

CHIMERIC MIMICRY

REFLECTION AND ANIMALITY IN MERLEAU-PONTY'S PHILOSOPHY OF NATURE¹



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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I attempt to understand how Merleau-Ponty views the relation between nature and reflection, as well as the meaning behind the terms “human” and “animal” and the relations between them. I approach this by outlining the transition from Merleau-Ponty’s early philosophy (SB, PP) to his late philosophy (N, VI). Roughly understood as the shift from inquiries into the *nature of experience* to inquiries into the *experience of nature*. I show that this shift or turn can be understood in terms of a reconsideration of the nature of experience, which opens toward non-human animal reflection; to the simultaneous kinship and estrangement in animal interspecificity.

The paper is divided into three parts: In the first part, oriented around *Phenomenology of Perception*, I outline the grounding of reflection in the co-natural corporeity of perception. In the second part, I present the implications of Merleau-Ponty’s turn to nature through his reading of Schelling. What becomes visible here is his reversal of method following his turn to nature. Essentially, this reversal of method tempts a reconsideration of reflection: reflection is no longer separated from nature, but a fold within nature itself; a dehiscence of the flesh opening a “mirroring reflexive” within nature itself as nature’s self-reflection, exemplified through the sensing-sensible human body. In the third part, the same reversal of method is considered in relation to animality. I contrast Merleau-Ponty’s account of life and animality in his second course on nature against his views in *The Structure of Behavior*. Consequently, his account of the grounding of reflection in the corporeity of perception is deepened and his ontology of sensing-sensible is further clarified. In the last sections of the third part, I discuss Merleau-Ponty’s account of the human-animal relation, I then briefly discuss his account of painting as a privileged form of ontological expression, and I finally speculate openly about the alterity of other animals and the possibility of animal philosophies.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

SB = *The Structure of Behavior*

PP = *Phenomenology of Perception*; VF = *Varseblivningens Fenomenologi*

N = *Nature: Courses from Collège de France*

VI = *The Visible and The Invisible*

S = “*The Philosopher and his Shadow*”

EM = “*Eye and Mind*”

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LANDSCAPE AROUND AIX-EN-PROVINCE, PAUL CÉZANNE 1865 ²

² Cezanne, P. (1865) *Landscape around aix-en-provence*. Private Collection. Public domain image downloaded from <https://www.cezannecatalogue.com/> 25th December 2023.

INTRODUCTION

In the introduction to his first lecture course on nature at collège de France in 1956-1957, French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) utters the following words: “We are looking for the primordial, nonlexical meaning always intended by people who speak of ‘nature’ “ (N, 3). When we use this word - “nature” - we often speak of forests, oceans, wetlands, and the creatures that roam these lands. We feel the bruteness of this nature, the unfathomable *arche* – yet we also feel a deep sense of belonging in it; our ground, the soil beneath our feet. But our words are multifaceted and complex: we use the word “natural” when referring to a certain “naturalness”; to that which is natural, or normal, as opposed to the unnaturalness of the abnormal. We hear, in this notion of naturalness as “things turning out as they are supposed to,” whispers of another nature: a nature that falls in line with our expectations; a nature that does not surprise us, that molds in our grasps. When we conceive of nature in this way, we risk distancing ourselves from its brute and unfathomable side. We turn nature into an object in front of us, flattening that which does not fit our models and preconceptions. We remain above nature, above other creatures within it.

But even in this reifying grasp, brute nature finds a way of revealing its originary nature. When we speak of “the nature of ...” something, we allude to an *essence*, a *Wesen* at the core of it, its deep truth. We do allude to a certain grasp or intuition here, but we also allude to something beyond our reach, to a concrete truth truer than any conceivable truth, pulsating behind the veil of any grasped essence – an nature that withdraws in its very essence. This is the brute, ungraspable nature we speak of when we speak of the supreme power of nature, of mother nature, of the wrath of nature and the sublime beauty of nature, of nature as infinite. When we do so, we speak of a nature which exceeds us; a “more-than-human” nature, a prereflective nature that resists our forms, that does not bend down before us nor wither at our feet – an archaic and originary nature that permeates us.

In ancient animistic cultures nature was regarded as alive and permeated with spirit. The creatures roaming the lands within this living, breathing nature were of flesh and spirit. With the abandonment of animism as something “childish” or “irrational,” the spirit was detached from the land, from animal beings and from the human body, instead lifted up into an immaterial soul. David Abrams describes this de-corporealization and de-animalization of mind in the western tradition:

From its source in ancient Athens up until the present moment, human beings alone are possessed of an incorporeal intellect, a “rational soul” or mind which, by virtue of its affinity with an eternal or divine dimension outside the bodily world, sets us radically apart from, or above, all other forms of life. (Abram 1996, 47)

It is this separating line between human and animal that will be at central stake in the following. The “general singular” signified with the concept of “the animal” has marked the opposite of “the human” in the western tradition, demarcating, in a principal stalemate, a separating line effectively homogenizing a vast and diverse realm of organisms (Derrida 2002, 40). These notions – “the animal” and “the human” – are, in Dufourcq’s words, “not simply references to concepts or realities; they are stubborn images that we should review, challenge, and reshape;” they are “old and still existing *figures*, ossified metaphors” (2021, 10).

The fossilization of this divide owes a lot to the cerebralization of reflection; reflection regarded as an exclusively human capacity setting “the human” apart from “the animal”. This perspective has been the handle of the homogenizing rendering of all non-human creatures as an instinctual, non-reflective mechanisms. As such, the general singular drawing all other creatures under the same comb, has been the negative definition of “the human” – it has marked our exceptionalism, made us into what we are (supposed to be) and in this separated us from our own animality, from the brute nature within and without us. This is not to say that what we call “the human” does not point out something specific; a specific way of being in the world, a specific embodiment, a specific manner, or mode of reflection - yet this specificity need not alienate what we refer to with “the human” from other ways of being, from the intricate and archaic kinship between humans and other animals. Difference need not abolish kinship.

In order to erase the sharp lines drawn by such human exceptionalism, we need to retrace our steps, bury our hands back down in the soil, see our-selves as yet another blooming dehiscence within the shimmering realms of many-faced Nature. Such an endeavor would entail a reconsideration of the notion of reflection as a uniquely human characteristic. There are indeed innumerable anecdotes of animals acting in ways that seem impossible to brush off as the product of non-reflective immediacy. For one, Tayler and Saayman describes an encounter with Dolly, a bottlenose dolphin who lived in Port Elizabeth Oceanarium:

A cloud of cigarette smoke was once deliberately released against the glass as Dolly was looking in through the viewing port. The observer was astonished when the animal immediately swam off to its mother, returned and released a mouthful of milk which engulfed her head, giving much the same effect as had the cigarette smoke. (Tayler and Saayman 1973, 291)

Dolly's "milk smoking," as Dufourcq comments, "involves imitation, analogical reasoning, creativity, and the attempt to establish communication" (2021, 5). In the absence of a shared language, Dolly initiates communication "at the level of raw matter," taking up and casting anew the gesture of smoking - which was not even a sign in the first place - in an "obvious analogical transposition" (Ibid). Dolly draws together two non-identical things, she creates a metaphor, an analogical bridge.

There are innumerable such stories, stories of animals shifting free from our preconceptions, breaking the morphologies we have assigned to them. We are inclined, if we are to speak of living creatures under a "general singular," to conceive of this singular as a *chimera* - concentrating, in this fabulous monster, a kinship between forms in simultaneous estrangement from each other. The goat's abdomen, the lion's head, and the dragon's tail united in the chimeric body of many bodies in one body. Different kinds of minds estranged from each other yet intertwined inseparably - "neither a species nor a gender nor an individual, it is an irreducible living multiplicity of mortals, and rather than a double clone or a portmanteau word, a sort of monstrous hybrid, a chimera waiting to be put to death by its Bellerophon." (Derrida 2002, 41). Chimeric mimicry as seeing eye to eye with the stranger; as feeling the strangely familiar kinship between my own embodiment and the perceived body of the non-human other, albeit from the respectful distance of an ungraspable alterity.

AIM AND OVERVIEW

Aim: I attempt to understand how Merleau-Ponty views the relation between nature and reflection, as well as the meaning behind the terms "human" and "animal" and the relations between them. I approach this by outlining the transition from Merleau-Ponty's early philosophy (SB, PP) understood as an inquiry into the *nature of experience* (primarily *human experience*), to his late philosophy (N, VI) understood as an inquiry into *experience of nature*, consequently leading to a reconsideration of the nature of experience which includes the *nature of animal experience*. In other words, I attempt to understand this transition as a *reversal of methodology* - in line with Toadvine (2009) and Barbaras (2001) - which follows from his turn to nature, and consequently founds a *reconsideration of (human and animal) reflection*. I primarily orient myself around Merleau-Ponty's lecture courses on nature, as well as part one ("The Body") and two ("The Perceived World") of his *Phenomenology of Perception*. I approach these aims through the following questions: What does it mean for reflection to reflect on its own condition of possibility, on a nature which precedes and exceeds it? How (if

possible) can reflection gain access to this primordial nature, according to Merleau-Ponty? How does Merleau-Ponty understand the relation between perception and reflection? What is Merleau-Ponty's account of the origin of reflection? How are we to best think the relation between "the human" and "the animal"? How are we to understand this expression "the human"? How are we to understand this expression "the animal"? How are we to best tackle the problem of the otherness of other animals?

Overview: In the first part, I focus on the grounding of reflection in corporeal perception. I also outline Merleau-Ponty's critique of intellectualism, the aseity of the thing in-itself, and his attempts at resolving the problem of perception through his radical reflection. In the second part, reflection is considered as something appearing in an archaic nature (*reflection of nature* rather than *nature of reflection*). This is done through Merleau-Ponty's reading of Friedrich Schelling's *Naturphilosophie*. His interpretation of Schelling's *barbarian principle* as well as his *positive philosophy* is outlined. It becomes apparent what Merleau-Ponty means when he describes Schelling's philosophy as a "phenomenology of prereflective being" (N, 41). This reading and interpretation of Schelling moves over into a presentation of Merleau-Ponty's *ontology of the flesh* as explicated in his unfinished work; *The Visible and The Invisible*. In the third part, I start by giving an outline of Merleau-Ponty's hierarchical view of the human-animal relation in *The Structure of Behavior*. This perspective is then perpetually contrasted with Merleau-Ponty's *lateral view* of the human-animal relation through a presentation of his engagement with Gesell, specifically, the notion of behavior as outlined in dialogue with Gesell's account of the development of animal movement. Merleau-Ponty's understanding of Uexküll's *Umwelt* is described through the metaphor of melody. Through Hardouin's studies on animal mimicry and Portman's studies on animal appearance, the self-expressivity of nature is described through the sensing-sensible bodies of animals. This leads to a definition of animality as *inter-animality* and, consequently, to an understanding of the human-animal relation as an irreducible *Ineinander*. This finally leads us back to Merleau-Ponty's perceptual ontology of the flesh, but here from the perspective of animality. In the last sections of the third part, I discuss Merleau-Ponty's account of the human-animal relation as an *Ineinander*; then briefly discuss his account of painting as a privileged form of ontological expression, and finally speculate openly about the alterity of other animals and the possibility of animal philosophies.

CURRENT RESEARCH

Recent Merleau-Ponty scholarship in English language philosophy has had a bit of a renaissance due to the increased availability of unpublished work and course notes from Merleau-Ponty's professorship at Collège de France (Merleau-Ponty 2007). His influence is broad, reaching into many areas of science and the humanities. Especially relevant to the questions addressed in this text are works in dialogue with Merleau-Ponty's writings about nature and animality (Toadvine 2009; Barbaras 2001; Abram 1996; Dufourcq 2021). The works listed have all been important sources of inspiration and consultation in the writing of this text. Toadvine's book, however, has been of special importance. It is not within the scope of this text to provide an overview of contemporary debates regarding these questions. But to provide some kind of reference point - and since it is of central importance to the questions raised here - I will outline Merleau-Ponty's shift or reversal of methodology as it is described by Ted Toadvine as well as Renaud Barbaras.

The reversal of method makes its first appearances in the lecture courses on nature in 1956. Whereas Merleau-Ponty, in his first two books (*Structure of Behavior* and *Phenomenology of Perception*) focused on the relation between human perceptual and reflective consciousness, his lecture courses start from nature itself, as the non-instituted and as that which precedes consciousness (Toadvine 2009, 90). Toadvine notes that Merleau-Ponty, in *Structure of Behavior*, attempted to "hold together two incompatible approaches to nature"; on the one hand, "he saw in vital behavior an immanent and self-organizing intelligibility," but his simultaneous commitment to phenomenology required him "to treat this immanent intelligibility as an object for human consciousness." This "Concept sunk into Nature and then made explicit in self-conscious awareness," Toadvine continues, "is precisely the 'problem of perception' around which Merleau-Ponty's first two books are oriented" (Toadvine 2009, 90). Renaud Barbaras describes the reversal in similar terms:

In [Phenomenology of Perception], the natural world . . . was reduced to the advantage of an incarnated subject, and the constitutive reference of this subject to a perceived world was made to appear. In the later works, Merleau-Ponty suspends subjectivity and becomes interested in only natural being, at the heart of which he discovers a constitutive reference to perception. (Barbaras 2001, 37)

The consequences of this reversal, according to Toadvine, was that Merleau-Ponty no longer approached nature and animality from the vantage point of the human subject. Nature, and the animal, are both considered from the perspective of "natural being", and this means, he suggests, "that Merleau-Ponty is no longer thinking nature, and the animal in particular, in

accordance with Agamben's 'anthropological machine,' that is, with the aim of marking an internal schism in 'man' " (Toadvine 2009, 90). While he, in *The Structure of Behavior*, "had placed the accent on spirit or mind as an integrative dialectic of form that subsumes life, Merleau-Ponty here treats mind as emergent from life by way of the "figural form" of reflection in the human body" (Toadvine 2009, 93). While early Merleau-Ponty had regarded the human as *the* (only) "flaw" within "the great diamond" of nature – the only *negativity* within the *positivity* of nature, he here, in his later work, admits the possibility of the animal being as a similar "flaw"; "he is admitting the possibility," Toadvine writes, "of an ontological questioning at the level of life as such. In other words, he is announcing the possibility of an animal philosophy" (Toadvine 2009, 96).

PART ONE: THE BODY

INTRODUCTION

Merleau-Ponty is led to put into question the naturalist preconceptions of classical philosophies through the discovery of the body itself. The body is irreducible to natural causality as to transcendental consciousness and will for precisely this reason allow for an insertion of consciousness, and reflection, in nature. The perceiving body is "co-natural" with nature, inserted in nature through its corporeal existence, yet circumscribed by a horizon of objectivity. Merleau-Ponty writes:

We will have to ask how existence simultaneously projects around itself worlds that mask objectivity from me and yet sets this objectivity as a goal for the teleology of consciousness by making these "worlds" stand out against the background of a single natural world. (PP, 309)

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty provides a detailed descriptive account of corporeal perception but does not go as far as treating the relationship between this perceptive layer and its objective horizon, nature in-itself. The corporeal existence of perception is the seed that will blossom in his later ontology and philosophy of nature. We therefore need to provide an outline of this seed before we can go any further in our inquiries.

In his systematic doubt, Descartes discovered that everything is doubtable except the act of thinking in its activity; the only thing that I can be absolutely certain about is *cogito* – that (I am) thinking while (I am) thinking. Merleau-Ponty notes that the cartesian subject of pure self-reflective activity was put on the verge of the world, as its initiation and first philosophy. An isolated act of thinking was posed as the foundation for all knowledge about the world (VF, 14). Kant furthered this initial structure of a privileged subject. The subject still comes first, and the world is rendered through ideal categories constituting it. The subject is thus constructed from a priori structures attached to it and the world is revealed in experience as the product of a synthesis. The relationship between subject and world is not symmetrical; the subject synthesizes the world, constructs it, constitutes it. As Merleau-Ponty describes, this is the insertion of a thin but deep crack in between the synthesized, experienced world and an objective world in-itself (VF, 14). Kant’s reflexive analysis, he continues, presupposes itself as its own self-residence or self-given ground; “reflection carries itself along and places itself back within an invulnerable subjectivity, prior to being and time” (PP, lxxiii). But this reflection of reflexive analysis cannot keep itself afloat on its own; its proposed aseity is illusory, it is not weightless and self-given but rooted in a nurturing soil underneath it, which grounds it in the concrete bruteness of nature. This originary ground is corporeal perception, and it is always already in primordial dialogue with the world. With Kant, philosophy *constructs* reality from reflective reason rather than *describes it* from the starting point of an unrepealed tension between perception-reflection-world. The latter alternative is the proper one for Merleau-Ponty, and the first breath of this tense relationality is the generosity or overflow of perception: “At each moment, my perceptual field is filled with sudden noises and fleeting tactile impressions that I am unable to link to the perceived context and that, nevertheless, I immediately place in the world without ever confusing them with my daydreams.” (PP, lxxiv).

INTELLECTUALISM

Merleau-Ponty associates such Cartesian and Kantian subjectivism with what he calls “intellectualism”. This strand of thought makes the mistake of looking for an essence of consciousness and of the world from the assumed starting point of a given *cogito* (VF, 23). From this starting point, ideal categories are placed as the necessary structures mediating the relation between an objective world in itself and the experience of world, between object and subject. The world in itself is posited as an absolute otherness which “stimulates” the passive

structures attached to the subject, resulting in a rendering of the world in experience. The world thus only ever presents itself after having been “handled” by structures that are presupposed and absolutely unquestionable (VF, 72). In Merleau-Ponty's words: an originary “pure” impression is handled by “a system of absolutely true thoughts capable of coordinating all phenomena, a geometrical plan that makes sense of all perspectives”. (PP, 42; VF, 74) The “raw” impression always already arrives “cooked”. Intellectualism thus simply passes over from absolute objectivity (the world in itself) to absolute subjectivity (world producing categories).

In assuming the unquestionable ground of a subjectivity that structures the world according to categories, intellectualism does not deal with the *relation* between subject and object, it privileges form over content; assuming the existence (somewhere) of “raw data” or “pure perception” but leaves it untouched on the assumption of the primacy of form. The intellectualist endeavor thus amounts to constructing the structuring categories of perception *after* receiving the needed information to do so from perception (VF, 73-74). In this vein, Merleau-Ponty writes that intellectualism is as naïvely trusting in its intellectual categories as “realism” is trusting in the “absolute truth” of the world as given by the immediacy of the senses (PP, 41). Both strands of thought reify perception by treating it as a given that can be left untouched. Perception is here objectified since its ambiguous and spontaneous character is lost in the intellectualist abstraction. Merleau-Ponty instead suggests a middle path grounded in the corporeality of perception: the world overflows perception, and perception grounds reflection before any a priori structures can be found in reflexive analysis (VF, 76). Perception is in other words in between the world and the reflective thinker. The world, he writes, “is not what I think, but what I live; I am open to the world, I unquestionably communicate with it, but I do not possess it, it is inexhaustible.” (PP, lxxx).

Perception, as this ground holding up the reflexive analysis, thus remains uninterrogated in Kant's intellectualism. It is dislocated from the body and unproblematized in its relationship to an exteriority exceeding it (VF, 89-90). The subject is constructed from disembodied rationality and first and foremost a set of ideal structures, rather than a body. It is posited from the vantage point of an office above the dirty ground of concrete materiality, in a move which implies, as Merleau-Ponty writes, “that the philosopher's thought is not subjugated to any situation” (PP, 63). *The other* never becomes a problem for Kant precisely because of this conception of the subject as a common set of normative structures attached to every and all individuals. There is in fact only one subject for Kant, and it is *everywhere the same*; a filter of ideal structures rendering every world, for every subject, in the same nominal colors of an *a priori* palette, and

thereby obliterating any and all ownness (*Eigenheit*) and consequently any and all alterity in intersubjectivity (VF, 99; PP, 63). The problem, Merleau-Ponty notes, is not the formal results discovered in the reflexive analysis (the practical “truths” of Kant’s categories), but the ontological privilege given to them when placed as the world-rendering unquestionable ground of all experience. When these structures are taken as a presupposed starting point, content is reduced to autonomous form and concrete particularity is violently amputated in the abstract grip of rough-grained category. It is in this way that all otherness – “morbid consciousness, primitive consciousness, infantile consciousness, the consciousness of others” (PP, 127) (not to mention the consciousness of non-human animals) - is flattened prescriptively. In other words: the Ego and the Alter ego are reduced to two instances of the same rational principle and in the same movement experience loses its haecceity or particularity.

Rejecting this one-sided intellectualism, Merleau-Ponty wants to find “a relationship that would be neither the reduction of the form to the content, nor the subsumption of the content under an autonomous form.” (PP, 128). Intellectualism divides reality into a world rendered through presupposed ideal categories attached to the subject and a principally unattainable world in-itself. Merleau-Ponty sharply rejects this dualism, proposing instead an undivided tension between subject and object. Form and content are in an ongoing dialectic, the latter is not reduced to the former, and the object is not reduced to the subject. Form is not a pre-established norm attached to the subject and then realized in perception. Form is always “the *birth* of a norm” (PP, 62). Content, the “pure” impression, remains contingent or “untamed”, it is not reduced to something packaged in ideal categories, and particularity seeps in between the fingers of the ideal principles, content overflows form from the bottom-up. Perception is both this bottom-up overflowing of form by untamed content and top-down form intellectually sublimating content (VF, 171). It is not one reduced to the other, but both, intertwined in a tense dialectic. This intertwining of form and content is “the very appearance of the world” (PP, 62). In other words, “[the world] is the identity of the exterior and the interior, not the projection of the interior into the exterior” (PP, 62).

PERCEPTION AND REFLECTION

The human is already a perceiving body in the world before it can reflect. Through corporeal perception – “the eye and the ear” (VF, 174) – the reflective subject is always already engulfed in the world through the originary generosity of sensory openness. Reflection is abandoned to its primordial embodiment that comes before the presupposition of categorial structures

attached to the subject. In other words, the intellectualist subject gives form to the world but can do so only if “the actual subject” first has a world or is in the world; first holds “a system of significations around himself whose correspondences, relations, and participations do not need to be made explicit in order to be utilized.” (PP, 131). Reflection is thus dependent on primordial or prereflective perception. Perception is the ground of reflection not because it causes it, but because “vision is this gift of nature” (PP, 128), that is, a pre-established engulfment in exteriority “that gives a sense in certain aspects of being, without myself having given them this sense through a constitutive operation.” (PP, 225). The human being can reflect because of this “pre-personal” sensory generosity.

The body is oriented toward the world through *motor intentionality*: an innate directedness toward the world *as potential* where bodily perception is understood as an “I can” rather than an “I think”. It “secretly” brings a sort of meaning to things before they can be handled and turned into knowledge through intellectual operations. The body inhabits the world through its concrete comportment in an immediacy “without any representation” (PP, 139-140). Unlike the world conceptualized in thought or reflection, the world of the body is not leveled through the refraction of a prism “placing all [objects] under the domination of an “I think” (PP, 139). The conceived world of “I think” depends on the embodied world of “I can”.

The body is not *in* space and *in* time, but *of* space and *of* time. It is of the world as “an open system of an infinity of equivalent positions in different orientations,” referred to by Merleau-Ponty as “the body schema” (PP, 142). While eliciting this power of openness in potentiality, it is simultaneously caught in actuality. The space and time inhabited by the body “are always surrounded by indeterminate horizons that contain other points of view” (PP, 141). It is caught up in the actual, in the temporality of the here-and-now, in absolutely particular perspectival moments which are made coherent in interchained forgetfulness. Yet its spatial proximity in the world is a constant envisioning of potential worlds not yet realized in the temporal actuality. The spatiality and temporality of the body is in this sense never conceived or objectively ordered.

The body is a *gestalt structure*. It is an emergent whole which bears an expressivity *on* its skin since it is co-natural with the things of the world, while it also has access to the natural expressivity of these things. This immanent or nascent expressivity extends “to the entire sensible world” (PP, 204); the “miracle of expression” in the perceived body will be found in all things. Yet the body is more than just a perceived thing:

In this package of bones and muscles that is my right hand for my left hand, I glimpse momentarily the shell or the incarnation of this other right hand, agile and living, that I send out toward objects in order to explore them. The body catches itself from the outside in the process of exercising a knowledge function; it attempts to touch itself touching, it begins “a sort of reflection,” and this would be enough to distinguish it from objects. (PP, 95)

The unity of the body is thus neither thing nor idea, but “a sort of reflection” that is “a new category” of reality (SB, 49). The modalities and specific functions are all “confusedly taken up and implicated in a single drama” which reveals to us - in our lived experience – the body as an “ambiguous mode of existence” (PP, 205) which awakens the dormant expressivity of all things because it is itself co-natural with them. I can only understand this nascent meaning by living it, by experiencing reality through the body in its “implicit and confused” unity. The body is thus “not a thought” since it is “always something other than what it is ... always rooted in nature at the very moment it is transformed by culture” (PP, 205). I am my body in the sense of living it, experiencing it, but my body is simultaneously “something like a natural subject”, something impersonal or anonymous which exceeds me.

THE THING

Corporeal perception is sunken in exteriority, it is *in dialogue* with the exterior environment through its innate ability to bring out its nascent expression. In a word, my perceiving body *interrogates* its surroundings; “The unfolding of sensible givens beneath our gaze or beneath our hands is like a language that teaches itself, where signification would be secreted by the very structure of signs, and this is why it can be said that our senses literally interrogate the things and that the things respond to them.” (PP, 333). This language that the body speaks originates in nature. Perception is abandoned to nature, its membranes open to an exteriority in “a certain manner that the outside has of invading us, a certain manner that we have of receiving it” (PP, 331). It is in this sense that the body exhibits *a sort of reflection*. The thing that I perceive speaks to me, meets me halfway, due to the generosity of my corporeal perception. This generosity is not something that I have constructed, as Merleau-Ponty makes clear in his refutation of intellectualism. Perception is a “gift of nature”, a *magical* opening toward exteriority. But the opening of perception is never exhaustive. The thing that I perceive always has shadow-sides that I cannot see:

To say that I have a visual field means that I have an access and an opening to a system of visible beings through my position, and that they are available to my gaze in virtue of a kind of primordial contract and by a gift of nature, without any effort required on my part. In other

words, it means that vision is pre-personal. Moreover, it means simultaneously that vision is always limited, or that there is always a horizon of unseen or even invisible things around my present vision. (PP, 225)

The thing as something not just *for-me*, but *in-itself*, transcends perception. The thing in-itself is the thing “seen from nowhere” (PP, 69); the thing perceived from every possible perspective, through different sensory modalities, at different times. This spatiotemporal multiplicity always exceeds perception. Yet the thing never truly exists in-itself in the sense of being completely alone; “The thing can never be separated from someone who perceives it; nor can it ever actually be in itself because its articulations are the very ones of our existence, and because it is posited at the end of a gaze or at the conclusion of a sensory exploration” (PP, 334). The thing for-me never exhausts the multiplicity of the thing in-itself; there are always shadow-sides not reached by the light. Yet the thing only exists as something for someone, as a *particular expression* rendered through the gaze of a receptive spectator. The thing in nature always exceeds the resonating powers of my body; it is an absolute otherness that I can see; an “in-itself-for-me” as Sartre has put it. In Merleau-Ponty's own words: “we do not know ourselves in it, and it is precisely this that makes it a thing” (PP, 335).

Corporeal perception is on the level of the world that it perceives. It speaks the language of nature but cannot articulate it in a word. It is an *anonymous* coexistence with the world. Anonymous in the sense that the perceiving body is intertwined with the reflective mind as another self; a natural subject which has “already sided with the world” (PP, 224) and relates to it in its own way, independent of my personal self. Anonymous perception is *concrete embodiment*; it is an existence that, on a prepersonal level is engulfed, soaked in bare materiality. Perception underlies reflection as its nurturing soil, its background. It cannot rid itself of its body and the ambiguous threads always latch on to it. The thinking subject is never free, never weightless. The heavy rest of the body always remains. But the opposite is true for the perceiving body: just as the reflective or personal self never shakes its body, the anonymous, natural self never shakes its personal and cultural determinations. The two relate to each other in “reciprocal expression” (PP, 185). A reciprocity that is clearly visible in the fundamental components of intersubjectivity. Communication is possible because I have a body that perceives and can be perceived, but in order to express myself, my personal self, I have to “dress up” this anonymous body in clothes from my own unique wardrobe. The natural body is thereby expressed through a determination at the personal level while the personal self can

only express itself through the natural body. Reflective thought and corporeal perception are thus inseparable in a reciprocal expression that moves in between abstract and concrete realms.

Perception is simultaneously “of nature” and transcended by it; it is in communion with nature while simultaneously being estranged from it. It does “get at” the thing as a for-me or for-the-perceiver, but in the same moment, the thing withdraws into a spatiotemporal multiplicity. The in-itself of nature – “the style of all styles” (PP, 345) – thus resists the forgetful perspectivity of perception. Infinite styles vibrate in multi-dimensionality around every singular perception-perspective. It cusps or scratches within finite horizons which are exceeded by the infinity of the in-itself. The relation between reflection and perception is of the same kind; reflection is originally bound to perception yet alienated from it; it distorts perception through the prism of its personal ownness, it cannot grasp its brute nature. Taken together, perception is both co-natural with and estranged from nature, and since reflection cannot grasp the brute nature of perception, it is estranged from nature in a double sense: both from the body as co-natural with nature since it cannot grasp it in its pre-reflective bruteness, and from nature as absolute otherness, as thing in-itself estranged from the human in both perception and reflection.

RADICAL REFLECTION

Merleau-Ponty departs from perception as this co-natural corporeality. The body is a part of nature; open to it, and on the same level as it. The body is coexistent with nature while simultaneously being estranged from it. Perception comes in contact with something which exceeds it. It is clear, from the preceding, that reflection is grounded in perception, but how can reflection gain access to the co-natural, prereflective bruteness of the anonymous body? What is the place of reflection in nature?

As Merleau-Ponty makes clear in the preface of *Phenomenology of Perception*, the principle problem of philosophy is the interrogation of reflection itself in its claim on knowledge of the world. Philosophical reflection must be *radical reflection*; that is, reflection on its own conditions of possibility. Reflection must be “conscious of its own dependence on an unreflected life that is its initial, constant, and final situation” (PP, lxxviii). In other words, it must be *reflection on reflection* rather than merely *reflection in operation* (PP, 253). This self-reflexivity of reflection is precisely what is lacking in intellectualism and empiricism; both of these strands of “objective thought” only gives us “thought about the body or the body as an idea” which “disentangles the object from the subject and the subject from the object” since it

does not treat the “the experience of the body or the body in reality.” (PP, 205). As radical reflection, then, philosophy must instead be reflection on the brute nature of the body that provides its nourishment, it must be reflection *coupled with* the anonymous body that always trails along at the level of nature. Philosophical reflection would need to constantly reconstruct itself in an “ever-renewed experiment of its own beginning” (PP, lxxviii). Philosophy would need to be inquiry into the *nature of reflection*.

As such, philosophy tangents art. The silent nature that can never be exhausted by reflection on its own must be expressed, and it can only be approached as such in communion with the co-natural body. The only way to “get at” nature within ourselves and outside of ourselves is therefore through creative expression. Through the embodied catalyzation of nature’s overflowing alterity in a musical piece, or the hand immortalizing the timeless sublimity of the perceived landscape in a painting. The artwork is here conceived as an expression of ontological truth. Reflection provides a certain distance to corporeality that, in artistic expression, draws it out from its concrete engulfment within nature. The possibility of such distance rests on the *tacit cogito*, which is our simultaneous givenness to ourselves and our openness to the world; the self-givenness of reflection and the hinge between reflection and the body (PP, 347). There seems, however, to be a certain tension between this tacit cogito and the “sort of reflection” of the body. They both seem to occupy the space of openness in between reflection and nature. This tension is visible in the light of Merleau-Pontys later work, where the touching-touched self-reflexivity of the body is explicitly regarded as this bridge between reflection and nature. Here, in Merleau-Pontys late philosophy, reflection is incorporated within nature itself, in contrast to its status in *Phenomenology of Perception*, where it is seen as an exclusively human faculty. This can be seen in the following passage, where Merleau-Ponty defines the human by the power of reflection, through which access to nature is gained by a “stepping back” from its brute animality, all the while depending on it:

Human life is defined by this power that it has of denying itself in objective thought, and it draws this power from its primordial attachment to the world itself. Human life “understands” not only some definite milieu, but rather an infinity of possible milieus, and it understands itself because it is thrown into a natural world. (PP, 341).

The reflective human is here regarded as a negativity within the positivity of nature, as “a flaw” in this “great diamond” (PP, 215) which distinguishes human being from the continuity of natural being. Self-supported reflection at a distance opens the human towards a world; that which “frees him from his (animal) milieu” and “allows him to see it” (PP, 89). The tacit cogito

provides the grounds for this distance while remaining separated from the natural self of the body. Human reflection is thereby alienated from the body of perception, marking a scission within the human which separates civilized thought from brute perception, all the while drawing from this brute originary immersion. What this distance provided by self-given reflection amounts to is thus the freeing of the reflective human being from its corporeal animality, from the animal body that remains blind in its entrancement within nature. The problem thus remains: how does the tacit cogito separate reflection from its animal ground? Reflection seems to be both dependent on the nurturing backdrop of its corporeality, and in need of overcoming the limitations of it. With this, Merleau-Ponty falls in line with Heidegger's definition of the animal as *poor in world* (Heidegger 1995, 185). Reflection is regarded as an exclusively human faculty, and the animal is left blind in its immediate environment, drunk and interwoven in nature, never at the illuminating distance of reflection.

Through his radical reflection or "reflection on reflection", Merleau-Ponty attempts to find a middle way between these pre-personal perception and personal reflection. He attempts to embrace its prereflective origin in a thinking-with its immemorial past that is its fundamental condition, while remaining at a distance from this origin due to the non-natural status of the tacit cogito.

PART TWO: NATURE

THE CONCEPT OF NATURE

Merleau-Ponty held two courses on nature at Collège de France between 1956-1958. In the introduction to the first course, called "The Concept of Nature", he states that "we are looking for the primordial, nonlexical meaning always intended when people speak of 'nature'" (N, 3). Merleau-Ponty speaks of the etymology of the word: "the Greek word for nature alludes to the vegetative", he says. Whereas the Latin term comes from *nascor*; "to live", "to be born". There is nature "wherever there is a life that has meaning, but where, however, there is not thought; hence the kinship with the vegetative". Nature is "the autoproduction of a meaning" (N, 3), he concludes. Instead of starting from the human being, from *the nature of reflection*, Merleau-Ponty here starts from primordial nature itself; from "the pre-existence of natural being" which,

he says, is “the very problem of a philosophy of nature”. His inquiries concerning the nature of reflection thus becomes *reflection of nature*. The relation between nature and reflection is still in focus, but it is approached from the vantage point of nature itself, from the vantage point of reflection *in* nature, from the brute nature which precedes and exceeds reflection. This is thus an attempt to treat reflection from an “archeological” rather than a “teleological” point of view. In the following, we aim to try to understand how Merleau-Ponty approaches this relation. How can philosophy reflect on the nature which precedes it? On its own nature? We follow Merleau-Ponty in his reading of Schelling.

THE BARBARIAN PRINCIPLE

Merleau-Ponty always remained a phenomenologist. In his late essay “The Philosopher and his Shadow” he writes about Husserl and phenomenology. The “ultimate task of phenomenology”, he writes, is to “understand its relationship with non-phenomenology” (S, 178). Phenomenology is neither “a materialism nor a philosophy of mind”, its “proper work” is to “unveil the pre-theoretical layer on which both of these idealizations find their relative justification and are gone beyond” (S, 165). This primordial nature; “the ‘barbaric’ source Schelling spoke of ... resists phenomenology within us” and “cannot remain outside phenomenology” (S, 178). In other words; phenomenology needs to transcend itself as a philosophy of consciousness and attend to the relationship between consciousness and that which is not constituted by consciousness, that is, a phenomenology of nature.³ Merleau-Ponty finds a philosophy with similar ambitions in Schelling. What follows is an overview of Schelling’s philosophy through Merleau-Ponty’s reading. This is not a mere reference to Schelling, it is Merleau-Ponty’s own thoughts as inspired by Schelling. We pay particular attention to how Merleau-Ponty, through Schelling, understands *reflection of nature* (or *reflection in nature*) which, as we will see, will eventually lead us back to the *nature of reflection*.

Primordial or barbaric nature is not an object in front of us, it is the soil beneath our feet, the originary ground of every human enterprise. It is the non-instituted; that which precedes any and all cultural custom. It is “a sort of pure, unmotivated surging-forth, whose motive we cannot seek in any essence” (N, 37). For Schelling, as for Merleau-Ponty, nature can never be exhausted by reflection, there will always be a *rest* of the pre-reflective left in the dark, unilluminable. Schelling calls this ungraspable nature *the abyss of the past* or *the barbarian*

³ or a phenomenology of life, as Renaud Barbaras has put it.

principle. And just like the overflowing otherness of the thing in-itself as explicated in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, this nature is revealed as something forever exceeding the grasp of reflection. In Merleau-Ponty's words, this idea springs from "a feeling " for Schelling "that Being is anterior to all reflection on Being and that reflection comes second" (N, 38) which – reminiscent of Merleau-Ponty's critique of intellectualism and realism in the *Phenomenology of Perception* - entails "an opposition to reflexive philosophies for which being is contemporary with reflection" (N, 38). Such "objective thought" falls prey to what Merleau-Ponty calls a "strabism" or "diplopia" of philosophy (N, 127). This is an inability to take a *binocular* perspective, where nature becoming-reflection (intellectualism) and reflection becoming-nature (realism) are thought through the logic of *chiasm*; as interwoven strings of the same thread.

We can thereby see that Schelling's "prioritization" of "existence over essence" (N, 38) as Merleau-Ponty puts it, is not an allusion to a materialist or realist philosophy, but rather a view of the essence of nature as non-essence, as existence. In other words: the essence of nature is that which withdraws from any essence. It is a non-ground of existence - *grundlos Existierende*, *the unconditioned of first nature (erste Natur)* – that overflows and exceeds reflection. This barbaric nature bears the irrational colors of Dionysus, and Schelling seeks to reveal how its irrational, unruly nature becomes ordered, rational, in nature; how this irrational *productivity* of nature is ordered in the *product* of nature. The product is finite inhibition of the infinite force of productivity. It is a manifestation of nature's productivity as a catalyzation or determination of its force. Productivity is only visible in the indirect liminalities of these manifestations; only empirically available in its products. Yet neither productivity nor product encompasses the other: the two are engulfed in each other as two tensely interwoven forces eating from each other, nurtured by one another.

The problem of thinking this tension, of grasping, in reflection, "this blind production" which results in "the air of being built with concepts" (N, 39) is the problem at hand in this section. The difficulty of this task becomes apparent when one considers that reflection itself is a product of this productivity. How can something that spawned from the concrete soil of nature turn itself inside out and grasp its very own flesh? How do we think that which always withers away in our grasps? How can we express this sense "that permeates living beings but is not thought as a sense should be?" (N, 39). As we will see, this endeavor requires us to return to our starting point, namely: perception.

THE EXPERIENCE OF NATURE

Whereas Kant, in abyssal or barbaric nature, saw the limits of human thought, Schelling saw opportunity (N, 37). There is, as Merleau-Ponty says, “a recognition of an unknown being” in Schelling. Like Schelling, Merleau-Ponty wants “to live and to feel” this unknown being (N, 39). Reflection on nature needs to be another kind of reflection, reflection that takes from the *experience* or *perception* of nature and that does not seek to *explain it* but to *describe it*. We can here recall Merleau-Ponty’s remarks regarding the principle task of phenomenology being to understand its relation to non-phenomenology. The reflective human being is one of nature’s products, which means that we, in our very being, hold nature’s infinite productivity within ourselves. When phenomenology, from this perspective, tries to understand the *nature of experience*, it is inevitably brought to an inquiry into the *experience of nature*. Taking nature as an object at hand would cause the productivity of nature to disappear behind the product. This is a violent handling of nature, a reification of nature in the hands of a reflection that has forgotten its origin, a transformation of the non-essence of nature into *something* that it is not, into an “is” that it can never be since it is never *some-thing*. In Jean-Luc Nancy’s words, such a grasping of nature as object would be “a death of birth and death” (Nancy 1993, 122). It would, in Merleau-Ponty’s words, “lead existence back to essence, interior productivity back to exterior production.” (N, 39). Such a reification of nature would cause it to “lose its interiority” and become “the exterior realization of a rationality that is in God” (N, 10). This is the Kantian or Cartesian nature, where the product is completely visible to productivity, the mechanistic realization of a rational principle that is in God... while human reflection remains thoroughly above this mechanistically determined nature, unnurtured and self-sufficient like a flower breaking through cement or the birth of freedom from no womb.

Merleau-Ponty’s ambition, with Schelling, is on the other hand to reflect on a nature which exceeds reflection from within this nature, from within, from under, God. The product must “disappear behind the productivity” rather than the other way around. What this entails is a rediscovery of nature “in our perceptual experience prior to reflection” (N, 40). We have to find the meaning of brute nature “in the state of indivision where we exercise our perception” (Ibid). I am, in Schellings words, “*identical* to Nature” and therefore “understand it just as well as my own life”; it is “in my own life that I find the originary state of the interior of things” (Ibid). This is because the perceiving body and the reflecting subject “have a common root in pre-reflective being” (Ibid) as Merleau-Ponty puts it. Nature within us “must have some relation to Nature outside of us” and “Nature outside of us must be revealed to us by the Nature that we

are.” (N, 206). There is an implicit or dormant *meaning* in nature’s products which speaks to us in perception. The product is “one unevenly perfect expression of the ground-plan” and perception is the name of the receptivity permitting these expressions to be read. In this sense “perception teaches us an ontology that it alone can reveal to us” (N, 40).

Merleau-Ponty describes Schelling’s conception of *light* as the modality of or symbol for a “primordial and eternal knowing which is incorporated in Nature” (N, 42). This “eternal knowing” is not knowledge in the common sense of the word; it is rather a *kind of sense* that is left wanting, an *Urwissen* of nature that must be awakened in impression in order to express. Light “explores the field promoted by our gaze and prepares it to be read” (N, 42); it adorns things with a certain *preparation of meaning* that is not expressed until awakened from its dormant state. The “common root in the pre-reflective” thus names the common site where the meaning-making capacities of reflection and the perceptually attuned arrangements of materials of nature are joined together in a *creativity* where the object itself is involved in the creation of an expressive meaning (Ibid). Both nature and reflection partake in the experience of the thing and as such “quality is not a thing” but a “thing seen” (N, 41). What lives in nature is thus not “mind or spirit”; it “cannot be considered the vehicle of an idea” since it is only the preparation of a meaning that “humanity gives to it” (N, 42). In other words, “the subject has to intervene to bring meaning out fully” (N, 43). The common root is archaic knowledge, an *Urwissen* of Nature, an intertwining of human meaning and natural productivity, implied in the simultaneous proximity and distance of an abyssal non-ground. Reflection can in this sense not be regarded as an isolated activity in the mind of a human subject but need always be thought of as nurtured in exteriority; reflection can thus be regarded as self-reflection or self-expression of nature.

PRODUCTIVITY AND PRODUCT

Nature’s finite product is the visible manifestation of its productivity. The product is produced by an “internal scission” (N, 37); a solidification through controlled inhibition; a direction or determination of the blind productive force. The ungraspable productivity of nature is not an “all-powerful” (N, 38) producer rationally determining everything from without, as in Descartes, but a blind activity or force that cannot stop itself and “produces nothing definitive” (N, 38). In the visible, natural productivity withdraws behind the product, not as its author, but as its interlocutor. It is *in* the product rather than *of* it, and it is not a “one-way relation” but a reciprocal interchange. The brute, productive nature is only disclosed in the empirically

available product, but for the very same reason never visible *directly*, always withdrawn behind that which it manifests. The contingent tension of this primordial indivision between product and productivity corresponds to a binocular ontology. The finite product is always a “becoming-infinite”; human reflection cannot exhaust nature. Infinite productivity is always a “becoming-finite”; nature cannot express itself without human reflection. As Merleau-Ponty says, “everything is I” for Schelling; hence “the role of the perceived world as milieu of experience, where there is not the projection of consciousness on everything, but rather a participation of my own life in everything, and vice versa.” (N, 40). In Merleau-Ponty’s words, paraphrasing Heraclitus: “Nature is a child at play; it gives meaning, but in the manner of a child who is playing, and this meaning is never total” (N, 84)⁴.

Merleau-Ponty writes that the catchphrase of *Naturphilosophie* is to “consider the existence of God as an empirical fact” (N, 47). In the liminalities of different “finished products” one and the same producer of “different potencies or powers of organization” is revealed to us by “concentrating our thought on this experience such as it appears” (N, 41); “God is not known apart from experience, but we take hold of him in the finite.” (N, 47). Infinite productivity is catalyzed through a finite, obstructing counterforce that embodies it in material form, that wraps it in a solidified crust, and manifests itself as the blooming-up, the visible whirlpools that whisper of the invisible streams within. This is a *shaping* of the infinite force of productivity; a *giving form* to the *formless* (Schelling 2004, 27). Only in this finite form given to the infinite formless do we find nature in its infinity; Being as such, Being in general, is only revealed in *particular being*; in nature “as leaf” of “total being” (N, 204). That which is available to experience is the product inhibiting natural productivity *in a specific way*; barbaric nature reveals itself to reflection in its finite manifestations. We can thereby clearly see the similarities between Schellings approach and phenomenology. And indeed, Merleau-Ponty calls Schellings *Naturphilosophie* a “phenomenology of pre-reflective being” (N, 41).

POSITIVE PHILOSOPHY AND THE SCHELLINGIAN CIRCLE

Grounded in the prereflective common root of perception and reflection, we have, with Merleau-Ponty, said that light leads perception to a dormant meaning in the empirically available products of nature, a meaning which is liberated in reflection. Reminding ourselves of the problems of the in-itself and the for-me discussed in the first part, we can ask ourselves how this dormant meaning is transferred from perception to reflection: how is perception and

⁴ This is probably an allusion to Heraclitus, Fragment 79; “Time is a child playing draughts.”

reflection bridged in this conception of reflection *in nature*? Much like anonymous corporeal perception is described (in *Phenomenology of Perception*) as co-natural, engulfed in nature, the Schelling-inspired perception articulated here is blind, unconscious, and “incorporated into Nature” (N, 41). Perception is “nature that perceives in me” (N, 41); a proximity to the dormant meaning furnishing reflection with the grounds for awakening this meaning. While this dormant seed of meaning in the thing is revealed in perception, its meaning is only ever awakened in reflection. But as we made clear in the first part: that which is presented to reflection cannot be equated to that which is perceived, since the natural subject of corporeal perception is anonymous, sunken, or engulfed in nature, unaware of itself. In Jaspers words, cited by Merleau-Ponty, Schellings philosophy is “reflection on what is not reflection” (N, 45) and thereby needs “a consciousness that grasps [perception] from within, even though reflection is placed outside the object; a [perception] capable of radiating out without ceasing to be dispersed”. (N, 44). In other words, perception has to “take hold of itself without leaving its concrete point of view” (Ibid).

Merleau-Ponty, hand-in-hand with Schelling, wants to solve this problem through “positive philosophy”. As it has traditionally been conceived, reflection “inevitably breaks” the indivision of the perceiving body in nature, this is “negative philosophy” and the Schellingian positive philosophy attempts to undo this break. In the classical, negative conception, the abstract and categorial tendencies of reflection break with perception, in effect alienating reflection from its originary nourishment in pre-reflective, brute nature. In positive philosophy, perception is a “mirroring reflective” wherein reflection is “preliminarily recognized” in the dormant meaning revealed to perception (N, 42). Through this preliminary recognition, positive philosophy allows for thinking the perceptual non-division of subject-object on a higher level, on the level of reflection, thereby living and feeling the non-ground of *erste Natur*.

This attempt to think the indivision of perception and nature in terms of reflection results in a circling-back or double movement of, on the one hand, a return to primordial subject-object indivision of perception, and on the other, an attempt to overcome this indivision of nature in reflection (N46). This perpetual movement back and forth is not, in Merleau-Pontys words, “a checkmate in relation to our knowledge of the absolute” (N, 47). In this movement back-and-forth between perception and reflection, we find ourselves “not in front of, but in the middle of” Nature. Nature is, in a sense, this very movement. We thus find ourselves in the middle of nature as simultaneously (1) the Absolute outside of us, brute indivision exceeding us, and (2) the Absolute from the distance of ourselves; nothing other than “the relation of the Absolute to ourselves” (N, 47). Concept and nature are of the same origin (N, 186). Reflection is of nature,

and nature is of reflection; “in one sense, all is interior to us, in another sense we are in the Absolute” (N, 48). This reciprocity is possible since the finite cannot be separated from the infinite; finitude is always an infinite becoming-finite, and everything, every part of every whole, is encompassed by this temporality or productivity that cannot be grasped and that reveals its barbaric face in its finite and empirically available products. Reflection is *of Nature* since it cannot ever forget that it is exceeded by the pre-reflective, and Nature is *of reflection* since it exists in finite manifestations grasped by reflection; “not only must Nature become vision, but humanity must also become Nature” (N, 47).

Reflection does not pollute the pre-reflective. The distance between reflection and non-reflection is rather the innate withdrawal of nature within itself, which is what allows expression and meaning. An opening from a closing. And the seemingly paradoxical Schellingian circle, the double movement, need not therefore be the mark of a failed system of thought, but the “equivocation of the two movements of finite-infinite and infinite-finite” that belongs to “the very fabric of things” (N, 42). That which withdraws is inseparable from that which shows face in the originary non-division of opposing forces. We thus cannot distinguish between the infinite and the finite, since “nothing exists alone, but everything becomes” (N, 48). The infinite productivity of Nature is thus “the horizon of all reflection” within which we must confront the finite. Brute nature is not the ground of reflection, for there is no ground, the human is never “a pure and simple negation” his freedom must be understood “with all the mass he drags behind him” (Ibid).

BINOCULAR VISION AND THE CHIASM

Schellings influence on Merleau-Ponty can be recognized here as the seeds (or rather saplings) of his *ontology of the flesh*, as explicated in his last work; *The Visible and The Invisible*. Let us recall the metaphor of binocular vision to clarify this. My vision is always already dual vision; always already a unification of the vision of my two eyes. My vision is an originary unity that precedes any duality in retrospective analysis. In the same binocular sense, my perception of the thing is simultaneously for-me and in-itself, as Merleau-Ponty puts it in *Phenomenology of Perception*. The thing exists undoubtably for me in perceptual givenness and simultaneously withdraws into an infinite multiplicity of possible perspectival renderings. In a working note for his unfinished work *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty describes *chiasm* or *chiasmus* in a similar way – here comparing binocular vision to intersubjectivity:

Chiasm by which what announces itself to me as being appears in the eyes of the others to be only “states of consciousness” -- But, like the chiasm of the eyes, this one is also what makes us belong to the same world -- a world which is not projective, but forms its unity across impossibilities such as that of my world and the world of the other (VI, 214-215)

The intertwined tension is here exemplified by the simultaneous closeness and distance of the other. Myself and the other are always already in co-existence, in a “co-functioning” (VI, 215) that corresponds to our sharing of the Earth as beings of the same world. While there is truth to the distance between my own experiences and the experiences of the other, there is also truth to the bridging between us. The unique perspectives of my left eye and right eye are as impossible, retrospectively, in reflection, as the solipsistic perspectives of myself and the other. This “problem of the other eye” concerns us only in retrospect. Their unity, their co-functioning, precedes their difference, but does not falsify the retrospective analysis, at least not if we keep ontology and biology apart. The same is the case with me and the other; the difference between us always comes after our shared nature as bodies pushed down towards the same earth, the non-difference between us of walking on the same soil “which carries us” (N, 4). The chiasm names this primordial intertwining of relating to the same world. This non-difference preceding all difference. It names, just like Schellings barbarian principle, the primordial reciprocity of man and nature in which we are “the parents of a Nature of which we are also the children” (N, 43).

DEHISCENCE OF THE FLESH

This originary intertwining is carried by the encroachment of the sensing body and the sensed body. The body can touch and be touched. It is both subject and object. In this overlapping, the body “opens in two” (VI, 123) like a “dehiscence”; a rip that does not separate but that opens in two interleaving directions. It is due to this deeper belonging of sensing and sensible that I can participate in the world. I can touch things, see things, because I myself can be seen and touched. I am among the things. My feelings about the world, about other humans, my wishes upon it and needs from it are all visible in the movements that manifest themselves in these interrogations. And in this, I am abandoned to nature as nature is abandoned to me. In the same vein, Merleau-Ponty describes the body as a “being of two leaves” (VI, 137): the body is in-between-the-world, in between these two leaves of the world-tree, in between sense and sensible. In this crossingpoint, the body is self-reflexive, it is not merely a thing, but not-not a thing; it is a self-perceiving thing:

My body does not perceive, but it is as if it were built around the perception that dawns through it; through its whole internal arrangement, its sensory-motor circuits, the return ways that control and release movements, it is, as it were, *prepared* for a *self-perception*, even though it is never itself that is perceived nor itself that perceives. (VI, 9 my emphasis)

The chiasmic logic of human and world brings us back to the paradox of the simultaneous givenness and aseity of the thing, but now from thoroughly different vantage point (form a non-vantage-point, if you will). In *Phenomenology of Perception*, this paradox of the for-me and the in-itself was presented as a problem *for reflection*, for the human being – since it arose *only in reflection*, which was there conceived as an exclusively human activity. In other words, the two-faced nature of the thing did not capture their originary intertwinement since it was conceived as a division resulting from the distance between perception and reflection. The aseity of nature was regarded as a product of reflection reflecting on the limits of perception from a distance, grounded in the tacit cogito. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, through the “replacement” of the tacit cogito with the chiasmic self-reflexivity of the body, this distance is no longer the same kind of unbridgeable distance. The two-faced nature of the thing becomes a paradox inherent to all of nature. Sensing and sensed, perceiving and perceived, becomes reflecting and reflected-on. The opening and closing; presentation and withdrawal, is an originary indivision of the flesh; “The flesh of the world is indivision of this sensible Being that I am and all the rest which feels itself (*se sent*) in me, pleasure-reality indivision” (VI, 255). The body schema of the body, as a nexus of possibility and actuality, is a prototype of this universal indivision. The flesh “is a mirror phenomenon and the mirror is an extension of my relation with my body” (VI, 255). The difficulty of the thing’s double nature – its Janus faced givenness and aseity exploding the local grasp of the thing in a million different directions which draws it back into a nameless void - thus becomes Nature’s own affair, the backside of the thing in its flesh, its own distance to itself.

In relation to reflection, the aseity becomes the *silence* of nature. A silence which reflection wants to put into words. The problem of bridging perception and reflection is thus resolved since reflection is inherent to the flesh of nature. The ambiguous status of the tacit cogito – as a non-natural openness toward nature – is replaced by the chiasmic touching-touched of the self-reflexive body. Reflection no longer finds itself at a distance from perception and nature. It is implied in the non-difference of sense and sensible, as the self-reflexivity of nature. The silence or aseity of the thing speaks, it *calls for expression*; it *wants to be said*. This expression is “called forth by the voices of silence” and captured in the artwork (VI, 127). Reflection, and

language, are implicated in the very flesh of the world. And through the simultaneous distance-and-proximity of artistic expression, the voice of silent nature can be invigorated.

PART THREE: ANIMALITY

INTRODUCTION

In the second course “Animality, the Human Body, and the Passage to Culture” held between 1957 and 1958, Merleau-Ponty investigates animal being. In his readings of Gesell, Uexküll, Hardouin, and Portman, he finds an innate “mirroring reflexivity” in the relation between the animal and its milieu. This grounds his ontology; “Being cannot be defined outside of perceived being.” (N, 189). Human reflection is here no longer sharply separated from nature and animal being, but instead closely knit together with the perceiving-perceived indivision of the animal and its surroundings. Reflection is vital, it is the “coming-to-self of being” (N, 273). As such, it does not break the human off from its kinship with the animal. As we will see, the human being is here no longer marked as the exception of reflection and is therefore no longer separated from the animal and from nature. Animal perception is inherently symbolic, and human reflection originates in *bodily reflection*; “reflection in figural form” (N, 273) exemplified by the self-reflection of the touching-touched body, which feels itself touching while being touched. Merleau-Ponty here draws a lateral relation between the human and the animal. They are intertwined in an originary *Ineinander*. But before we venture down this path, we will turn to Merleau-Ponty’s early account of animality as given in *Structure of Behavior*. We do this to get sense of the development of his thinking, and to see if any strings are left untied, trailing along and possibly getting stuck in the wheels of his late ontology.

HUMAN-ANIMAL HIERARCHY

Merleau-Ponty treats the relationship between animality and reflection (life and mind) in his first book *The Structure of Behavior*. He here orders nature under three different kinds of gestalt structure; matter, life, and mind - drawing, from this, a three-level hierarchy of behavioral forms that correspond to different levels of intentional openness achieved by organisms in

relation to the world through their *Umwelts*. The nestled ordering of matter, life, and mind loosely maps onto a grouping of “lower animals”, “higher animals”, and “humans”, corresponding to the physical order, the vital order, and the human order. The human order is founded on the vital order, which is in turn founded on the physical order. This is not a founding in a reductive sense: with each order, novel properties emerge that cannot be reductively explained by the order below it (SB, 145).

In the vital order, living organisms create *virtual* conditions in their perceptual orientation toward the world. These virtual conditions constitute their relation to a milieu and are brought into existence through their activity within it (SB, 146). These organism-milieu relations – these environments or “*Umwelts*” – are “fixed” by the species-specific perceptual and behavioral structures constituting them and are thereby unchangeable for the animal organism itself. This unchangeability differentiates animal organisms from human organisms. Yet the living animal still elicits a certain freedom within its milieu; the organism itself “measures the action of things upon it and itself delimits its milieu by a circular process which is without analogy in the physical world.” (SB, 148). This free activity within the perceptively predetermined virtual structures of its environment is an exchange in the sense of “a general attitude toward the world” (SB, 148). We can thereby see the way in which vital structures introduce top-down influence, internal unity generating action from whole to part, in a manner that is irreducible to its foundation in physical structures.

In a similar way, the human structure is irreducible to its foundation in the vital structure. The human is over and above the animal, emergent from it and irreducible to it. It is, on multiple occasion stated that the animal lacks consciousness; “It goes without saying that in all the preceding discussions, and in spite of the anthropomorphic language which we have used in order to be brief, consciousness is not supposed in the animal.” (SB, 234). But this rejection of “pure consciousness” in animals, Merleau-Ponty writes, “is not to make them automations without interiority.” (SB, 126). The animal “is neither thing nor consciousness” yet “certainly *another existence*” (SB, 126-127). The extent to which the activity of the animal within its milieu amounts to “existence” depends on how much its “internal unity” is “integrated”. Whereas the animal’s circular or dialectical engagement with its environment through virtual projection of meaning is determined or fixed within the bounds of its species-specific structures, the human has the ability go outside of its structures; directing itself towards the structure of structure (SB, 162-164). In both animal and human structure, the relation of organism to environment is molded from experience, resulting in a “general power of responding to situations of a certain type by means of varied reactions which have nothing in

common but the meaning.” (SB, 130). In the case of the animal, these virtual meanings, which result in “varied reactions”, are restricted to certain a priori structures specific to its species and therefore cannot themselves be put into question. In the case of the human, however, they can. This is essentially what separates it from the human. It is this meta-orientation toward the virtual itself that opens the human organism toward “truth” and objective reality. Animality is nestled underneath, engulfed, and sunken in its milieu. This difference is not presented as a sharp division, but as a gradual overcoming or a transformation resulting in novelty. As Brian Smyth notes; “the structure of human life, rather than breaking with the vital order of animal life, dialectically sublates it.” (Smyth 2007, 184).

ARCHAEOLOGY AND TELEOLOGY

At the end of *Structure of Behavior*, Merleau-Ponty describes the problem of perception, which will remain with him throughout all of his work. As Toadvine writes, this problem entails the difficult task of resolving the *archaeology* of corporeal perception with the *teleology* of rational reflection:

We find throughout Merleau-Ponty's oeuvre two opposing tendencies ... the ‘archaeological’ and the ‘teleological’, the first oriented toward the primordial origins of consciousness in its lived perceptual situation, and the latter concerned with the development of consciousness toward rationality and objectivity (Toadvine 2009, 84; Bimbenet, 2005).

This reconciliation, when treated in *Phenomenology of Perception*, was weighed down by the trailing hierarchical subsumption of the vital under the human in *Structure of Behavior*. Merleau-Ponty, in *Structure of Behavior*, “attempted to hold together two incompatible approaches to nature” through the concept of structure: “on the one hand, Merleau-Ponty saw in vital behavior an immanent and self-organizing intelligibility. But on the other hand, his commitment to phenomenological principles required him to treat this immanent intelligibility as an object for human consciousness.” (Toadvine 2009, 90). Nature and animality was treated through the scope of embodied reflection throughout *Phenomenology of Perception*, where “the natural world ... was reduced to the advantage of an incarnated subject”, as Renaud Barbaras writes (2001, 37). Reflection-in-nature, the archaeological tendency, was treated only as a refraction through the prism of nature-in-reflection, of a corporeal perception grounding the reflective subject, which remained free from nature, upholding itself via the tacit cogito. Nature was here treated from the top-down; treated recursively as reflection gaining access to nature

by “going back” to corporeal perception, as if reflection was there first. Such an accusation might sound harsh given that Merleau-Ponty, throughout all of his work, seeks to overcome the biases of our preconceived thoughts and “put essence back into existence” (PP, vii) rather than the other way around. It might, however, sound more legitimate when considering that animality is left untreated in *Phenomenology of Perception*. In one of the few passages where animality is mentioned, he situates himself, again, in line with the opinions of Heidegger and Scheler:

Animal behavior aims at an environment (*Umwelt*) and centres of resistance (*Widerstand*). Human behavior opens upon a world (*Welt*) and upon an object (*Gegenstand*). Human life is defined by this power that it has of denying itself in objective thought, and it draws this power from its primordial attachment to the world itself. Human life “understands” not only some definite milieu, but rather an infinity of possible milieus, and it understands itself because it is thrown into a natural world. (PP, 381).

THE NOTION OF BEHAVIOR

In the second course on the concept of nature, Merleau-Ponty initiates his interrogation of life and animal being by treating the notion of behavior. He introduces George E. Coghill’s biology of behavior through his studies of the axolotl lizard, describing Coghill’s account of the development of movement from non-motile embryo to walking and swimming lizard. Behavior does not originate with nervous-system activity. There is an innate potential for growth in the body of the animal, which can be seen in the pre-neural development of movement in the axolotl. The nervous system “is not the ultimate explanation” since there is already an “intrinsic potential for growth, a dynamic system reacting to its surroundings in the manner of an organism” which renders neural conduction “a consequence and not as the principle of the system” (N, 143). The axolotl learns how to swim by way of twisting its arm-and-legless body in a repetitive manner “like a movement of waves crossing the body” (N, 141) and then “transfers” this “solution” to land, learning how to walk by way of “knowing” how to swim.

Following Coghill, Merleau-Ponty describes how “the maturation of the organism and the emergence of behavior are one and the same thing” (N, 144) and that a double movement is apparent in this maturation-and-emergence: there is first an “expanding of behavior through the whole body” an overarching scheme that “spreads throughout the whole organism” as a “total pattern”, which “invades” the subsequent development of more specialized parts (feet, forearms etc.) to the extent that these parts “acquire an existence proper to them in the very

order in which they are invaded by the total pattern” (N, 145). In other words, “at the same time that the reign of the totality is extended, this totality is translated into an organization articulated in distinct parts.” (N, 145). The whole precedes the parts and stays with them when they come into being. The fundamental process, the total pattern, is the *gestalt* of the organism. This gestalt relates to the fully fledged articulation like flight relates to wings. Merleau-Ponty makes this point by comparing the axolotl to a telephone switch, stating that “The organism is not just a telephone switchboard. In order to understand it, we must include the inventor or operator of the telephone: we could say that the axolotl is a telephone which invents and maneuvers itself” (N, 145).

It can be ascertained from the preceding that the gestalt or “total pattern” governing the development of the organism comes from within the organism itself, and that it in this sense holds a certain power of self-authorship within its own being. The organism, Merleau-Ponty writes, “is a seat of endogenous animation” and its behavior does not descend into it “like a visitation from above” (N, 150). Totality is something different from its parts, yet not an exteriority determining it from without. Consequently, the organism is to be considered as a field of material and spirit; “it is both physical being and a meaning.” (N, 150).

Merleau-Ponty speaks of a “rupture of equilibrium” that marks the end of the development of the organism - the introduction of balance in this double movement of maturation and behavior. The gestalt is a dynamic principle, an outline that constitutes “a factor of imbalance” in the embryo precisely because its power – “what it can do” – is a “reference to the future” (N, 144) in the sense of “fixing the conditions for future balance” (N, 156). This power is thus a directing principle or outline within which particularities are bound; “a hollowed-out design of a certain style of action” that stays with the growing morphology of the organism, rather than determining it beforehand. This double movement of fledging growing within a certain structure is called “interrogative being” (N, 156), and it defines life for Merleau-Ponty. The interrogative being is a *fold* within nature “that gives meaning to its surroundings” (Ibid) in the chiasmic sense of a dehiscence that opens up as a self-interrogation or self-expression of nature. The individual is never truly individuated from nature, yet nature does not fully circumscribe the mirroring reflective that opens with the individual. An animal is “borne by an infrastructure of being” (N, 120) as a sensing and sensible body within the flesh of the world. Within the bounds of the specific body of the animal, it questions itself in a self-sensing negativity (Ibid). With this, reflection is already sunken in nature as waves through the folds of life through the dehiscence that opens a “mirroring reflective” in nature. It is in this sense that nature is in the “interrogative mode,” as we said earlier.

UMWELT

Merleau-Ponty outlines and interprets the work of J. von Uexküll. Life as interrogative being must be understood as “the opening of a field of action”, Merleau-Ponty writes. The animal, he continues, “is produced by the production of a milieu, that is, by the appearing in the physical world of a field radically different from the physical world with its specific temporality and spatiality.” (N, 173). This is the essence of the concept of *Umwelt*; the shaping of a particular way of *rendering* the world. Yet to the extent that this way of shaping the world defines life becomes problematic when considering “lower animals” that seem to “receive nothing from the exterior world” (169). Behavior in these “animal machines” is handled by pre-defined structural organization working in a manner of machine-like response - the “Bauplan” as Uexküll calls it (N, 171). The *Umwelts* of these “lower animals” entail a closing off from the world, rather than an opening towards it. The lower animal is molded within its milieu “more surely than the infant in its cradle” (N, 170).

Yet Merleau-Ponty notes that Uexküll moves beyond his Kantian influence when conceiving of the *Bauplan* as the visible veil concealing a hidden *Naturfaktor*; “the structure that hides the construction of the structure” (N, 169). This Schellingian conception of the *Bauplan* as product, as the manifestation of productivity, points us towards Merleau-Ponty’s reading: the animal, in contrast to the machine, is always an organism – regenerative and a constructor of forms. The amoeba provides an example: here the *Bauplan* is endlessly recreated, the legs and stomach (pseudopods and vacuoles) are born anew in every; the amoeba “creates organs like a magician ... it is continuous birth, pure production, ‘much less machine than a horse’, according to Uexküll” (N, 170). Merleau-Ponty continues:

The protozoans offer us a marvelous spectacle, as if our machines and our horses were born of a sort of purée, and each room in the house contained a reserve of this purée, in a way to assure the repair of the machine, or better, in a way to assure the reproduction and multiplication of the machine. (N, 170)

Lower animals “are moved” by the *Bauplan* - and can be understood as machines in this sense – yet this remains a metaphor or a grasp since they are simultaneously the enjoinder of multitudes of protoplasmic cells that reproduce themselves, unlike any machine. Coming back to the *Umwelt* then, what essentially separates the lower animal from the so called “higher

animal” it that the behavior of the of the former does not unfurl towards an outside. There is no outside, since there is no inside; the lower animal is a “collective animal” (169). For higher animals the *Umwelt* is an opening rather than a closing, they *are* their *Bauplan* to the extent that they engage with it as active agents. Whereas the urchin *is moved* by its legs, “the dog, and above all the human ... move themselves” (N, 209). The world is “distilled” or “possessed” by the animal because the nervous system creates a “copy” of the exterior world which allows it to separate itself from it. The *Umwelt* of higher animals is thus possessed as something that can be managed, an *interiorized* milieu that, through neural elaboration of exterior stimuli, opens towards *the world as object*. This is what sets the higher animal apart; “here is the absolute novelty; a neoformation”, as Merleau-Ponty puts it. The higher animal in this sense “dominates its *Umwelt*” (N, 221) whereas the lower animal is caught in it, swallowed by it.

But while the *Umwelt* in this sense is the “grill interposed between the animal and the world” or the specific way the world is rendered through its sense organs, it does not lock the animal in a narrow cavity; there is a displaceability or flexibility to it since it is the overcoming of chaos, the shelter from the storm. In this sense, it is also a “surplus of signification on the surface of objects” (N, 172) which overrides and shapes with respect to action and movement. The production of a milieu can thus be regarded as the intertwinement of imagination and perception.

The *Umwelt* is an “intermediate reality” that marks the difference between the world for an absolute objectivity and a pure subjectivity; the in-itself and the for-me (N, 167). It is “the aspect of the world in itself to which the animal addresses itself” its slice of reality - exteriority shaped through perceptual organization which “exists for the behavior of the animal, but not necessarily its consciousness” (Ibid). Consciousness, regarded thus as a specific type of behavior, is characterized by the experience of “a closed world where external stimulations appear to it as outside of it” (N, 167). It is not “defined from within” and is thereby liberated from its necessary attachment to behavioral authorship, conceived instead as a variation of behavior, a certain kind of *Umwelt*.

From animal-machines to animal-consciousness “there is everywhere an unfurling of an *Umwelt*” Merleau-Ponty writes (N, 173). This unfurling is “the production of a milieu ... like a melody that is singing itself” (Ibid). Nature sings itself through the animal being; “the melody is incarnated and finds in the body a type of servant” (N, 174). The melody contains its whole buildout within the first note, it cannot be understood if its parts are analyzed in isolation. The same holds true for the behavior of the animal in its *Umwelt*: there is a certain holistic dynamism to it, the parts are always already interlinked, just like the development of swimming

and walking in Coghill's lizard. Merleau-Ponty's description of the maturation and behavior of the tick provides an example:

The tick parasitizes on the mammal. At its birth it has neither feet nor sexual organs; it fixes on a cold-blooded animal, like a lizard, acquires its sexual maturity, and breeds, but the semen is kept in reserve, encapsulated in it the stomach. The tick installs itself in a tree and can wait for eighteen years. It doesn't have eyes, ears, or taste. It has only a sense for light, a thermal sense, and a sense of smell. What makes it leave its dormancy is the smell of the sudoripary glands of mammals. It falls on the mammal, seeks out a place without hair, settles in and nourishes itself on warm blood. The presence of this warm blood makes the semen come out of its capsule; the egg of the animal is inseminated, and the animal dies after procreation. (Ibid).

How is this behavior to be understood? The tick plays its melody in counterpoint with its *Umwelt*. The *Umwelt* of the tick "chokes the world" (Ibid) at every step of action and environmental response. A joint symphony is initiated when the mammal-interlocutor enters the tick's sphere of sensitivity, and the chain of action is constructed anew at every joint, by the animal's own movement. Each movement calls forth responses from the milieu, that elicit responses from the animal: "each action of the milieu is conditioned by the action of the animal" (N, 175). The world moves with the movements of the tick, all inside the sphere of concrete givenness afforded by its sensory structures, its anatomy. We cannot understand what is happening here if we divide it into isolated happenings; just like the tones making up a melody, each part of the situation functions only as part of the whole situation. This is what the notion of the *Umwelt* conveys – a relation of *meaning* between organism and milieu – described by Merleau-Ponty as "a beginning of culture" (N, 176).

THE MAGIC OF ANIMAL MIMICRY

Interpreting Hardouin's study of animal mimicry and Portman's study of animal appearance, Merleau-Ponty arrives at similar conclusions and articulates this "nature singing itself through the animal" as a *lateral* relation between human and non-human animal. Hardouin's studies of animal mimicry reveal an indivision between the animal and its surroundings, a kind of contamination between them which speaks of their transgressive expressivity. Mimicry is not just camouflage in the sense of fixed homochromy; "polar fauna is white" and "in an arborescent milieu, numerous insects are the same color as the trees." (N, 184). It cannot be explained through *utility*, since certain animals "have ornamentation that not only are not useful, but complicate their existence." (Ibid). There is more to mimicry than the utility of

camouflage, it speaks of the inherent expressivity of nature, the morphogenesis in the design of expression (N, 184).

The “magic” of animal mimicry, of an animal looking like its surroundings (or another animal) is just as miraculous as the appearance of the sense organ in nature. Like magic, it seems like something that appears out of nothing; an unfolding of the flesh, looking back at itself. The perceiving sense organ appears in nature; a material configuration exposed and disposed to other material configurations. Nature turns itself inside out, mirrors itself (N, 186). In relation to this, Merleau-Ponty states that “the advent of consciousness” is not more clear, not less miraculous, than this “indivision between the outward appearance of the animal, like the zebra, and its surroundings” - in both cases “there is a contamination” (ibid). In the same paragraph, he connects this contamination to Schelling and the impurity of meaning: ”Concept and Nature are of the same origin” (Ibid). The ideality of the concept necessarily refers to the guttery and soiled impurity of finite embodiment. Meaning is here not separable from the concrete world-dialogue of the body, and this implies a certain erasure of the division between human and animal. The relation is no longer hierarchical, but lateral.



ZEBRA - CONTAMINATED BY THE SURROUNDING DEADWOOD⁵

Through Portman’s study of animal appearance, Merleau-Ponty finds a similar *self-expressivity* inherent in the flesh of nature through the sensing-sensible body of the animal. The relation between the animal and its milieu cannot be “a physical relation in the narrow sense of the

⁵ Rei, 2004 “A Zebra mother nursing her young among deadwood” accessed 2023-12-22 from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Zebra_camouflage.jpg

term” (N, 189). Behavior is neither reducible to physical causality nor to Darwinian utility. *Animals are meant to be seen*. They mirror each other, each is the mirror of the other in a lateral intersubjectivity termed *interanimality* or *Ineinander*. We cannot speak of a species as a group of separate individuals; we must speak of an intertwining where animals are visible to each other in mutual exposure, ontologically a-part of each other as kins. This is not a point made with reference to herd animals; it applies just as much to the mutual visibility of predator and prey. Like the contamination between animal and surroundings “everything happens as if there were an indivision, a perceptual relation between the two” (N, 189). It is in this innate perceptual life of nature that Merleau-Ponty finds the grounds for his ontology: “What mimicry seems to establish ... is that behavior can be defined only by a perceptual relation and that Being cannot be defined outside of perceived being.” (Ibid).

INEINANDER

As noted earlier in this text, Merleau-Ponty seemed to be aware of the reflexivity of the human body already in *Phenomenology of Perception*. But he did not allow himself to articulate it fully, speaking of it merely as “a sort of reflection” (PP, 95). In the third course on nature, called “Nature and Logos: the human body” he is more explicit about the reflexivity of the body:

We understand here that the human body is, for the human, not the stand-in for or lining of his “reflection,” but rather reflection in figural form (the body touching itself, seeing itself), nor is the world an inaccessible in-itself, but “the other side” of his body. (N, 268)

The visible body is the flesh of the world, which splits itself in a dehiscence of the visible and the invisible, in a “coming-to-self of Being”; a distancing of being from itself, a *Selbstung* or “selfing” without any notion of a subject (N, 268). It is “starting from the visible that we can understand the invisible”; “starting from the sensible that we can understand Being, its latency, its unveiling.” (Ibid). From this follows that the animal cannot be seen as nestled under the overarching human. The relation between human and animal “is not a hierarchical relation, but lateral, an overcoming that does not abolish kinship.” (Ibid). Humanity, in its specific corporeity, is also inter-animality; “in a relation of intercorporeity in the biosphere with all animality” (Ibid). The human being thus cannot be defined as that which is not the animal:

We must say: animality and human being are given only together, within a whole of Being that would have been visible ahead of time in the first animal had there been someone there to read

it. (...) life teaches us not only the union of our soul and our body, but also the lateral union of animality and humanity. (N, 271)

This originary kinship is to be understood as “our projection-introjection, our *Ineinander* with Sensible Being and with other corporeities” (N, 271). Reflection, in the sense of higher-order reflection or *cerebral* activity, is not something that descends into the human body; there is “a deep simultaneity between this body and this reflection” (N, 273). Reflection thus cannot be seen as something separable from its embodied nourishment.

CHIMERIC MIMICRY

With this perceptual ontology, Merleau-Ponty conceives of nature as innately self-expressive or self-reflective. From an archaeological perspective, the logic behind this expressivity can be thought of as *the origin of perceptivity as inter-perceptivity*; animals developing *sensing* in conjunction with (inseparable form) *being sensed* by other sensing organisms. This is interanimality, the irreducible *Ineinander*.

Animals are meant to be seen, as Merleau-Ponty shows with reference to Portman. The ontology of the flesh is the dehiscence of touching-touched, seeing-seen, sensing-sensed. In the third course, which is presented as the climactic summit of the three courses taken together, it becomes apparent that Merleau-Ponty’s interest lies in what this bidirectional metamorphosis can teach us about ourselves, about the human and human reflection and meaning in its teleological blossoming; “It is to give this depth to the human body, this *archaeology*, this natal past, this phylogenetic reference (...) that we have given such a large place to the theory of evolution” (N, 273). He is thus speaking about the *Ineinander* as something innate to life, something shared by all animals, including humans - perception; reflection “in figural form”; a symbolism “of non-division”, a “latent, blind meaning” innate to the sensing-sensed of humanity and animality (N, 226). He shows that human reflection, in its teleology, diverges from this innate ability to sense, and it cannot be defined in isolation from this symbolic life of perception. The visibility of the visible is thus the lifegiving spring of the invisibility of the invisible, even if access to the invisible is precisely that which separates higher-order human reflection from lower-order animal reflection – reflection “in figural form”.

We may here ask if this human teleology is *the* teleology? Is “higher order thought” - human reflection - *the one kind of reflection*? This question can be construed as impossible to answer from within human reflection, given that one has a certain understanding of the nature of identity and difference. But Merleau-Ponty’s account of interanimality as this Ur-reflection

provides the resources for another perspective, another logic where I am both human and non-human. We traverse into a territory of simultaneous kinship and estrangement; a territory of strange intertwinements with other animals. We venture into the chimerical space comprised of, on the one hand, the sharp particularity of species-specificity, of individuality within species, a space of pure otherness where singular embodiments shape singular worlds. And on the other hand, the blending and intertwining of bodies within a visible collectivity, the shared world of communication. The principal question reveals itself here, in this chiasm of particularity and generality, singularity and plurality: how are we to understand the nature of thought given this chimeric dialectic? Do our particular bodies and comportment mark an incipient decision for what our reflection is and can ever be? Do other non-human animal bodies comprised of other sensory organs and other motilities open towards other possibilities in terms of reflection and imagination?

We are indeed alluding to such “teleologies” with these questions. In the bodies of other creatures, in their peculiar behavioral forms and ways of being in the world, one can get the sense of “dormant teleologies”; *possible* forms of reflective, imaginative, creative behavior that have not yet blossomed. One can also see (and one does not have to look far in this case) creatures that already display expressive and imaginative behavior (recall Dolly’s milk-smoking, for instance). We thus do not, with these speculations, close ourselves to the possibility of overlap and metaphoric kinship between the reflective activities of different animals. With that said, it is interesting to explore the ontological consequences of pushing estrangement to its limit.

We can imagine a sort of “ground-plan” as making up what we call “animal”; multicellular interanimality as something akin to what Godfrey-Smith (2016) conceives of as the origin of the predator-prey relation 500 million years ago – the first meeting between self and other. It diverges out into vastly different embodiments, vastly different sensitivities; evolving over unfathomable timespans in shifting environments as ever-shedding skins. A body grows in a certain direction – a certain inhibition of productivity, in Schellings terms - then circumstances change, the environment changes, new animals venture into the same space, evolve into new bodies within the same territory, and so they intertwine – many different combinations of animals intertwine, resulting in the chimeric beings that dwell on earth today. They grow together in bidirectional metamorphosis, giving and taking from each other in dialogue within the flesh, mutations spark - new directions – increased sophistication in directions already initiated, death, extinction. They parasite on each other, divulge on the blood of the other, live in the eye of the other. This every growing, ever evolving organism somehow “remembers”

what it has been; it *cannot forget*, it cannot *start completely anew*, it always retorts to an archaic body ground-plan, to previous decision. This is the kinship and estrangement of the *Ineinander* – of this “in-the-other” - and it sheds light on the complexity of evolutionary divergence; species *becoming their own* way while always remaining together, intertwined in a shared world, and springing from an archaic past. Indeed, with Merleau-Ponty, we can say that kinship does not break with estrangement: “the human and animal bodies are homonyms” (N, 272). The irreducible *Ineinander* is the simultaneity of the same and the other. Identity need not abolish difference.

I am irreducibly interpenetrated by the chimera that therefore I am. But this word, “the animal”, still haunts us, as Derrida shows (2002: 23). While it fixes our attention on the *Ineinander*, the overlap, the kinship between ourselves and “other animals,” we cannot shake its historical baggage as the handle of a mass-lobotomization. Even if we keep ourselves fixed on the kinship, on the similarities, we still run the risk of flattening or obliterating all that which remains outside of the circumference drawn out by the overlap. We risk amputating the bodies of other creatures if we force the one-sided perspective of empathy and understanding. But if we allow ourselves to go outside of the circumference, outside of the overlap, and look back at it from without, without forgetting it—we might see it shimmering in new colors. Chimerical colors, chimeric shapes. The irreducible *Ineinander* surely remains the ground of any communication, but if we allow otherness sticking out on the sides, we open ourselves towards *the new*, to *surprise*, to meeting these estranged kins of ours in inter-specific improvisation, in the vertical topology of a share world.

OTHER INVISIBLES

This chimeric reflection opens towards the possibility of other kinds of invisible folds within the visible. Of other versions, styles, or modes within the visible-invisible, perhaps unilluminable by the light projecting from the human eye. In Merleau-Ponty’s last published essay, “Eye and Mind,” he speaks of the invisible as accessible only through the creative expression of painting. This seems to seclude the expression of the invisible within the ocular activity of painting. Merleau-Ponty speaks of painting, and consequently of the eye and the brush-wielding hand, as privileged in the investigation of ontology since it makes possible a suspension of the world not found in other art forms, like music or writing. Painting is suggested to exclusively hold the power of disclosing the invisible sheath of the flesh, while music, he writes, “is too far on the hither side of the world and the designatable to depict

anything but certain schemata of Being—its ebb and flow, its growth, its upheavals, its turbulence” (EM, 123).

This recalls the metaphor of the unfurling of the *Umwelt* as “a melody that is singing itself” (N, 173). The growth, the upheavals, the turbulence expressed in music would be expressions of the visible. Music would reveal the ebb and flow of the sensing-sensible animal in its entrancement within the visible “like a pure wake that is related to no boat” (N, 176) - whereas painting would cut right into the thing, suspending it in its particularity, revealing to the observing eye *the* invisible intertwined within the visible. But would we not go against Merleau-Ponty himself if we allow for the privileged expression of this “the”? Does painting not rather reveal *our way* of making invisible folds within the visible, *our* specific carvings of the thing in the *Abschattungen* available to us, of awakening the dormant meaning in the things as lead by the light? - A certain meaning revealed in a certain touching. Might we not, as Ted Toadvine suggests, “listen more carefully to the contrapuntal refrains that constitute each organism’s characteristic style of singing the world[?]” (2009, 95). We can, with Merleau-Ponty, hold true that Cezanne’s landscapes do reveal invisible sheaths of the flesh, but we might still ask ourselves if these revelations are restricted to the specificity of the human invisible? If painting is posited as *the universal ontological expression*, the artistic expressivity of the non-human animal is preemptively castrated. Can we not regard painting as a truth, that discloses a certain way of being in the world, a certain human way of existing and relating to nature? If any art form were to be deemed expressive of ontological universality, one might think it would be the musical chords and scales resonating in the *Ineinander*, including all the other beings in its chorus as it reveals the rhythms of sensible Being? Such a view would not close the door to the truth of the peculiar expression; the expression of the particular invisible would still be *true* in its proximity to itself, in its own sphere of Being, but it would in principle be de-universalized. All universal claims to ontology could still be disavowed. There would be no *privileged* expression of particular invisibles.

The question we might ask ourselves is how the peculiar corporeity of other animals ground wholly other ways of “singing the world”. This question, making use of the term “reflection,” tries to challenge the very normativity or homogeneity of it. If we, with Merleau-Ponty, think of higher order reflection as *distance*, as the ability to direct oneself toward the directedness itself, toward one’s own relation to an *Umwelt*, we seem to be heading in a direction which would flatten other kinds of reflection. We seem to be heading towards a *general notion*; “reflection” – which, as Derrida shows, harmonizes with the general notion of “the animal” – here understood as the ability to separate oneself from the concrete, from entrancement within

the immediacy of an *Umwelt*; the closure of self-reference enabling world-relation, openness, and the freedom of authorship. In another word: consciousness, defined by Merleau-Ponty as “a closed world where external stimulations appear to it as outside of it” (N, 167). While Merleau-Ponty seems to regard reflection and consciousness as demarcating this activity of distancing oneself – and which is unique to humans in its fully fledged expression - he no longer looks at it hierarchically, as a higher form subsuming the lower animal forms, but as “one of the varied forms of behavior” (N, 167).

Merleau-Ponty’s interanimality is thus an expression of a lateral relationship between human and animal, yet our preoccupation is brought to its head as a consideration of the ontological stakes of this laterality. Merleau-Ponty suggests that the animal desires, while still separating this “animal” from “the human”; “Human desire emerges from animal desire” (N, 288). He erases the line and draws a new, different kind of line – a line that includes the animal but is still a line demarcating an ontological abode within which we are now searching for inhabitants. And the next question – the one after ‘who lives here?’ – becomes ‘how do they live?’ And we ask ourselves if this second question turns the first one on its head.

If we , with Merleau-Ponty, consider human reflection and meaning as built on or instituted by the oneiric language of the body - on the general frame of the desiring animal – while simultaneously considering that the laterality of *Ineinander* breaks apart the very notion of “the animal” and opens toward a multiplicity of particularities, human reflection is disclosed to us as a finite outgrowth of a certain shoot of a rhizomatic laterality. Human reflection is not fully grown, and it does not grow towards some Great Purpose of Absolute Disclosure. Its light cannot illuminate the other folds within the flesh, and it shines the brightest when it moves in counterpoint, aware of its limitations.

O O O

After all of the above, we might revisit the thing in its aseity: it shimmers in prismatic multitudes. Its aseity is its withdrawal to the non-specific multiplicity of the not-yet-incarnated angles and vantage-points exceeding any one perspective. It withdraws into its sides as rendered by different kinds of eyes, different kinds of ears, different kinds of nostrils. Its aseity whispers of renderings through species-specific sensory structures. These points of view-and-appearance hide within the thing in its fullness, within its objective horizon – this is also a withdrawal, a withdrawal of being - the thing holds these perspectives within a multi-

dimensional inaccessibility. Must not any claim to universality find its contours against the abyssal backdrop of this aseity?

Walking, then, hand-in-hand with Merleau-Ponty on the right, and the chimera on the left, we must still ground all our speculations about “other negative folds” or “other invisibilities,” in corporeal perception; in the visible bodies of beings engulfed in brute nature, since any manner of reflection must ground itself in the originary symbolism of corporeal perception – in “the life of perception” which is “the language before [any] language” (N, 219). In other words, if we are to think other distances, we must first think other embodiments or proximities. And if we squint our eyes and lend a chimeric ear to the many voices of the forest, we step back into an incipient abode by abiding our own singularity to a plurality of other singulars. Only thereby can we let ourselves be, only in this listening to the others in our midst can we understand ourselves and our relation to the nature from which we spring.

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