

Ole M. Nessel

Embodied Nature

An Essay on Eco-Phenomenology

Bachelor's project in philosophy

Supervisor: Thomas Netland

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Norwegian University of Science and Technology
Faculty of Humanities
Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies



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Introduction

The concept of the *Anthropocene* may be associated with the looming threats that our ecosystems are currently facing as a result of our activity in the pursuit of economic interests; mass extinctions, alterations of the global temperature, pollution, and perhaps to some degree a form of nihilism. Experientially, this inevitably leads many to a sense of moral unease over what we are doing to the planet. Faced with environmental concerns imbued with the knowledge that humanity's current course of action is unsustainable, we may look to environmental forms of science, philosophy, and psychology for potential solutions. In this essay I will attempt to provide an *ecological* foundation for phenomenology. I will argue that an *overemphasis* on objectivity and abstracted reasoning causes us as naturally affective beings to adopt a theoretical framework in which we conceive ourselves as passive subjects observing external objects. Consequently, this provides us with a limited understanding of the *human-nature relation* wherein we conceive ourselves as separated from the environment.

My central thesis is that an ecological approach to phenomenology can potentially provide *environmentalism* a broadened framework from which we can understand the human-nature relation and our situated place within the biosphere as *prior* to dualistic categories such as 'subject' and 'object'. This argument will be rooted in the central thoughts of the phenomenological tradition of the 20th century and its critique of naturalism, where particularly Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger saw objectivity as essentially derivative of something more fundamental. I will however mainly draw upon Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *embodied perception* to gain a newfound understanding of the human-nature relation and our situated place within the world. 'Embodied perception' will be understood as a way of apprehending and *acting* within the world. From this perspective, thoughts and perceptions are not understood as separated from the neither the world nor the body.

To set the groundwork for an ecological phenomenology as a framework for environmentalism, the first part of this essay will examine how the phenomenologists repudiated the theoretical conception of the world as a set of objects void of experiential content, by rejecting the apparent separation between the perceiving subject and the perceived object. This will first be demonstrated through a short clarification of the assumption that objectivity, as a method of inquiry, dismisses the qualitative in favour of the quantitative, resulting in dichotomies such as mind-body and subject-object.

Although we will not explore their thoughts in-depth, understanding the most central concepts of Husserl and Heidegger and how they saw objectivity as secondary to our most basic

ways of existing will lay down the groundwork for understanding the human-nature relation as essentially *pre-reflective*; occurring as prior to rational thought or reflection. I will then try to present Merleau-Ponty's conception of the body as one which is inextricably entangled and directly involved with the world prior to any conceptions about objectivity. The conditions which *enable* any theoretical conception of objectivity is thus of central importance to us in light of these thinkers, and we will further expand upon these implications the second part of this essay.

The second part will attempt to build upon the ideas laid out in the first and discuss eco-phenomenology as a potential framework for environmentalism by revealing the interrelationship between the living being and its *lifeworld*, which will now be understood as a bodily engagement with the biosphere. This will allow for a new understanding of ecological questions in regard to the *co-constitutive* relationship between the embodied organism and its inhabited world. As we will see, although our main emphasis will be on the human-nature relation, this will have implications for our understanding of nature's intrinsic values and the non-human domain as well.

It should be made clear that the goal is not to dismiss theoretical thinking and objectivity, nor to argue for a sort of romanticism, but to show that in denying our immediate experiences and by *only* taking the existence of an external world for granted. Hence, we forget our situatedness (or context) as natural beings enmeshed in a world which we are deeply intertwined with. Eco-phenomenology should thus be understood as a complementarity for understanding our relations to the natural world and it is, in a sense, taken to be an addition of the Dionysian to the Apollonian.

Part I: Subjects and Objects

Natural Objects

Objectivity is the hallmark of many natural sciences, and the ideal of objectivity rests upon an ability to properly describe the world *as it is* unmediated by subjective perspectives, what Thomas Nagel calls ‘*the view from nowhere*’.¹ Historically, the scientific and philosophical traditions of Descartes, Galilei and Newton emphasized the division between the inner world of the *subject* (the observer), and the outside objective world. Descartes famously posited a distinction between *res cogitans*, the thinking substance, and *res extensa*, the extended substance, as well enforcing the idea that secondary qualities such as taste, colour and so on are no more than mere names existing only in consciousness.² From a Galilean point of view the condition for discovering the real properties of nature is through the exclusion of the qualitative in favour of studying the quantitative. These perspectives also held a conception of nature and its various ecosystems as consisting of extensional properties which are related to each other in a causal matrix, and consequently, the outcome for some of these thinkers was a *mechanistic* conception of nature as a machine, inherently meaningless and void of sense qualities.³

In this view, the spontaneous and self-initiated activities that are characteristic of the mind seem to be absent in the external world. By abstracting the various aspects of the natural world for theoretical study, we gain a more objective understanding of the laws which governs it. ‘*Objective*’, in this regard, is thus understood as that which is independent from what is ‘*subjective*’, the latter being qualities which exist within the individual rather in the world itself.

This classical perspective on the natural world posited a distinction between the observer and the observed, or the mental and nonmental. But according to Aaron Ben-Ze'ev, modern explanations of the mental realm are also often presented in frameworks which take the mental realm of the subject as distinct from the extended world of inanimate objects.⁴ Most importantly, it often conceives of the subject as causally *receiving* information as sensory input from an outside source. This distinction between the world and the subject is often associated with the idea that the mind is internal to the latter, forming *representations* of the former.⁵ This

¹ Julian Reiss, *Scientific Objectivity*, Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/scientific-objectivity/>, accessed 02.02.2021

² Neil Evernden, *The Natural Alien* University of Toronto Press Incorporated, (1993), p. 17.

³ Sigurd Hverven, *Naturfilosofi*, Dreyers Forlag, Oslo, (2018), p. 169

⁴ Aaron Ben-Ze'ev, *Explaining the Subject-Object Relation in Perception*, Social Research, (1989), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/268871793_Explaining_the_Subject-Object_Relation_in_Perception_Accessed_04.02.2021, p. 512

⁵ Aaron Ben-Ze'ev, *Explaining the Subject-Object Relation in Perception*, p. 515.

take on the relationship between the subjective and the objective comprises the roots of many philosophical difficulties concerning the reconcilability between different forms of dualism; inner and outer, internal and external, mind and body, and as I shall argue, humanity and nature.

The emphasis on understanding an external world and its relation to perceiving subjects nudged humanity into an epistemic paradigm where subjective and experiential qualities are considered potentially obstructive from true knowledge about the world.⁶ This paradigm was according to Alfred North Whitehead also reigning in every university during his time, where reality would be framed in terms of high abstractions which would be mistakenly taken to be concrete realities.⁷ As it strives to be as value-free as possible, it holds that the features of human subjectivity are properties of the human condition, and since the mind is taken to have no *direct* relation to the material objects in the world, the subject's body from which perception takes place is often conceived as another object within a world of objects. In this view, natural objects exist as having objective features *before* we perceptually experience them, which we can explain through disinterested, detached methodologies. From this perspective, nature may for example consist of indivisible particles void of sense qualities which only exist in the mind of the observer, and objectivity is thus placed at the forefront of our inquiry for us to understand the nature of the external world. From this perspective, meaning and values become immanent properties of a reflective, passive mind.

It is exactly this overemphasis on objectivity that I shall argue only provides us with a limited understanding of the human-nature relation. The goal of this essay is to discuss the various implications of conceiving the world from an objectifying paradigm which *overlooks* the active and constitutive relationship between the body and its surrounding environment. This may have profound implications for how we experientially (and ethically) conduct ourselves in the world, and if eco-phenomenology can provide us a conception of ourselves as *part* of nature it may have implications in how we act towards it, for as R.D Laing tells us;

*“Our behaviour is a function of our experience, and we act according to the way we see things.”*⁸

Therefore, our goal is to understand nature and the biosphere as inextricably bound up with our experiential lifeworld, which will be our common thread henceforth. But to see how, we will

⁶ Hverven, *Naturfilosofi*, pp. 168-169

⁷ Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, New York: The Free Press, (1967), pp. 54-5.

⁸ R.D. Laing, *The Politics of Experience*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, (1967), p. 4.

begin with a brief overview of Edmund Husserl's criticism of what he deemed to be a form of naturalism which took the existence of an external world as a given.

Husserl's Lifeworld

According to Edmund Husserl, the philosopher who founded the philosophical school of *phenomenology*, natural objects must be first *experienced* in consciousness in order for any theorizing about them to be possible. In this view, 'experiencing' denotes the consciousness of phenomena from first-person point of view.⁹ According to Husserl, the emphasis on scientific objectivism took for granted the existence of the external world, through what Husserl calls *the natural attitude*.¹⁰ It is from the natural attitude that we normally take the world as something external from which we receive information which we can then analyse and study. The world is thus understood from this perspective as an external object. However, to take the natural attitude as the only legitimate conception of the world was to take it as the source of all knowledge, thereby taking it for granted in the treatment of deeper philosophical questions, such as those relating to meaning and consciousness – central features of experience.

According to Husserl, science itself *presupposes* experience, which is what he put to the forefront of his investigations. Husserl famously called for the need of *going back to the things themselves*¹¹ and urged us to return to the lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*) of raw experience which exists prior to any theoretical conceptions. The lifeworld is the world *as* we live it and from our first-person point of view, and it is our *experienced reality*, and it can be understood as the rational structure underlying one's natural attitude. It is additionally understood as an *intersubjective* world of common meanings which we share with other subjects, wherein objective truth is *constituted*; subjects *structure* the world similarly.¹² Although we will explore the notion of constitution later on, let us now explore how Husserl repudiated the naïve conception of objects as separated from the subject.

For Husserl, it is unjustified to infer the existence of one set of perceptions as real and quantitative and the other as meaningful and value-laden, since both are fundamentally experienced from within the lifeworld. It is this lifeworld which Husserl believed had been

⁹ Edmund Husserl, *Pure Phenomenology, Its Method, and Its Field of Investigation*, The Phenomenology Reader, Routledge, (2004), p. 125.

¹⁰ Ted Toadvine, Charles S. Brown, *Eco-Phenomenology*, State University of New York, (2003), p. 3

¹¹ Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, The Hague: Nijhoff, 1982 (1913), p. 35.

¹² Christian Beyer, *Edmund Husserl*, Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/husserl/>, accessed 19.03.2021. p. 25

obscured by objectivist, “Galilean style” science we alluded to earlier, which took mathematical physics as descriptions of the way the world really is independent of the knowing subject.¹³ This is because Husserl believed that all theoretical activity is itself presupposed by the lifeworld as a *background*; the pre-given from which our conscious experience is structured.¹⁴ Husserl therefore believed that in order for us to understand the centrality of experience we must make a phenomenological *reduction*. This is where we ‘bracket’ our presuppositions about the external world (a method which he calls the *epochè*) and adopt a *phenomenological attitude* to solely focus on how phenomena are given to us.¹⁵ By performing this reduction we suspend our judgment about the world and instead focus on experience as it is *directly* given in consciousness. Through reflection and systematic inquiry, phenomenology could then become a philosophical foundation for science, according to Husserl.¹⁶

Through this method, Husserl’s analysis of *intentionality* attempts to demonstrate how consciousness cannot be isolated, for it must always *of* something as a universal and fundamental property. As Husserl explains, to be conscious of something as a *cogito*, an observing self from which perception takes place, is to bear within itself its intentional object (or *cogitatum*) as the very definition of intentionality.¹⁷ Neil Evernden reads that the object is from this perspective built into the *act* of consciousness, and what is perceived is not only dependent on the external object, but on the actual manner of grasping in consciousness.¹⁸

As intentionality is a fundamental structure of consciousness, consciousness always comes *with* objects and must thus be understood as a *noetic* and *noematic* correlation, in which the former denotes the act of intending, and the latter is the entity *as* intended from a particular perspective with certain features.¹⁹ Perception is thus always in *direct* contact with the world, and consciousness is not just a pure representation of an external environment. By way of this method, we find that perceiver and world are essentially correlated. This is how, in Husserl’s view, the world and perceiver are never separated in the first place, since they are in a form of dialogue. To take the existence of an object as given there must therefore be a *presupposition* about the *existence* about that object in the first place which has not yet been thoroughly clarified.

¹³ Francisco J. Varela, Evan Thompson, Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind*, The MIT Press (1991), p. 17

¹⁴ Varela, Thompson, Rosch, *Embodied mind*, p. 17

¹⁵ Shaun Gallagher & Dan Zahavi, *The Phenomenological Mind*, Routledge (2008), p.19

¹⁶ Gallagher & Zahavi, *The Phenomenological Mind*, p.19

¹⁷ Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, p.33

¹⁸ Evernden, *The Natural Alien*, p. 58

¹⁹ *Cartesian Meditations*, p. 36

This is how Husserl breaks free from the philosophical and scientific traditions in which we understand our own inner mental states as enclosed from an outside world; by viewing the lifeworld as that which allows for a natural attitude to exist, and by understanding consciousness in terms of correlative structures between the perceiver and the lifeworld. This understanding of the correlative relationship between the subject and the lifeworld is, as we shall see, one which Merleau-Ponty further expounded with his ontology of the body.²⁰ This will have implications for our understanding of the human-nature relation. However, to see how Merleau-Ponty can provide us with a basis for eco-phenomenology, we will also introduce some essential concepts from another of most central influences; Martin Heidegger.

Heidegger and Dasein

In his magnum opus *Being and Time* Heidegger argued that when we make judgments about the nature of *beings*, we have already assumed that we have understood the meaning of *Being* as such.²¹ According to Heidegger, the western intellectual tradition had forgotten its fundamentality by trying to understand the *ontical*, namely the factual states of things, and thereby forgetting the *ontological*, the existential conditions for the possibility of us making judgments and explanations of entities in the first place. Heidegger argued that there is an ontological difference which must be considered, which is the distinction between Being and beings (entities).²² This recognition of the *ontological distinction* is what had been forgotten by the western philosophical tradition. For this reason, Heidegger argues that all ontology remains blind from its own aim if it had not yet clarified the meaning of Being as its fundamental task.²³ We shall see the importance of this implication when we will further discuss eco-phenomenology, but for now, we must first see how Heidegger puts the ‘perceiver’ *in* the relational world.

Unlike Husserl, Heidegger is not concerned with the intentionality of objects as an essential structure of *consciousness*, but rather how we *comport* ourselves as *within* the world. Instead of operating with the notion of a subject or cogito, Heidegger describes *Dasein* as the social being with a pre-theoretical grasp of the a priori structures that make possible the particular modes of Being.

²⁰ Although Husserl also distinguished between the body as an extended object (*körper*) and as a lived body (*leib*), this distinction will not be considered at this point.

²¹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Basil Blackwell Ltd. 1962 (1926), pp. 25-31.

²² Michael Wheeler, *Heidegger*, Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/heidegger/>, Accessed 03.03.2021, p. 9.

²³ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, pp. 25-31.

What is fundamental for Heidegger's phenomenological analysis is not an intentional consciousness, but a *Being-in-the-world*, which is a pre-theoretical openness towards the entities in which one finds oneself being-with (or is *thrown*, as Heidegger calls it).²⁴ Being-in-the-world replaces notions such as subject and object, where Dasein is understood as no longer cut off from the entities which surrounds it, as we will see.

Being thrown into the world Dasein is presented with a multitude of different *possibilities* of action to which it can project or comport itself and according to Heidegger, a fundamental characteristic of Dasein as a mode of being is *care* [*sorge*].²⁵ Dasein is the disclosedness of itself and other entities, and this is done pre-reflectively, *before* any theorization *about* the entity. Dasein's primary understanding is thus through skilled *activity* with the surrounding world.²⁶ We shall see the importance of this when we present Merleau-Ponty's conception of embodiment. For now, it suffices to make clear that since comportment towards the various possibilities within-the-world is Dasein's fundamental relationship with its surrounding environment, our primary understanding of the world cannot be through a detached, theoretical analysis as the western tradition held – it is a practical, skilful *dealing* with the various entities we encounter, as what Heidegger calls *readiness-to-hand*, [*Zuhanden*].²⁷

Ready-to-hand entities are for Dasein encountered as *equipment* in a *referential totality* in which entities stand in *relations* to something else, and it is through these relations that the world announces itself. For example, when engaged with something ready-to-hand, such as a hammer, our relationship with it is not detached or reflective, and there is no conception of it as an *external* object, nor of oneself as a subject.²⁸ There is only the experience of the present, ongoing task. This hammer is not understood theoretically, but always experienced as *for* something, and its essence is revealed in its practical use in relation to other things (e.g. *for* building a house, *in-order to provide* shelter, and so on).

Dasein is as such a field of care, and *worldhood* is the referential totality which constitutes significance.²⁹ As Heidegger explains, only when the practical activity breaks down does one gain a more detached relationship with it – properties that were previously unnoticed now come to light, becoming more *present-at-hand* [*Vorhanden*].³⁰ If the hammer breaks, for example – the hammer is *drawn* into a more analytical and theorizing relationship with Dasein, and it now

²⁴ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 174

²⁵ Wheeler, Heidegger, pp. 33-35

²⁶ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, pp. 67-71

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 98-103.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

³⁰ Michael Wheeler, *Heidegger* p. 17

appears more as an external and independent object, or present-at-hand. Yet the hammer retains some of its readiness-at-hand since its referentiality is still maintained (through a “lighting up” of a *workshop* in order to repair it, and so on).

It is when we theorize, abstract and analyse entities outside of their practical, referential context they appear to us as external objects amenable to study. When Dasein engages in scientific theory and see entities outside of their referential context, they are thus removed from their practice. Under an objectifying lens, entities are *revealed* as independent. But our most basic way of encountering the world, according to Heidegger, is not through categories of subject and object, because;

“An ontic knowledge can never alone direct itself ‘to’ the objects, because without the ontological [...] it can have no possible *Whereto*.”³¹

Knowledge of objects as external, understood in this regard, is *derivative* of something more fundamental, which is our practical dealings within-the-world, and our objective explanations of phenomena are thus secondary. In this way we can understand Heidegger as arguing that objectifying entities implies a cut-off from the primary meaning structures that accompany our basic participatory dealings with the world. The Husserlian notion of bracketing our presuppositions about the world to solely focus on phenomena as directly given in consciousness is itself a theoretical construct for Heidegger. Phenomenological analysis must therefore not start with the *consciousness* of objects, but with a questioning of the of the pre-theoretical conditions which allows for any theoretical judgments about the world to exist at all.³² With this groundwork laid out, we may now turn our attention to Merleau-Ponty’s conception of the body as an evolution of Husserlian and Heideggerian phenomenology which can function as a framework for environmentalism.

³¹ Wheeler, *Heidegger*, p. 9

³² *Ibid.*, p.6

Merleau-Ponty's Embodied Perception

Lived Space

We have so far explored the cartesian conception of nature as a mechanical and causal matrix consisting of external objects, and Husserl and Heidegger's repudiation of this cartesian perspective. Maurice Merleau-Ponty aims to show the relations between consciousness and nature.³³ In light of what we have previously discussed, we will now look at Merleau-Ponty's conception *Being-in-the-world* which he inherited from Heidegger as his tenet, but one which he further develops by placing his account of the *body-subject* at the centre. We will also look at how this can be understood in relation to his idea of the lifeworld.

Like Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty argues that we find ourselves first and foremost to be *in* the world, but that our *bodily* communication is that by which we can perceive the world at all. According to Merleau-Ponty, awareness of one's own body, in which it is experienced as an external object, must *itself* presuppose a prior awareness where the body is not given as a thing, but as our means of communication with the world, and the body is fundamentally open and receptive to the surrounding environment. Unlike Husserl, Merleau-Ponty does not operate with the notion of a noema-noetic structure. Merleau-Ponty takes the concept of intentionality (which presupposes a body in a world) and instead fuses it with a Heideggerian conception of a practical inclination towards various projects.³⁴ As Merleau-Ponty explains, the body is the vehicle of being in the world, and for a living being, having a body means being united with a definite milieu, merging with certain projects and being perceptually engaged therein.³⁵

Through reflection we can however attend to ourselves as objects; by touching one's left hand with the right hand, we can attend the sensations which represents the 'objective' characteristics of the right hand, or we can attend the subjective sensations in the left hand. Through this experiment we find that we can understand ourselves to both *be* a body and *have* a body. Being a body is a pre-reflective awareness, whereas the experience of having a body refers to the realm of thematic reflection which is *founded* on the more primary form of self-awareness. Such a pre-reflective, *operative* intentionality is put *directly* in the world as a bodily, intentional and affective comportment towards the various possibilities which are presented within the lived body.³⁶ To be an incarnated body-subject is thus to be *tied* to a certain world.³⁷

³³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behaviour*, Beacon Press, 1967, p. 3.

³⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 253

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 84

³⁶ *Ibid.*, xxxi

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 149

Although we will explore this notion more deeply later on, we may now take notice of its similarity to Heidegger's analysis of Dasein's care, but where the *body* comports itself towards various possibilities which surrounds it. The body is not just a thing in objective space, but *a system of possible actions*, whose 'place' is defined by its task and by its situation.³⁸ To experience an object with its given properties is to experience it as providing a set of bodily possibilities with which it can interact or achieve *maximum grip*. As Toadvine explains, this is because the body serves as a template for the logic of the world, and properties of things that we take to be 'real' or 'objective' tacitly assumes a reference to the body's norms. An object's "real" qualities depend on the body's privileging of orientation that yield as much richness and clarity as possible.³⁹ This means that whenever we experience something as an object in perception, both presence and absence are only variations within a primordial field of presence, a perceptual domain over which one's body has power.⁴⁰ We will explore this further.

A useful conceptualization for understanding this way of being *solicited* by the environment is by way of what James Gibson calls *affordances*. Affordances are not cognitive representations enclosed in a Cartesian subject, but ways of being 'invited' into a practical, interactive dealing with the environment. As we saw with Heidegger's example of a hammer, in the case of a body-subject, a hammer 'affords' hammering, similarly to how a doorknob 'affords' being gripped by our hands. An affordance is to Gibson '*what it offers for the animal, what it provides or furnishes, either for good or ill*'.⁴¹ Affordances presuppose a body-subject from which it can solicit actions, yet the body presupposes a world which affords it certain actions, as we will see. From this perspective, bodily consciousness is not detached from the world, as it is a bodily being-in-the-world towards the milieu of different interactive possibilities, and this is what Merleau-Ponty calls the *intentional arc*.⁴²

The body-subject is thus not primarily a thing or object in space, but the intentional *movement* towards various possibilities of action. This perceptual act happens *before* any abstract theorization takes place. It is a fundamental way of being as a body-subject, and categories such as 'object' and 'subject' are hence, like Heidegger explained, derivative of something more fundamental, namely Being-in-the-world.

³⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 260

³⁹ Ted Toadvine, *Maurice Merleau-Ponty*, Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/merleau-ponty/>, accessed 19.02.2021, p. 22

⁴⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 94

⁴¹ James J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, Psychology Press, 2015, p. 119

⁴² Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 137

The implication of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is that the body, and hence the self, is no longer conceived an external object which the Cartesian paradigm holds, but that *by which* there are objects. In perceptual experience the body-subject is in contact with the affordances through its bodily activities, bringing them into view as *ensembles of manipulada*, or what the body-subject can interact with.⁴³ It is *through* the body that we have access to the world, and perception is thus directly involved with the *situation* in which the body is nested. It is this understanding which will have strong implications for the human-nature relation.

Perception as Action

In the preface of *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty writes that “*the world is not what I think, but what I live*”.⁴⁴ As we have seen, the body's typical mode of existence is being-toward-the-world, or what Toadvine calls a pre-objective orientation toward a vital situation.⁴⁵ Since the body has a “situational spatiality” which is oriented towards possible actions as being-toward-the-world, it is expressed *through* this spatiality. This *kinaesthetic* awareness (of pre-reflective bodily position and movements) consists of the system of the *body-schema*, that into which different movements can be integrated through habituation.

The body schema and perception are strongly interconnected since perceptual habituality is according to Merleau-Ponty a *motor-habit*.⁴⁶ Perceptual habits, as motor habits, presuppose a body which is situated within-the world, and perception, as we shall see, becomes a bodily *act*, forming the *background* against which objective space is constituted.⁴⁷ Our lifeworld, which we have alluded to in relation to Husserl, is constituted by this background. Our perceptual access to the lifeworld can however be narrowed depending on our body schema, as in the famous case of Johann Schneider, who suffered injuries to his brain during the first world war.⁴⁸ Schneider could no longer respond to *abstract* movements, or movements which are not directed towards a situation (such as making a gesture on command). This meant that Schneider could not *project* into virtual space, for the intentional arc had been disrupted by his injury. Schneider's possibilities of action within-the-world had thus been limited, and this implies that

⁴³ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 107

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, (preface)

⁴⁵ Toadvine, *Maurice Merleau-Ponty*, p. 19

⁴⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 154

⁴⁷ Toadvine, *Maurice Merleau-Ponty*, pp. 19-20

⁴⁸ Rasmus Thybo Jensen, *Motor intentionality and the case of Schneider* Research Gate, www.researchgate.net/publication/225503111_Motor_intentionality_and_the_case_of_Schneider. Accessed 29. 10.2019.

perceptual experience is affected by the body-schema and the background which forms our lifeworld - a pre-reflective unity of co-existence with the world which solicitates bodily actions.

What this shows is how the body-subject's spatial intentionality towards entities is a form of *practical* rather than *theoretical* knowledge.⁴⁹ As Gibson explains, perception must be understood as the bodily *achievement* of the individual, not as an appearance in the theatre of one's consciousness.⁵⁰ This is because the abilities and structures of our bodies are *implied* in our perceptions of the world. Perception is an activity which is presupposed by a bodily being-in-the-world, structured by a body schema which allows for the interaction with the world through the intentional arc. In other words, perceptions are tacit bodily actions. Perception and actions become two sides of the same coin, and the distinction between mind and body is seems to be rendered a form of category error, because the mind is not *distinct* from bodily actions. We will further explore these implications.

The Phenomenal Field

Merleau-Ponty describes a *phenomenal field*, which is the encompassing field of our subjective awareness and how the world directly appears in perception. This has its basis in the *gestalt*, or meaningful whole of figure against ground.⁵¹ Entities are for example always experienced as more than the sum of its various parts, and sensing is characterized by a dialectic in which both the perceiving body and perceived thing are equally active and receptive. The entity, through its affordances, invites the body to adopt an attitude that will lead to its disclosure, and this living communication is what endows the perceived world with meanings and values that essentially refer to our bodies and lives.⁵² As Toadvine explains, since sensing takes place as the co-existence or communion of the body-subject with the world, we can now begin to see the reciprocity between them.

Sensing and perception is inextricably bound up with the contextual aspects of the lifeworld and is "*a living communication with the world that makes it present to us as the familiar place of our life*".⁵³ We do not *think* our way into perceiving an entity as that specific entity, since the gestalt is given pre-reflectively, and sensing invests the quality we experience with a living value and grasps its signification for the body. We will explore this mutual relationship between the world and body-subject in more detail later on.

⁴⁹ Toadvine, *Maurice Merleau-Ponty*, p. 20

⁵⁰ Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, p. 239

⁵¹ Toadvine, *Maurice Merleau-Ponty*, p. 19

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 53

This view holds that information is nested within the environment, and our brains do not simply process *neutral* sensory data. Sensory input, in this view, must be understood in the context of our actions, and as actions are solicited by the world, the notion of qualitative experience as completely isolated from the world becomes misleading. This is because qualitative experiences are encompassed by the phenomenal field (e.g. sensory modalities such as sight, taste, scent, touch and so on and as Toadvine explains, the phenomenal field is only forgotten as a consequence of perception's own tendency to forget itself in *favour* of the perceived phenomena which it discloses.⁵⁴ Sensory experiences are thus often mistakenly perceived as derivative from an external object in experience.

Perception naturally projects itself towards truth by attempting to disclose reality successfully. A natural tendency in bodily perception is to have a mastery of one's surroundings on a practical level, and this will consequently include a practical understanding of the things which exist, for example. This tendency is also reflected in theory when we stop and reflect on what is experienced. But reflection has the natural consequence of leading to the theoretical constructions of an objective world of determinate things. Scientific methodology is particularly what allows for precise measurements of the phenomenal field, but this may also reduce perception to what Merleau-Ponty describes as *confused appearances* of objective space which require reinterpretations and explanations.⁵⁵

Since the body-subject is not primarily a thing, but the intentional movement of various possibilities of action, dualistic categories are products from perception's own tendency of favouring the perceived, forgetting the pre-reflective act, which is amplified by objectivity. By viewing the derivative as the fundamental we disclose the world as existing *independently* of the body-subject in a world of objects. As we have also seen with Heidegger, this is amplified when we isolate the entities encountered as merely present-at-hand, amenable to study.

Similarly to Heidegger and Husserl, Merleau-Ponty's project aims to take us back to what *enables* objectivity to exist in the first place by disclosing the origin of objective thought in the pre-objective, perceptual field.⁵⁶ However, objective explanations are as such derivative of the *body's* way-of-being in apprehending the world, and as Merleau-Ponty explains, the tendency of a constant demand for pure descriptions must be avoided so that we can return to what he calls the primordial layer from where ideas and things are born.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Toadvine, *Maurice Merleau-Ponty*, p. 18

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Thomas Netland, *The Living Transcendental: An Integrationist View of Naturalized Phenomenology*, *Frontiers in Psychology*, ResearchGate, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/342936628>, accessed 11.11.2020. p. 4

⁵⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 228

The relevance of this in relation to environmentalism may not be yet obvious, but this will become clearer since we are trying to establish a different *basis* from which we apprehend ourselves as situated within the environment. The understanding of embodied perception as essentially entangled with the environment is what allows for such a basis in which we can see how it revitalizes the human-nature relation by revealing the situated interdependence between the body and its lived space:

*“If I find, while reflecting upon the essence of the body, that it is tied to the essence of the world, this is because my existence as subjectivity is identical with my existence as a body and with the existence of the world, and because, ultimately, the subject that I am, understood concretely, is inseparable from this particular body and from this particular world”.*⁵⁸

As Merleau-Ponty also tells us, the goal of phenomenology is to return to the lived world beneath the objective world.⁵⁹ This goal sets the stage for our discussion on ecological phenomenology, which aims to reveal the worldly relationalities of the body-subject within the biosphere. By seeing how the body is in direct communication with the world as perceptual acts, the world and the entities we encounter structures our experience of nature, and, as we shall now see, vice versa. With this in mind, we will begin to see its profound implications as a potential framework for environmentalism by providing a new understanding of the relationships which lodges the embodied subject within the biosphere. This is what we will now explore.

⁵⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 431

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 57

Part II: Eco-Phenomenology

Co-Constitution

As Merleau-Ponty writes in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, *man is a knot of relations*.⁶⁰ What we have seen so far is that the phenomenological tradition believes that the notion of a detached and isolated self which surveys an external world is misleading, for the person must start *in* the world for her consciousness to be *of* the world. As Merleau-Ponty describes, the body *has* its world and understands it without having to go through representations, and without being subordinated to a symbolic or objectifying function.⁶¹ Since bodily perception is in an interactive communion with its environment, the contents of one's lifeworld cannot be reduced to mere categories such as subject and object – this is because categories are derivative of what is more fundamental, as we have also seen in our analysis of Husserl and Heidegger.

As Gallagher & Zahavi point out, in presenting perceptual experience as a kind of involvement or entanglement with things, we find that it could not exist in the absence of these situations. Perception, from this view, is revealed as a condition whose nature depends on the presence and involvement with the encountered world.⁶² This situatedness entails the body-subject as being anchored to its surroundings in which it is incorporated and dependent. Our perceptual experiences which underpins our objective understanding of the world is not separated from the world but is *in* it.

An eco-phenomenological understanding of the body-subject reveals *nature* as the unitary intertwined web of experience. The lifeworld, as David Abram explains, is nothing more or less than the *biosphere itself*, the matrix of earthly life in which we ourselves are embedded with other lifeforms. But as he explains, it is not the biosphere as conceived by an abstract, objectifying lens. It is rather the biosphere as it is experienced and *lived from within* by the body.⁶³ As we will see, this entails that it is not simply the world *causing* us to have qualitative, subjective experiences. The world and the perceiving body-subject are mutually co-constitutive because the way an entity is experienced is always affected *by* the body-subject, yet the object *itself* also forms the body-subject's experience of it. One's *way* of experiencing an entity is central for how it appears, whilst the entity itself is also simultaneously having an affective role in the subjective constitution of the object. Since there is a mutual co-constitution, this relation is primary, and the body-subject is thus *realized* in this relation.

⁶⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 483.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

⁶² Gallagher & Zahavi, *The Phenomenological Mind*, p 104.

⁶³ Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, p. 48.

Take the example of a perceptual experience of a flower. Depending on our body schema and background, the encounter with a flower can take on a manifold of different possible perceptual experiences. Two persons may experience it differently (one person may be colour-blind or have a stuffy nose), and the perceptual experience of a bumblebee (assuming it has one), will because of its bodily structures be of a completely different nature than the two humans.⁶⁴ Through its affordances the flower provide the embodied agents many possible ways of interacting with it. From what has been established we cannot however say that our experience of the flower is *only* caused by the flower itself, nor by only our internal faculties – the perceptual experience is constituted within the participatory engagement *with* the flower.⁶⁵ The flower is situated within a nexus of possible sensory experiences from which meaning emerges – symmetrical *beauty*, *pleasant* scent, *vibrant* colours and other bodily expressions. The qualitative experience of the flower does not only exist in the *head* of the human – because the experience *is* the bodily interaction with the flower. Perceptual experience exists in the relation *between* the body’s capabilities and the entity perceived – not in isolation. From our analysis, neither what is sensed, nor that which senses, can thus be passive in perceptual experience.

Although notions such as “*beauty*” are linguistic concepts and thus *anthropogenic* (human-made), these are emergent in the practical engagement for a body-subject *with* the flower. Whilst values such as beauty may presuppose language as a bodily, human expression, these projections can only exist *by virtue* of there being something which brings it forth *as it is* by a body-subject through its affordances. A bumblebee, without (presumably) an abstracted and conceptual repertoire will thus have a non-reflective *being-towards* the flower as *for* collecting nectar, a non-thematized perception *as* bodily behaviour (realized by their *proboscis*, or hairy tongues, for example).⁶⁶ How the embodied being is structured is thus paramount for how the world is disclosed. The bodily structures, whether of impaired or normal body-schemas of humans, or that of bumblebees, *brings forth* a lifeworld in its interaction with nature. Embodied beings bring forth their worlds as a *procedural*, tacit knowledge which is situated, evoked by the affordances of the entities encountered. But this bringing forth a lifeworld presupposes Being, first and foremost. This is true of all embodied lifeworlds - reflective or otherwise.

⁶⁴ Trond Gansmo Jakobsen, *Økofilosofi*, Tapir akademisk forlag. 2005, p. 215.

⁶⁵ Gansmo Jakobsen, *Økofilosofi*, p. 215

⁶⁶ We do not assume that a bee possesses cognitive concepts such as “flower” or “nectar”, because it brings forth a world by its bodily way of being, and this is a pre-reflective, co-constitutive, bodily act.

From what we have seen, perception is a tacit, co-constitutive action. Additionally, in the context of ecology, the notion of constitution can be further expanded by also revealing that many co-relations *presuppose* each other. How the object presents itself *for* the embodied being via its affordances affects how the embodied being interacts with it. We cannot reduce a flower, nor ourselves, to stand in isolation from our immediate surroundings. For example, we cannot remove the bee from the context of the flower, since bees are also ‘constitutive’ of the flowers through pollination, yet the flowers are ‘constitutive’ of the bee, since the bee depends on the flower for the nectar. Without assuming a wilful or conscious volition of these entities, their existence is nonetheless realized in this symbiotic relation.

Body-subjects are constitutive in the sense of bringing phenomena to pre-reflective awareness, to disclose them, and to actively participate with them. Features are experienced as they are because of how they are disclosed by the embodied agent, and the perception of the organism must be made explicit in relation to the autonomy and intentionality of life which encompasses the lived body - and lifeworld. The meaning of an entity, its significance, is thus subject *related*, but not merely “*subjective*”. The web of relations within which it acquires meaning is constituted by the body-subject but is also independent of this *particular* body-subject’s individual whim.⁶⁸

By attending to the way we perceptually experience our lifeworld as embodied, we reveal the diversity of many various ways of being towards a shared world. This lifeworld includes the co-constitutive relations which encompasses more than just the human domain. Since all (or at least many) of the various living beings within-the-world need sun, water and oxygen, a shared horizon which is constructed from our practical encounters is revealed.⁶⁹ The plant exists only by virtue of there being a soil in which it stands, rainwater which nourishes it, and sunrays vitalizing it. Similarly, most organisms, including humans, could not exist in the absence of photosynthesis, which presupposes plants, which again presupposes all the other factors underpinning its existence. Our embodied selves are thus dependent on the relations with what is *beyond* the human, anthropocentric (human-centered) domain.

As Trond Jakobsen explains, we are nested in-the-world as dynamic and interactive processes, analogous to how biological phenomena are nested within dynamic and interactive ecological processes.⁷⁰ We do not live *on* earth; we live *in* earth.

⁶⁸ Toadvine, Brown, *Eco-Phenomenology*, p. 24

⁶⁹ Douglas A. Vakoch, . Ferenando Castrillòn, *Ecopsychology, Phenomenology and the Environment*, Springer, 2014, p. 150

⁷⁰ Gansmo Jakobsen, *Økofilosofi*, p. 115

Perception involves the perceiving body-subject from *within* its given context, rather than happening as a detached spectator who has abstracted themselves from that context.⁷¹ When we begin to understand how the world is reflected in one's bodily behaviour and directedness, we also see our primordial relationship as a deep involvement with a *lived* world which the body brings forth in its interaction with nature. As Merleau-Ponty explains, the one who contemplates the blue sky is not an a cosmic subject (distinct from the universe) standing before it, possessing its colour as a thought. Instead, he describes the blueness of the sky as something which:

*“Thinks itself in me. I am this sky that gathers together, composes itself, and begins to exist for itself [...] but the blue is not a mind, so it makes no sense to say it exists for itself [...] yet when it comes to the perceived or sensed sky, [...] we can say that it exists for itself in the sense that it is not made up of external parts.”*⁷²

Objectification, however, masks this relation. We begin to see how objectification by way of reflection makes us apprehend the world through a derivative lens where the world becomes mediated through our categories. We will return to thought this later on.

Intrinsic Values

Although the notion of intrinsic values is a secondary focus for us, it is important to mention in the context of environmentalism. An environmentalist can according to Neil Evernden be described as someone who sees intrinsic value in nature and must demonstrate her experience of value as a feature of reality.⁷³ By shifting our attention from the abstracted explanations, descriptions and models of the world to its lived *meaning* within the lifeworld, a phenomenological ontology dissolves the barrier between the thinker and the object, and hence the distinction between values as *immanent* in nature “out there” or as *subjective* valuations “from here”. As Toadvine explains, organic life and human consciousness is emergent from a natural world which is not reducible to its meaning for a mind, nor as a causal nexus of pre-objective realities.

Through objectification (by taking perception as a causal process from which we infer the existence of external objects), we deny any meaningful configuration to the perceived

⁷¹ Jack Reynolds, *Maurice Merleau-Ponty*, Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, <https://iep.utm.edu/merleau/>, Accessed 14.04.2021

⁷² Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 222

⁷³ Evernden, *The Natural Alien*, p. 4

entity.⁷⁴ Values and meanings become the individual's projections. But whilst we may *think* of the world as a set of objective entities linked by causal and mathematical relations, this is not, as we have seen, how we pre-reflectively experience it. The world we immediately experience is our lifeworld, constituted by our being and our doing. This experience is structured by the body-subject in its practical, pre-reflective relation to the biospheric entities, whether one is a human or a bumblebee. From these perspectives the environment is not something with an independent existence as common sense may have us believe, including the various meanings which exist within-the-world.

By understanding the relation between the constitutive role of the organism and nature itself, we can now see how any conception of intrinsic values in nature must be rooted in our experiential lifeworld. Although values are indeed subjective, we can see that they are subjective to the extent that they can be perceptually experienced in various ways by many embodied subjects with different structures. They are not, however, constituted by the mere *projections* of the subject, nor by the causal effects of the objects themselves - but the relation *between* the perceiving body and its lifeworld.

As Jack Reynolds points out, meaningful behaviour is *lived* through rather than thematised and reflected upon.⁷⁵ As nature is a series of nested gestalts, *valuing* becomes an embodied act of meaning-giving and is a pre-reflective intentional act.⁷⁶ In this sense, nature becomes active and affective in the constitution of our qualitative experiences, and by forgetting our experienced reality through an overemphasis on objectivity, it is supplanted by a model which, despite its enormous usefulness, is abstracted from the primordial where our categories arise. If we only perceive the world as an object as “out there” we are distanced from it; we *separate* thoughts, ideas and our perceptions from the world, as well as meanings and values.

As we have seen, one consequence may thus be a mechanistic conception of nature, which by its very essence denies any meaning or value to nature. Although we will not deeply explore the consequences of this, to conceive of the natural world with all its complex lifeforms as inanimate, dead matter may have great implications for our actions and morality. Furthermore, this way of being-towards the world weakens the human-nature relation whereby we see the “outside” world as something inherently different from ourselves, void of any experiential

⁷⁴ Toadvine, *Maurice Merleau-Ponty*, p. 20

⁷⁵ Jack Reynolds, *Maurice Merleau-Ponty*, <https://iep.utm.edu/merleau/>

⁷⁶ Zachary Davis, Anthony Steinbock, *Max Scheler*, Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/scheler/>, accessed 22.04.2021, p. 10.

qualities, and hence forgetting our situatedness within the biosphere by overlooking the practical, constitutive acts of our being. As David Abram points out, to conceive of the world as *nothing* but a collection of determinate objects is to *deny* its active and engaging role with the perceiver.⁷⁷

As we have seen, when we only make sense of the world from the natural attitude, we overlook our perceptual, bodily acts and instead focus on an interpretation of what is experienced. What is thus experienced as an object is seemingly more central and real than the act itself. The act remains invisible, for it is not noticed. But as Evernden points out, to be ignorant of the act is to miss the context of meaning for the experienced entity.⁷⁸ This is a natural consequence that the overemphasis on objectivity has for the human-nature relation, and it is exactly the opposite that an ecological understanding of phenomenology can provide for environmentalism.

A New Framework

Environmentalism, as a broad philosophy and social movement, is concerned with the impact humans are having on the planet, as well as the preservation of various ecosystems. It may also seek to control pollution, climate change or to protect the biodiversity of the planet.⁷⁹ In many cases it aims to do so by *balancing* the relations between humans and the environment. As humanity is searching for solutions to environmental problems, it may be the case that our pollution, destruction of the various ecosystems and mass extinctions of numerous species is a pathological symptom of a certain way-of-being. Environmentalists are generally concerned with what we have repeatedly spoken of throughout this essay, namely the ‘human-nature’ relation. In this context it is understood to how we *relate* to the environment by our ways of *being-toward* it. It is *how* we understand ourselves as living beings and how our conception of nature is constituted.

Since environmentalists often seek to understand the human-nature relation, they may look to *ecological science* for a deeper understanding of the facts concerning how humanity affects and relates to the surrounding world. As ecological sciences are (amongst many things) the study of the relationships between living organisms and their physical environments, ecological science may thus provide a basis for the human-nature relation

⁷⁷ David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, Vintage Books, (1996), p. 43

⁷⁸ Evernden, *The Natural Alien*, p. 53.

⁷⁹ "Environmentalism" – Definition and More from the Free Merriam-Webster Dictionary. Merriam-webster.com. 13 August 2010. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/environmentalism> Accessed 17.04.2021

which is based on an objective understanding of our situated place within the biosphere. It may also provide us with enormously useful data on the correlations between certain behaviours and the effect it has on the biosphere, for example. Environmentalists, who only base their frameworks on such a scientific approach, take nature and humanity as something amenable to study.

But as we have seen, by solely focusing on modelling and categorizing nature as a causal matrix and taking for granted the human body as an object within a world of objects, we forget the pre-reflective lifeworld in favour of the phenomena we perceive *within* this lifeworld. Objectivity is a way of *revealing* the world, but in this process, something else remains hidden. As Heidegger explains, by forgetting Dasein's fundamental relationship with the world as care, we disclose the world in terms of what is merely present-at-hand. With its emphasis on rationality and objectivity, this way of being implicitly dismisses the subjective dimension (and from our analysis, the *axiological*, value-laden dimension as well) of our being-with and thus reduces reality to extension and causality existing outside of the perceiver.⁸⁰ For Heidegger, merely apprehending nature as a collection of neutral objects has the character of depriving the world of its worldhood in a definitive way. Hence, by dismissing the fundamental care-structure of Dasein, Heidegger explains that by only conceiving the world as present-at-hand;

“[...] *the nature which assails and enthralls us as a landscape remains hidden*”.⁸¹ A theoretical and abstracted conception of nature as a causal matrix which consists of entirely extensional properties, separated from the subject, is thus a limited understanding for environmentalists who seek to incorporate humanity with nature. Environmentalists who are trying to strengthen the human-nature relation and establish the existence of intrinsic values in nature may potentially benefit from a phenomenological understanding of the body-subject. Nature itself and its experienced meanings are no longer understood as separated from the perceiver. This understanding encompasses the whole biosphere as essentially a large co-constitutive web of relationalities.

Conceptual Difficulties

By labelling a method of inquiry as “objective” there is a presupposition that there are indeed objective features of the world, which is itself to presuppose a distinction between subject and object, or at least an alterity. It should be noted that Merleau-Ponty never denies there being

⁸⁰ Toadvine, Brown, *Eco-Phenomenology*, p. 3.

⁸¹ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 100.

an alterity between humans and the environment, and that nature is not something we are identical with (nor alienated from).⁸² Since our perceptual experience is structured in such a way where we experience ourselves as distinct from nature, there is *some* merit to such a conception, but it should not be understood as absolute (and thereby dualistic). As I have tried to make clear, objectivity is a *way* of apprehending the world. Without weeding out subjective predispositions, scientific progress may not have come as far as it has. Though this is speculation on my part, what I have tried to show is that our perceptions are not *separated* from the world, for objectivity *presupposes* a lifeworld, dependent on nature, in which perceptions are *already* enmeshed. As Merleau-Ponty explains;

*“The entire universe of science is constructed upon the lived world, and [...] we must first awaken that experience of the world of which science is the second-order expression”.*⁸³

However, it is difficult to get around the anthropocentric concepts when trying to get behind what underpins concepts in the first place. One may argue that what we have described here is itself guilty of what it is trying to criticize. Is it not presupposed that it is an *objective* claim that the overemphasis on objectivity is causing us to become alienated from nature? Is it not a *description* of what *is* the case, thereby objectifying our objectifying tendencies?

We may accept (or deny) that in this reasoning there is an implicit, reflective reference to a subject-object distinction which seems difficult to overcome. However, it may be a *pragmatic* argument that the truth-value of an eco-phenomenological understanding of the body-subject must not be considered by only its propositional content, but by its expediency in producing a *practical* understanding of our situated place within the biosphere. Anthropocentric objectivism is thus unpragmatic (when it denies the co-constitutive role between the body-agent and the world) for an environmentalist who seeks to understand the human-nature relation more fully.

A linguistic analysis is beyond the scope of this essay, as is the central themes of *intercorporeity* and *temporality* within the works of Merleau-Ponty. The assumption that a bumblebee (or some other organism) without a capacity for language can have perceptual ‘experience’, has been largely left unjustified. However, what we have defined perception as, is the pre-reflective bodily orientation *towards* the world. As we have seen, perception is a bodily *act*, not just a higher-order property of linguistic beings. It is a way of bringing forth a

⁸² Ted Toadvine, Charles S. Brown, *Eco-Phenomenology*, State University of New York, 2003, p. xv

⁸³ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. lxxii

world, and given that many lifeforms are also embodied with sensory capacities, it is logical to assume that they enact a pre-reflective lifeworld, which is bodily ‘perceived’ in some sense.

Additionally, the “human-nature” relation may only encompass a fraction of what environmentalism seeks to understand, and it is considerably anthropocentric in and of itself, since it is more concerned with the relation of *humans* to nature rather than that of other lifeforms. However, our goal has mainly been to provide a potential framework for environmentalism as one which captures the co-constitutive relationship between embodied agents, particularly humans and their surrounding environment. Now understood as the biosphere, it by its very definition encompasses all living organisms as co-constitutive.

Objectivity Revisited

Whilst there is little doubt that an objective understanding of the human-nature relation can provide extremely useful data as to how we may practically reduce emission of greenhouse gasses, protect species from extinction and help us innovate new, sustainable technologies, it has been our case that eco-phenomenology provides us with an *additional* understanding of the human-nature relation potentially impervious to scientific, objective research. This is, because we have seen, if we define ‘objectivity’ as the method of inquiry by way of distinguishing the independent, perceiving subject from the environment, one *necessarily* attempts to understand the natural world as an object with a collection of more objects, including ourselves. From our analysis, all objective claims are first and foremost rooted in mankind entering practical, perceptual relations with the biosphere.

Throughout this essay we have tried to understand how the perceiving body-subject, and the natural world in which it interacts, cannot be conceived as *only* mere objects. Our existential way of being is permeated by our interactions with the world, and to be a body-subject is to be in a relation with the surrounding environment. The body is that by which there can be a derived experience of objects at all, and an overemphasis on objectivity separates perceptions and experiences from the world. But if we only separate our perceptions and experiences from the world, we also forget our deeply rooted situatedness by supplanting pre-objective reality with an abstracted model. As Abram points out, when we value explanations of the objectively as it is independently of the subjective perceiver, we seem to forget our active participation and involvement within it.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, p. 33

Through our constant tendencies to represent the world objectively, we forfeit its direct, affective and subjective presence.⁸⁵ It was exactly this that led Husserl to realize that the assumptions of objectivity had led to a near complete eclipse of the lifeworld. Husserl tried to show objectivity as derivative of the lifeworld, and as we have seen in light of Merleau-Ponty, the lifeworld is revealed as a deep entanglement within-the-world. But the lifeworld is not *only* intersubjectively constituted from an anthropogenic perspective, as it is also biological interaction between embodied subjects enacting and bringing forth a world in the biosphere. How we bring forth our world is thus a consequence of our being towards the ecosystems which surrounds and enmeshes us.

Philosophers have argued for centuries that knowledge of the facts cannot necessarily provide us with a set of prescriptive *oughts* as to how we should morally govern ourselves, as Hume showed.⁸⁶ This is no different from what we have been trying to show here. Even though we have considered intrinsic values as rooted in experience, eco-phenomenology does *not* necessarily ascribe any understanding of the human-nature relation, objectively or otherwise, as either *good* or *bad* in its practical, ethical outcome. Nor does it provide us with a set of prescriptive solutions to environmental threats, unless one can somehow ground normativity in experience, which is beyond the scope of this essay.

In fact, one study found that identifying oneself with nature may *rationalize* destructive behaviour. On the other hand, the same study found that resolving dissonance in one's perception of the human-nature relation may also lead to greater levels of environmentally responsible behaviour.⁸⁷ Our own perceptions of our self-nature relationships are thus associated with certain behaviours relating to *either* environmentally destructive or responsible patterns of behaviour. Whether an eco-phenomenological environmental framework causes us to adopt a more sustainable way of being remains a topic for another time.

However, as Evernden points out, if we were to regard ourselves as 'fields of care' rather than as discrete objects in a neutral environment, our understanding of our relationship to the world may be fundamentally transformed.⁸⁸ As we have seen, our perceptions are not detached from our ways of being-in-the-world. And since *perceiving* has been understood a reciprocal act carried out by the subject's bodily being-in-the-world, a radical shift in how we perceive ourselves entails a shift in how we act. We might closely approximate the facts of existence by

⁸⁵ Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, p. 33

⁸⁶ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Oxford University Press, 2009 (1739), p. 469

⁸⁷ Joanne Vining, Melinda Storie, Emily A. Kalnicky: *The distinction between humans and nature*, Human Ecology Review, (2008), pp. 1-11. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228485279> Accessed 03.05.2021.

⁸⁸ Evernden, *The Natural Alien*, p. 47

regarding ourselves less as static objects than as sets of dynamic relationships. Understanding Merleau-Ponty's body-subject within-the-world as a perceiving field of care allows for a new take on the human-nature relation from which all meanings and values are found within this lived space shared with other lifeforms.

This notion is also further elaborated by Ted Toadvine, where he argues that an *ontological shift* in our perception of the world can alter our ethos by shifting our sense of *what is* and how we experience and interpret our relations with the surrounding world. Toadvine cites Arne Næss, who argued that “*ethics follows from how we experience in the world*”.⁸⁹ A change in our thinking about what ‘*is*’ can thus lead to a new conception of environmental ethics which also captures our dwelling in the world.⁹⁰ Perhaps by simply *recognizing* the ontological distinction between Being and beings, which Heidegger urged us to do, environmentalism may have a practical framework from which it understands the human-nature relation as a perceptual engagement with entities. Although left unexplored here – it *may* be the case that such an understanding can ambitiously bridge the gap between facts and values. As Evernden passionately explains:

*“If what we are is entailed in the story we create for ourselves, then only a new story will alter us and our actions.”*⁹¹

Eco-phenomenology provides us with the story of us as deeply intertwined with nature, whatever the implications of this may be.

⁸⁹ Ted Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature*, Northwestern University Press, 2009, p. 134

⁹⁰ Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature*, p. 134

⁹¹ Evernden, *The Natural Alien*, p. 141

Conclusion

In a time of environmental unsustainability, humanity may search for ways of mitigating the disastrous impacts that we have on the planet. We may look for potential solutions in environmentalist philosophy and natural sciences by understanding our objective relations to the world around us. In this essay I have attempted to present an eco-phenomenological understanding of the human-nature relation by presenting Merleau-Ponty's body-subject as a deep involvement with the surrounding world. I have tried to make the case that an overemphasis on objectivity causes us as naturally affective and embodied beings to adopt a framework from which we conceive of our perceptions as separated from the world.

We have found is that there is a deep, co-constitutive relationship between the body and its surrounding environment, because the body brings forth a world when it is invited into a practical engagement with the environment through affordances. Thus, to summarize, by conceiving the world solely as an object through an overemphasis on objectivity, we gain only a limited understanding of the human-nature relation. But if we can reveal our experiences and perceptions as part of the world, we strengthen the human-nature relation by revealing our deep entanglement and situatedness with-the-world. Eco-phenomenology shows how our perceptions and experiences are not separated from the world. Therefore, by revealing this situatedness, eco-phenomenology strengthens human-nature relation. Since some environmentalists are concerned with the human-nature relation, eco-phenomenology can hence serve as a potential framework by revealing our interrelated and lived relationship with the biosphere.

However, by no means does an ecological phenomenology discard the usefulness of objectivity, reason or scientific methodology. I personally believe that the pursuit of objective knowledge about the world is one of our greatest sources of awe, and curiosity and wonder. The goal of this essay is thus *not* to present abstract or objective thinking as pathological, but to hopefully show that it is not the *only* way to think about the world. Phenomenology merely suspends its judgement about the existence of an objective world, providing us with a new perceptual understanding of ourselves as situated within-the-world, hence providing us with a new story in which we are co-creators. Since perception is an act, and how we act is entailed by our perceptions, it is thus up to us to perceive ourselves as protectors, rather than destroyers, of the world which we share with the various ecosystems and its embodied inhabitants; the lived world of the biosphere itself.

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