

The Animal that I Have Always Been: The Sources of Human Excellences

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Abstract

This essay explores how the phenomenology of the body is vital to correcting the long held belief popular within European culture and also within European philosophy that the body is an impediment to the so-called transcendent capacities that mark human excellence. Instead, this essay will argue for reversing that idea, not only rejecting the body's supposed inferiority as comprising human's "lower nature" as incorrect but articulating how the body's immediate prereflective experience in perception and its inseparable levels of sense (such as emotion and a certain kind of imagination) are the necessary sources that give rise to those capacities of human excellence. Derrida's impassioned plea to reconsider the status of animals in his work, *The Animal that Therefore I am*, is appreciated for its dismissal of the Cartesian assertion that the animal body is a mere mechanism and Derrida's call for "animal philosophers," but it is the phenomenology of the body of Merleau-Ponty that fills in the gaps to make this claim compelling. The essay considers Merleau-Ponty's descriptions of 1) how the invisible sense of visible prereflective perception makes ideas and values possible, 2) how the animal body's perception is a "dialogue" with the things and beings of the world that broadens sense, 3) how the animal body and animals are a communicative bodies leading to the root sense of language, 4) how instinct in the animal body is not a mechanical reaction, but is an entry into a dimension of dream and the imaginal realm, 5) how emotions are not merely biological or subjective states, but are instead also part of the circulation of sense among the members of the phenomenal field (or "flesh of the world") that have layers of meaning opening up an interiority in the animal body, and 6) how the prereflective, immediately experienced "felt solidarity" among living beings is the necessary source of ethics and gives more formal ethical principles their resonance and persuasive sense. Human excellence in all these areas, whether ranging from love to speech or from symbolic meaning to ethical action, stems from our shared embodiment with animals.

Keywords: embodiment, reversibility, self-reflexive perception, gestural language, oneiric instinct, e-motion, the invisible of the visible, silence, felt solidarity

Introduction: Catching Sight of Our Animal Nature in Descartes, Derrida and Merleau-Ponty

After thousands of years of considering animals as inferior beings to humans in the philosophical tradition from Plato and Aristotle to the twentieth century, Jacques Derrida's collection of essays entitled, *The Animal that Therefore I am*, reverses this evaluation. The cultural context that surrounded this tradition was also convinced of human superiority to the "dumb brutes" who share the planet with humans. However, it is interesting that in Derrida's title, which is a parody of René Descartes famous dictum, "I think, therefore I am" (Descartes, 1970: 103), a statement that asserts the essence of humanity is to be a rational being capable of thought that is also key to human's superior capacities, Derrida is phrasing this insight as if it, too, is the result of thought and reflection. Descartes located the status of animals as being inferior to humans on a hierarchy of being because they lacked reflective thought and rationality. Even more extremely, Descartes saw animals as being insensate machines. During the past decades, the Cartesian perspective on animal nature has become increasingly questioned within philosophy, psychology, and anthropology (and also in other disciplines). Increasingly revolutionary discoveries of previously unknown capacities of animals by ethologists (some to be discussed later in this essay) have altered the status of animals in global culture, especially with the wide audiences of popular researchers like Jane Goodall (Goodall, 1971) or Frans de Waal (de Waal, 2016) or Marc Bekoff (Bekoff, 2010). The changing evaluation of animals is correlative to the changing assessment of the natural world, which previously failed to appreciate its intrinsic value, both philosophically and practically. However, there is still further revision needed in our thinking about the human relationship with animals. To see more clearly these relationships alters our sense of what humanity is insofar as we, too, are animals. Our animality has still not received the sort of philosophical validation and exploration that it needs to fully reorient our way of thinking about humanity, animals and the natural world.

The title of this essay, "*The Animal That I Have Always Been*" as a retort to Derrida's famous title is an attempt to call attention to another level of human being that might be call the "prereflective level" of experience—the immediate perceptual and felt in taking in of the environment and its events that is implied in Derrida's essay, but not explored. This is the level of experience that was so exhaustively investigated by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose writings preceded Derrida's, but in many ways went much further in articulating the reasons why this reversal of the status of animals and of human's own animal nature is warranted. Both philosophers, however, are undermining Descartes position and the tradition he founded. Descartes' tortuous path to declaring that as a human being he is only a thinking thing, a thinking substance, a partaker of the universal mind as guarantor of clarity and distinctness housed within a body (Descartes, 1970: 105), is

appropriately arrived at after a “therefore,” an *ergo*, since the only way for him to affirm his true human being is through a process of thought and deduction. That Derrida also inserts a “*donc*” or “therefore” before his declaration of being an animal, is perhaps Derrida’s trickster’s point that Descartes was misguided in his search to discern the nature of human being by focusing on our rational capacities. This would assume that Derrida is being satiric with his title, which is plausible since it seems that he doesn’t believe this conclusion is arrived at by thought. If this is so, he is asserting more than is obvious in his text and by using this title, he is satirically belittling the mistaken belief that our animal identity is a matter of thought, when instead our animal identity is not found through reflective conscious thought.

In his essay, the revelations about human’s animal nature begin after Derrida is ashamed to be naked before his cat in the bathroom. For Derrida, at first glance, it seems that a prereflective experience, that of shame, the shame of being the object of a gaze of an animal, his cat, is the source of his recognition of his being an animal, as another animal looked upon, which means, of course, that to be human is to be a body. It is the most obvious interpretation of Derrida’s text, that it his nakedness that causes an immediate flush of shame. It is also the case that our bodies that have been for thousands of years in this philosophical tradition located as the site of our “animal nature” and a source of shame. For Descartes, this is the hidden and unacknowledged answer to his quest for the essence of humanity, perhaps hidden from his own awareness, that his shame about human embodiment is what unconsciously forces him to invalidate the body and hold it as inessential to his being. Descartes would not be open to the gaze of the cat or be embarrassed, since he insists that embodiment is inessential to human being and that animal perception is just mechanical. However, perhaps Descartes doth protest too much that his body is not Descartes, and perhaps so does the entire tradition that follows his conclusions, hiding from another less conscious recognition that we are certainly bodies and that these bodies share so much in common with animals, that this is why we are human *animals*.

However, Derrida’s shame is not from the seemingly obvious source of being seen naked by his cat, by an animal, by an Other. Derrida distinguishes two types of philosophers, those who are open to the gaze of the other, the animal, who feel its impact, its plea and dialogue, and those who “have taken no account of the fact that what they call ‘animal’ could look at them and address them from down there, from a wholly other origin” (Derrida, 2008: 12). For this second type of philosopher, the animal is devoid of a gaze, devoid of otherness, and is looked upon not reciprocally, not in dialogue, but “autopsically” and “devitalizingly,” in a gaze upon animals as a vision that really sees only themselves, is self-directed, self-centered, and looks upon a world of objectified others to be exploited. Derrida *implies* that he could

enter such an immediate experiential interchange with an animal, since he does not consider himself superior and looking down upon mechanical beings called animals. However, Derrida confides in passing that it is not his body that causes Derrida shame in front of his cat, but rather a further realization that the cat's gaze engenders in him. Through the cat's gaze, the reality of the unrelenting human war upon animals comes to his consciousness, and this is what is shameful to him is that as a human, he is part of that dreadful legacy. It is humanity's historical shame about this violence and also the hatred of their own animality, their embodiment, that has lead humanity to this vicious and shameful behavior towards animal others. These are important thoughts to which we will return briefly at the end of this essay, but it is the immediate level of bodily experience and perception that needs to be explored first in what it means to assessing what our shared animal nature with the animal world means for our human capacities.

Derrida does point us in this direction as a task to be undertaken, since the essay repeatedly reminds us, we "follow" after animals, which among its many meanings indicates that what animals are is at the heart, the founding phenomena, of our human capacities. However, how there is another level that underlies our rational capacities and other human virtues that we shared with animals is not explored by Derrida but is the guiding thread of Merleau-Ponty's work. For Merleau-Ponty, the body is our access to the world and is the cloth that the threads of reality are woven into (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 139, 235). Later, Merleau-Ponty will explore this prereflective embodied level as the dimension of "interanimality: and will call our prereflective access to the world, "the animal of perceptions" (Merleau-Ponty, 2003: 171). This regard towards animals and human animality recalls the Native American tribes of the United States who had divergent views on many aspects of life but agreed that the encounter with animals was an encounter with their *teachers*, and that the wisdom that resided within their human being was the result of the teachings of their animal nature.

Before we look at Merleau-Ponty articulation of embodiment and its tie to animality, one last point of Derrida's is helpful as a starting point for this essay. Derrida's comments on the human naming of *the realm of "the animal"*—what he playfully calls an "animot"—is a reminder to readers that the name "animal" is a term that is not accurate, but more of a remnant of labeling animals in an invalidating manner. In French, the word "mot," means "word," so an "animot" is a word for an animal that is just that—a word, an empty term. Derrida says, "The animal, what a word! The animal is a word, it is an appellation that men have instituted, a name they have given themselves the right and authority to give to the living other" (Derrida, 2008; 23). Derrida's objection is that "with the myriad of life forms, the multiplicity of kinds of existence, to which this name is supposed to refer and yet humans dare to name in general as if a singular, *the animal* (Derrida,

2008: 24). There are myriad very different beings supposedly designated by the term “animal,” which lumps them all together in a generalized or stereotyped way. I recognize this problem with the term “animal” and in this essay I am especially referring to those animals more closely akin to our embodiment and to the qualities of our sentience, although the assertions do fit others to a lesser degree.

In the lectures on nature at the Collège de France at the end of the decade of the 1950s, Merleau-Ponty distinguishes in the 1957-58 course between what he calls “animal/machines” from other sorts of animals as one key distinction to be made. The difference is that the former are ruled in their functioning as organisms *by the dictates of the environment* they are within, versus those animals that take in information from the environment and *respond or reply* to it (Merleau-Ponty, 2003: 168-171). Merleau-Ponty is drawing upon Jacob von Uexküll’s discovery in the nineteenth century that central to animal being is the *Umwelt*, the environment that surrounds them and is incorporated into their structure and functions differently in these two types of animals. The “animal/machines” or what some would call the “lower” animals (or what I would rather call “cohering” animals—a phrase Merleau-Ponty uses in describing them) are unified with the *Umwelt* in such a way that it is closed-off to the larger world. It is like an impermeable bubble. On the other hand, the animal that *responds, that replies*, to what surrounds it and to which it has a bond, is *an opening up* to the environment, whether the natural world, other members of its species, other creatures or other beings. There is a movement undertaken by the animal and a response from the *Umwelt*, and then a further reply to that and so forth, in an ongoing cycle and transformation that von Uexküll calls a *melody*. We will see how the idea of a melody fits Merleau-Ponty’s idea that perception is not a passive taking in of the environment, but itself a prereflective dialogue with the world. Merleau-Ponty himself finds the idea of *melody* aptly fits his ideas of “reversibility” and perception as a “dialogue.” It is this prereflective level of dialogical perception that Merleau-Ponty explores and it is in this passage (and others) that he calls the human body the “animal of perceptions,” a phrase that is suggestive of the relationship that he will go on to articulate between animals and humans.

In this essay, I would like to utilize a series of insights from Merleau-Ponty about the nature of this animal body, both our human animality and that of other non-human creatures, to turn on their heads the long Platonic/rationalistic philosophical tradition, the Judeo Christian tradition, and the Enlightenment scientific tradition to claim that not only is it incorrect to believe that human’s “lower nature” as animality, as it has been defined, is not only *not a hindrance to the human excellences* of reason, language, art, morality, culture, virtue and witnessing, but rather these and other human excellences *are only possible because first and foremost we are animals*. This essay will argue that our animality is the necessary

founding of these excellences. This is to go beyond the many phenomenological reassessments of animals that lead to seeing animal capacities as differing from humans but still intrinsically valuable and requiring respect as such, or even the more radical work of David Abram in *Becoming Animal* who argues all life on this planet shares a basic awareness that is precious, but he does not locate animals as the source of the so-called “higher” human capacities. A prime example of this approach is Abram’s taking written language as an alienation from this shared animal awareness permeating the natural world (Abram, 2010: 295), whereas this essay will argue for a continuity of that awareness being expressed through human’s more poetic language. I would like to embrace the human capacities of thought, spirit, emotion, imagination, language and ethical behavior in their intrinsic value and excellence, but also show they come from our animal nature and are not on a separate plane of being. There is not a break or an alienation necessarily, but rather a continuity, at least in our excellences.

The way to see this continuity is to see the world through the lens of the phenomenology of embodiment as accessed through an understanding of the scope and depth of our perceptual taking in of the world. It is for this reason that I state that *I am the animal that I have always been*, in order to express there is a primal level of experience in perception that founds other focal senses of the world that streams from the animal body. Its apprehension occurs in the self-reflexivity of the immediacy of perception and not through the “therefore” arrived at through reflection or rational deduction, which although Derrida is critically commenting on Descartes famous dictum by using the “therefore,” it may be that he, too, is a victim of the “therefore” in that he does not explore embodiment and perception with the assiduousness of Merleau-Ponty. It is Merleau-Ponty’s articulation of how perception is inextricably woven with the invisible, a different sense of the things of the world, the nonverbal gestural basis of language, the dream dimension of instinct, the imaginal dimension that deepens perception, and the immediate “felt solidarity” that underlies more principle-based ethics that allows us to understand how our human excellences are indebted to our animal bodies. These are the topics to be explored in this essay.

The Invisible Sense of the Visible World for Both Animals and Humans

In Merleau-Ponty’s reading of Jakob von Uexküll’s key insight that “the animal body is a relation to an *Umwelt*” (Merleau-Ponty, 2003: 214)—that the animal is only itself in relationship to a specific environment which shapes its behaviors and aims—he discovers that this is not merely a biological trait, but a source of meaning. He states that “between the situation and the movement of the animal, there is the relation of meaning which is what the expression *Umwelt* conveys. The *Umwelt* is the world implied by the movement of the animal” (Merleau-Ponty,

2003: 175). The animal has meanings communicated to it and with other animals by the environment that spark responses, desires and fears, the movements towards what it wants and what it wants to avoid. Its movements are expressions, as Merleau-Ponty says are human movements, and for that matter, even the movements of the world. The aspects of the world around the animal have a “physiognomic character,” they are expressions, gestures, recognized by the animal. This physiognomic sense is also cited by Merleau-Ponty in the *Phenomenology of Perception* as at the heart of human perception and continues to be the way that Merleau-Ponty has expressed the way the world speaks to humans in “the voices of silence.” Like the physiognomy of another person, there is a *face* to things and happenings, and like all faces, there is an expression that is not verbal, but is very much a communicated sense, even if indeterminate.

In Merleau-Ponty’s radio lectures of 1948, he says, “this relationship is an ambiguous one, between beings who are both embodied and limited and an enigmatic world of which we catch a glimpse (indeed which we haunt incessantly) but only from points of view that hide as much as they reveal, a world in which every object displays the human face it acquires in a human gaze” (Merleau-Ponty, 2004: 70). Embodied vision caught in the dialogue of perception sees faces as presented by all beings with expressions that mean something to be explored and acted upon, even if only partially revealed. In the 1959 nature lectures focusing on the human body in relation to animality, Merleau-Ponty returns to physiognomic sense perceived by animals and humans then speaks of all embodied beings as having a “universal-lateral of the co-perception of the world” (Merleau-Ponty, 2003: 218) in these same passages where he calls human embodiment “the body as animal of perceptions” (221). There is a human/animal co-perception because many of the meanings of the *Umwelt* are shared senses. Furthermore, by calling it a lateral relation, Merleau-Ponty means that “the relation of the human and animality is not a hierarchical relation” (268) but is an overlap despite difference, a “kinship.” This kinship is described as an *Ineinander* [in one another] with animality and the natural world, as interwoven, conjoint yet differing, and prompts Merleau-Ponty to call humanity an “interbeing” (208).

When Merleau-Ponty says that the animal’s *Umwelt* is an expression of meaning, we can’t hear this without recalling his repeated statement that meaning is *invisible*, such as his statement from a working note of November 1959, when he says “Meaning is invisible, but the invisible is not the contradictory of the visible: the visible itself has an invisible inner framework (*membrure*), and the in-visible is the secret counterpart of the visible, it appears only within it ... it is *in the line* of the visible (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 215). The animal and our animal body as the seat of perception is the ongoing birthing of the sense of the invisible experienced within the visible. In the nature lectures, Merleau-Ponty sees this expressive dimension in

perception also in animals, and the example he repeats more than once is the animal openness to love or comradeship or being mated to another (Merleau-Ponty, 2003: 208). In experiencing these senses transcending but lodged within the empirical, the animal lives within the invisible of the visible also. Love as an invisibility is certainly cited as a human excellence, perhaps the most important human excellence, this ability to love, the ability to bond with another and stay cooperatively working together in affection continuously. Certainly, Merleau-Ponty's conception of perception and of prereflective experience is one that happens with *sedimentation* (the way the past "piles up" or "lodges" *within* present perceptions) and within a context that has been built up by personal, cultural and natural history, and is therefore also enriched by these past contributions of reflective intentions. However, the basis, the founding, of this invisible dimension is in the ability to perceive beyond the mechanistic inputting of sense data or sensations, as empiricism would understand the nature of perception to be, something denied by Merleau-Ponty at the start of the *Phenomenology* when he states that sensations (as understood as mere sense data) do not exist in the prereflective course of perception, but rather are intellectual reconstructions of the perceptual process (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 3-4). They are "carved out" or abstracted from a richer whole. He tells us there that empiricism misses what makes a percept *lively* or *sad* and these senses are read from the world as a situation, an embedded emplacement that is dialogical (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 23).

Yet, philosophical and cultural understandings of animal perception still often understand it within the empiricist schema. Merleau-Ponty, by contrast, feels that of all von Uexküll's statements about animals, the most telling is his description that "the unfurling of the animal is like a pure wake that is related to no boat" (Merleau-Ponty, 2003: 176). He takes this phrase to be a way of describing the animal as an upsurge that is not predetermined but is still embedded in its environment marked by a movement and momentum that also affects the environment itself and moves towards an open future. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, "with the living being, a milieu of events appears. which opens on a spatial and temporal field" (Merleau-Ponty, 2003: 177). The animal is not an object like a machine placed in Cartesian space, but rather it has opened up around it a field of relations, that is to say, a space of meanings. Merleau-Ponty sums up this aspect of animality with his most apt characterization, "The animal is like a quiet force" (Merleau-Ponty, 2003: 177). It is quiet as living within the voices of silence of the prereflective experience of the world. It is a force as dwelling differently with the natural world environment by shaping, resisting and even transforming when necessary with an initiative that pushes back, that responds, yet does so immediately, without thought, hence still "quietly." He points to how animals define a territory, regulate aspects of what surrounds them, make detours, and lay down strategies with other predators, resist physical forces or give in to their own inertia. They are responsive to a field of

relations of which they are part of and also co-creators. This means that the invisible of the visible, the realm of meaning, opens for the animal body taking in a world.

The Things of the World as Silent Interlocutors of Animals and Humans

Within the animal's perception of the world, not having the same reflective distance of humanity of categorial linguistic ordering, the sense of invisibility differs from humanity's. Yet, that does not negate this dimension in animal perception nor the human's dependence on the invisible within the visible being founded by the opening of fields of sense of the animal body. To fully grasp the circuit of perception and its dialogical nature as articulated by Merleau-Ponty, we must also insert the voices of the things of the world. In the 1959 lectures on the animal body of humans, human animality, Merleau-Ponty, declares that *Einfühlung*, the feeling into and feeling across beings that is a silent communication and co-expression, that links animals, the natural world and humanity is also a being penetrated by the sense of things, as the things of the world gesture to us in the reversibility of sense that we have from our perception of them. By "reversibility" Merleau-Ponty means that in perceiving anything we take in the sense that we would have *as if* perceived by that being. The rock's solidity which speaks silently of steadfastness is used by the makers of the Zen garden to communicate it to the human visitors, who experience the garden *as if* seen by the rocks protruding from the landscape enter into a relation with these steadfast interlocutors.

As Merleau-Ponty says in this passage the sense of things enters my embodiment from a distance as the sensible and that "things are missing from my body in order to close its circuit" (Merleau-Ponty, 2003: 218). This circuit is not only with things but with other creatures, animals of the human and nonhuman ilk, as he says of the sensible "this is also an opening of my body to other bodies ... the articulation of their body in the world is lived by me in the articulation of my body on the world as I see them" (Merleau-Ponty, 2003: 218). The sky is an open for me in a co-embodiment in which actions can be taken to literally soar or to soar just in vision, virtually kinesthetically, imaginatively and spiritually, as my body feels the pinioning of the birds overhead looping and swooping in circles, diving, and playing the moving air on a windy day. The birds' bodies are part of the circuit of open sky, wind and air currents, just as is the human body and the bodies of other beings. The emergent sense can't be parsed out from the interwovenness of the perception, this "universal-lateral of the co-perception of the world." This shared sensibility means that our perception of the qualities of the world is not just an exclusive human ability, but rather is a human capacity to enter into a circuit of things, creatures, beings, other humans and to be part of this larger matrix of emergent sense.

Humans can do things with this openness that may be within their unique domain, like recoding it, writing about it, or painting it. However, this capacity is afforded by being an animal body, a body of movement and perception, such that perception is *already expression* and underlies our rational capacities of reflection to create concepts and express in human language that categorize from a distance these immediately felt senses. Even the further elaboration of these conceptual representations only takes place through the continual return to the animal body as access to the world that enriches the sense of what is to be expressed and moves it along and deeper in further unfolding. This is why Merleau-Ponty must say the life of animals doesn't consist in functioning "but rather is a power to invent the invisible" (Merleau-Ponty, 2003: 190), and it is our human animality, our animal body of perception and movement, the opens us to the possibility of the invisible as the lining of the visible.

Merleau-Ponty gives examples of the animal going beyond the merely visible, like that of the crab, which is able to use an object as a tool or implement, as is the sea anemone, for differing ends, which he calls "the beginning of culture" (Merleau-Ponty, 2003: 176). The crab using the same object for camouflage or as food or as a protective barrier or as a replacement dwelling shell is part of the prereflective sense of the perceived having a symbolic significance. Merleau-Ponty says this shows that "the *Umwelt* is less and less oriented towards a goal and more and more toward the interpretation of symbols" (Merleau-Ponty, 2003: 176). In other words, the things arrayed to animals as well as to humans are not mere brute physical entities caught in mechanical chains of reaction of a mere cause and effect nature. Rather they "speak" in voices of silence, they mean something and often possibly more than one meaning, in the prereflective world of animals and humans.

Communicative Animality

Merleau-Ponty's notion of the "flesh of the world" articulates all perception as a taking in of a shared world of sense that is intertwined among all perceiving beings. Given that the co-perception of the world is also among animals, the fact that there is a symbolic significance to actions and behaviors in response to the environment entails that there is also a richer communication among animals than the mechanistic, empiricist notion of animals as demonstrating merely coordinated or automatic acts of utility. Merleau-Ponty gives examples, such as the bodily motions that geese make in taking off from the water that can become a gestural symbolic call to the other geese to get ready to leave the water in preparation for taking flight. However, perhaps the now most famous and impressive communicative behavior of a symbolic nature first discovered by Karl von Frisch in 1927, but not accepted as a correct interpretation until more than a half century later, is the honey bee's "waggle dance." When the honey bee returns to the hive and makes a series of figure eight

movements whose various movements within the dance convey several meanings to the other bees including the distance to a food source, the quality of that food source, and the angle from the sun to locate the food (Page, 2001: 134-40). Ethologists have discovered more and more of these sorts of communication among animals, such as Con Slobodchikoff's discovery of the varied vocalizations of the Gunnison's prairie dogs that have different warning calls depending on the type of predator - coyote, domestic dog, human, hawk - but also construct differing series of calls in order to describe and communicate to the other prairie dogs what a particular predator looks like (Crew, 2014).

Despite the traditional denials, it is clear that animals communicate and do so in a way that conveys expressive meanings that go beyond reflexive hard-wired patterns. Ornithologists now know that birds do not sing the same song patterns as if they were mechanical music boxes running through a present program but vary their songs and can even share differing songs with dissimilar birds (Kowalski, 1999: 33-34). Perception on the prereflective level, Merleau-Ponty has demonstrated, is expressive, and thus it is not surprising that perceiving animals and human animality finds other human expressive capacities. We tend to think of linguistic capacities first when we think of human communication and expression, and even furthermore often limit that paradigm to propositions, yet so much of expression as Merleau-Ponty has demonstrated is gestural, and how the tone, pacing, rhythms of language bring into it the gestural expressions from other beings. In the 1953 lectures on the sensible world and the world of expression, he says, "The movement of things—the movement of living beings—[are] gestures, languages, 'traces.'" He explains these movements as behaviors of things that are traces that signify and propel sense from one gestalt of meaning to another (Merleau-Ponty, 1953: 183). If there is a *co-naissance* (a "co-knowing") of sense among humans, the natural world and its creatures on the prereflective level of immediate perception, then the traditional barrier of human communication and language sharing as signifying human exclusiveness and absolute superiority vanishes. To emphasize this point, Merleau-Ponty uses the term "*co-naissance*" ["co-knowing"] which plays with the usual French word for knowing, "*connaissance*," a wordplay borrowed from Paul Claudel's *L'Art Poétique* (Claudel, 1913: 39), who had a very similar insight about the body's relationship to the environment.

In fact, instead of being the sole property of humans, the proclivity and capacity to communicate meaningfully instead becomes yet another *link* with the natural world and animality. Rather than being a different plane of being, the move into language and its expressiveness stems from our animal nature and being part of the flesh of the larger interrelated world. This recognition, in turn, opens the horizon to revision human communicative capacities in a broader way, realizing much of language's expressiveness stems from tone, pace, accompanying movements, facial and

postural expressions, et.al., of the prereflective animal body. In the nature lectures Merleau-Ponty concludes that “human communication is as natural as the functioning of human senses” (Merleau-Ponty, 2003: 225) and arises in the interplay of physiognomic expressions, and that behaviors, gestures and faces are like “conversations” without the imposition of the ideal meanings of reflection. This primal level of expression is inchoate and expressive in a differing way than more refined human communication, but nevertheless functions as the basis from which it would further develop and flower. This means, however, the seemingly human exclusive capacity is the gift of the endowments of our animal bodies. Animality offers the necessary opening to this dimension of human excellence.

For Merleau-Ponty, the alienation from the animal body which has occurred historically through language use is only the fate of the spoken or empirical language and not that of the literary and creative language. Unlike the everyday use of empirical language, which is meant to function without inspiring hesitation, to be efficient in getting things done and achieving clear communication, the creative use of language is a use that calls attention to itself, to highlight the act of trying to bring forth sense, and in doing so to throw its users back to the initial and more primal encounter of sense with the world. For Merleau-Ponty, this is the originary power of language to manifest the sense of the world and also its most authentic use, as he states in his essay, “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence”: “The empirical use [*l’usage empirique*] of already established language [*du langage déjà fait*] should be distinguished from its creative use” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 44). Literary language throws us outside of itself, beyond language, yet the reader is still in its spell, its thrall, moved by its rhythms and jostling meanings and senses. One is still in relation to the expressed words, as if suspended by them and yet moving beyond them. One does not coincide with this literary language or become contained by it, since it is the case that “like the functioning of the body, that of words or paintings remains obscure to me. The words, lines, and colors which express me come out of me as gestures.” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 75). The words are like gesturers and like gestures bring us back to a prereflective experience of the world. The other side of this dialogue is the world as equally gesturing to the creative writer or as Merleau-Ponty says in *Prose of the World*, “A poet has received, once and for all, the task of translating these words, this voice, this accent whose echo is returned to him by each thing and each circumstance” (Merleau-Ponty, 1973: 64). Like an echo and like an accent, the sense communicated is not clear and distinct but rather is suggestive and moving, calling for its trajectory to be followed further and into its latent depths. It takes us back into the thrall of sense of the more primal or animal body. Yet, also like a nuance or accent, the sense is specific, singular, a sensitive shading among many possible shadings unlike a more categorical or generalized concept which distance us from that level of experience.

Meaning and Instinct, Not as Opposed: A Dream Dimension

A primary focus of invalidating the generativity of meaning of human animality is the traditional characterization given to “instinctual behavior,” since behaviors stemming from our biological makeup are seen as the source of mechanistic, or to use today’s vernacular, “hard-wired,” systems of responses to triggers. In terms of the language inherited from the Freudian perspective, such instincts are “blind drives” to be suppressed consciously or unconsciously or properly harnessed for rational purposes. Merleau-Ponty’s analyses of embryological development in the nature lectures, to give an example, instead articulates how biological makeup and its dynamic development is itself a dialogical process in which the body responds to the environment in ways that open a field of further responses in the regulation and progress of the organism. It is not a blind upsurge of a predetermined biology. Merleau-Ponty’s ensuing description of instinctive behavior is even more surprising, given traditional formulations: “the ‘instinctive tendencies’ are not actions directed towards a goal, not even a distant goal of which the animal is aware. Instinct is a primordial activity ‘without object,’ *objektlos*” (Merleau-Ponty, 2003: 190). Instead of being a path to accomplish a certain set objective, Merleau-Ponty sees instinct as “a sort of reference to the non-actual, an oneiric life, [and] is manifested in these instinctive activities in a pure state” (Merleau-Ponty, 2003: 192). The oneiric, the sense of dream, of the imaginal deeper background of perception, is about being drawn towards something, which although presented to one, somehow stands for something that is not graspable in a rational, clear and distinct way, but rather has an affective charge, a compulsive force that has a depth of a mysterious meaning yet is powerfully suggestive. As Freud demonstrated in the *Interpretation of Dreams*, in the oneiric realm, the sensual qualities perceived become emblems, gestures, symbols, of varied significances within a given context, but never to be fully grasped, yet powerful. It is not about the utilitarian level of existence, but the life of desire and affect that can infuse the percept. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, “the instinct is not accomplished in view of an end, it is an activity of pleasure (Merleau-Ponty, 2003: 192). The action is such that it is pleasurable in its performance and the animal undertaking the action is in a state of ‘fascination’” (Merleau-Ponty, 2003: 193). They become in thrall of the percept.

Merleau-Ponty also says that the trigger of such behavior is not a precise stimulus as it has been seen to be the case in instinctive behaviors, but rather is a sum of characteristics that may have some aspects exaggerated and the trigger is an “idea” or a sense that seems to be compellingly linked to pleasure. One example given by him is of the red throated bird being drawn to splotches of red in front of it, described by Merleau-Ponty as if the bird “enters a trance when it sees red in front of it, as if it has lost its head, whereas the perception of forms is infinitely finer” (Merleau-Ponty, 2003: 193). Instinct isn’t about the precision of performing a set

series of specific mechanical actions, but rather plunges a being into the richer saturation of meaning and pleasure of the realm of dream and the imaginal. He says of this instinctive action that is it both an inertia and a “hallucinatory, oneiric behavior, capable of making a world and of picking up an object of the world” (Merleau-Ponty, 2003: 193). It is an inertia because it stops one from the normal the normal round of activity and yet there is the activity of being drawn in and forward in entering for the moment another world, a world whose value at that moment appears to take the shape of that object. The compulsion is one that is a displacement from the ordinary realm of actions and percepts and the entrance into the imaginal of a dreamlike state that promises more.

This displacement into a dreamlike sense, which is a dimension of the animal body, haunts the human experience as well. Objects, persons, events, activities in this spell take on an oneiric character. They become more present and compelling as a haunting presence that is more compelling than even the oneiric background that Merleau-Ponty finds accompanies all perception. They take on a sense that can't be explained rationally that fuels a spellbinding desire. For humans, this can be a driving creative force or it can be an obsession or even an addiction that resists whatever rational assessment can be given about the object's characteristics, since now the object has taken on this oneiric and symbolic cast or value. If it were merely a mechanical drive that became overpowering, there would be no meaning or value to this being pulled into this dimension, but as oneiric, there is an exciting or mournful meaning to what has overtaken the person. These compulsions are at the heart of humanity's greatest achievements, as well as at the core of many of humanity's foibles and self-defeating actions. The examples are myriad, but Sartre's recollection in *The Words* of how as a five year old he was fascinated by the books in the Schweitzer's library and they became an object of desire (Sartre, 1964: 95). Books and the writing of them became a symbol of achieving a being in this world that led Sartre to compulsively writing to thousands of pages, often driven to sit at his desk for hour after hour until pulled away by Simone de Beauvoir. It would also be easy to think of myriad examples of objects or events that take on this oneiric character in addictions and obsessive compulsions. Whether it is the allure of alcohol, gambling, a certain food or a sexual act, the power of this appeal is imaginal and symbolic. On the social level, the drive to create an empire can be its dark side that destroys whole countries, but also can fuel myriad acts of loving kindness, such as the joy of giving away one's riches to help others. This level of energy and desire, for good or bad, is not the gift of reason but of human animality.

It is also important to note that Merleau-Ponty points out there is ceremonial sense to all such actions that are more like dramas of pleasure that can take on a sacred character as a component to its sense (Merleau-Ponty, 2003: 193). If these most primal upsurges of image and sense that fuel compelling behaviors are also an

inertia in the sense of a stopping in front of the world as it shows itself in some sort of wonderment or delight, then there is a source of reverence for the world in this prereflective sense. This is significant in countering the many long religious traditions that see the spiritual sense of humanity threatened by human animality as the seat of voracious unholy compulsions. Merleau-Ponty and also Derrida at the conclusion of his essay (Derrida, 2008: 132) are proposing that the animality of humanity is not the oppositional force to spirituality. Rather, the symbolic being drawn to aspect of the world may be an opening up that is a founding phenomenon of this dimension of human existence.

The Vital Sensitivity of the Emotional Life and Animality

Undervalued both in regard to animals and humans is the way in which the emotional, the affective, currents afford the most primordial sense of others and the world. In the opening pages of *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty states, “As the thing, as the other, the true dawn through an emotional and almost carnal experience, where the ‘ideas’—the other’s and our own—are rather traits of his physiognomy and of our own, are less understood than welcomed or spurned in love or hatred” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 12). The face of the things of the world, of other creatures and other people caught up together in this sensible circuit are present with a sense that is not only symbolic but always has an affective significance on this primal level of experience. From the beginning of Merleau-Ponty’s articulation of the perception, he demonstrated that even the simplest percepts only appeared with this dimension of sense, or as he says, “We must therefore stop wondering how and why red signifies effort or violence, green restfulness or peace, we must discover how to live the colors as our own body does, as peace or violence in a concrete form” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 211). The sensible is also the e-motional (an outward motion into the world), as I described at length in *Emotion and Embodiment* (Mazis, 1993: 29-31). The word “emotion” comes from roots that indicate a groping or a movement out into the depths of the world and a return to the body with a felt sense of the environment and the beings within it. Our sense of shared space with other people and with our belonging with the world is one that is affective. This is the felt quality of the circulation of sense with the world of which we are part.

Space is not a clear and distinct realm, although it can be made to present itself in that way with the intellectual construction of a Cartesian or so-called “objective space.” However, when introducing the sense of space in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty makes the statement which deserves more attention than it has received: “The phantasms of dream reveal still more effectively that general spatiality within which clear space and observable objects are embedded” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 284). The more primordial and encompassing space is oneiric space. Space and the dream, the oneiric, overlap in opening up for humans and animals

places in which to be, the sense of direction, the sense of belonging, the experience of being emplaced within a space. These are e-motional vectors. Merleau-Ponty describes these constituents of space at length, such as how being downcast and the bodily postures that express this emotion and that comparable direction in space are expressions of the same “existential tides” as he calls them and not just seen together by analogy. Similarly, the feeling of being in high spirits and that direction in space are co-emergent. He concludes that “the movement upwards is s a direction in physical space and that of a desire towards its objective are mutually symbolical because both express the same essential structure of our being, being situated in relationship to an environment, of which we have already stated that this structure alone gives significance to the directions up and down in the physical world” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 284). This structure is shot through with the multiple intertwining strands of 1) dream, such as shown in his example of the dream of the bird that soars and then falls into a heap of paper and ash, 2) with the affective, such as in his example of feeling connected to another location by worry about the people one loves at a distant location rather than being connected to the physical space where one is located, and 3) also with mythical entities that can further instantiate these emotions, perhaps like the Phoenix who is the analogue of the bird mentioned in the dream. Merleau-Ponty sums up these ideas in stating, “In dreaming as in myth we learn where the phenomenon is to be found by feeling towards which our desire goes out, what our heart dreads, on what our life depends. Even in waking life, things are no different” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 285). The space humans inhabit is a space crisscrossed with vectors and fields of the sensory, affective, imaginal, memorial, kinesthetic, mythical, and historical in ways that overlap with the felt space of animals and are experienced in the primordial level of the human animal body. This is not our reflective, rationally appointed space, but the immediate felt space of experience. It is our primal experience of *belonging* to a certain space, of being *connected* to the things and beings in that space, and being *located* in a certain space (Mazis, 1993: 86-89), and this affective sense of the animal body yields human and animal *situatedness*.

Even in the 1948 radio lectures, Merleau-Ponty devoted one session to animals and declared that the culture had to stop “rashly denying interiority to animals” (Merleau-Ponty, 2004: 75). The ethologist, Marc Bekoff, has spent a long career studying all sorts of animal emotion and concludes in his book, *The Emotional Life of Animals*, that “numerous animals feel a rich panoply of emotions” (Bekoff, 2008: 13) and notes how interwoven the human and animal emotional lives are. Merleau-Ponty points out in both his radio lectures and in the nature lectures how permeated are human myths with animal beings and feelings. I suggest then rather than seeing our animal nature as a seething cauldron of affective animal drives and primarily aggressive ones, it is realized that to achieve human emotional excellence is a matter of sensitivity to the world and others and this emerges from our attuned animality.

This is also relevant to Merleau-Ponty's characterization of instinctive behavior as behavior for pleasure. The Cartesian attitude that animals are driven only by utilitarian goals in a mechanistic way is blind to the fact that animals continually act of fun and even for joy. Johan Huizinga in his classic study of the play spirit, *Homo Ludens: a Study of the Play Element in Culture*, feels constrained to begin his book by describing how playing is rampant among animals and how humans draw upon these roots in their being: "Play is older than culture, for culture, however inadequately defined, always presupposes human society, and animals have not waited for humans to teach them playing. We can safely assert than human civilization has added no essential feature to the general idea of play. Animals play just like men." Again, examples of animal play are too numerous to discuss, but to cite one that flies in the face of the long European prejudice explored by Derrida in *The Beast and the Sovereign* (Derrida, 2009: 88-89, 341), instead of the grim fierceness attributed to wolves and then attributed to human's wolfish animal nature, wolves spend much of their time in play with one another. However, even more striking is that with another species, ravens, wolves have been observed playing "chase,"—instigated by a raven who creeps up to the sleeping wolf, speeds away, marches back and forth in front of the wolf again, giving piercing, raucous taunts, is lunged at, escapes, and so on for 20 minutes, until the wolf becomes too tired to continue (Dutcher, 2005: 130-132). To think of joy in animals recalls another phenomenon observed by the ethologists, Jim and Jamie Dutcher, in regard to these not so grim wolves. They see natural world itself is a playmate to the wolves: "Any event can spark wolf play. Even falling snow can cause the pack to erupt in a spontaneous celebratory romp. They may chase each other or nip at a tail or a rump and they take turns being pursuer and pursued or they may just try to catch the snowflakes" (Dutcher, 2005: 88). Thinking of wolves running about catching snowflakes is a striking image of play and joy at the sheer existence of the world, as much as thinking of human children doing the same and feeling the same joy before they become serious adults.

In the nature lectures when in 1959 Merleau-Ponty turns to the human body and the study of sensibility, he states, "it emerges from life without absolute break ... from the relation to an *Umwelt*, human desire emerges from animal desire. Already in the animal, in the ceremony of love, desire is not a mechanical functioning, but an opening to an *Umwelt* of fellow creatures (possible fixation on others), communication" (Merleau-Ponty, 2003: 225). Open to the natural world together, animal and human are interwoven and in a fashion similar to the suggestion of Derrida mentioned at the beginning of this lecture, humans could become "animal philosophers," affirming this interrelation with hospitality, where hospitality, used in its philosophical sense, indicates an openness to the fullness of the being of the other and a respect for their value. To experience this sort of emotional "being brought up short" by the value of animal beings would make us more ethical beings,

Derrida suggests. More than this, however, I would claim this would also bring us back to the source of our ethical capacities. The paradigm of a principled ethical stance in the European philosophical tradition is the Kantian articulation of the categorical imperative. According to the idea of the categorical imperative, the ethical principles governing a situation are the product of pure reason and must pass a series of logical tests to be found to be genuine. Kant goes so far as to claim that any action motivated by emotional factors or inclinations has no moral or ethical value. At the other end of the spectrum is the traditional Buddhist ethical approach that considers any action taken on the basis of an abstractly reasoned principle to be the beginner's attempt to be ethical, but when one becomes truly ethical, one does good actions as "spontaneous right action" without thought and moved by the emotion of compassion. If we look at animals, we see myriad examples of the animal body spontaneously moved by fellow-feeling to act on the other's behalf, whether it be four terns switching between pairs of them grabbing a wing and flying for part of the migration in carrying a wounded tern by its wings, or a group of monkeys answering the cry of another monkey caught by an eagle, and surrounding the eagle and plucking its feathers until it gave up and flew off (as witnessed by Darwin), or the group of six dolphins surrounding the sick dolphin and guiding it from becoming beached, or even the shoal of dolphins who came into harbor to beleaguer a fisherman who had caught and wounded another dolphin until he let it go free and they all left the harbor (as witnessed by Aristotle) (Kowalski, 1999: 82, 84, 89-90). Animals who have a developed sentience experience this spontaneous feeling of solidarity, and at times, even across species differences. This "felt solidarity," as I have called it elsewhere (Mazis, 2016: 125-140) is a current running through our human bodies as within the flesh of the world that can either be foreclosed or sensitively augmented.

One moment in the interaction of wolves and caribou or deer has been speculated to be an instant of the recognition of impending death and fellow-feeling for the rest of the herd. It occurs when an old and or sickly member of the herd comes forth after the wolves have stalked their prey and then run into their midst. This member of the herd will stand there watching the wolves. A striking moment unfolds when the wolves see that the prey has noticed them and both stay still, looking at each other. For one or two moments, they remain standing still, caught in this mutual stare. One ethologist, Mech, asserts with seeming frustration that this pause is scientifically inexplicable (Mech, 1970: 201). It serves no practical purpose and therefore has no scientific explanation. However, another wolf expert, Barry Lopez, interprets this moment as full of both meaning and communication: "Wolves and prey remain absolutely still while staring at each other. ... I think what transpires in those moments of staring is an exchange of information between predator and prey that either triggers a chase or defuses the hunt right there. I call this exchange the conversation of death" (Lopez, 1978: 62). Lopez believes that in the glance at one

another, there is a mutual recognition between the wolf announcing that it is seeking prey to keep its vitality alive and the prey animal conceding that its life is ebbing and spontaneously offers itself in a *worthy death* of feeding the wolf and protecting the rest of the herd. The caribou offering itself to the wolves is almost like an echo of the Buddhist tale that exemplifies spontaneous right action when it is said that the Buddha coming upon a starving tigress who is about to eat her cubs in desperate starvation, instead allows the tigress to eat him to feed the cubs and the tigress. This pause and act by the aged or infirm Caribou offering itself to the wolves is not only a highly nuanced and sensitive wave of compassion for one's fellow creatures but is an act that is a laudatory and courageous sacrifice that goes beyond the demands of rational ethics to the goodness of the heroic, which takes us to our final point of this essay.

Even Ethics Has Its Source in the Animal Body

It is often remarked that Merleau-Ponty failed to offer the world an ethics as a result of his phenomenology. However, I believe it is not merely a dramatic flourish to end the final paragraph the *Phenomenology of Perception* by quoting at length a paragraph from Saint-Exupéry's *Pilote de Guerre* [translated as *Flight to Arras*] that describes how a man in a moment of silence feels compelled, no matter what obstacle awaits him, to rush into a fire to save his son. There is no need for Merleau-Ponty to have a separate chapter deducing an ethics, since his exhaustive phenomenology of the body, the "animal of perception," has already yielded that dimension. To end the book with this quote is Merleau-Ponty's statement that this is the ethics that follows from seeing the body as enmeshed in the world inseparably with other beings. The key to ethics *lies in the animal body of perception* that prereflectively feels, desires and is inseparably bound to others in the flesh of the world. He ends this more than 400 page book with these words: "Your abode is your act itself. ... Your act is you ... You give yourself in exchange ... Your significance shows itself, effulgent. It is your duty, your hatred, your love, your steadfastness, your ingenuity ... Man is but a network of relationships" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 456). This is akin to the immediately felt call of that summons of the monkeys to the treetop to fight off the eagle that has grabbed one of their fellow monkeys. This final passage of the *Phenomenology of Perception* begins with thoughts about what is the ethical thing to do in such situations and this question has no rational answer. It is the moment of spontaneous feeling of the interconnectedness with loved ones that compels ethical action and sacrifice. It is also particularly the point of Saint-Exupéry's book, whose pilot feels despair in following the abstract ethical precepts he was raised with, but only comes to feel connected with others after a near-death experience over Arras that throws him into feeling wonder for being alive and a new emotional sensitivity to those around him that he had lacked before. It is only on the basis of first feeling this immediate emotional connectedness with others that then

the ethical precepts take on a new and vibrant meaning for him and this is the point of Saint- Exupéry's tale.

Our human excellences do not come into being by transcending our so-called lower animal nature of our animal body, but rather by embracing and appreciating it. On this embodied level, our kinship with animals and our animal body is a significant accomplishment of first founding the basis of understanding, of love, of belonging, of imagining, of conceiving, and of becoming ethical, as well as giving a basis for other so-called "higher human faculties." We are animals taking full advantage of being embodied in order to become fully human and are not fated to leave our bodies and animal nature behind in order to be excellent. This also means there is a threat from our over intellectualized, consumeristic and utilitarian cultural dynamic that alienates us from our animal bodies in that we are depriving ourselves not only of the help of the natural world and animal kin, but that we are short-circuiting our own valuable animal gifts.

Finally, there is another way to think of the silence that pervades the animal world. Sounds and cries made by animals are often seen as indications of their inarticulate existence. The inarticulateness of their lives is seen as a mark of their inferiority. Since rational reflection and linguistic abilities have been taken as marks of human excellence, this lapsing into silence of animals is seen as showing their lack of spiritual development. Yet, Merleau-Ponty continually returns to the source of meaningfulness that runs throughout human language and finds that the most expressive use of words is that which somehow recaptures and brings to the fore the silence of dwelling with things and with other creatures sensitivity. In *The Visible and the Invisible* he states, "language lives only from silence; everything we cast to others has germinated in this great mute land which we never leave" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 126). However, to appreciate this power of silence, one must return to the priority of the prereflective world, to the body as our access to the world and meaning—our animal body: "The sensible is precisely that medium in which there can be *being* without its having to be posited; the sensible appearance of the sensible, the silent persuasion of the sensible is Being's way of manifesting itself without becoming positivity, without ceasing to be ambiguous and transcendent. The sensible world itself in which we gravitate, and which forms our bond with the other, which makes the other be for us, is not, precisely qua sensible, 'given' except by allusion—The sensible is that: this possibility to be evident in silence" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 214). This suggests that hearkening to silence in dwelling in our animal bodies is the key to a rich taking on of the world and of a spiritual existence.

The Irish poet and thinker, John O'Donohue, sees this ability to dwell in silence in animals and interprets it as a sensitivity that opens up an interiority from which spirit emanates. This way of understanding the animal body may help us understand why

cultures like Native American tribes saw animals as our teachers, our spiritual guides:

There is the silence of the animal world. . . . It is conceivable, however, that the reserve and subtlety of animal presence suggests a refined interiority, an interiority at one with itself. The silence of animals suggests their seamless self-presence. Animals are more ancient than us. Their untroubled inner silence gifts them with great ease to acquiesce in the fathomless silence of landscapes
(O'Donohue, 2011: 131-2).

If it is the animal body, our animality and kinship with animals, that allows for a refined interiority, we can also understand what Derrida meant by insisting that we “follow after” animals and strive to realize our shared “divinanimality” (Derrida 2008: 132) The word “divinanimality” is meant to bring the animal and the spiritual dimension together as one. Merleau-Ponty’s work on embodiment has provided us with the concrete articulation of how we “follow after” animals, as Derrida phrased it. We “follow after” our animal bodies as they are the immediate sense of the world as a beginning of expression of the dimensions that will be further developed as our human excellences, not by leaving our animal nature behind, but by realizing its full potential.

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