

"EACH AUTHENTICALLY  
EMBODIED STEP IS THE  
WALK OF NATURAL HISTORY"

G l e n M a z i s \*

I. Introduction: For Merleau-Ponty to be  
Human is to be "Natural Historical"

Maurice Merleau-Ponty taught a course at the *Collège de France* during the academic year 1956–1957 entitled "The Concept of Nature" and began the course by asking the question of his students, "Can we validly study the notion of nature?"<sup>1</sup> Whereas Aristotle thought that the human being could not adequately describe the sense of the world without carefully observing the varieties of other living beings in the natural world and classifying them, by the time Merleau-Ponty asked this question of his students it had come to be assumed by many that the idea of nature was itself just a cultural artifact, an epiphenomenon. Merleau-Ponty addresses this suspicion he knows his students harbor by challenging their assumptions in phrasing his next question: "Isn't it [nature] something other than the product of a history, in the course of which it acquired a series of meanings by rendering it intelligible?" Whereas for Aristotle, it was obvious that there are other orders of beings, which humans must confront as having another sort of nature and as part of a more encompassing natural world, a world of which the human is a part but which the human also transcended in virtue of its specific human capacities, for the students of Merleau-Ponty's class, it seemed that the exercise of abstract reason and language traps humanity in a self-enclosure in such a way that it had become dubious whether the natural world could be encountered in its own terms. Merleau-Ponty's students would suspect

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<sup>1</sup> Merleau-Ponty, M. (2003), *Nature: Course Notes from the Collège de France* (translated by Robert Vallier). Evanston: Northwestern University Press, p. 3.

that either nature is mute, or the power of language and reason are so great that humans give nature whatever voice it might appear to have as a trick of human ventriloquism. This skeptical situation has deepened since Merleau-Ponty addressed his students. Even though for Aristotle, human being's rationality was unique and uniquely valuable, humanity was still a part of an encompassing whole moving towards actualization. As Merleau-Ponty points out in the beginning of his course as he discusses Aristotle's approach to nature, Aristotle's *finalist* understanding articulated qualitatively defined regions of natural phenomena such that "nature is the more or less successful realization of this qualitative destining of bodies."<sup>2</sup> This understanding establishes the encompassing of humanity within nature. In realizing their potentialities, human and nature are woven together. It is through the meaning resulting from their structure and function that varied purposes emerge within this totality. Even though this notion seems outdated, it is often the rationale of a "natural history:" to comprehend the variety of phenomena that encompass human being within this whole, and to grasp our place within its scheme—both within the history of its unfolding and in the comparisons of structure and function within it.

Merleau-Ponty at the beginning of the course distinguishes the other idea of nature that has been dominant with the tradition of philosophy from the Greeks to modern Europeans—Descartes' idea of "nature as the idea of an entirely exterior being, made of external parts, exterior to man and to itself, as a pure object."<sup>3</sup> This idea of nature also dates back to the Greeks, Merleau-Ponty notes, but became dominant with Descartes and Newton. In this vision, nature is something alongside us or stretching out before us and easily becomes something to be exploited for humanity's purposes. The lack of meaning within nature and its loss as a voice to which to hearken is summed up by Merleau-Ponty in stating that, "Nature thus becomes a synonym of existence in itself, without orientation, without interior. It no longer has orientation. What we thought earlier as orientation is now only mechanism."<sup>4</sup> If this

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

were to be the case, then Descartes' dualism of an immaterial thinking substance confronting an extended material world means that natural history aims at the comprehension of those determinate processes that interact in causal chains and have an ongoing impact on the material conditions of human life. This conception of nature is resonant with the "two cultures" that evolved between the sciences and the humanities, even though "natural history" usually denotes the more qualitative exploration of this material surround than the more strictly quantifiable approach of natural philosophy. Within this understanding, natural history is the study of a certain set of material entities and their interactions that lie in front and around human being, allowing them to be grasped as a system that might be manipulated and utilized for our ends. The attempted unification of nature and subjectivity as undertaken by the Romantics is also explored by Merleau-Ponty early in this course, but for him, it does not break out of the dualisms inherent in the treatment of nature within a tradition that opposes mechanism to meaning, individuals to totality, and matter to spirit, always reducing the dichotomies to the favored term of the particular argument.

Merleau-Ponty followed this initial course with two other courses about the concept of nature: the 1957–1958 course entitled "Animality, the Human Body, and the Passage to Culture" and also the course of 1959–1960 entitled "Nature and Logos: The Human Body." By the end of this third course, Merleau-Ponty had sketched out an approach to nature that does not mesh with traditional perspectives on the human relationship with the natural world, dispenses with the dichotomies that comprise the traditional articulation of this relationship, and uses another logic to recast its structure. In Merleau-Ponty's path of thought, nature becomes something unimagined by the tradition. In accomplishing this new formulation of the human relationship with nature, he fulfilled the promise he had announced at the very beginning of the first course to discover another kind of nature: "Nature is the primordial ... It is our soil [*sol*] — not what is in front of us, facing us, but rather, that which carries us."<sup>5</sup> The key for Merleau-Ponty for rethinking nature is the same key he used to unlock other philosophical problems: realizing

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

the primordially of embodying being<sup>6</sup> that led him to an “ontology of the flesh of the world.” In Merleau-Ponty’s articulation, the world comes forth within the layers of perception of an embodying being, such that there is a “vertical visible world,”<sup>7</sup> and the natural world is comprehended as an interpenetrating layer with the human and cultural world. Furthermore, this verticality of comprehension is also an unfolding process, in which the perceiver is perceptible and perceives in a fashion that the sense which emerges in perception seems to be also comprised by the additional sense offered *as if* perceived by the world itself of the perceiver and the world. This notion that the perceiver takes in what is beyond its own perception as a constitutive part of its own perception is Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the “reversibility” of perception. As we will explore these ideas in their relationship to natural history, we will see that humans are not capable of taking in the world about them unless the world itself is part of that process. There is only a kind of *co-perceiving* accomplished together by humans and world.

However, in contrast to the philosophical tradition that precedes him, Merleau-Ponty does not describe this interweavement, as he calls it, by postulating the subsumption of perception by an Oversoul or a notion of spirit or even transcendental consciousness that would be totalizing and transcendent to the concrete circumstances of perception. Rather, the co-perception of perceiver and natural world arises from the ongoing interplay of the contingent and necessary, not as simply opposed to one another, but rather as belonging to an ongoing dialectic. For Merleau-Ponty the “the perpetual reordering of fact and hazard by a reason non-existent before and without those circumstances,” as stated early in his project at the beginning of the *Phenomenology of Perception*, means that what is encountered within the situation becomes the very

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<sup>6</sup> Throughout this essay when possible, I will use the phrase “embodying being” instead of the more common term “embodiment” in order to indicate this is a process, a continual movement, and a dynamism of the becoming of embodied relations. It will indicate the sense of the body should be taken not as a description of “the body” as a noun, nor should “embodiment” be taken as the embodying of “something” as if it were a substance, but rather embodying is gerundial—in the way that Heidegger’s use of *Sein* is about the be-ing, the worlding of the world, without anything underlying as a foundation.

<sup>7</sup> Merleau-Ponty, M., *Visible*, op. cit., p. 236.

means of ordering our perception to comprehend the situation.<sup>8</sup> Nature in its perceived sense, as well as other dimensions of existence, is not the result of *a priori* universalizable and formal structures nor is it merely given, but rather emerges from the ongoing interweaving of the relationships in its historical unfolding such that "there is no longer any way of distinguishing a level of a priori truths from factual ones" (PP 221). There is no realm of intelligibility of human beings or sphere of interiority that is not equally in the world and its materially grounded sense. Yet, materiality is not mutely, obstinately confronting us, but has beckoned us to enter a dialogue of emerging sense with it through the unfolding of perception and our bodily matching of its rhythms and textures. Human being in its relationship to the natural world can not be named by any term among the traditional dichotomies. The logic of Merleau-Ponty is not the logic of "the one" of monism or "the two" of dualism, but rather is a logic of "not-one-not-two" in which human being and the natural world come forth together.

Natural history is in part a recognition that the earth has a vast history and that the natural world has rhythms and characteristics stemming from an ancient past to which humans and all living beings have had to adapt and that has molded the inanimate natural world into varied identities that are testimony to those eons of interaction. The study of natural history as revealing the essence or characteristics of various regions of the natural world always shows itself against this background of this great expanse of time. Yet, expressed and conceived in this manner, this sense of the historical dimension of natural history is a phenomenon comprised of cause and effect chains of events. It is a linear sense of time. It is also a conception of time that drives a further wedge into the dualistic disjunction between human being and the natural world. Whether we are considering the natural history of the cosmos, the galaxy, or even just our planet, the expanse of time of this linear sense of time dwarfs the comparable history of the human species. Within this asymmetry of histories, the natural world seems to be of a different temporal order and a different register of being than human being. Given the human pace of transformation of the surround in our short history, there seems

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<sup>8</sup> Merleau-Ponty, M., *Phenomenology*, op. cit, p. 127.

a disjunction between the natural world as being merely there, evolving, transforming, certainly, but not with the alacrity that may seem to bespeak a different order of purpose, intelligibility and value. There seem to be two temporal orders and two orders of being, as if there is human history as differentiated from natural history, that humans in their accelerated and compacted history transcend natural history. In this second history, it seems as if the being of the human is here to remake the being of the natural world as following its own destiny, one which may depart from that of the natural world. In general, the historical sense or historical being is taken to be the creation of human self-awareness, rationality and language. Humans are often thought to be those beings through whom history first comes to consciousness and articulation—a presumption that also is taken to separate the history of humanity from the vast natural history of the world that is passing by unnoticed within the darkness of that night populated by all the nonrational beings of the natural world.

In looking at Merleau-Ponty's comments about the relationship of human being and the natural world in his late 1950's lectures about nature, in his early work and in his last unfinished work, *The Visible and the Invisible*, this essay will assert that "natural history" emerges as a depth within the "lived time" of human temporality. Despite the human pretension to introducing the historical sense into the world, the deepest history surrounds us in the natural world not as just a fact of linear time to be discovered by the human sciences, but as a presence—the sense of what each being is in the natural world resounds with a "natural history" that seems at the heart of perceiving the natural world for what it is. This is the founding sense of the history of the natural world and perhaps in some ways even of any sense of the historical. It is also the founding sense of natural history as the study of the natural world insofar as we find ourselves only as echoes of this resounding at the heart of the natural world. To walk through the natural world is to experience a density below one's feet reverberating within the surround of an ancient temporality, a density of co-presences of untold and unfathomable comings and goings that still support and beckon to us. Merleau-Ponty suggests that to have a perceiving body of the kind we have as human beings is to be in some sense "natural-historical". When a sense of this

being a dimension of our being is lost, a depth of humanity's meaning here on earth is lost. Merleau-Ponty only moved towards suggesting these insights gradually, and in fragments within his work that this essay will attempt to assemble.

## II. Embodying Being is Time and Time Is in the Depths of the World: *Phenomenology of Perception*

In the beginning of the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty poses many questions to be explored, most of them concerning the nature of perception, but he acknowledges that the empiricist and intellectualist distortions of perception and of embodying being have also led to a false picture of nature and puts among his tasks that "We shall therefore have to rediscover the natural world too."<sup>9</sup> In actuality, Merleau-Ponty will not get to this task until two decades later in his last years of lecture courses and writings, right before his sudden death. As he says in an often cited "working note" of July, 1959, included in *The Visible and Invisible*, the problems posed in the *Phenomenology of Perception* were insoluble using the traditional philosophical terms and concepts and had to await his finding new ones. This seems particularly true of describing the relationship between humans and the natural world. However, there are some interesting hints in the *Phenomenology of Perception* that should be noted as laying the ground for his later formulations.

In the beginning of the first chapter, in which Merleau-Ponty starts to sketch out his idea of perception and embodying being,<sup>10</sup> he articulates how the body's role in the process of perception enacts a dispersal throughout its surround. This dispersal at first seems as if it might be merely spatial but is revealed to even be more fundamentally temporal. For Merleau-Ponty, to become concentrated upon perceiving an object is "to respond to this summons" upon my body. Our embodied being is solicited by aspects of the surround to be perceived. Furthermore, "to look at the object is to plunge oneself into it" such that "I become an-

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>10</sup> After his introductory chapter deconstructing several key ideas from the tradition about perception.

chored in it.”<sup>11</sup> Embodying being extends beyond its literal bounds to circulate within that which is perceived or as Merleau-Ponty will phrase this more powerfully in his last published essay, “Vision is not a certain mode of thought or presence to self; it is the means given to me for being absent from myself, for being present at the fission of Being from the inside—the fission at whose termination, and not before, I come back to myself.”<sup>12</sup> By contrast, within the traditional empiricist or intellectual account of perception there is a gap between the object and the distanced perceiver that either results in a mechanical response through causal intermediaries or an immaterial mental representation. Merleau-Ponty details how the body overlaps with the perceived, in the language of the early work, or is a fold of the flesh of the world back upon itself, in the terms of the later works. In the *Phenomenology of Perception*, this moment of perception is called one of “communion.”<sup>13</sup> Yet, this is not the coincidence of two objects in space, for embodying being is not a specific location in space as defined by locating it in a Cartesian grid of points, but is rather throughout its surround. If “to look at an object is to inhabit it,” as Merleau-Ponty says, and if “every object is the mirror of all others,” as he also says, then in this moment of seeing, the embodying being is caught up in the mirror-play among all the objects within the surround.<sup>14</sup> The body circulates within the surround to take up the vantage points of all the objects it perceives:

When I look at the lamp on my table, I attribute to it not only the qualities visible from where I am, but also those from which the chimney, the walls, the table can ‘see:’ the back of the lamp is nothing but the face which it ‘shows’ the chimney. I can therefore see an object in so far as objects from a system or a world, and in so far as each one treats the others round it as spectators of its hidden aspects which guarantee the permanence of those aspects by their presence.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 67.

<sup>12</sup> Merleau-Ponty, M. (1964), “Eye and Mind.” in: *The Primacy of Perception* (translated by Carleton Dallery) Evanston: Northwestern University Press, p. 186.

<sup>13</sup> Merleau-Ponty, M., *Phenomenology*, op. cit, p. 212.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.



The embodying being is dispersed throughout its surround as enacting a perceiving that comes from the vantage of the objects and aspects that envelop it, a description of perception that already implies the idea of "reversibility" that Merleau-Ponty will make more explicit in the later writings. What is important here in working our way towards the perceiver's relationship to nature is that the perceiver perceives from within the contours of its surround.

Also, in the first pages of describing embodying being, Merleau-Ponty states that "we base our memory on the world's vast Memory."<sup>16</sup> This seems to be a usage of language that fits the last works and not the early pages of the *Phenomenology of Perception*, and indeed, Merleau-Ponty doesn't use a phrase similar to this until another working note of May, 1959, when in describing how the perceiver and perceived are a "winding" (*serpement*) around each other, he says that what has been is held within "The Memory of the World."<sup>17</sup> What Merleau-Ponty might mean by this develops later in the *Phenomenology* when he discusses how the horizon of any particular spatial surround is always located within other possible spatial horizons. When walking through a field, for example, Merleau-Ponty states that "through my perceptual field, with its spatial horizons, I am present to my surroundings, I co-exist with all the other landscapes which stretch out beyond it"<sup>18</sup> The perceiver co-exists with all these further fields, because they are all vantages from which to experience the world that my body inhabits as if it were perceiving from their vantage—however indeterminate this sense might be as part of my present perception. Merleau-Ponty points out, however, that "The synthesis of horizons is essentially a temporal process, which means, not that it is subject to time, nor that it is passive in relation to time, nor that it has to prevail over time, but that it merges with the very movement whereby time passes." There cannot be this spatial expanse without there being even more primordially a temporal one.

What is important to Merleau-Ponty's later ideas about nature is that he explains this merging with a motion of time as an entrance to a differ-

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 70.

<sup>17</sup> Merleau-Ponty, M., *Visible*, op. cit., p. 194.

<sup>18</sup> Merleau-Ponty, M., *Phenomenology*, op. cit., p. 330.

ent depth of time within the horizons of far off spaces coming together in a more global sense. All these other landscapes stretching beyond my local surround are my co-existences since “all these perspectives form a single temporal wave, one of the world’s instants.”<sup>19</sup> A single temporal wave from within all landscapes suggests that there is a resonance or reverberation within my personal time that is of an impersonal planetary time—the time of the natural world. From within that great body of the earth, its extensive flesh within time, my own perceptual existence is but “one of the world’s instants.” Indeed, Merleau-Ponty, goes on to say that in perceiving one’s surround the spatial horizon is subtended by a temporal horizon that has a depth far beyond my personal existence: “Through my perceptual field with its temporal horizon I am present to my present, to all the preceding past and to a future. At the same time, this ubiquity is not strictly real, but is clearly only intentional” (PP 330–331). Unlike God, the perceiver does not open unto a time that is literally all times, but this impersonal time of perception is marked by indeterminate vectors that are directed towards this vast depth of time. This time is not the temporal horizon of my projects at my disposal, but rather that which resounds in enveloping me in a presence I can never fathom.

Although Merleau-Ponty will articulate how human history and culture envelop my personal time in a deeper temporality that forms a background to my personal acts, it is the natural world that provides the most primordial temporal depth to my life: “My voluntary and rational life, therefore, knows that it merges into another power which stands in the way of its completion, and gives it a permanently tentative look. Natural time is always there. The transcendence of the instants of time is both the ground of, and impediment to, the rationality of my personal history.”<sup>20</sup> Deeper than the personal perceiver is the anonymous impersonal perceiver that Merleau-Ponty documents throughout the *Phenomenology of Perception* and to which again he returns decades later in the working notes of *The Visible and the Invisible* when he says we must think of “the self of perception as ‘nobody,’ in the sense of Ulysses,

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 347.

as the anonymous one buried in the world."<sup>21</sup> The way the perceiver is buried in the world is that this lack of self is a joining up with that single temporal wave or what Merleau-Ponty calls in this working note the "sinking into" a "temporal openness." This echoes his conclusion at the end of the *Phenomenology of Perception* that the perceiver is really time: "I am myself time"<sup>22</sup> and "we are the upsurge of time."<sup>23</sup> As time, we are enveloped within the "one single phenomenon of lapse"<sup>24</sup> that is time.

I take my steps through the landscape and these steps echo with the whole of my personal history, since as Merleau-Ponty says "I am still that first perception" since "my first perception, along with the horizons which surrounded it, is an ever-present event"<sup>25</sup> But for this meditation, it is more important to consider those surrounding horizons. Since the core of perception is time, at the core of the perceiver there is the vast time of nature. As Merleau-Ponty phrases it, "Since natural time remains at the center of my history, I see myself surrounded by it."<sup>26</sup> The time we live within has another side, has a deeper background, and has reverberations within perceiving the natural world around me. We join up with a greater momentum and an ongoing unfolding that Aristotle was attempting to articulate as an erotic pulse that moves throughout the natural world that also bears us along with it, especially if we hearken to it. Merleau-Ponty will turn towards this erotics of the unfolding of the natural world in his last lectures, but even within the early *Phenomenology of Perception* he concludes, "Because I am borne into personal existence by a time which I do not constitute, all my perceptions stand out against a background of nature."<sup>27</sup> The other fields and the other landscapes that trail off from the spatial horizon that I am now traversing are temporal fields that resound with their deepest layer, the history of the natural world.

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<sup>21</sup> Merleau-Ponty, M., *Visible*, op. cit., p. 201.

<sup>22</sup> Merleau-Ponty, M., *Phenomenology*, op. cit., p. 421.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 428.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 419.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 407.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 347.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 347.

Although in the natural attitude we may consider ourselves surrounded by objects that stand in themselves and constitute the natural world that has been comprised of a vast chain of beings in cause and effect relationships, giving rise to one another and then being swallowed up by time, the truth of our experience is that the single wave of temporality into which I am taken by perception shows up at the heart of my perception of an indeterminate and vast history, and I also have a sense of this deeper background to my existence: “I am thrown into a nature, and that nature appears not only outside me, in objects devoid of history, but it is also discernible at the centre of my subjectivity.”<sup>28</sup> The objects of the natural world may be taken as devoid of history, as if they are just inert matter, but what is more the case is that they are at the core of my being as a perceiver as resonating with a sense that they carry with them this single temporal wave at whose dim beginnings I am still somehow remaining and still beginning. The separation that seems fundamental to the very idea of a “natural history” is undercut to reveal that natural history is not a dimension I confront within the world, but is rather a depth of my own being, the depth of that temporality that does not contain me as something other, but rather as that which I am.

This awareness of being within a single temporal wave that is the natural world and the history of the natural world lines perception like the backing of a fabric or is submerged within the background of the gestalt of what is present to us as perceivers, and only rarely may we have a sense of this unfathomable depth to our own presence. This background sense can become enriched with the scientific and reflective knowledge we have gained of natural history, since the process of *Fundierung* that Merleau-Ponty calls the “dialectic of form and content”<sup>29</sup> works both ways: not only may the unexpectedly immediate experience become a structure that shapes intelligibility, but an abstract or reflective idea as we live with it can become “sedimented” into the flow of our experience, such that it is lived in an affective, kinesthetic, imaginal, memorial and altogether perceptual manner in our embodying being.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 346.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 127.

In order to exemplify a moment of perception that instantiates the presence of the natural world, its ways of being and its history as the depth of the sense of my own embodying being as perceiver and as the depth of what I perceive, it is helpful to quote at some length the anthropologist and science writer, Loren Eiseley, and his experience one summer afternoon in the shallows of the Platte River. Eiseley knows a great deal about natural history, but it is not a reflective experience that he entertains on this afternoon, but rather an adventure of embodying being moving him deeply on an emotional, kinesthetic, memorial, proprioceptive, imaginal and sensual level. A man who has always been somewhat afraid of the water, Eiseley, on this lovely afternoon, let go of himself and entered the flow of the water and the flow of time:

Then I lay back in the floating position that left my face to the sky and shoved off. The sky wheeled over me. For an instant, as I bobbed on the main channel, I had the sensation of sliding down the vast tilted face of the continent. It was then that I felt the cold needles of the alpine springs at my fingertips, and the warmth of the Gulf pulling me southward. Moving with me, leaving its taste upon my mouth and spouting under me in dancing springs of sand, was the immense body of the continent itself, flowing like the river was flowing, grain by grain, mountain by mountain, down to the sea. I was streaming over ancient river beds thrust aloft where giant reptiles had once sported.

I was wearing down the face of time and trundling cloud-wreathed ranges into oblivion. I touched my margins with the delicacy of a crayfish's antennae, and felt great fishes glide about their work. I drifted by the stranded timber cut by beaver in mountain fastness; I slid over shallows that had buried the broken axles of prairie schooners and the mired bones of mammoth. I was streaming alive through the hot and working of the sun, or oozing secretively through shady thickets. I was water and the unspeakable alchemies that gestate and take shape in water, the slimy jellies that under the enormous magnification of the sun writhe and whip upward as great barbeled fish mouths, or sink industriously back into the murk out of which they arose. Turtle and fish and the pinpoint chirpings of individual frogs are all watery projections, concentrations—as man himself is a concentration—of that indescribable and liquid brew which is compounded in various proportions of salt and sun and time. It has appearances, but at its heart lies water, and as I was finally edged against a sand bar and dropped like any log, I tottered as I rose. I knew once more the body's revolt against emergence into the harsh and unsupported air,

its reluctance to break contact with that mother element which still, at this late point in time, shelters and brings into being nine tenths of everything alive.<sup>30</sup>

As an extremely gifted writer and man who has spent his life sharpening his awareness of his sensibilities, Eiseley is able to articulate the felt dimension of being in ancient waters as a crayfish, of being part of the rhythm of the primeval sliding of great land masses, of being the hot fluid mixture from which life forms emerged, of being part of a school of large primitive fishes, and how even in the felt sense of the effort of our daily posture there is a reverberation of the effort of the first emergence from water into air, as well as many other eddies of the time of the long history of the planet. In the background of his own present time, there are these resounding voices, some of which he has come to know in his studies and is now able to recognize and name in coming to the level of his felt experience, but which were always already there in the depths of his embodying being as it is enmeshed in the natural landscapes around him. At the core of the perceiver, Merleau-Ponty tells us, in the depths of time that it subjectivity, lurks the rhythms and presence of the natural world, and Eiseley's experience is a testimony to its power.

### III. Geological Time Is Beneath our Feet and Resounds within our Steps

In the last working note included in *The Visible and the Invisible* from March, 1961, less than two months before his sudden death, Merleau-Ponty states that he needs to articulate "Nature as the other side of man (as flesh—nowise as 'matter')." At this point in his work, Merleau-Ponty had sketched out how "the flesh of the world" is the *unfolding* of the human, animals, and all the beings of the planet in an *enfolding* in which the beings of each register have their unique identities but are interlaced with others in such a way as to be both distinct yet inseparable, the logic of "not-one-not-two," or of interconnected interdependence. The natural world lies on the other side of humanity in the sense of a Möbius strip, where there are two distinctive sides of the strip yet within their intertwining they are one unfolding being of both inside and outside.

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<sup>30</sup> Eiseley, L. (1959), *The Immense Journey*. New York: Vintage Press, pp. 19–20.

This intertwining of the natural world as the other side of humanity—a depth of being that is both the primordial human dimension and laterally crosses over and through other species and beings—causes Merleau-Ponty to reconsider the temporality of natural history in relation to the human experience of temporality.

In his last years, Merleau-Ponty is seeking an architectonic understanding of how the vastness of the past of the natural world infuses time. In April, 1960, in his working note in *The Visible and Invisible*, he points to another sort of time within linear time such that “the past as ‘indestructible,’ as ‘intemporal’” becomes visible to us once we have achieved the “elimination of the common idea of time as a series of ‘Erlebnisse.’”<sup>31</sup> This “common idea of time” as a series of experiences, the propulsive movement of “inner time consciousness,” had been both the common sense of Western culture of how time is straightforwardly lived and the basis of phenomenology’s sense of the flow of the unfolding of being-in-the-world, especially as laid out in Husserl’s *The Phenomenology of Internal Time Consciousness*. However, Merleau-Ponty applies this to time’s unfolding, embracing the sense of depth that he had been elaborating since the *Phenomenology of Perception*, when he declared that “this being simultaneously present in experiences which are nevertheless mutually exclusive, this implication of one in the other, this contraction into one perceptual act of a whole possible process, constitute the originality of depth.”<sup>32</sup> Temporal depth in this sense that depth is comprised of the co-presence of impossibles would mean that differing times might be enjambed or contracted into one time comprised of differing dimensions, and this contraction is what gives time greater depth.

In the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty had cited Husserl’s famous analysis of time and had agreed with it. Yet, towards the end of the book, there is a passage that might point ahead to his later departure from Husserl’s analysis, especially when taking subjectivity as decentered into the natural world. When Merleau-Ponty declares that “we must understand time as the subject and the subject as time,”<sup>33</sup> he

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<sup>31</sup> Merleau-Ponty, M., *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 243.

<sup>32</sup> Merleau-Ponty, M., *Phenomenology of Perception*, *op. cit.* p. 264.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 422.

is planting a seed that will take him beyond the traditional notion of subjectivity and beyond Husserl's analyses of time consciousness. When Merleau-Ponty declares "I am myself time"<sup>34</sup> and likens it to a way that people have of talking about time as if it were almost a person or having a proper name or "as a single concrete being, wholly present in each of its manifestations", he is pointing towards a depth of time that transcends our consciousness of time; but he is not yet ready to abandon the Husserlian framework. It is a depth of time he will only be able to articulate with his last analyses of nature and the flesh of the world. Yet, it is interesting that Merleau-Ponty already says here of perception that it occurs within an unfolding of the world as manifest where there is no time beneath, behind or ahead of it, but rather "temporal dimensions, insofar as they perpetually` overlap and bear each other out and confine themselves to making explicit what was implicit in each, being collectively expressive of that one single explosion [*un seul éclatement*] or thrust [*ou une seule poussée*] which is subjectivity itself."<sup>35</sup> In the place of subjectivity instead is an invocation of an "explosion" from whose depths the world emerges continually. The term used here in this late passage of the *Phenomenology of Perception* in focusing on time and depth is yet another precursor. When in 1961 in "Eye and Mind," he uses the word "deflagration" in place of subjectivity in describing depth as the "dimension of dimensions," this seems like the unfolding of the germ of his earlier thought. To use this word in this last published essay to describe how the painter and what he paints both emerge from the *deflagration* lit when each person comes into the world seems resonant with the idea of the relationship of perceiver to the perceived as *one single explosion*. These phrases suggest that both "the subject" and "states of consciousness" have been volatilized. This "explosion" is the site where what had been taken as subjectivity is now articulated as another face of time. The trajectory from the end of the *Phenomenology of Perception* is moving beyond subjectivity towards a becoming- or a process-view of embodying being as the unfolding within time of the depths of the world, especially the natural world.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 421.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 422.



Returning to Merleau-Ponty's working note of April, 1960, we find him calling for an exploration of existence outside the life of the ego, and also outside "interiority", in a way that "the intentional analytic cannot grasp."<sup>36</sup> In taking reversibility seriously, our relationship to the natural world is not only about the way we intend it, but is also about the way it encompasses us such that we take up its indirect or silent voice. Here Merleau-Ponty asserts we must go beyond the "whole Husserlian analysis" and description of internal time consciousness to consider a "past that adheres to the present and not to the consciousness of the present" or as being a "vertical past" that "contains itself the exigency to have been perceived, far from the consciousness of having perceived bearing that of the past ... a spatializing-temporalizing vortex (which is flesh and not a consciousness facing a noema)."<sup>37</sup> This vortex that is the flesh of the world contains that which is "hidden" or "latent", and emerges in "this philosophy of transcendence", Merleau-Ponty's final indirect ontology, no longer "compatible with 'phenomenology,'"<sup>38</sup> as Merleau-Ponty writes in these working notes. By this, he means that he must go beyond Husserl's phenomenology in focusing merely on the way in which time is the horizon of our world—the human personal, historical, and cultural world—to envision how this temporal horizon winds around the time of the natural world like the two strands of genetic material in their chiasm. It is only in this way, he says, that he can investigate a time in which there is also a "past-present simultaneity" that is not found either in the natural attitude's sense of time as succession or in the Husserlian sense of internal time consciousness, but is rather within a "dimensional present or *Welt* or Being, where the past is 'simultaneous' with the present in the narrow sense." It is the world or Being as a dimensional presence that exists as a present that is at the same time a past, a vertical depth that envelops us. A few months before, in another working note, Merleau-Ponty had described "the vertical world" as "the union of impossibles, the being in transcendence, and the topological space and the time in joints and members, in dis-

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<sup>36</sup> Merleau-Ponty, M., *The Visible and the Invisible*, *op cit*, p. 243.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 244.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

junction and dis-membering.”<sup>39</sup> The vertical world is a world that is topological, offering us the expanse of varied places of our planetary surround, but in the unique sense of depth he had articulated in the *Phenomenology of Perception* as the union of impossibles; and rather than a *seamless* temporal wave, the verticality of the world is one of joinings in the midst of disjoinings. Although he doesn’t mention it in these two notes, I believe it is his thinking through a conception of natural history and our relationship to the natural world that is moving him into this new idea, this deeper sense of a time as a “time before time, to the prior life,” a time akin to that “mythical time”<sup>40</sup> towards which his thinking had pointed decades before.

By June, 1960, it is clear that Merleau-Ponty has been thinking about temporality in terms of the impact of the envelopment of the natural world and of history by natural history. He now speaks of a “transcendental geology” as the way to think about the “authentic temporality” that one confronts in the sense of a history of what appears inert about us in the surround that emerges with taking in our geography. In considering the space of the planet that envelops us, Merleau-Ponty notes there is a layer of our being that emerges from this contact with another sort of time that is at the depths of this enveloping space of the natural world: “For history is too immediately bound to individual praxis, to interiority, it hides too much in its thickness and its flesh for an easy return to the whole philosophy of the person. Whereas geography—or rather “the Earth as *Ur-Arché*”—brings to light “the carnal *Urhistorie*,” in fact “it is a question of grasping the *nexus*—neither ‘historical’ nor ‘geographic’ of history and transcendental geology, this very time which is space, this very space that is time.”<sup>41</sup> The Earth brings out in our layered and dehiscent being (as one of depths, of impossibles), a dimension of history before history that cannot appear other than through the embodying historical sense of humanity, but meets it within a nexus, within an entwining, in which encrusted within the space of the natural world is itself another sort of time. The depths of the world, as echoed

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 228.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 242.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 259.

in the depths of embodying being as the natural world, is not before us or about us but is enmeshed within: "The antecedent unity me-world, world and its parts, parts of my body, a unity before segregation, before multiple dimensions—and so also the unity of time."<sup>42</sup> To have a human body is to have a body that perceives not only from its own vantage but with a welling up of presence from within an enveloping geological space and time of the natural world.

It is in the working note of November, 1960, labeled "Nature", that it becomes clear that Merleau-Ponty has been thinking through the intersection of the phenomenological sense of time with another sort of time of the natural world. This note begins with his citation of Lucien Herr's phrase, "Nature is at the first day," and adds for emphasis "it is there today."<sup>43</sup> Merleau-Ponty warns that this does not mean some sort of coincidence with the natural world, some sort of naturalistic mysticism, but is rather how the flesh of the world folds back on itself within the embodying being of the perceiver: we are not the natural world, our human history does not coincide with natural history and yet the time of opening up to the natural world has an inescapable depth: "It is a question of finding in the present, the flesh of the world (and not in the past) an 'ever new' and 'always the same' — A sort of time of sleep (which is Bergson's nascent duration, ever new and always the same). The sensible, Nature, transcend the past present distinction, realize from within a passage from one to the other. ... Existential eternity. The Indestructible. The Barbaric principle."<sup>44</sup> Although we perceive the natural world as present, this perceiving is also of a co-existing past, not trailing along in a series of retentions, but within the present as a depth or verticality that makes it be the presence of something indestructibly still at its origin—a never-ending silent explosion. Each new step may open up a new vista, so perhaps with a thud we come up against an unexpected rock or discover the sight of hawks circling above; but each of these moments is *at the same time* a vast opening of vistas existing even before there were humans to see them but instead perhaps only

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 261.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 267.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

an ancient reptile. And this suggests, too, that the thud on the rock is still sounding with that of mammoths upon that same rock ten thousand years ago, and that the hawks are circling in gyres that contain within their spinning the gyres of ancient flying beings who no longer soar above the earth in new flights, but whose tracings still envelop the sky, and these circling artists of the wind are still tracing arabesques. Furthermore, explaining this verticality of time by referring to the time of sleep, Merleau-Ponty invites his readers to hear a passage from the *Phenomenology of Perception* describing at length the sense of the night as “pure depth” that “enwraps me and infiltrates through all my senses, stifling my recollections and almost destroying my personal identity.”<sup>45</sup> The time of night and sleep has unfathomable depths, takes one into an impersonality of something indefinable, but much more encompassing and labyrinthine. The time of nature is like this, barbaric, having something untamable, wild, outside human construction and order.

With each step upon this planet, there is not only a depth of space and of literal ground vital to our sense of grounding, but also as sense of the depth of time, such that differing times resonate within each other, are present in each other, not in a linear successive sense, but in another sort of reverberation or as Merleau-Ponty phrases this sense in the next paragraph:

“In what sense the visible landscape under my eyes is not exterior to, and bound synthetically to . . . other moments of time and the past, but really has *behind itself* in simultaneity, inside itself and not it and they side by side ‘in’ time.”<sup>46</sup> The landscape of natural history is the same landscape of our everyday existence. It is not a separate object of inquiry and not a discovery of an “additional” dimension of our world. It is the presence of each landscape “behind itself in simultaneity”—the landscape within the landscape—the natural history at the depths of history.

Andy Goldsworthy, a masterful “earth artist”, endeavors to express this dimension of time in his artworks. Some of his pieces are made from sculpting ice into elaborate delicate biomorphic shapes, sewing leaves together in intricate patterns and then floating them down a stream in

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<sup>45</sup> Merleau-Ponty, M., *Phenomenology of Perception*, *op. cit.* p. 283.

<sup>46</sup> Merleau-Ponty, M., *The Visible and the Invisible*, *op. cit.* p. 267.

a graceful back and forth motion, making etched undulating pathways in the clay of a valley that snakes across its floor, or by making floating spherical objects of interlocking stones to be carried out and swirled apart by the tides. His artistic works are made of the materials taken from that environment and they return to their component parts with the participation of natural forces that are also part of the specific environment. Many of his pieces are meant to express and bring people's attention to the fact that "time and change are connected to place,"<sup>47</sup> as he states at the opening of his book, *Time*, in which he chronicles and displays photographs of many of his works. He states that in working with the natural world for a twenty five year period, "the more I worked, the more aware I became of the powerful sense of time embedded in a place."<sup>48</sup> One work in particular expresses pointedly Merleau-Ponty's description of place as being a layered perception of geological time that is felt but not explicitly perceived until we celebrate the vertical time we take for granted. At Scaur Glen in Dumfriesshire, Scotland, there is a spot in the river near where Goldsworthy lives that contains pockets of red rock submerged within the rock face along the banks of the river. Goldsworthy realized that this red rock was a striking perduring presence of an ancient time in the river's life that had now become submerged within the overall experience of the river. Goldsworthy excavated some of the rock, ground it into a powder, and mixed it with water in order to make several bright red pools among the rock crevice pools towards the upper range of the water's depth, and waited for the river to rise.<sup>49</sup> When it did, suddenly the deep past of the river that was always there to be seen and experienced but had become part of deep background of the sense of the river was splashed on its surface flow in bright red bursts to highlight the startling co-presence of the ancient strata of the river's history now carried on the surface of its newest water flow. The ancient time was always present in a still, red, submerged depth, but now it is brought to the literal surface to the perceiver's attention to celebrate a depth of time we often pass by unnoticed—the way

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<sup>47</sup> Goldsworthy, A., (2000), *Time*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc, p. 7.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., pp. 25, 49–51. Also, Goldsworthy displays this piece and discusses it in his film "Rivers and Tides."

in which natural history reverberates throughout the natural world. This is the function of the discipline of natural history in Merleau-Ponty's perspective: to reveal our vertical being within the world and our vertical grasp of this being, and not to just display objects located at a distance from us in time or space that would spark our curiosity as other.

#### IV. Interanimality and the Life of the Planet as Natural History

Even though the varied schema that have been used by natural history beginning with Aristotle's classifications to comprehend the world of living beings have in one sense always placed human beings within the whole as part of an encompassing web of life, at the same time, starting with Aristotle, natural history has always placed human beings outside this web as uniquely different in the superiority of in human being's special capacities. Whether it be linguistic capacities, the capacity for abstract reasoning, for symbolism, upright posture with opposable thumbs, relationship to mortality, a sense of history and cultural institutions, humans have been seen to transcend their place among other animals as above them and not of the same order of being. Merleau-Ponty denies this long evaluative tradition, stating in his lectures on nature that "the relation of the human and animality is not a hierarchical relation, but lateral, an overcoming that does not abolish kinship."<sup>50</sup> Rather than human being ranking above the animal, their relationship is lateral, on a shared level, despite whatever other capacities humans developed beyond the basic shared being together, being like kin, within the natural world. This difference in Merleau-Ponty's evaluation of the status of human beings in relation to animality also stems from his notion of the nature of embodying being as the key to understanding human being. He is also led by this analysis to reassess the capacities of animals as co-perceivers.

Merleau-Ponty's next sentence elaborates that even the most distinctive dimension of human being has its roots in the lateral level of shared being of human and animal: "Even mind is incredibly penetrated by its corporeal structure: eye and mind. It is starting from the visible that we

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<sup>50</sup> Merleau-Ponty, M., *Nature*, op. cit., p. 268.

can understand the invisible." The corporeal structure of human being is the ground of mind that emerges as an elaboration upon the world as already revealed and understood in a sensory and motoric grasp. This basic hodological sense of space is the lived understanding of the meaning of the surround that overlaps with animals. Even in his 1954–5 lectures on the nature of institution, Merleau-Ponty had already started to rethink the human and animal relationship, given that the interwoven nature of embodiment and perception "reflected a certain animalization of the human" and that the "animal is a certain variant of the human."<sup>51</sup> In the course of his three years of lectures on nature at the end of the decade, however, the intimate tie of the human with the animal further emerges as a major theme: "We must say: Animality and human being are only given together with a whole of Being."<sup>52</sup> Human being and animal being are not separable in our shared relation to the world surround in which each is enmeshed and enters through perceptual being.

Seeing humanity as Merleau-Ponty does, as an embodying being making sense of its world through a layered perceptual comprehension that is sensual, visceral, affective, kinesthetic, proprioceptive, as well as memorial, imaginative and rationally reflective, we are led to see that the areas of overlap, taking in the world with the animal, are large: "Animal life refers to what is sensible for us and to our carnal life; sensible, that is not our human kind of the present or timeless mind. In the order of *Einfühlung*, of the 'vertical' where our corporeity is given to us, there is precisely an opening to a visible."<sup>53</sup> In our sensible life, the world opens as a carnal engagement with what is around us and means something to us, just as it does for animals, and this opening does not occur through the human mind. This opening of the world's sense carnally can be imagined, for example, as the discovery alike for humans or animals that the shade is a place of rest from the hot, glaring sun; that the icy, flowing stream is a source of refreshment from the weariness and thirst experienced after a long trek through the forest; and that the oncoming night is a time to lie down and enter the world of sleep

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<sup>51</sup> (2003), *L'insitution dans l'histoire personnelle et publique: notes de cours au College de France*. Paris, Belin, p. 54.

<sup>52</sup> Merleau-Ponty, M., *Nature*, op. cit., p. 271.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

to become renewed for the next day. In the tradition of philosophy as in the tradition of natural history, this shared carnal life of the human and the animal is not grasped, since they assume that intellection is the ground and active ordering principle of sense-making. With rational discrimination taken as foundational, instead of being an ordering that only functions within the world already revealed and apprehended by perception (as Merleau-Ponty demonstrated throughout his work), reason is overvalued. It is taken for granted that the human being's comprehension of the surround by reason or mind transforms our relationship to the natural world to another level that is assessed as different in kind from other creatures. Merleau-Ponty denies this assessment: "An organ of the mobile senses (the eye, the hand) is already language because it is an interrogation (movement) and a response (perception as *Erfühlung*) of a project, speaking and understanding. It is a tacit language."<sup>54</sup> In the earlier lectures about institution and in the later lectures about nature, Merleau-Ponty had already contended that the motor meanings communicated among animals have significances that verged on the symbolic and constituted a kind of "pre-culture:" "The architecture of symbols that the animal brings from its side thus defines within Nature a species of pre-culture."<sup>55</sup> Merleau-Ponty's point here is that the same perceptual-motoric round of projects found in the surround of both humans and animals is a kind of tacit language, and our linguistic abilities are an elaboration of this "wild" meaning, grounded in this shared carnal sense of the world.

For Merleau-Ponty, not only is there a motoric and perceptual level of meaning that is more pregnant with possibilities than the tradition had allowed, but language itself relies upon the gestural and the perceptual as the underside of its own sense, such that the tacit language of animality and the more explicit language ability of the human are sides of each other: "The difference is only relative between a perceptual silence and a language that always carries a thread of silence."<sup>56</sup> Merleau-Ponty states that to see this anchorage of the human mental

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 211.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 176.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.



capacity in the shared animality of perceptual life is not only vital to understanding our relationship with the natural world, but also is essential to understanding what human beings are: "What we call mind is again a re-equilibration, a decentralization that is not absolute ... The invisible, mind, is not another positivity: it is the inverse, the other side of the visible. We must retrieve this brute and savage mind beneath all the cultural material that is given ... There is a Logos of the natural esthetic world, on which the Logos of language relies."<sup>57</sup> That mind is an emergent quality of the way in which embodying being gears into its surround through perception and action anchors humanity in the midst of the natural world and animality in a way that traditional philosophy has never envisioned; nor did European cultural and intellectual history. Merleau-Ponty does not deny human difference, but he relocates it: "We study the human body in order to see it emerge as different from the animal, not by the addition of reason, but rather in short, in the *Ineinander* with the animal ... by escape and not by superposition."<sup>58</sup> Merleau-Ponty agrees with the tradition that humans do create a distinctive level of meaning, but for him, such meaning emerges from within this shared matrix of sense within the natural world, this echo among beings open to the same world and this overlapping of sense from which the human can perpetually for a moment move outside, but to which they must return, remaining within a shared dwelling.

This sense of the meaningfulness of the carnal relationship to the natural world also means for Merleau-Ponty that seeing human apprehension of the world as an isolated phenomenon is a misjudgment. Our human "seeing," our "hearing," our human sense of the threat of the predator lurking, our human sense of the inhospitable nature of the wind whipping sub-zero day outside is not purely "our" doing. Once we understand that animals apprehend the surround with affective, intelligible, and even imaginative dimensions in their own distinctive ways and take "the animal body defined by the Umwelt"<sup>59</sup> as analogous to human embodying being that first understands its world in the embody-

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 212.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 214.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 221.

ing hodological space of its own being-in-the-world, the emergence of sense moves in lateral circulation among surrounds within the natural world. Of course, despite analogous relationships that are inscribed through its projects in dialogue with the world, the animal surround differs from the human way of having a world in that the human surround includes the “sedimentation” of reflective intellection’s structures within this more carnal relationship. As open to the same world, even though carving out sense in ways that are similar and different, the sense emerges not only in the body’s being caught up in the “mirror play” among objects within the surround discussed at the beginning of this essay, but also from within the echoes of how other animals perceive the world: “As for esthesiology, it emerges from life without absolute break. As esthesiology emerges from the relationship to an *Umwelt*, human desire emerges from animal desire. Already in the animal, in the ceremony of love, desire is not mechanical functioning, but an opening to an *Umwelt* of fellow creatures.”<sup>60</sup> The human embodying being finds itself at the depths of the world, partly from the vantage and sense given indirectly to us by inanimate, but also as a shared being with other animals. Merleau-Ponty says that “our ‘strange kinship’ with the animals ... teaches pertaining to the human body” that this embodiment is “our *Ineinander* with Sensible Being and with other corporeities.” In other words, the human body senses *as if* sensing through the trees and sky above it, but also *as if* in some sense its own body is extended through the senses of the other animal bodies enmeshed with it on the planet.

Human embodied being cannot even be thought outside this relationship to animality. As Merleau-Ponty says: “life teaches us not only the union of our soul and our body, but also the lateral union of animality and humanity.”<sup>61</sup> This means that within our deepest humanity, we are animals, we are creatures enmeshed in our being with a planetary home from which we distance ourselves. Although, humans are traditionally recognized as within the natural world and within the family of animals in terms of finding objective characteristics that had vital connections in the cause and effect unfolding of the planet’s history, and,

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 225.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 271.

therefore, having certain parallels in basic life functions, humans have been regarded in the European philosophical and cultural tradition as having an interiority and a spirit of mental substance that sets humanity apart from the material and creaturely world. If Merleau-Ponty is correct, then what we are studying by studying natural history is our own extended being—our being at its greatest depths—our own being that is not really ours in some sense, but eludes us like the animal in the brush. Yet, in another sense, the animals in our world, these seemingly distant beings, spatially or temporally, are in fact at the very heart of our embodying being and are most closely what we are. Natural history is the unraveling of the sense of our own embodying being. The history of natural history is the present of each step we take on this planet in the sense of the ringing forth about us from the depths of what things around us mean, how we are directed, and even how our bodies miraculously take in all the sense they do, in a reverberation sounded by time's unceasing folding back on itself, as if natural history were a lyre whose strings could move spontaneously, sounding their own voice, without intermediary.