed long before Descartes. *Perhaps* Augustine employs a touch of doubt for the sake of invigorating faith with passion, another common move during his time.¹⁶ Is touch on the side of dogma or doubt?

Bill Rebigier questions the relationship between doubt, dogma, and haptic marvels in the context of Jewish ritual and custom ("A Magic Touch: Performative Haptic Acts in Biblical and Medieval Jewish Magic," pp. 104–21). As he notes, prohibitions against touching as well as imperatives to touch give definition to a communal body. The Hebrew scriptures and Halakhah offer clear instructions regarding who may touch and who may not touch, what to touch and what not to touch, when to touch and when not to touch, and how to touch and how not to touch. To touch according to the law is an expression of fidelity to one's tradition and community, and to one's God. The law arguably leaves little room for doubt in touching. Rebigier considers biblical stories about acts of touch that offend the clear boundaries laid down by law and custom. Uzzah accidentally crosses this boundary when he impulsively reaches out to catch the Ark of the Covenant when the oxen stumble. He is struck dead the moment his common touch comes into contact with the holy object. Elisha boldly oversteps when he defies the prohibition against touching a corpse. As scripture reads, laying himself over the child's dead body, he "put his mouth on its mouth, his eyes on its eyes, and his hands on its hands, as he bent over it. And the body of the child became warm."¹⁷ *Risky touching with uncertain outcomes can have the consequence of life or death.* In taking a risk, the sceptical gesture of overstepping/overreaching/overtouching has the potential to yield haptic marvels beyond our imagination.

When we defy cultural norms surrounding touch, we enter a risky zone. The consequence can be devastating when one's community—religious or secular—exercises its power to shame through tactics ranging from gossip to excommunication. Yet the consequence may be immensely rewarding when touch yields sensations so profound that they cause our deepest commitments to quiver. These two consequences often coincide, throwing an individual's relationship to her own touching—to the way she comes into touch with the world—into the crisis of equipollence, splitting her sense of self in two.

When a community decides that one of its members has touched out of turn, the toucher becomes the untouchable: the pervert, the player, the cheater, the slut. The

¹⁶ Nineteenth-century scholars retrospectively identify the appropriation of sceptical arguments by Christian theologians and leaders as "sceptical fideism." By challenging reason's grasp of our phenomenal experience, they defend divine revelation as a source of knowledge. Sceptical fideism has been attributed to figures ranging from Tertullian to Kant.

¹⁷ 2 Kings 4:34 (New JPS Translation).

punishment of being marked untouchable, specifically for the way one has touched, places the untouchable out of reach of experiences of transformative touch, while often making her vulnerable to acts of violence. As we have noted, the excess of touch is inherently disruptive and even threatening. As Libera Pisano argues, this disruption is not only a personal experience, but a political disturbance (“*Noli me tangere*: The Profaning Touch That Challenges Authority,” pp. 122–37). Touch might seem to be the sensation that we explore behind closed doors. It belongs to the most private and intimate crevasses of our life. But if touching is a personal matter, then why is it of interest to the law? Pisano situates touch as a medium of power relations that take place on the body, “a place of exchange between the I and the world” (p. 125). Following Edmund Husserl, Pisano argues that unlike the other senses that are one-directional, touch demands reciprocity: “It is possible to see without being seen and to hear without being heard, but not to touch without being touched” (p. 125). Touch is thus the site of intimacy and struggle. Society regulates touch in order to protect its vulnerable members from the abuse of power. However, society also regulates touch in order to protect its own abuse of power:

It can be said that authority exercises its power through this injunction and that *noli me tangere* has nowadays become the prohibition *par excellence*. It deals with abuse, impurity, consumption, damage, offence, or simply with usage, pleasure, and enjoyment. There is an everyday use of this prohibition in which power, consumption, and usage are interwoven. This conjunction raises many questions: What does this untouchable represent? What does this register of warning mean? Why is it forbidden to touch? What is the grammar of this gesture? Could we interpret the act of touching as a radical calling into question of authority in general? Does touch involve a radical (a)political form of resistance? Is touch a temporary suspension of the apparatus of power? (p. 134)

The cultural revolutions of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries reveal the transformative power of defiant touching. Insofar as these movements shook the deepest social dogmas surrounding sexuality and gender, they may be understood as sceptical crises of national and global proportions. If touch is the medium through which power secures itself by inscribing the authority of society and law into our skin, it is also the site for resistance and revolution.

Untouchables may choose to demonstrate the revolutionary power of profane touching through parades and protests. But sometimes, the most disruptive act of the untouchable is simply to exist—to revel in the reciprocity of being in touch with a world that experiences your very being as an excess. To exist is to force the world to touch you back and to struggle with the insistence of your being.

Pisano adopts Jean-Luc Nancy’s reading of the story of Doubting Thomas through a common medieval framework that marked Mary Magdalene, rather than Thomas, as the compulsive toucher. While Thomas’s masculine desire to touch is connected to the epistemological pursuit of spiritual truth, Mary Magdalene’s presence before Christ, whom she addresses as “teacher,” is marked as contaminated by carnal desire.

Mary Magdalene was without a doubt one who worshipped through sensuous touching, anointing Christ's feet with oil and wiping them dry with her hair. But in her encounter with the resurrected Christ, in John's account, she stands at a distance. Mary Magdalene's "being-there"—without so much as a gesture towards touching—is in itself an excess of touch. Why is the potential touch of Mary Magdalene so threatening? It is as if her touch threatens to come out of the pages of scriptures and contaminate the religious desire for disembodied truth (ironically represented in the form of the resurrected body). What would have happened if Mary Magdalene *had* touched Christ? He who overcame death defeated by a woman's touch. Without lifting a finger, she causes the son of God to quiver in his flesh: don't touch me! The touch of the untouchable is powerful indeed.

Audre Lorde notes the cultural reduction of female sensuality under capitalism to a commercialised form of eroticism to be viewed and consumed.¹⁸ To unleash *eros* in its richest sense would not only be empowering, but dangerous to the powers that be. Lorde writes, "In touch with the erotic, I become less willing to accept powerlessness, or those other supplied states of being which are not native to me, such as resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, and self-denial."¹⁹ Touch as an act of political rebellion begins with an autoerotic gesture. One comes into touch with her own heightened sense of pleasure and joy by embracing the disruptive power of her sensuous being. Feel yourself. Autoeroticism becomes revolutionary when emboldened sensuous beings come into touch. Lorde calls us

to risk sharing the electrical charge without having to look away, and without distorting the enormously powerful and creative nature of that exchange. Recognizing the power of the erotic within our lives can give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world, rather than merely settling for a shift in characters in the same weary drama.²⁰

Following Lorde and Pisano, we can identify touch as a sceptical gesture that challenges the hierarchies that structure philosophy, religion, and politics (and all experience). An inner transformation of one's subjectivity occurs with the realisation that just being-there is an act of (a)political disturbance. A political transformation of society occurs with the communal realisation of the potential of this disturbance when untouchables come into erotic touch. Promiscuity is revolutionary.

There are great risks and rewards for challenging the social and political boundaries of touch. But does uncertainty and risk persist in the experience of individuals who touch according to the rules? We may return to Rebiger, who explores this question by highlighting the role of touch in medieval Jewish magic. A magic touch may involve handling enchanted objects, laying one's hands on another's body, or mak-

¹⁸ Audre Lorde. "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, rev. ed. (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007), 55–59.

¹⁹ Lorde, 58.

²⁰ Lorde, 59.

ing an inscription on the skin. In order to achieve the desired effect of a love spell or a curse, a practitioner of magic must not deviate from a spell's specific instructions, no matter how demanding or baffling. The aid of written or oral instruction would seem to clarify touch. But, as Rebigier points out, a touch of doubt nevertheless creeps in even when language provides clear direction. Did my touch achieve the effect I desired? Was my performance underwhelming? When a practitioner doubts the efficacy of his spell, he must repeat the haptic performance again and again until he gets it just right. But in many cases, it is difficult to know whether the transformative power of a magic touch has taken place. Is doubt a hindrance to the transformative potency of touching, or does doubt motivate touch? Adding a new dimension to J.L. Austin's speech act, Rebigier coins the term "performative haptic act" to discuss the transformative power of touch through repetition and singularity. He notes that repetition serves the function of overcoming doubt. For this reason, many rituals require regular repetition to strengthen our fidelity. However, we might also argue that the persistence of uncertainty drives the repetition of touch. *Doubt drives the toucher to repeat his touch, to adjust his touch, to perfect his touch, to reflect on his touch and try again.*

Let us repeat the question: Does touch belong to the sceptic or to the dogmatist? As with any rigorous and thorough sceptical investigation, the results are inconclusive. Apuleius would go to trial for touching too much (everything from forbidden magical objects to a wealthy widow, the mother of his best mate).²¹ And yet, Socrates was accused of not touching enough. Of course, the accusation of touching too much or too little has a lot to do with the preferences of the other (one's community, religion, or lover). The accusations against the sceptics with regard to their inappropriate touching—whether too much or too little—reflect two different understandings of the relationship between fidelity and touch: one position demands faithfulness in the abstention of sensation; another position demands the other's touch all to himself. When Alcibiades walks in on Socrates cosying up with Agathon on a coach, we are offered an impassioned account of how erotic/epistemic promiscuity leads to the frustrated desire of the beloved who wants the lover all to himself in body and soul.²² Plato devotes an entire dialogue to the frustration of touching. The *Symposium's* question, "What is *eros*?", is layered with the question, "What is it that I want to touch when touching the other?" Apuleius, in response to being charged with compulsive touching, makes it clear that he would like to grasp a bit of everything. But Plato suggests that there is just one thing we want from touch: Oneness itself. Aristophanes's image of the flayed circle people desperately bumping "belly buttons" to reunite themselves points to the impossibility of achieving this one thing. As we have

²¹ Apuleius, *Apologia*.

²² Plato, *Symposium*, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989), 213b–22b.

suggested above, only sight and imagination can achieve the unity that touch longs for.

The fantasy of Diotima's ladder is to transcend the whole ordeal of touching: the messiness of other bodies and the complications of asymmetrical desire which plague *eros*.²³ In Diotima's vision, by climbing past touch, we achieve oneness and unity through sight as we gaze into the form of the Beautiful. Hence, we move from procreation between bodies to the creation of beautiful ideas. A sceptical interpretation of Diotima's ladder and Plato's forms, however, identifies the unity brought about by the gaze as wishful thinking. We are unable to transcend touch, either because the top of the ladder is impossibly out of reach or because no matter how high we climb we are always on our way. Instead of gazing into the pure form of Beauty in itself, we are left in the dark, clumsily groping each other's flesh.

The *Symposium* explores how the frustration of touch is a structural component of *eros*: a kind of fundamental drive, which cannot be satisfied, propelling us towards other bodies, activities, and ideas. Bara Kolenc attributes this frustration to the paradox of desire, which she names "the (un)touchable" ("The (Un)Touchable Touch of Pyramus and Thisbe: Doubt and Desire," pp. 78–103). If the desire of knowledge is to close the gap between subject and object, the desire of touch is to close the gap between bodies. In both cases, doubt and uncertainty are the result of a gap between two. The fulfilment of desire would be achieved by closing this gap. If two could become one, doubt could be overcome. But, as Kolenc argues, when doubt is extinguished, so is desire: the desire for knowledge, desire for the other. *Eros* desires unity, but the fulfilment of this desire is death. If the flayed circle people could have their way, they would suffocate each other in their embrace. Like a fight to the death, one side would eventually swallow up the other, snuffing out the animating force of desire—the difference between two, even in the case of two of the same—that had so attracted each to the other in the first place. In order to sustain itself, desire must desire too much and thus fend off its own fulfilment, maintaining the excruciating distance between two, maintaining the space for doubt and uncertainty. *As a function of desire, touch likewise must hold open a gap even as it seeks to draw another near.* In Kolenc's framework, the (un)touchable—the condition of touch—is found in the equipollence of these two contrary impulses: to cling to the other for all eternity (an eternity equivalent to death, the death of desire) and to hold the object of lust/knowledge at a distance, to preserve desire by sacrificing its fulfilment.

Kolenc demonstrates that the spatial paradox of touch is also temporal. Her analysis echoes Anne Carson's illustration of the temporal paradox of desirous touch through a fragment of Sophocles's poetry about ice.²⁴ A glistening icicle catches my eye. My impulse is to break off the icicle to cling to its beauty. But the warmth of my hands would cause it to melt away and slip through my fingers. The ice, in

²³ Plato, *Symposium*, 210a–12a.

²⁴ Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet: An Essay* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 111–16.

turn, would surely sting my hands to exact its revenge. In ancient scepticism, the experience of crisis at the encounter of paradox sometimes results in a transformation that is one-sided: the transformation of the sceptic. Alternatively, the student of the sceptical master undergoes transformation by engaging in pedagogical dialectic. However, haptic scepticism shows us that the transformation that occurs when two (or more) come into touch, although asymmetrical, is mutual. Mutual transformation is not without risks. In order to be transformed, we must come into contact with and be fundamentally altered by the other. But how do we give ourselves over to the other's touching without losing ourselves? *Can we be transformed by touch while holding open a space for the integrity of our own desire—even without fully understanding the nature of our own desire which is itself conflicted?*

Augustine's image of the apple that turns to ash when pressed against one's lips is mirrored by Kolenc, who locates haptic scepticism in Ovid's image of lovers who press their lips against the stone wall that separates them. As Kolenc clarifies, the lovers press their lips not merely upon the cold stone, but against a deep crack in the wall. The crack rather than the wall both frustrates and mediates the impossible touch. The sceptic's interest in touch is also about grasping nothing: the crack between two, or the crack within one that is already divided. The ancient sceptics were content to describe the sensuous and affective experience of touching paradox, revealing that contradiction seems to lie in every touch. They did not go so far as to speculate why paradox appears to be directly beneath our fingertips.



Fig. 3: Zack Sievers, film strip from *Haptic Cinematography*, 2018.

The Haptic Marvels of Touching Oneself: Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Haptic Scepticism

As I noted earlier, many of the contributors to this volume, myself included, have our philosophical home in the Ljubljana School of Psychoanalysis, which is most strongly associated with Mladen Dolar, Alenka Zupančič, and Slavoj Žižek. Thus, the number of references to G.W.F. Hegel per page (HPP) should not be surprising. As next generation scholars within this tradition, we stress the central role of scepticism in the connection between ancient philosophy, German idealism, and twentieth-century continental philosophy and psychoanalysis. We extend the scope of the Ljubljana School by building upon the philosophy of touch and language developed in late twentieth-century continental philosophy and psychoanalysis in the dialogues between figures such as Jacques Lacan, Didier Anzieu, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Emmanuel Levinas (see our collected volume devoted to this topic: *The Language of Touch: Philosophical Examinations in Linguistics and Haptic Studies* [New York: Bloomsbury, 2019]). Through haptic scepticism, we further elaborate the relationship between touch and language by tracing the indebtedness of continental philosophy of language and touch to methods and themes belonging to ancient scepticism. In my view, the trajectory of the Next Generation Ljubljana School into haptic scepticism has its stakes in an ethics that is aligned with aesthetics rather than epistemology: sensation rather than certainty. We reach for an ethics that reinvigorates desire and sensation with a touch of doubt.

Ancient scepticism finds new life in nineteenth- and twentieth-century European philosophy in two movements: 1) German idealism and 2) twentieth-century continental philosophy: phenomenology, psychoanalysis, structural linguistics, and post-modernism. In dialogue with ancient scepticism, the new expressions of scepticism within German idealism and continental philosophy explore the phenomenological experience of contradiction or paradox. German idealism offers scepticism two new thrilling elements: an introspective subject and a metaphysical framework, each deeply informing the other. As a result, the Platonic theme of *eros* in ancient scepticism becomes autoerotic in German idealism. Continental philosophy and psychoanalysis adopt the sceptical subject of German idealism, endowing this subject with a rich philosophy of touch and language. Scepticism takes a detour into the interiority of the self in order to reach back out into the world through these two vital modes of being in the world with others.

It might seem that a self-actualised modern subject—with the ability to reflect on and articulate her complex desires and preferences—would be able to clear up some of the troubles with touching (so long as the other respects her wonderful autonomy as she does his). However, the new waves of haptic scepticism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries reveal that contradiction runs deep into the very substance of the

subject (so much so that some twentieth-century philosophers challenge the category of the subject altogether). Rather than mending the crack that constitutes the self, continental philosophy and psychoanalysis show that language only magnifies the frustrated desire for unity in both the experience of touching others and of touching oneself.

In the context of German idealism, scepticism does not shy away from making metaphysical claims as it once did. The sceptical description of contradiction and crisis instead serves as the foundation of metaphysics, whether this foundational crack is found within the world, between the subject and the world, or within the subject. As we witness in Hegel's *Science of Logic*, Being herself steps into the role of the sceptic in crisis.²⁵ Being attempts to grasp herself as such—as pure indeterminate Being—only to grasp a handful of nothing. We find that Being can only grasp herself by the crack between Being and Nothing, which mirror each other in their indeterminacy. Nothing can likewise only grasp himself by this same crack. This metaphysical impasse—the indecipherability of Being and Nothing—is not the impossibility of metaphysics, but the starting point. I read the opening of Hegel's *Science of Logic* as an origin story that grounds his ontology.²⁶ Existence is set in motion in this cosmic instance of self-touch/self-doubt. Being, pure Being, touches herself and doubts her own being. The repetition of Being's own sceptical crisis—the suspended equipollence between Being and Nothing—is the ongoing animating force of Becoming.

From this speculative origin story, I claim that metaphysical (self-)doubt precedes ontological existence. The world is not created through the word that asserts itself, but through a question: Let there be light? It is good. Is it though? (which at times seems to be a closer characterisation of God to his creation.) Moving from an objective register to a subjective register, we might further claim that self-doubt precedes the self. I doubt therefore I am. Am I? In the crisis of equipollence between "I am" and "am I?", we find the subject (for several formations of the subject in doubt, see Kolenc, Vranešević, and Louria Hayon).

Ancient haptic scepticism leans into an almost psychological analysis of the experience of *epochē*, describing the emotional stages of individuals when processing a sensational encounter that disrupts their basic assumptions. Ancient scepticism zeros in on subjective experience even while lacking the category of the subject. Hegel claims that scepticism concludes ancient Greek life, giving birth to the shadowy outline of the modern subject at the site where the old gods were burned to the ground.²⁷ German idealism adds to scepticism's analysis of the subjective expe-

²⁵ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. George Di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), §§21.68–21.69, 59–60.

²⁶ For this account, see Rachel Aumiller, "Twice-Two: Hegel's Comic Redoubling of Being and Nothing," *Problemi International* 2, no. 2 (2018): 253–78.

²⁷ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Terry Pinkard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), §§745–47. I offer a detailed account of this moment in Hegel as well as in ancient Greek philosophy and art in "The Aborted Object of Comedy: Plato and Aristophanes'

rience of crisis, a metaphysics of the subject of crisis. Goran Vranešević demonstrates how the figure of the sceptic in crisis serves as the prototype for subjectivity as such as painted by modern philosophy, especially by Hegel (“An Atom of Touch: Scepticism from Hegel to Lacan,” pp. 156–76): “Since Hegel, it has been practically self-explanatory that natural consciousness has a sceptical character. While this is an essential position of modern thought, it also illustrates a re-evaluated perspective on scepticism itself” (p. 166). Ancient haptic scepticism reveals the trouble with coming into touch with the phenomenal world. German idealism shows us the trouble of coming into touch with the self. It further shows that this trouble is at once the condition not only of self-knowledge, but also of any claim to knowledge. Vranešević continues, “[Hegel] paired the question, ‘What can I know?’ with the labour of conceptual unveiling and thereby grasped knowledge as the process of self-comprehension (*Selbsterfassen*), or, more directly expressed, the task of touching (*Fassen*) one-self (*Selbst*)” (p. 159). Scepticism challenges epistemology by demonstrating that anything we cling to as truth slips through our clenched fist. Hegel, however, identifies this fistful of nothing as the very structure of knowledge, since every appearance must realise its identity both in “what it is” and “what it is not” (the internal otherness of determinate negation). The subject likewise must grasp herself by the crack between both what she is and what she is not (which is also what she is): the haptic world.

Hegel is a natural companion for this study because of the haptic overtones of one of his driving concepts, which takes the form of both a noun and verb: *Begriff/begreifen*. As with the English “to grasp,” *begreifen* also contains the double sense of a literal grasp (to grasp a handful of clay/bread/flesh) and a metaphorical grasp (to grasp a concept/idea/ideal). However, as Mirt Komel argues, Hegel’s language of grasping when applied to a concept (*Begriff*) is more than mere metaphor (“Touching Doubt: Haptolinguistic Scepticism,” pp. 138–55). Or, to put it differently, the structure of the metaphor is itself more than a mere metaphor. Metaphor is the sceptical engine driving spirit. Concepts have a haptic character just as touch has a conceptual character. We must grasp an idea by its material body. What is more, a concept must grasp itself by its material body, even if only by its crack. What appears from one perspective as *the grasp of the concept* appears from another perspective as *the concept of the grasp*. And yet, as dialectics would have it, these two sides cannot be collapsed, but remain in suspension. Komel illustrates how the metaphor that connects conceptual grasping with physical grasping reveals the sceptical structure of the concept itself: the speculative unity which both holds together and separates the touchable (our haptic experience of our own body, other bodies, and material world) and the untouchable (*logos/language*).

Alliance,” in *The Object of Comedy*, ed. Gregor Moder and Jamila M.H. Mascot (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020): 75–92.

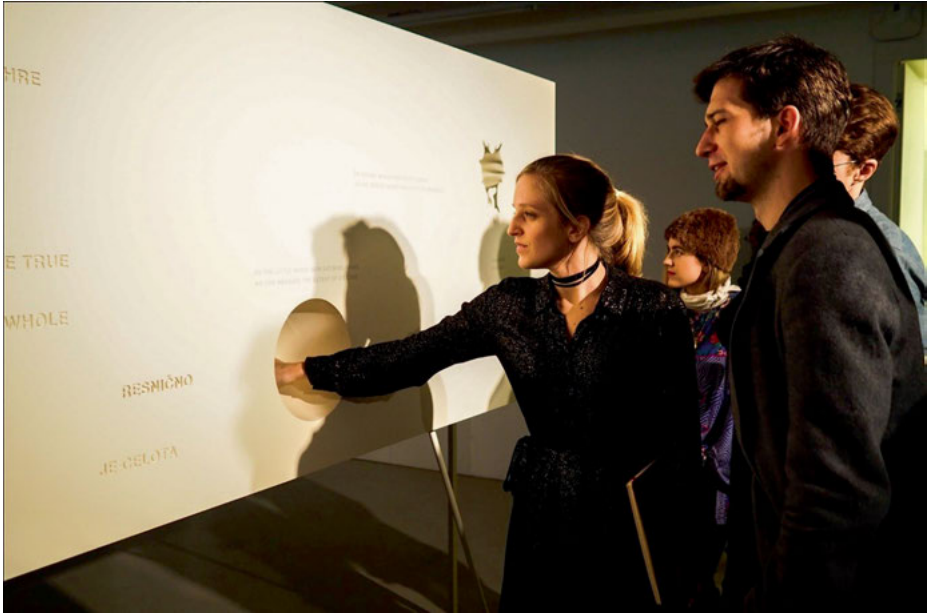


Fig. 4: Bara Kolenc, Mirt Komel and Atej Tutta, *Hegel's Begriff*, 2018, installation, mixed media. *Hegel's Begriff* is an interactive installation that explores the role of touch in grasping the negative and positive aspects of a concept. The black side of the wall displays convex objects that are hidden from view. The white side displays the corresponding concave side of each object. Through the use of touch-responsive technology, the wall records and projects the nature of each stroke or prod onto the ceiling.

In previous investigations, Komel and his team laid the foundation for haptolinguistics, the study of touch as a fundamental component of language.²⁸ In the framework of structural linguistics, “phoneme” denotes a single unit of sound, while “grapheme” denotes a single unit of writing. Komel and his team coin the term “hapteme” to denote a single unit of touch within language. A straightforward example of the hapteme is a single stroke of an index finger over a bump within Braille. In our present collection on haptic scepticism, Komel makes a critical move by identifying the place of doubt within haptolinguistics. In response to his contribution, I question whether a more elementary unit of touch is not found in a touch of doubt.

Ancient scepticism shows us how any line of philosophical reflection eventually leads us to a dead end (*epochē*). And yet, the repeated failure of philosophy to hold onto any single truth, from a sceptical perspective, is what propels philosophy forward as a dynamic and ongoing process of perpetual inquiry. Hegel applies the paradox of movement generated by *impasse* not only to the work of the philosopher, but

²⁸ Mirt Komel, ed. *The Language of Touch: Philosophical Examinations in Linguistics and Haptic Studies*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019.

to *everything*, exchanging the Greek *epochē* for the German *Aufhebung* (which can be translated as “suspension” as much as “sublation”). Spirit’s activity of repetitive grasping is played out on a metaphysical stage in the *Logic*, on a historical stage in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, in which history repeatedly attempts to grasp itself by its own cracks, on a linguistic stage in the *Aesthetics*, and on a subjective stage when the substance of the subject is revealed to be negative. Being, history, language, and the subject are constituted by the same crack. All four registers are driven by what Hegel boldly identifies as the self-consuming scepticism belonging to spirit itself (*sich vollbringende Skeptizismus*).

Our philosophical examination of grasping oneself (as self) does little to defend continental philosophy and psychoanalysis against the accusation of its masturbatory character. By tracing the inheritance of ancient and modern skepticism in twentieth-century philosophy, our study probes touch as the contested sight of certainty and doubt for both epistemology and ethics. We analyse the manifestations of haptic autoeroticism within twentieth-century European thought, while also marking autoerotic doubt within this tradition as an ethical force. Jacob Levi investigates the autoeroticism of haptic scepticism by taking on the great masturbator himself (this is to say, Martin Heidegger; see Levi’s commentary on Derrida’s well-placed jab at Heidegger’s monstrous hand, “‘Es wird Leib, es empfindet’: Auto-Affection, Doubt, and the Philosopher’s Hands,” pp. 30–57). Levi claims that the motif of the philosopher’s hand within the history of Western philosophy is at the centre of sceptical and anti-sceptical debates, embodied by Ludwig Wittgenstein’s sceptical refutation of G.E. Moore’s proof of the external world based on the self-evidence of his (other) hand. Levi argues that the reduction of the hands to their epistemic value—with regard to both doubt and certainty—evades the ethical dimensions of coming into touch with another (an argument also made by Pfaller and Kolenc).

We have discussed different kinds of relationships to touch: the compulsive toucher who wants to grasp a bit of everything from all sides, the one who overtouches without lifting a finger, the defiant toucher, and the one who touches by the book. We explored how each example of touch can produce a disruption that shakes dogmas ranging from our own expectations to the deep-seated values of society. By highlighting the relationship between touch and doubt, haptic scepticism limits the reach of the epistemologist who attempts to master the world through an all-knowing conceptual/haptic grasp. In this spirit, the phenomenological tradition initially brackets the epistemological debate about what we can prove with our hands, to offer a description of the existential experience of touching. However, as Levi notes, haptic scepticism within the phenomenological tradition may hide its own dogmatic assumptions. Even while abandoning the epistemological project of defining the world through touch, the phenomenological method nevertheless privileges a handy approach to encountering other beings. Take, for instance, Heidegger’s vocabulary to describe the world as “presence-at-hand” (*vor-handenheit*) and “readiness-to-hand” (*zu-handenheit*). Derrida identifies this philosophical treatment of “the hand” as anthropocentric in his critique of Heidegger’s claim that the ape does

not have hands.²⁹ Levi writes, “[D]oubting the hands of others enables a form of haptic scepticism where the hands become a proxy for the value of other beings. [...] According to this view, the hand is more than a prehensile appendage: it is the embodied form of thinking, reasoning, and ultimately writing” (p. 39). The motif of the philosopher’s hand reflects the ancient alliance between touch and language in Western philosophy. Those who “have hands” also “have language,” and thus claim the power to dictate what violence can be done to those deemed without the power of human touch and language.

Those who “have hands” have the power to draw a line between those they identify as having a rich relationship to existence and those who lack the ability to grapple with their own being. As opposed to beasts, according to this view, only those who “have hands” are able to doubt, to question, to struggle with their existence: the sceptical activity which Heidegger identifies as the metaphysical vocation of the German people in his 1935 lectures *Introduction to Metaphysics*.³⁰ Levi makes a powerful connection between Heidegger’s haptic scepticism/dogmatism and his politics. When Karl Jaspers questions, “How can such an uneducated (*ungebildet*) man like Hitler govern Germany?”, Heidegger replies, “It is not a question of education, just look at his marvellous hands!”. In Levi’s analysis, “The exclusionary logic governing Heidegger’s monstrous hand, its unarticulated mode of fleshiness, and its apparent disinterest in the desiring touch or caress are emblematic of the solipsistic thinking that failed to grapple with the monstrosity of Nazism” (p. 42). The autoerotic thinking of dogmatic haptic scepticism, which cannot see past its own hand, justifies very real violence.

Levi traces the consequences of haptic scepticism/dogmatism from its epistemological determinations through its political symptoms. However, he also identifies a deeper sense of haptic scepticism that runs parallel to and disrupts the strand of dogmatic haptic scepticism at the service of anti-Semitism and fascism. Although we have connected fascist thinking with the masturbatory touch, the subversive counter position is also born from a philosophical discourse about the haptic marvels of touching oneself. Husserl notes the unique quality of auto-affective touch, in which one experiences the double sensation of touching the “other” and of being

²⁹ Jacques Derrida, “Geschlecht II: Heidegger’s Hand,” trans. John P. Leavey Jr., in *Deconstruction and Philosophy: The Texts of Jacques Derrida*, ed. John Sallis, paperback ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 174.

³⁰ Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014). In his lectures on metaphysics, Heidegger identifies the German people as having a metaphysical vocation (42–43), going on to characterise metaphysics as the process of perpetually questioning Being to the end of disrupting our unreflective modes of production. However, as we explore in this volume, those who are marked with the privileged “ability to question” are given the power to dominate. Scepticism presented as a privileged standpoint has a dogmatic underbelly. For an insightful commentary on the double nature of questioning in these lectures, see Jan Voelker, “Heidegger’s Movies: National Socialism and the End of Philosophy,” *Problemi International* 1, no. 1 (2017): 181–215.

touched by “another” in the same stroke.³¹ He frames self-touch as the strongest instance of the grasp-ability of paradox. When an individual touches herself, she occupies the position of both subject and object, without collapsing the distinction between the two. To put it differently, she grasps herself by the slit between her subjective and objective sides.

In Husserl’s analysis, auto-affective touch contains a hetero-affective sensation, since when I touch myself, I grasp an alterity that is inherent to the self. Merleau-Ponty reads the reverse formulation in Husserl.³² When I touch the flesh of another, I empathetically sense what my touch must feel like against the other’s skin. Flesh senses flesh. Hetero-affective (we might add heteroerotic to denote both sensation and desire) touch contains an auto-affective/erotic sensation. However, Levi draws on both Derrida and Levinas to recognise the danger of imagining another’s body as an extension of one’s own flesh. The imagination slips back into an epistemological framework when an individual bases her touch on the imagined knowledge of the other’s sensation and desire. Levinas turns to the model of the caress as a kind of touch that is guided by perpetual questioning rather than certainty. As Levi explains,

Whereas touch seeks to master knowledge in the hand’s grasp, the caress is an encounter with the unknown *otherness* of the other’s touch. [...] The caress is a touch beyond touch: it reveals the transcendence that arises out of the immanence of tactile impressions. It is precisely this unknown incalculable quality of the other’s touch that is responsible for its allure, as the locus of desire or ethics. The caress is marked by its incalculability. (p. 51)

Haptic scepticism within late twentieth-century philosophy, represented by Levinas’s caress, places sensation and hesitation at the heart of ethics by frustrating the dominance of epistemology over questions of touch (and what is more, the question belonging to touch). The fascist’s touch is not sensual enough. We stumble across a surprising claim that erotic curiosity and sensuality towards the unknown lies at the heart of ethics. *The experience of caressing in the dark is not only a model for an ethics of touching, but for all ethics.*

Adi Louriya Hayon explores the impact of haptic scepticism within the American art world (“The Weak Relations of Touch and Sight through the Passage of Lapsed Time,” pp. 178–206), focusing on artistic practices through which the concept of touch seeks to grasp itself by its material body. She gives particular attention to Robert Morris’s performative series *Blind Time Drawings*. Morris made hundreds of drawings by following a disciplined procedure in which he blindfolded himself and set a timer to a predetermined increment. He would dip his fingers in black ink and press

³¹ Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy. Second Book: Studies in the Phenomenology of Constitution*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz and André Schuwer (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1989), §36, 144–45.

³² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, trans. Richard C. McCleary (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 168.

them against the canvas following a set of instructions (a score), which he composed ahead of time. In opposition to the heavy hand of the philosopher that we find in the work of Heidegger, Louria Hayon offers a meditation on the delicate fingertips of the artist's blind touch:

The artist activates the body in withdrawal. He suggests a base materialism that adheres to nothing but the proximities of skins and surfaces and blindly touching their exposed externality. His finger movements, their weight, pressure, velocity, and cadence, perpetually desire an image that can only be achieved in discreteness, in delay, posed in externality. This excessive movement requires some consideration. (p. 185)

By blindfolding himself, Morris distances himself from what we earlier discussed as the excess of sight, which projects an imagined unity. Morris frustrates the epistemological dominance of sight and foresight over a traditionally visual medium and instead searches for something unknown under his fingertips. Playing the canvas like a piano, Morris muddies the surface with his fingerprints, the deepest representation of an individual's singularity. And yet, as Louria Hayon describes it, the artist's touch is a process of allowing himself to be undone:

With his eyes closed, Morris begins his withdrawal. The first withdrawal is from mimesis; from forms that were not projected in advance. The second withdrawal is from self-imitation. The score and materials serve to set the conditions for the activity. A model is suspended in thought at the time of performing the act of drawing, in the moment of its coming-into-form. (p. 182)

Louria Hayon highlights the haptic paradox of the artist's sceptical practice. By obscuring sight, Morris sets himself up for failure. In the suspension of his score—the vision he had planned in advance—the artist's touch is guided by two contrary impulses found in the excess of touch: he backs away, holding open a space for something unforeseen to take place, even as he presses the weight of his fingers against the canvas. Louria Hayon questions what comes into presence as touching creates a disjunction between two kinds of time that belong to touch: the calculated minutes of the timer and the organic haptic intervals that emerge through the rhythm of touching. We have claimed that touch gives us more than we could have imagined. Louria Hayon concludes our volume by answering that the unforeseen presence that takes form in the temporal friction of touching is the mutually transformative experience of *aporia*.

Restoring Doubt within an Ethics of Touching: Haptic Scepticism for Today's World

I opened this introduction with a discussion of two kinds of scepticism. The first model is represented by the figure who immediately takes a step back, who resists the temptation of giving herself over fully to another, who holds the object in ques-

tion at an arm's length. The second model is represented by the figure who oversteps, who crosses the line, who offends the law, who takes her line of questioning too far, who insists on getting her hands dirty. What I initially described as two models of the sceptic, I now reconsider as a single moment of suspension in haptic scepticism. When scepticism becomes one-sided—embodied by only one of these two kinds—it falls back into dogmatism. In the true equipollence of sensuous desire, I am equally compelled to step forward and to step back: to leap towards another in eager desire and to pause to question my own impulse to touch. *Haptic scepticism marks this crisis of indecision between erotic sensation and hesitation as that which fuels both desire and ethics.*

This research collaboration took place against the backdrop of the social crisis of #MeToo. My own engagement with haptic scepticism offered me a lens to process this crisis, through a new ethical framework. The crisis of course is not new but has recently pushed its way to the surface of our social existence, making itself felt as a global crisis to be grappled with by all. The figure of “the second sceptic,” who hears the demand to stop as an invitation to take a step further, seems to be the obvious source of this crisis. But what is at stake when a culture instils certain populations with dogmatic certainty in their right to overstep? And what kinds of experience or action are required to shake the certainty of a touch that does not question itself?

A common response to this crisis has been to call for greater clarity by calling on language to rescue touching from ambiguity. On one side, there has been a renewed dialogue that emphasises the importance of clear consent. On the other, those who are violated by touch are cast under suspicion under this same logic: Did they make their desire or lack of desire known beyond a shadow of a doubt? Our accounts of our own desire and body must count, both in private relations and before the law. And yet, even when desire is able to be clearly articulated and respected, does perpetual questioning continue to serve a role in touching? Should doubt persist even in the presence of consent? In what way can we see autoerotic doubt as fuelling, rather than inhibiting, relationships of touch?

When individuals adopt the one-sided role of “the sceptic” who crosses boundaries set by another, those who are affected by this action are forced into the one-sided role of “the sceptic” who must hold others (strangers, friends, colleagues) at an arm's length. The suggestion of the other's touch must be cast into suspicion even before there is a gesture towards touching. From the perspective of the self-certain toucher, the other who immediately takes a step back without consideration of his advances seems to oppose touch, sensuality, and sex. What he fails to see is that the activity of pushing the other away is a last attempt to hold open a space for her own desire and sensuality that has been denied to her. Sexual harassment and assault are not only acts against another's body or another's ability to feel at ease in her embodiment. The dogmatic touch destroys the space of another's autoerotic questioning. An individual is forced to preserve the integrity of her desire by denying herself touch, fall-

ing out of touch with the world itself (since her experience shows her that touching tends to be on another's terms). Desire can only preserve itself in a negative form.

A culture of sexual harassment and assault deprives all of us of genuine moments of sceptical crisis in touch relations. On one hand, those who unreflectively act on their impulse will not experience the excess of touch, which is found in what cannot be known or mastered in the touch and desire of another. This one-sided touch only serves to reinforce their assumptions about what they hold to be true. On the other hand, those who are violated are denied their own moment of autoerotic questioning, the experience of oscillating between considerations of how they desire to be in touch with others and the world. Pfaller suggests that we live in "a postmodern culture that is obsessed with harassment of all kinds" and that haptic scepticism can teach us that "not every touch must necessarily be experienced as a nuisance" (pp. 67–68). I see my generation's obsession with identifying harassment of all kinds as such as being motivated by a determination to recover rich relationships of transformative touch. This goal can only be achieved through the transformation of a world-historical stage that is constituted by asymmetrical power relations that alienate us from sensuous relations with our selves, others, and our environment. The global protest against harassment and assault of all kinds is the uprising of a revolutionary *eros* that crushes the self-certain touch of the dogmatist in the name of an ethics that acts for the sake of sensuality. Haptic scepticism as a philosophical and political movement exposes the dogmatist's self-certain touch, out of a desire for touch relationships that are capable of achieving mind-blowing haptic marvels.

The authors in this volume do not always speak in one voice, but we come together on critical points that are found in the relationship between sensation and hesitation. Haptic scepticism frames ethics as the ongoing activity of developing a heightened sensitivity to sensation and desire. This practice simultaneously develops a heightened sensation of the unknown. The unknown side of the needs and desires of both oneself and other makes touching risky and thrilling. Becoming responsive and responsible to the sensation of the unknown is where epistemology ends and the real work and pleasure of ethical relationships begin. The act of overpowering another is often attributed to an excess of desire. However, we recover erotic desire as an ethical force that is fuelled by autoerotic doubt and that holds open a space for the other's own sceptical transformation. Haptic scepticism is the practice of moving with and for the sake of another in the form of a touch that perpetually questions.

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