
Merleau-Ponty and the Generation of Animals

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In recent years, there has been a surge of interest among continental philosophers in questions concerning animals.¹ Breaking with “the thick silence that has too often surrounded the animal question in continental philosophy” (Atterton and Calarco, xxv), the principal—but by no means exclusive—aim guiding this new interest is to overcome the paradigm of Cartesian ontological dualism that predominates in modern consciousness, especially in modern science, and to do so in the service of a radically biocentric ethics. Roughly put, the general idea is threefold: 1. to overcome the alienating deracination of human subjectivity from the natural world that follows from the reduction of the latter’s materiality to inert, meaningless, atomistic ‘matter’; 2. to demonstrate, in the words of Warwick Fox, “that we can make no firm ontological divide in the field of existence,” that is, that “there is no bifurcation in reality between the human and the non-human realms” (196); and 3. to establish this in a way that effects a normative shift from the hegemony of human speciesism to the recognition of an interspecific egalitarianism.

Although lagging somewhat behind the work of moral philosophers in the analytic tradition in their explicit concern for this sort of normativity,² continental thinkers currently addressing the ‘animal question’ in this way can be seen as engaged in the deeper, more *exploratory* project of rethinking, in as consistent and defensible a manner as possible, the operative ontological categories of ‘human’ and ‘animal.’ The basic aim is to secure the philosophical underpinnings of *any*

viable scheme of ‘interspecific justice’ (cf. VanDeVeer), by narrowing the gap between the sciences and the ethics of non-human life—that is, between the biological and ecological *is* and the interspecific *ought*.

How does Merleau-Ponty stand with respect to this endeavour? Anyone familiar with his work knows that very little of it directly concerns animals. But based on the fundamental importance that it ascribes to corporeality and intercorporeality, and in particular the way in which it develops this into an ontology of “flesh” [*la chair*], it is entirely reasonable to suspect that Merleau-Ponty’s work has a potentially significant contribution to make. And there is surely some truth to this. It must be borne in mind, however, that Merleau-Ponty’s overriding concern in all this was with *human* corporeality—that is, corporeality’s relation with consciousness—and hence with working out an approach to nature that would be consistent with the critique of naturalism that belongs essentially and indissociably to phenomenology. No less than to Husserl’s, then, this anti-naturalism positions Merleau-Ponty’s project in a distinctly and indelibly *humanistic* framework. The question to consider, then, is whether this can offer an ‘enlarged’ or ‘decentred’ humanism of a sort that would not be inconsistent with biocentric ethical concerns, even if it would found these rather differently—and perhaps in some ways even more defensibly.

The idea to be developed in this paper is basically this: as a radical reinterpretation of Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology, the contribution that Merleau-Ponty’s work can make to the ‘animal question’ is primarily *methodological*, which is to say that it is more epistemological than ontological. Following Merleau-Ponty, it is not a matter of rethinking *what is* in order to then rethink what *ought to be*. Rather, his phenomenological approach shows that our basic concern is not properly with ontology *per se*, but rather with ‘ontological faith,’ where this is understood as the primordial, pre-cognitive belief—what Husserl called “*Urdoxa*”—in the worldliness

of our experience—that is, that your experience and mine are rooted in a singular and universal common ground. For since this common ground can never be given as such in experience, it is along the lines of ontological faith alone that phenomenology can overcome the egological horizons that otherwise threaten to imprison it in a state of “transcendental solipsism” (see Husserl, *Logic* §107.c). In other words, these horizons cannot be *directly* overcome on the basis of theoretical cognition alone. What Merleau-Ponty called the “basic fact of metaphysics” [*le fait métaphysique fondamental*] is as inescapable as it is blunt, *viz.*, “I am sure that there is being—on the condition that I do not seek another sort of being than being-for-me” (*Sense* 93). Nothing about intercorporeality alters this fact. As Franck, for example, expressed it, even “the relationship with another flesh [*chair*] is a component of the meaning of *my own*” (*Chair et corps* 148, quoted in San Martín and Pintos Peñaranda 359, italics added). It is easy to lose sight of this condition, and to misrepresent assertions concerning our relations with animals—for example, that in addition to animalian specificity, “there must also be some somatic element that is *interspecifically shared*” (San Martín and Pintos Peñaranda 361)—as positive ontological claims. On the contrary, my claim is that, at least as far as Merleau-Ponty is concerned, such assertions can only have a critical epistemological import, for they are *transcendental inferences from ontological faith*. They are thus ultimately statements of *practical* reason grounded—if anywhere—in the human desire for a singular and universal world.

Since, for Merleau-Ponty, such a world would be *understood* in intercorporeal terms, this approach is not necessarily inconsistent with the ethical concern that stands behind current efforts to formulate new ontological insights into animal life. And in any case, it is humans who are actually called upon to achieve new forms of ethical interspecific coexistence. So what fundamentally distinguishes this Merleau-Pontian approach is that by construing this coexistence in

light of the ‘basic fact of metaphysics,’ it subordinates the traditional understanding of ontology as pertaining to some sort of brute facticity or ‘is-ness’ to the *urdoxic* commitment *that there be* a singular world. Properly understood, then, the deeper issue concerning animals that continental philosophers are relatively well-positioned to address is not the ontological basis of interspecific justice, but rather the normative status of the primordial ‘faith’ that renders the ontology of interspecificity itself phenomenologically possible in the first place.

The following remarks develop this idea mainly in terms of Merleau-Ponty’s notion of ‘interanimality.’ I will first provide a preliminary clarification of the general methodological issues that arise for phenomenology with regard to nature (§ I) and set the stage for considering Merleau-Ponty’s notion of interanimality (§ II). Then, in looking at the development of Merleau-Ponty’s work in the next several sections (§ III-V), I show that his original and abiding interest in animality—as worked out in *The Structure of Behaviour*, which I thus look at closely (§ III)—imposed the methodological task upon which his embrace of phenomenology was effectively premised. Merleau-Ponty did not fulfill this task in *Phenomenology of Perception* (§ IV), but only did so later when he took non-human nature seriously as a possible phenomenological theme in the mid-1950s (§ V). It is here that the idea of interanimality emerges, and what is crucial is that the manner in which Merleau-Ponty argues for it is transcendental, such that it is not—as it could certainly *appear* to be—some matter of ontological fact upon which, once disclosed, we might base biocentric ethical conclusions. Rather, it is itself already a normative projection, a heuristic fiction based on ontological faith that serves to disclose—or, more accurately, to *generate*—phenomena of interspecificity. That this is the case is borne out by Merleau-Ponty’s own recognition of the affinities between our experience of animals and mythic thought (§ VI). By way of conclusion, I relate Merleau-Ponty’s position back to the larger methodologi-

cal issues with which the paper begins, claiming that it offers a non-anthropocentric humanism which, despite exhibiting only indirect concern for animals as such, is not at all hostile to biocentric sensibilities. For in foregrounding, ahead of the theoretical task of discovery, the practical task of *realizing* interspecific being as a dimension of a *singular* world, this approach can indeed offer a solid foundation for the aspiration toward there being a *more ethical* world for all species (§ VII).

I. Toward Ecophenomenology

Terminological differences notwithstanding, the general sense and profundity of recent continental philosophical interest in animals are strongly congruent with the ethos of “deep ecology” as a kind of ‘ecophilosophy’ (cf. Naess; Drengson). As Devall and Sessions put it, “[g]oing beyond a narrowly materialist scientific understanding of reality ... to the level of self and Earth wisdom,” “[t]he essence of deep ecology is to keep asking more searching questions about human life, society, and Nature as in the Western philosophical tradition of Socrates” (65-66). While it initially may seem more than a little strange to trace radical ecological thinking back to Socrates, and perhaps no less strange to align him more closely with the continental than with the analytical sub-tradition, at issue in Devall and Sessions’ claim is a certain sense of *wonder*, as in the Socratic claim that “wonder [*thaumazein*] is the feeling of a philosopher, and philosophy begins in wonder” (*Theaetetus* 155d. Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, A2 982b 12ff). The point is that what fundamentally links certain continental approaches with deep ecology is a shared sense of searching—and even potentially subversive—wonder *vis-à-vis* “the meaning and truth of our reality” (Devall and Sessions 8; see also Zimmerman, “What Can”; Vogel; cf. Michelfelder).

It is perhaps little wonder, then, (if I may put it that way), that within the recent continental interest in animals we find a particular surge of interest among phenomenologists.³ For since Husserl, phenomenology has understood itself as rooted in that ancient sense of wonder.⁴ As Fink put it in his important summary expositions of phenomenology, “the origin of philosophical problems is *wonder*” [*Verwunderung*] (“Das Problem” 182; cf. “Was will” 168).⁵ To be sure, phenomenology does not have a unique claim to this passion. But it *is* unique in its attempt to inculcate it methodologically. Phenomenological inquiry is inaugurated through the phenomenological reduction which, through the ‘suspension’ of the natural attitude, brings about “the awakening of an immeasurable wonder” at the state of affairs confronting philosophy at its beginning (Fink, “Die phänomenologische Philosophie” 115-116).⁶ This wonder involves the loss of naïve obviousness, the disconcerting astonishment of which “displaces one from the *captivation* in everyday, publicly pre-given, traditional and worn-out familiarity.” It “drives one from an always already authorized and expressly laid-out interpretation of the sense of the world,” with the result that the phenomenologist “once again opens herself primordially to the world, finding herself in the dawn of a new day of the world in which she, and everything that is, begins to appear in a new light” (“Das Problem” 183).

While no precise theoretical consensus regarding the phenomenological reduction has yet been achieved,⁷ the search continues because its formal essentialness to any *bona fide* phenomenology is irrefragable. As Fink put it: “There is no phenomenology that does not pass through the ‘reduction.’ Anything calling itself ‘phenomenology’ while renouncing the reduction would in principle be a mundane philosophy, which is to say, a ‘*dogmatic*’ one (in the phenomenological sense)” (“Die phänomenologische Philosophie” 105, n1). It is precisely in virtue of this uncompromising ‘bracketing out’ of quotidian and scientific presuppositions, and its consequent “will-

ingness to follow the weaving path of an inquiry as it ventures into the unfamiliar,” that phenomenology has been deemed “indispensable” to the development of a robust and viable ecophilosophy.⁸ For lest efforts to address environmental issues inadvertently entangle us ever more deeply in the fundamental problems, what is needed is “more thinking, deeper questioning, fewer ready-made maps and more explorative wandering and wondering” (Toadvine, “Ecophilosophy” 73; see also Zimmermann, “Deep Ecology”).

But surely what is also needed is some measure of reassurance that the phenomenological wonder to which the reduction gives rise will not wander aimlessly, that the *terra incognita* to which phenomenological questioning would lead is indeed where ecophilosophy should be going. Although its style of inquiry may be suitable in principle, why place hope in a programme that lacks a definite methodology? How can we parry the worry that the recent phenomenological interest in animals might be due merely to the academic voguishness of the theme, rather than anything intrinsic to the sense of phenomenological wonder?

We can address this by considering that, in a complementary way to its ‘indispensability’ to ecophilosophy, phenomenology’s methodological destiny, so to speak, itself lies in ecology. This is because the rigorous pursuit of ‘the *logos* of the phenomena’ cannot consistently stop short of an interrogation of the *logos* of nature, where ‘nature’ is understood as the home or dwelling—the *oikos*—of the ordinarily experienced horizons of the world, i.e., the world of the natural attitude. For only in this way can the cognitive achievements of phenomenology, which would otherwise remain wholly egological, be properly subjected to what Husserl called ‘transcendental self-critique.’⁹ To carry out this essential dimension of its transcendental project, without which the deployment of the reduction would remain ‘transcendentally naïve,’ phenomenology cannot restrict itself to ‘regressive’ questioning (*Rückfragen*), but rather must develop what we could

call a ‘progressive’ style of interrogation that serves to situate critically its *egological* analyses in the *ecological* dimension.¹⁰ The idea here is that the contribution phenomenology can make to ecology in terms of primordial experiential access to nature would at the same time be a development through which phenomenology itself could uniquely realize a solid methodological grounding, that is, a reflexive justification of the reduction—a ‘phenomenology of phenomenology.’¹¹ The absence of a more definite account of the reduction is thus not necessarily a problem for ecophilosophy because this absence simply expresses phenomenology’s *not yet* having been developed ecologically, a development that is requisite for its own methodological fulfillment (cf. Toadvine, “Naturalizing Phenomenology”).

I will return to the idea of a progressive phenomenology below. For the time being, suffice it to say that because it aims to rethink ‘nature’—and thus also *naturalism*, the traditional nemesis of phenomenology—in holistic and non-reductive terms, the mutually beneficial conjunction of ecology and phenomenology that has been adumbrated here, and which has been termed ‘*ecophenomenology*’ (see Toadvine, “Ecophilosophy”; Brown and Toadvine; Wood), offers considerable promise for approaching non-human life in a way that can successfully avoid the pitfalls of traditional metaphysics, and possibly help counteract the unjust regimes of domination and cruelty to which they are connected.

II. Merleau-Ponty: Interanimality

The path of thought that brought us from continental concerns with the question of animals through ecophilosophy to ecophenomenology now brings us to Merleau-Ponty. The ecological consequences of Merleau-Ponty’s work have been variously examined and developed in recent literature (see Abram; Langer),¹² and it would be safe to say that, at least among those concerned,

a general consensus obtains according to which Merleau-Ponty may be located in the realm of ecophenomenology. “Indeed,” as the editors of a recent anthology assert, “apart from the process metaphysics of Alfred North Whitehead, it is difficult to imagine another philosophy that so completely supports environmental well-being and prepares for a coherent philosophical ecology” (Cataldi and Hamrick 5). This would be primarily in virtue of the priority Merleau-Ponty assigns to embodiment, and his having formulated, or at least having begun to formulate, an alternative to ontological dualism that integrates human existence into the chiasmatic *Ineinander* that is ‘the flesh of the world’ (see Dillon).

With respect to the animal question, this perspective expresses itself in terms of what Merleau-Ponty termed ‘*interanimality*.’ In a very late ‘working note’ (dated March 1961, the last one published in *The Visible and the Invisible*), Merleau-Ponty wrote that the second part of the projected book would consist in “a description of the man-animality intertwining” (274; cf. 172). In his pursuit of a more profound comprehension of human embodiment and its relation to nature, Merleau-Ponty was developing a view that revised the traditional hierarchical distinctions between human and non-human life and redrew them laterally as so many ways of being bodily within the common element of ‘flesh.’ Recognizing that non-human animals are “variants” of the same sensible-sensing corporeality as humans means that they must be considered as open to a general sort of *Einfühlung*. If this is the case, he claimed, then “what exists are not separate animals, but *an interanimality*” (*Nature* 248, italics added). Here in this non-hierarchical ‘interanimal flesh,’ it is “humanity that grounds the animal as animal, and animality that grounds man as man” (*Nature* 277n). Of course, the relation between animality and humanity is not symmetrical. But it is a “*lateral union*” (*Nature* 339, italics added). That is, “the transcendence of one by the other is ... lateral rather than frontal, and one meets all sorts of anticipations and reminiscences”

(“Themes” 165). In the human-animal relation there is, in other words, “an overcoming [*dépassement*] that does not abolish kinship” (*Nature* 335).

These are certainly attractive ideas from the biocentric point of view. They are, however, transcendental claims that lack any *direct* ontological import. To construe them otherwise is to obscure the methodological question as to whether—and if so, *how*—they have managed to get beyond an egological framework.

Two specific points require comment here: first, as mentioned above, over the course of his career Merleau-Ponty did not actually write very much about animals. While the theme does often crop up in his work, his only sustained discussions of it are to be found in a) *The Structure of Behaviour* from 1938, and b) his three courses on nature given at the Collège de France between 1956 and 1960, in particular in the year 1957-1958. Here, however, we should note Abram’s claim, written before any substantial material from the nature courses was even available, that this absence is “not crucial,” since “a new recognition of other [i.e., non-human] animals follows directly from” Merleau-Ponty’s work (“Merleau-Ponty” 92).

While certainly not without some textual support, this claim is far from obvious (or even clear). An important reason for this—and this is the second point—is that although his reviews of scientific research dealt with a veritable menagerie of non-human creatures, strictly speaking Merleau-Ponty was much more interested in ‘animality’ than in animals *per se*. The use of this generic concept was, of course, roundly criticized by Derrida as “perhaps one of the greatest and most symptomatic idiocies of those who call themselves human” (409). In the case of Merleau-Ponty, this concept was used because he was indeed primarily interested in *human* animality, and this quite simply because he was primarily interested in *humanity*, in particular in its transcendental origins. Although his notion of interanimality is meant to have a general application to the

relations between *any* species, Merleau-Ponty was overwhelmingly interested in the participation therein of humanity. Perhaps it is also idiotic for those who call themselves transcendental philosophers to speak of a generic ‘humanity.’ Be that as it may, no sound interpretation of Merleau-Ponty’s work will ever show that he lost his commitment to humanist universalism, or that his interest in ‘transcendental life’ yielded to a different concern for non-human alterity. Even Abram admits that Merleau-Ponty was a “recalcitrant” humanist. But again, he claims that this does not set up an insuperable barrier within Merleau-Ponty’s thought to an ecophenomenological contribution (“Merleau-Ponty” 93). In particular, he claims that Merleau-Ponty’s humanism is not necessarily anthropocentric, for what he was engaged in was precisely “the slow and cautious *overcoming*” of anthropocentrism (94, italics added).

Now *this* claim is by far a surer guide to Merleau-Ponty’s thought than the claim that it leads “directly” to a “new recognition of other animals.” And linking this back to the claims about interanimality, we can see that this overcoming of anthropocentrism needs to be approached in *methodological* rather than substantive terms: specifically, it reflects the methodological effort to surpass egology that belongs to Merleau-Ponty’s effort to work out a coherent reinterpretation of transcendental phenomenology (along the lines sketched out in § D). Thus, in keeping with the underlying sense of the ecophenomenological project and the role of phenomenology within it, we need to ask what methodological clarifications and illuminations, if any, can be brought to bear upon the development of ecophilosophy—and the animal question in particular—from a Merleau-Pontian standpoint.

Given the methodological significance of ecophenomenology, this question is tantamount to asking what Merleau-Ponty’s work can contribute to the future of phenomenology, that is, to its having a viable future at all (cf. Bruzina, “The Future”). For the discourse of *post-*

phenomenology' is on the rise, driven primarily by concerns with heterology on both ethical (especially Levinasian) as well as on theoretical (especially cognitive-scientific) grounds. So if it is indeed the case that the future of ecophilosophy is phenomenological, then quite a bit hangs in the balance. The challenge for phenomenology is to retool itself in such a way as to optimally reconcile a theoretical comprehension of alterity with normative recognition of it. The animal question is a key focus in this task, for it is exemplary of the issue of alterity in both its ethical and theoretical facets. The challenge here is to formulate an approach to animal life that is not naturalistic (at least not in the traditional way), but which can account for the relevant 'natural' phenomena while still respecting basic intuitions concerning interspecific justice. An approach, in other words, that can articulate a normative vision of nature—or, equivalently, envision its normative articulations—while remaining true to the critical spirit of phenomenology.

By considering the role of animality and interanimality in his attempt to work out the methodological aporias of transcendental phenomenology, we shall see that, at least in outline, Merleau-Ponty offers a viable response to this challenge. But it *is* one that takes humanistic form, albeit non-anthropocentrically. To bring this into view, it is necessary to trace out the development of this position beginning with Merleau-Ponty's original engagement with the animal question, the main operative notion of which—to wit, the idea of "*organism*"—provides the chief clue to Merleau-Ponty's later thought.

III. Vital Form and the Truth of Naturalism

Merleau-Ponty first dealt with animality in *The Structure of Behaviour*, the stated aim of which was "to understand the relations of consciousness and nature: organic, psychological or

even social” (3). Although often given short shrift in the literature on Merleau-Ponty, this text sets out quite clearly the basic problems of Merleau-Ponty’s later work.

What guided Merleau-Ponty in pursuing this aim—and, indeed, what remained the basic abiding quest of his entire *œuvre*—was the wish to reconcile the two broad, ‘classical’ approaches to this problem, *viz.*, those of realism and idealism.¹³ As he later put it, “one treats man as the result of the physical, physiological, and sociological influences which shape him from the outside and make him one thing among many; the other consists of recognizing an acosmic freedom in him, insofar as he is spirit and represents to himself the very causes which supposedly act upon him.” On the one hand, that is, “man is a part of the world; on the other, he is the constituting consciousness of the world” (*Sense* 71-72). In Merleau-Ponty’s view, both of these views do have their respective (one-sided) truths, and the basic problem is to reconcile reflective self-awareness, *i.e.*, “the primary truth of the *cogito*” (“*Titres et travaux*” 11-12), with the undeniable results gained by the human sciences from the vantage point of the “external spectator” [*spectateur étranger*]. The idea is to disclose a deeper common ground that would reveal us, “on this side of the subject and pure object, as a kind of third dimension”—a dimension he later approached in terms of ‘flesh’—“in which our activity and our passivity, our autonomy and our dependence, would cease to be contradictory” (“*Titres et travaux*” 13).

In *The Structure of Behaviour*, Merleau-Ponty adopts the standpoint of the ‘external spectator’ with regard to the question of “the relations of consciousness and nature,” his strategy being to demonstrate that the leading results of contemporary psychology and physiology were undermining the implicit ontology of scientific thought—the dualistic ontology of objective exteriority that is expressed in the clarification that Merleau-Ponty immediately added to the statement of the book’s aim: “[b]y nature we understand here a multiplicity of events external to each other

and bound together by relations of causality” (*Structure* 3). By exploring scientific work based on the concept of *behaviour*, a concept he took in its “biological meaning” to be “neutral with respect to the classical distinctions between the ‘mental’ and the ‘physiological’” (4; cf. 21), Merleau-Ponty sought to deny that positive science “reduces man to the condition of an object” (“Titres et travaux” 13), and thus to redefine the ‘mental’ and the ‘physiological’ in the light of these results (*Structure* 4).

The details of Merleau-Ponty’s analyses, which were strongly influenced by the leading figures of Gestalt psychology (e.g., Wertheimer, Koffka, Köhler), as well as—in fact, much more so—by the existential neurology of Kurt Goldstein, cannot be rehearsed here. The key ideas for the present discussion can be approached in terms of the following seven points:

1. Behaviour cannot be understood in causal or atomistic terms (e.g., reflexology), for it cannot be reduced to a sum of real parts. Rather, it has an intentional unity that is tied to the intrinsic (*a priori*) functional norms of the organism, which in turn exist in relations of “circular causality” with the organism’s specific milieu (Umwelt). The understanding of behaviour thus necessitates a holistic, dialectical, and structural concept of form (Gestalt).

2. Merleau-Ponty distinguished a three-level qualitative hierarchy of behavioural forms in accordance with the degree of the intentional openness of the structure, which is to say, the nature of the “signs” through which the organism relates to its Umwelt as a field of possibilities: i) “syncretic” forms involve no signs at all, but are firmly embedded instinctively in the organism’s Umwelt; ii) “detachable” [*amovible*] forms involve “signals,” signs that carry meanings which, while not closed, are still limited in range to organic functional value; and iii) “symbolic” behavioural forms involve “symbols” that can convey abstract expressive meaning independently of any biological significance.

3. This hierarchy of behavioural forms shows qualitative levels of organismic integration and individuality, and roughly maps onto the groupings ‘lower’ animals, ‘higher’ animals, and human beings. Merleau-Ponty emphasizes, however, that lower forms cannot explain higher, nor *vice versa*. While no organism lives entirely at either the syncretic or symbolic level, different species can be usefully viewed in terms of the behavioural form most typical of them. Unsurprisingly, symbolic behaviour is effectively the exclusive domain of (adult) human existence. But Merleau-Ponty did insist both on the necessary incompleteness of even human integration, and that genuine “learning” does occur in the detachable behaviour of other ‘higher’ animals (e.g., Köhler’s chimpanzees). Most importantly, though, animals, no less than humans, have a *structural* rather than a *substantial* reality, such that their lives and their interactions with their respective *Umwelten* are characterized by a meaningful, melodic, and irreducible existential “style.”

4. In pursuing a philosophical generalization of the notion of form, and thus approaching it on its own terms (rather than in terms of concrete behaviour), Merleau-Ponty analytically distinguished the elements of behaviour—matter, life, mind—and arranged them as a dialectical hierarchy of “orders of signification”: the physical order, the vital order, and the human order. Each order represents “the institution of a new dialectic,” and “[h]igher behavior retains the subordinated dialectics in the present depths of its existence, from that of the physical system and its topographical conditions to that of the organism and its ‘milieu’” (207-8). Thus, the structure of human life, rather than breaking with the vital order of animal life, dialectically sublates it. “What defines man is not the capacity to create a second nature ... beyond biological nature; it is rather the capacity of going beyond created structures in order to create others” (175). But this is anticipated in the irreducibility of animal life to mere physical existence—both human and animal alike involve “a retaking and ‘new’ structuralization” of the preceding level (184). And in

both cases, “all integration presupposing the normal functioning of subordinated formations, which always demand their own due” (210). Thus, as Merleau-Ponty put it some years later in a public talk, in ‘giving form’ to its specific Umwelt, animal life “displays very clearly the struggle involved in existing in a world into which it has been thrown, a world to which it has no key. In so doing, it reminds us, above all, of our failures and our limitations” (*Causeries* 76).

5. In this philosophy of form Merleau-Ponty went decisively beyond existing Gestalt theorists, who in his view failed to appreciate the ultimate consequences of their own findings—and thus failed to break completely with substantialism and causal thinking—inasmuch as they failed to see the intentionality of all formal structure, including physical. They thus tended to assume that the concept of structure can be accommodated within the prevailing ontology of scientific naturalism. For they believed in the reality of physical structures existing in themselves to which all else could be reduced. Rather than categorically renouncing substance in favor of a “universe of form” (*Structure* 133), “they preferred to affirm—by a pure act of faith—that the totality of phenomena belonged to the universe of physics and merely to refer to a more advanced form of physics and physiology to make us understand how, in the last analysis, the most complex forms have their foundations in the most simple” (*Sense* 85). Although it offered a veneer of theoretical coherence, this recourse to naïve realism obscured the basic “epistemological reform” (*Structure* 135) that Merleau-Ponty thought was needed.

6. Such epistemological reform was Merleau-Ponty’s principal interest, both in *The Structure of Behaviour* and afterwards. It was motivated in the first place by the unavoidable recognition that Gestalt structures do not exist in themselves, that it is incoherent to treat them otherwise than as only existing for a perceiving subject: “form is not a physical reality, but an object of

perception,” and only as such is it conceivable (143-4). In particular, there is nothing at the level of physical events that distinguishes life (vital form) from non-life. To ‘see’ life in these events,

one must trace lines of cleavage in them, choose points of view from which certain ensembles receive a common signification ... one must choose points of view from which certain sequences of events, until then submerged in a continuous becoming, are distinguished for the observer as ‘phases’ ... of organic development. One must mentally detach certain partitive phenomena from their real context and subsume them under an idea which is not contained, but expressed, in them (152).

Following Goldstein (*The Organism*), Merleau-Ponty thus sees the organism as an “ideal unity,” a “unity of *signification*,” a “phenomenon in the Kantian sense” (152, 156, 159). The idea of life is not a *Seinsgrund*, but rather an *Erkenntnisgrund* (153). The object of holistic biology can only be grasped in terms of the vital signification that it is perceived by a consciousness as expressing. Life is thus always already the consciousness of life—vital form is a phenomenal reality, *and this is a function of the point of view of the consciousness to which it is manifested* (161-2). This need not imply any sort of anthropomorphism, however, which was no doubt what worried the Gestaltists. For “[t]he notion of form does nothing other than express the descriptive properties of certain natural wholes” (51). There need not be any anthropomorphism, that is, *so long as the correct epistemological reform is made with respect to consciousness as the perceiving subject of vital structure*. For Merleau-Ponty, this reform has everything to do with establishing a new point of view that would go beyond naturalism, yet without succumbing to vitalism or falling back into the old critical tradition. This requires rethinking consciousness in a way that decenters the priority of representational and cognitive intentionalities. It must be the case, Merleau-Ponty reasoned transcendently, that “consciousness is a network of significative intentions which are sometimes clear to themselves and sometimes, on the contrary, lived rather than known.” Further, it must also be the case that at the ‘lived’ level of pre-cognitive intentionality, the distinc-

tion between empirical content and *a priori* form ceases to hold. For as regards structure, vital or otherwise, what we need to come to terms with is “the emergence of an indecomposable signification in the moment of experience itself” (170-3).

7. Merleau-Ponty described structure as “the joining [*jonction*] of an idea and an existence which are indiscernible, the contingent arrangement by which materials begin to have meaning in our presence, intelligibility in the nascent state” (206-7). In this way, structure is “the philosophical truth of naturalism and realism” (224; cf. “Themes” 148), and it would be by way of lived perceptual consciousness of organismic Gestalten that we can have non-anthropomorphic experience of non-human life. This means that *perceptual* consciousness and “*primordial* Nature” must be interrogated transcendently in order to illuminate the basic problem of the relations between consciousness and nature, spirit and animality (245, n82). It would be in this way that the epistemological reform based on recognizing the status of ‘organism’ as a regulative ideal would be achieved. The final upshot of *The Structure of Behaviour* expresses the methodological import of this task: as a consequence of the irredeemably intellectualist nature of critical philosophy that blinds it to the structural indiscernibleness of idea and existence, it is “necessary to define transcendental philosophy anew in such a way as to integrate with it the very phenomenon of the real” (224).

IV. The Methodological Impasse of Existential Phenomenology

Merleau-Ponty took up this task in *Phenomenology of Perception*. I take him at face value when he said—in what may well be one of his most underrated statements—that the aim of this work was to “*define a method* for getting closer to present and living reality” (“Primacy” 25, ital-

ics added). To be sure, this method was never laid out very clearly or explicitly. But at least some definite things may be said about it.

First of all, it was based on the body, on the perceiving body in the living present. Merleau-Ponty insisted that transcendental insight is not gained by intellectual transcendence, but “by *living* my time” [*en vivant mon temps*], “by *plunging into* [*m’enfonçant*] the present and the world” (*Phenomenology* 456, italics added). As he put it, “the solution of all problems of transcendence is to be sought in the thickness of the pre-objective present” (433). *At least insofar as they are legitimately solvable*. This qualification is crucial, for Merleau-Ponty did not hold that all such problems admit of theoretical resolution. Recall the dilemma he posed at the end of Part II: *either* second-order reflection will clarify the world completely, in which case first-order description would be superfluous, *or else* second-order reflection can at best only remove some but not all obscurities left by description (365). Granting that phenomenology must begin in the natural attitude, first-order description is *not* superfluous, and we must therefore accept a certain degree of opacity. *Merleau-Ponty thus rejected the possibility of complete theoretical transparency with respect to the methodological self-understanding of phenomenology*. The lived intentionalities that are operative in the very performance of phenomenology cannot be entirely suspended, and this is why neither a complete phenomenological reduction (xiv), nor ‘absolute knowing’—that stage at which consciousness “becomes equal to its spontaneous life and regains its self-possession” (*Sense* 64)—is a living possibility.

Second, in all of this Merleau-Ponty was responding to the suggestion that had been put forward by Eugen Fink in his *Sixth Cartesian Meditation* of a “constructive” phenomenology. The idea behind this is that in order to fully ground itself in a sound ‘phenomenology of phenomenology,’ transcendental phenomenology needs to reckon critically with the “external hori-

zons” of intuitional givenness, that is, with the forms of totality *within which* phenomena are encountered, and which, as such, are themselves *in principle* not given (e.g., birth/death, psychological development, socio-historical institutions, cultural and religious traditions, nature). Such horizons exceed the scope of both static and genetic regressive analysis. Just as static analysis of the structures of intentionality occurs as an abstraction within a given genetic horizon of egological temporalization, so too does genetic analysis of those structures occur within, while effectively abstracting from, some further horizons. Lest phenomenology resign itself to an ultimately uncritical (and anyway abstract) egology, its regressive work must be situated within some sort of ‘progressive’ framework.

Merleau-Ponty agreed with this, but the question that arises asks what sort of ‘progressive’ framework should phenomenology adopt? At issue in this question is whether the limits of phenomenological cognition can coincide with the limits of phenomenological intuition, or else whether phenomenology must attain a critical standpoint beyond intuition that would encompass it within a larger frame of philosophical experience. Although the historical consensus tends to favour the first alternative—an endorsement of Husserl’s “principle of all principles” (*Ideas I* §24)—unless it is progressive, the implied limitation is ‘transcendentally naïve.’ And this naïveté threatens phenomenology with philosophical incoherence and irrelevance.

Fink’s proposal was for phenomenology to seek recourse beyond intuition to *speculation* (*Sixth Meditation* §7; see also “Die intentionale Analyse”). To cognize the ‘external horizons’ of experience in positive theoretical terms, phenomenology must proceed through speculative “construction.” “Phenomenology without *speculative elements* is,” Fink thought, “sheer *psychology*” (quoted in Bruzina, “Construction” 54).

Ronald Bruzina has recently elaborated Fink's 'constructive' proposal, noting in particular the idea of an interplay between descriptive investigation and speculative construction. But the relation is not entirely clear. On the one hand, as a speculative guide to detailed investigation, "[c]onstruction ... requires constant methodologically critical control of its *interpretive sense*, precisely because that sense at the same time has to be drawn from the descriptive-analytic phenomenological-investigative work it guides if it is to have any relevance and value" ("Construction" 56). On the other hand, though, the speculative component of phenomenology is concerned with the "central philosophical assertions" of phenomenology (57), those that are indispensable for there to be any phenomenal grist for the descriptive-analytic mill in the first place (cf. Fink, "Die intentionale Analyse" 153-156). The question of priority between description and speculation is thus ambiguous, and this is not simply a matter of phenomenological hermeneutics. Rather, what is unclear is whether phenomenology remains a fundamentally intuitional project that appeals to speculation on a hypothetical and corroboratory basis, or else whether the intuitional aspects of phenomenology unfold entirely within certain speculative commitments.

This question need not be resolved here.¹⁴ For now, it need only be emphasized that the crucial idea in constructive phenomenology is *not* that it is a kind of 'projection.' Rather, what is key is that 'constructive' projection is tied to the aim of realizing phenomenology as an "absolute science," as the triumphant theoretical discovery and determinate expression of the truth of "transcendentally originative constituting life." Constructive phenomenology thus understands itself as "a cognitive movement of the Absolute" (*Sixth Meditation* 150; cf. 117-18) in which the reduction effects "a theoretical self-surmounting [*Selbstüberwindung*] of man" ("Die phänomenologische Philosophie 126) that makes of the phenomenologist an "impartial spectator," i.e., a "non-participating onlooker" [*unbeteiligte Zuschauer*] (*Sixth Meditation* 23).

As signalled on its very first page, *Phenomenology of Perception* offered a critical response to Fink's 'constructive' proposal. Merleau-Ponty shared with Fink the aim of providing an interpretation of phenomenology that would defend it against charges of transcendental naiveté, without surrendering Husserl's contention that phenomenology provides an "ultimate understanding of the world," that is, an understanding behind which "there is nothing more that can be sensefully inquired for, *nothing more to understand*" (*Logic* 242, italics added). But against Fink, Merleau-Ponty wanted to maintain the intuitional basis of phenomenological cognition. His own 'phenomenology of phenomenology,' comprising the third Part of *Phenomenology of Perception* (365), thus took the form of a deflationary argument to the effect that there is nothing of significance outside the human world—"nothing outside this unique fulguration of existence" (*Sense* 152)—thus obviating the need for phenomenological 'construction.' Partly echoing Husserl, he wrote: "if we rediscover time beneath the subject, and if we relate to the paradox of time those of the body, of the world, of the thing, and of the other, then we will understand that *beyond these there is nothing to understand*" (*Phenomenology* 365, italics added). In short, for Merleau-Ponty phenomenological *Rückfragen* need not leave any "uncomprehended residue" (cf. Fink, *Sixth Meditation* 23), *at least none that could be comprehended theoretically.*

Here we rejoin precisely the above remarks concerning the ultimate inscrutability of operative intentionalities. The absence from *Phenomenology of Perception* of any serious discussion of animality (non-human organismic phenomena) follows directly from this methodological restriction. Although Merleau-Ponty had *intended* to explore 'primordial nature,' two main factors conspired to limit *Phenomenology of Perception* to a strongly anthropocentric examination of perceptual consciousness alone:

First, as discussed above, there was the need to provide, *contra* Fink, a coherent reflexive interpretation of phenomenology that upholds its intuitional character.

Second, in conjunction with this, there was the largely uncritical Marxian account of history that Merleau-Ponty embraced. This account aided in turning Merleau-Ponty away from ‘primordial’ nature and animality, for according to it, in human history “man’s *natural* behaviour has become *human* ... human being has become his *natural* being, his *human nature* has become his nature” (*Sense* 129-30). Here the “motivating force of the dialectic,” the “principle of productivity and novelty,” has simply become “*human* productivity.” This view effectively toes the line of ‘Western Marxism’ as initiated by Lukács, a basic parameter of which is the denial of nature’s amenability to philosophical analysis. Although it did take a step beyond a simple genetic perspective, in combination with Merleau-Ponty’s response to Fink it set up a *methodological blindness to ‘primordial’ nature* that resulted in Merleau-Ponty’s existential phenomenology remaining for all intents and purposes within a genetic framework, i.e., an *egological* framework. To be sure, it foregrounded embodied experience, and the value of this as a sort of “naturalization of the subject” is not to be denied. Nonetheless, the work unfolds “within the horizon of bodily subjectivity” in such a way that the “naturalization of the subject” entails a “subjectivization of nature” (Bernet 76), that is, the enclosure of nature within a certain schema of human history. Little wonder, then, that there are no animals.

Although this anthropocentric solution is deeply unsatisfactory, what is salvageable is its formulation of phenomenology as a project of practical—not theoretical—reason. Merleau-Ponty’s was a “militant” perspective, one which held that truth is not so much to be discovered as to be made (*Sense* 64, 134; *Notes de cours* 80). His opposition to Fink is encapsulated in the contention (which was indeed directed at Fink) that “[t]he phenomenological world is not the

bringing to explicit expression of a pre-existing [*préalable*] being, but the laying down [*fondation*] of being. Philosophy is not the reflection of a pre-existing truth, but, like art, the realization [*réalisation*] of a truth” (*Phenomenology* xx).

This is the core of Merleau-Ponty’s abiding view of philosophy as aiming to integrate itself with “the very phenomenon of the real” (as he put it in *The Structure of Behavior*), to “realize itself by destroying itself as *separate* philosophy” (*Phenomenology* 456, italics added).¹⁵ Although in his postwar thought this orientation was vitiated by the anthropocentrism of his existential Marxism, Merleau-Ponty retained it in his later work on nature, where it will support a praxiological alternative to the phenomenological ‘construction’ of non-human life.

V. Merleau-Ponty and Nature

Given that his methodological blindness to primordial nature was tied to Marxian anthropocentrism, it is no coincidence that Merleau-Ponty’s nature courses follow on the heels of his searching critique of dialectical thinking. But we need to be clear on the fact that it was Merleau-Ponty’s (belated) recognition of the bankruptcy of *anthropocentric* dialectical thinking that finally got him to go decisively beyond egology by turning his thought back to the question of nature and raising anew the question of animality.

Still, it would be mistaken to see this as a turn away from Marxism. When Merleau-Ponty announced at the end of *The Adventures of the Dialectic* that “the Marxist critique must ... be taken up again, re-exposed completely, and generalized” (*Adventures* 231), he was in fact supplying an apt gloss on the rationale behind the thematic turn to nature. For the problem with his early uptake of Marxism was that it was based on an equivocal, “predialectical ontology” (“Themes” 159; cf. *Nature* 77-78). As the *résumé* for the first nature course indicates, this the-

matic turn was motivated by the problems of dialectical thinking, primarily Marxism—and the main problem was the “astonishing” absence from it of a philosophy of nature. “The most famous of all philosophies of history [i.e., Marxism] rests upon a concept which has never been elucidated and which may be mythical. ... In trying to elucidate this problem, we are therefore not so far from history” (“Themes” 130-132). In setting out to explore the possibility that ‘*human productivity*’ may be grounded in *nature* and ‘*natural productivity*,’ and thus directly challenging the basic parameters of the main traditions he had inherited, Merleau-Ponty was making his first serious attempt to *advance* Marxism as a philosophical project.

An earlier work to which this attempt bears some affinity, then, is Engels’ much maligned *The Dialectics of Nature* (an incomplete manuscript, written in the late-1870s, and published posthumously in 1935), a work that sought to demonstrate the existence in physical nature of Hegel’s ‘laws’ of dialectical development. Although Merleau-Ponty concurs with the general rejection of this work as an embarrassment—noting that “everyone avoids any confrontation between Engels’ conception of nature and that which we have come to know in the last fifty years” (“Themes” 132)—the philosophical lineage is significant.

An even closer connection is with Trần Đức Thảo’s *Phenomenology and Dialectical Materialism* (1951), a work which, like Engels’, is no longer often discussed (see Herrick). It is worth noting that Thảo was quite close to Merleau-Ponty in the 1940s, both philosophically—they collaborated in setting up the Husserl Archives in Paris—as well as politically—Thảo had been “the dominant figure” of anti-colonialism around *Les temps modernes* (Davies 19-20). But in a move that reflects well his ultimate disenchantment with phenomenology, Thảo returned to Vietnam in 1951 to participate in the anti-colonial struggle there against France, in particular in the devel-

opment of “new cultural discourses and practices that would help construct a postcolonial reality” (McHale 13).

The gist of Thảo’s critique of phenomenology is that it ineluctably poses questions of the real origins of consciousness that it is in principle incapable of answering within its egological horizons. Its constitutive analyses of antepredicative experience necessarily leads it into intractable contradictions that can only be resolved, according to Thảo, within the framework of dialectical materialism. “Marxism appears to us as the only conceivable solution to the problems raised by phenomenology itself” (xxi)—“dialectical materialism [is] the truth of transcendental idealism” (129, italics removed). Very much in the spirit of Engels, (and with the occasional appeal to Lysenkoism), Thảo thus supplemented genetic phenomenology with a detailed dialectical-materialist account of the emergence in nature of animal behaviour and sensory-motor development as part of accounting for the real genesis of consciousness (133-178; see also *Investigations*).

For present purposes, there are two noteworthy aspects to this critique. First, Thảo’s dissatisfaction with phenomenology is a dissatisfaction with phenomenology developed to the level of genetic analysis. Along with Merleau-Ponty, Thảo was one of the very few people who had the opportunity to read Fink’s (then-unpublished) *Sixth Cartesian Meditation*. Thus his is a critique of regressive analysis of which Merleau-Ponty could accept the negative upshot, that the limited scope of egological *Rückfragen* leaves it naïve with respect to its origins.

Second, although it was not expressly presented as a ‘constructive’ account in Fink’s sense, the move to dialectical materialism that Thảo makes beyond the framework of genetic phenomenology does share the main hallmarks of the sort of theoretical speculation that Fink recommended, in particular its adoption of a non-participating, theoretical approach, and its un-

shakeable commitment to expressing transcendental insights in determinate theoretical form. In other words, it involves precisely the same sort of ‘theoretical self-surmounting of man,’ and thus provides an instructive contrast with Merleau-Ponty’s more practical approach to nature and animality.

We can first consider Merleau-Ponty’s approach in his lectures on nature negatively, by taking up Bruzina’s argument that it is ‘constructive’ (“Construction” 60-71). His argument actually takes up a very wide purview, seeing *The Visible and the Invisible* as the “companion piece” to these lectures, such that what is effectively at issue for him is the place of the nature lectures themselves in the development of Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of ‘flesh.’ Even at this level, though, there is something peculiar about Bruzina’s discussion, inasmuch as the emphasis falls on this ontology as the speculative *outgrowth* of the extended interrogation of biology, which itself is seen as philosophically *preliminary* (“Construction” 65-66). The main thrust of ‘constructive’ speculation is thus posed backwards. For the point is supposed to be that detailed descriptive work occurs in the light of a *prior* projection. To this inversion is tied the ambiguity discussed above regarding the priority of phenomenological givenness and non-givenness, i.e., the in principle ungiveable horizons *of* phenomenological givenness. Bruzina does recognize that there are overarching, projective ideas at work in the nature lectures themselves. But he sees these as “stem[ming] from earlier phenomenological achievements” (66), a claim that tends to further equivocate on the basic sense of how constructive phenomenology is supposed to operate.

In any case, fortunately, such is not what Merleau-Ponty is doing in the nature courses. However, this is not because he does not engage in some sort of projection. As noted earlier, projection is not specific to ‘constructive’ speculation, and there are different styles of phenomenological projection, depending on whether one’s goals are theoretical or practical—

whether one's aim is to capture the truth of one's objects in conceptually determinate ways, or else whether it is to coexist with them in a state of truthful harmony, so to speak. Or again, whether truthful coexistence is seen as a matter of *knowing* or a matter of *living*. Merleau-Ponty actually engages in a far more audacious sort of projection than Bruzina acknowledges. But as he does this in a *practical* mode it eludes Bruzina's notice.

The key to this is his use of the notion of 'organism,' the status of which he suggested may be philosophy's central question (*Nature* 194). As he said in *The Structure of Behaviour*, the organism is a "unity of signification," the immanence of which must be understood *prospectively* (159-60). This Goldsteinian view still holds good for Merleau-Ponty, as it is only on the projective basis of 'organism' as an *Erkenntnisgrund* that he can see in the work of figures like Russell and Portmann, for example, that animal life manifests an "existential value," a "theme" or "style" (*Nature* 239, 246), that it harbours an "operative non-being," a negative principle, an indeterminate absence or *écart*—in sum, that "it is not a positive being but an interrogative being that defines life" (*Nature* 207-8). Performatively inconsistent with the 'constructive' project of capturing life in positive terms from a standpoint of non-participation, such findings testify to the integrated, non-separate, *participatory* style of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological interrogation of nature. It is on this basis that he approaches animality and thus develops his account of interanimality.

In *The Primacy of Movement*, Maxine Sheets-Johnstone makes much of a notion of organism as well. However, she combines this with explicit endorsements of phenomenological 'construction' in the manner of Fink (223-272; cf. 133f, 146, 150, 161, 174n3), and equally explicit criticism of the methodological confusion she finds in Merleau-Ponty (273-319). Does this jeopardize the above interpretation?

Sheets-Johnstone believes that, beyond the limited accounts of egological genesis, we *can* come to theoretical terms with our ‘animate organism’ by discovering, through ‘constructive’ means, “the kinetic/kinesthetic structures of our original humanness” (232). This background of “primal animation” is “opaque because it is made opaque, and not because there is no method by which to recover those beginnings in which we learned to move ourselves” (243, 251). Sharing some of Thảo’s excessive theoretical optimism, Sheets-Johnstone argues that the “primacy of movement” is the “epistemological corollary” of Fink’s account of constructive phenomenology (174, n3), and she fleshes this out by drawing *inter alia* on the work of infant psychologists Daniel Stern and Andrew Meltzoff.

However, in doing so it is evident that Sheets-Johnstone is always already *interpreting* movement, always already employing some notion of organismic life by which the kinetic phenomena appear *as* ‘living movement.’ If anywhere, then, *this* qualified notion must be the site of primacy. But this reaffirms the priority of a methodological notion of organism. For it is necessarily the case that living movement is encountered only within the horizons of an organismic biological totality, *even if as such this cannot in principle be intuitionally given*. As Merleau-Ponty wrote in *The Structure of Behaviour*, it is a matter of “choos[ing] points of view from which certain sequences of events, until then submerged in a continuous becoming, are distinguished for the observer as ‘phases’ ... of organic development” (152). We risk vitalism if we locate the livingness of living movement in any of its successive positions. And lest we remain within traditional naturalism, the idea of being an ostensibly impartial spectator needs to be rethought. For “[t]o go back to the concrete and living relationship of the subject with the world is to go *beyond the standpoint of the impartial spectator* and, consequently, to go back beneath the

opposition between theoretical consciousness and objective Nature” (Barbaras 537, italics added).

I would suggest that at least provisionally we regard the kind of ‘progressive’ phenomenology presented by Merleau-Ponty—which stands as an alternative to phenomenological ‘construction’—in terms of what Anthony Steinbock, drawing on Husserl, has called ‘*generative*’ phenomenology (see *Home and Beyond*). Like constructive phenomenology, generative phenomenology recognizes that phenomenological investigation, precisely in its fidelity to the phenomena, itself calls into question the intuitional basis of phenomenological cognition. But it is also recognized that the very inquiry itself is already normatively engaged with the phenomena, and that the phenomenologist ineluctably participates in their development. The phenomenologist thus does not adopt the standpoint of the impartial, non-participating onlooker. Rather, just by inquiring into its constitution, the phenomenologist recognizes that she “must take a position with respect to the way sense is constituted ... she must be engaged in how sense should, ought to or must take shape.” This is because the constitution of sense “concerns the future orientation of sense, which is to say, the *generation of new historical meaning structures*” (Steinbock, “Spirit and Generativity” 189-90, 196), the structures within and into which egological temporalization are to unfold.

In returning to the question of nature, Merleau-Ponty was exploring generative horizontality at the highest level, and was pursuing his reinterpretation of transcendental phenomenology along these lines. The notion of organism is key here, and so I would submit that for Merleau-Ponty this is best understood as a *generative* notion. Although beyond the scope of straightforward intuitional givenness, it nonetheless plays a role in terms of normatively structuring our background experience of ‘brute being’ such that phenomena of vital form are brought to ap-

pearance, or *generated*. ‘Organism’ is a heuristic projection that reflects the desire to understand certain things as meaningful totalities (Charles Wolfe). The same holds for ‘interanimality,’ and in each case this desire is rooted in an *urdoxic* ontological commitment that there be a (singular) world. With interanimality, it is a matter of resignifying the ‘naturalness’ of the natural attitude in a way that restructures the perception of our belongingness to nature by generating, among others, the phenomena of human-animal ‘kinship.’ Contrary to the theoretical proclivities of constructive phenomenology, the crucial point is that there is no *pre-existing ontological truth* behind this kinship. Rather, what is at issue is nothing more nor less than its *realization*.

VI. Merleau-Ponty and Myth

Perhaps nothing bespeaks more clearly the methodological commitment to practical over theoretical reason in Merleau-Ponty’s approach to animality than his claim that “*mythical thought* best indicates the humanity-animality relation” (*Nature* 277, italics added). In this regard, it would be instructive to recall the work of Roger Caillois. For instance, in the 1930s, Caillois wrote extensively about myths surrounding the praying mantis, noting a nearly universal human fascination with this insect (“La mante religieuse”). Affirming that humans and insects belong to the same nature (108), he attributed to the mantis a capacity to exercise direct and immediate effects on the primordial level of the human psyche. Caillois claimed that the mantis is a sort of “objective ideogram” that realizes materially in the external world some of the most powerful human affective tendencies (109). The insect incarnates what humans represent in mythic imagination. Humans are subject to the same biological laws that determine the behaviour of other species; it is just that in our case it is the imagination that is biologically conditioned (116-

18). Myth is thus not *symbolic* of biological facts, according to Caillois, but is rather a manifestation of our deeper biological connaturality. The mantis is thus like a “myth in action” (118).

In *The Structure of Behaviour*, Merleau-Ponty noted that his account of behavioural form might be helpful in accounting for phenomena such as Caillois’ mantis, clearly affirming that “there is no longer anything of the anthropomorphic about these comparisons” (229, n77). Although Caillois’ ideas on the mantis may be questionable or even potentially dangerous (see Adorno), such “caricatures,” as Merleau-Ponty called them, offer precise instantiations of the human-animal *Ineinander*. They thus exemplify the sort of interanimalian phenomena that are to be generated, which is why human-animal kinship is “strange” (*Nature* 277).

Myth, of course, always had a place in Merleau-Ponty’s thought. For example, as Bernet remarked (74), although many others have noted this as well, there is a striking resemblance between Merleau-Ponty’s account of embodied existence in the *Phenomenology of Perception* and the account of the ‘primitive’ world structured by myth given by Ernst Cassirer (Goldstein’s cousin, as it happens) in *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. Merleau-Ponty certainly did draw on that work, and this merits closer scholarly attention than it has received. Here I just want to point out how an appeal to myth fits in with Merleau-Ponty’s larger methodological concerns.

In a word, myth for Merleau-Ponty pertains to a generative specification of the *Urdoxa* of ontological faith – an heuristic fiction that it would be nowise amiss to refer to as a kind of ‘rational faith’. In opposition to constructive speculation, the point of turning to myth is to deal with the horizontal lacunae of intuitional givenness in terms of their dialectical history, and at the level of perception—it is a matter of restructuring and resignifying perception in the direction of universal orientation. Thus, while Merleau-Ponty’s early postwar work was underwritten by an existential myth of “man” as a sovereign natural purposiveness (*Sense* 186), Merleau-Ponty’s later

work is underwritten by metabiological myths of organism and interanimality. In each case, the myths are geared toward universality and its realization: at first just in the ostensible form of humanity, and then in the broader form of humanity in its kinship with animality. Even if this decentred anthropocentrism is mythic, and even if from the perspective of traditional naturalism the resulting view of nature portends a sort of “anti-Nature” (Barbaras 537), the fact is that this restructuration of our sense of our own naturalness leads to a more complete and equilibrated Gestalt than humanity considered in strict anthropocentric terms, a perceptual scheme that can support new and higher forms of human self-understanding.¹⁶

In this way, the question of nature for Merleau-Ponty is one of profound ethical import. We should be careful not to exaggerate this, in particular without clarification of the normative relation between biological and ethical Gestalten. But neither should we sell it short. This is especially true when we consider that the social context in which Merleau-Ponty’s courses on nature took place was dominated by the Algerian War of Independence. Following as it did the French defeat in Indochina, the fierce war in Algeria had a profound and far-reaching impact on French intellectual life: “the decolonisation of French Algeria triggered a fundamental re-evaluation of French (especially French intellectual) identity” because it forced an “honest coming to terms” with the fact that French culture was not universal (Le Sueur 169-170). “The emergence of liberation movements in Indochina and North Africa turned the colonial world upside down, *and revealed its myths as historical and cultural, rather than natural and eternal*” (Evans 152f, italics added). In this context, when modern self-conceptions were undergoing radical revision, and when universalism was being variously subverted and despaired, we can see Merleau-Ponty’s work on nature as conducive to new forms of human identity and self-conception rooted in specific animality and a correspondingly deeper universalism. Consider, for example, how in his

critique of anthropocentric dialectical thinking Merleau-Ponty was critical of Sartre for (among other things) his abstract application of a simplistic Manichean discourse of alterity to the concrete historical phenomena of colonialism (*Adventures* 189-195). In contrast to this, it is not difficult to see Merleau-Ponty's take on organism and animality as geared toward establishing, on a more profound corporeal basis than that offered by his earlier existential discourse of embodiment, a higher universalism that could potentially generate positive ethical duties *vis-à-vis* those living in the colonial world—thus taking a step toward the realization of an increasingly shared, singular world—where others, lacking this perspective, could only pronounce negatively in the form of “abstentions” (*Signs* 336) that reinforce the *status quo*.

At any rate, and quite independently from Merleau-Ponty's views on colonialism, it is in a similar way that the sort of generative approach outlined above can be expected to have *indirect* consequences for questions of interspecific justice. Although no precise normative consequences can be adduced, it is easy enough to see that the recognition of interanimality and in particular human-animal kinship could bring significant ethical revision in its wake. For there is an important general consequence that this work of Merleau-Ponty would have, and this has to do with the very nature of the debates in which arguments about interspecific justice occur. Rather than unfolding, as they often do, as debates over attempts to justify the inclusion of non-human life within the domain of *bona fide* ethical consideration, with the perceptual restructuring proposed by Merleau-Ponty the onus would shift, such that it becomes the *exclusion* of non-human life that requires explicit justification. As Acampora put it, it would now be “the movement toward dissociation and nonaffiliation that needs to be justified against a background of relatedness and interconnectivity” (5), i.e., a background of human-animal kinship.

VII. Concluding Remarks

‘Militantly’ pursuing the methodological exigency “to define transcendental philosophy anew in such a way as to integrate with it the very phenomenon of the real” (*Structure* 224), Merleau-Ponty pushed transcendental phenomenology beyond the egological context of regressive analysis to a ‘progressive’ standpoint that I have characterized as ‘generative.’ In so doing, he formulated a non-anthropocentric perspective that provides a viable basis for addressing questions of non-human life, albeit at a high level of generality, e.g., in terms of interanimality as a regulative ideal. What is clear, though, is that notwithstanding its non-anthropocentricity, Merleau-Ponty’s position remains indelibly humanistic. While this may make it grossly inadequate in the eyes of those who advocate radical forms of biocentric egalitarianism, it is not necessarily a serious impairment. But why is this? Does Merleau-Ponty offer a robust approach to the kinship of humanity and animality *despite* the humanistic emphasis? Or could these be positively linked?

The latter is, I suspect, closer to the mark. At least this is so *if* it is the case that any phenomenology that remains within an egological framework cannot adequately deal with non-human life, and *if* it is true that the alternative to a generative approach is a ‘constructive’ one, where the fundamental difference between these is whether priority is accorded to practical or to theoretical reason. For inasmuch as life is a structural phenomenon, perception of it is always normative, and questions concerning it must as a matter of principle be questions of practical reason. As far as approaching life is concerned, then, whether human or non-human, the “theoretical self-surmounting of man,” the methodological “*de-humanizing* [Entmenschung]” (*Sixth Meditation* 120; cf. 32, 40; “Die phänomenologische Philosophie” 104) that would put the ‘constructive’ phenomenologist into a position of non-participatory theoretical detachment is simply misguided. Thus, a robust humanism—if we can still call it that—may provide the best route to

fully appreciating other forms of life because we only recognize life through our own living participation in it—the external spectator is *not* impartial.

More importantly, what gives this sort of humanism its openness to biocentric sensibilities is its being grounded in ontological faith, the *urdoxic* commitment that there be a singular, universal world. Heidegger was not wrong to say that animals are ‘world-poor’ [*weltarm*]. But what needs to be recognized is that in an important sense we humans, *too*, are ‘world-poor,’ in that we lack that singular, universal world. If there is a connection—and surely there is—between such worldliness and the robustness and sustainability of ethical being, then the realization of it is, at least potentially, in the ethical interest of all beings.

Thus it could be that in embracing the philosophical problem of alterity in its full scope, and hence discounting the theoretical tasks of ontological discovery, while foregrounding the practical task of realizing interspecificity as a dimension of that singular world, this approach is indeed able, *in virtue of its being a decentered humanism of ontological faith*, to strike a balance between the comprehension and normativity of life, and thus to offer a solid foundation for the actual movement toward a common—and hence more ethical—world for all species.

Notes

¹ See, for example, the contributions in *Animal Others*, ed. Steeves; *Zoontologies*, ed. Wolfe; and *Animal Philosophy*, eds. Calarco and Atterton.

² The key groundbreaking texts are, of course, Singer’s *Animal Liberation* and Regan’s *The Case for Animal Rights*.

³ See, for example, Beck; Depraz, “Animalité”; San Martín and Pintos Peñaranda; and Lotz. A new volume entitled *Phenomenology and the Non-Human Animal*, edited by Christian Lotz and Corinne Painter, will appear soon from Springer. Historically, the main locus of Husserl’s work on animals is the second part of the second book of *Ideas*, although many of the supplements to

the *Crisis* text also bear on the topic. For Heidegger's main contribution regarding animals, see *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*.

⁴ As Spiegelberg put it: "Phenomenology in general may be characterized as a philosophy which has learned to wonder again and to respect wonders for what they are in themselves" (*Phenomenological Movement* 81). And Welton: "What gives rise to phenomenological analysis is an unsettling wonder in the presence of things, which themselves come to us through certain modes or manners that are not themselves objects" (*The Other Husserl* 13). Cf. Husserl's "Philosophy and the Crisis of European Humanity." Of course, Husserl regarded "the pure ego and pure subjectivity" as "the wonder of wonders" (*Ideas III* 71, 75). On this, see Melle. For a more general discussion, see Barnacle. For a critical discussion, see Kingwell. As for Heidegger, see his discussion of 'curiosity' and 'wonder' in *Basic Questions of Philosophy* §38; cf. *Being and Time*, I.5. For a comparative view, see Staehler.

⁵ Note that in "Das Problem" Fink developed this idea in terms of "astonishment" [*das Staunen*] (182-5). In the Preface to *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty expressed the view that "the best formulation of the reduction is probably that given by Eugen Fink ... when he spoke of 'wonder' in the face of the world" (xiii; cf. 295).

⁶ On the problem of the beginning of phenomenology, see Lenkowski. On the natural attitude, see Luft, "Husserl's Phenomenological Discovery".

⁷ There is a considerable literature on this. See the discussions in Boehm and Kern, and the recent contributions from Depraz. For a general discussion, see Taminiaux. For a recent re-examination, see Luft, "Husserl's Theory".

⁸ There is a sizeable literature on Heidegger's possible contributions to ecophilosophy. In addition to the work of Zimmerman, see Llewelyn and Foltz. Examples of Husserl's influence include Kohák and Embree.

⁹ See *Formal and Transcendental Logic*: "The intrinsically first criticism of cognition, the one in which all others are rooted, is transcendental self-criticism on the part of phenomenological cognition itself" (289). And *Cartesian Meditations*, where Husserl affirms that the "second stage of phenomenological research would be precisely the criticism of transcendental experience and then the criticism of all transcendental cognition" (29). "All transcendental-philosophical theory of knowledge, as 'criticism of knowledge,' leads back ultimately to criticism of transcendental-phenomenological knowledge (in the first place, criticism of transcendental experience)" (151-52).

¹⁰ I borrow the term 'progressive' from Fink, *Erganzungsband* 7-8. Cf. Bruzina, *Beginnings and Ends* 415-16.

¹¹ This notion was central to Fink's undertaking in his *VI. Cartesianische Meditation*, but it was first expressed by Husserl. See, for example, *Zur phänomenologischen Reduktion*. Cf. Luft, *Phänomenologie der Phänomenologie* 8-22. The notion was also taken up by Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology* 365.

¹² A new anthology, *Merleau-Ponty and Environmental Philosophy*, eds. Cataldi and Hamrick, has also just appeared from SUNY.

¹³ Cf. *Phenomenology*: "the problem was to link the idealist perspective, according to which nothing exists except as an object for consciousness, and the realist perspective, according to which consciousnesses are introduced into the stuff of the objective world and of events in themselves" (428). See also "Titres et travaux" and "An Unpublished Text."

¹⁴ I will return to this below in briefly discussing Bruzina's claim that Merleau-Ponty engages in 'constructive' phenomenology.

¹⁵ Cf. *Sense* 79, 133; "In Praise" 51; "Philosophie et non-philosophie" 275, 323, 333.

¹⁶ For this reason, it is instructive to compare Merleau-Ponty's 'militant' thinking with what Caillois had called a "militant orthodoxy" ("Pour une orthodoxie militante").

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