Ralph Perry offered an important and influential answer to the question “what is the source of ethical value?” He argued that it cannot be physical nature alone, since physical nature, by itself, is impassive, and that value must subsequently have its original source in life, in living things that have interests and seek to maintain themselves over time. Yet even though life is the source of ethical value, he continues, “the moral drama opens only when interest meets interest.... Every interest is compelled to recognize other interests, on the one hand as parts of its environment, and on the other as partners in the general enterprise of life.” This is a good starting point. Value begins with life and the interest that life entails, since it is difficult to see how we could attach value predicates to an impassive, unfeeling, non-sentient, non-living nature in itself, and it is easier to see how interest arises as living things seek to maintain themselves over time, how, subsequently, value becomes associated with life. In addition, Perry seems to be right to argue that morality must begin with the recognition of the value of others, since morality, properly speaking, involves behavioral relationships between human beings and a genuine recognition of the value of each by all the others. Yet, especially if we begin to think about an environmental ethics, we should perhaps qualify Perry’s first point with the claim that we must recognize that certain natural, physical conditions support life while others do not, thus at least indirectly attaching value predicates to nature in itself. Moreover, if we wish to establish a morality with regard to nature and other living things, as well as a human morality, we must establish how the recognition of the value of others (nature, plants, and animals, as well as human others) is possible, i.e., how it is possible ontologically. The works of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, especially his ontological studies, are uniquely suited to help us with this task. It is thus to his work that this essay will turn.

Before we turn to his works a few additional comments should be offered. David Hume reminds us that traditionally there have been two primary sources of value: reason and pleasure, and he proceeds to add a third, the association of approval or disapproval, which is based on sympathy for the other, with certain observed behaviors toward the other. More recently, we find many postmodernists arguing that human moral values are “rooted” only in the more or less arbitrary agreements among interlocutors. Yet, regardless of position, all seem to agree that ethics requires the genuine recognition of the other as other. We should add here, though, since there is less agreement regarding this point, that the ethical recognition of the other requires the recognition of the other as both the same (similar not identical) and as different. We must recognize the other as the same, so that the other’s life has intrinsic value, like the intrinsic value of one’s own life, and we must recognize the other as different, so that the other’s life is not just an extension of one’s own—that it has value in its own right, that it has its own intrinsic value. Now, the recognition of the value of the other (as the same and as different) usually focuses on other human beings, rather than animals or the environment, and it is perhaps easier to establish with regard to humans, yet the recognition of the value of the other has recently been extended to both animals and the environment, and we should thus consider how the recognition of the other is possible in each of these cases as well.

Merleau-Ponty makes use of all of the points in the above paragraph and even integrates them in what we might call his ethics (or, more properly speaking, his political theory). He makes use of self-feeling or sentience, sympathy for and recognition of others, and dialog and reasoning.
with others. At least implied in his theory, then, is the belief that value begins with life and sentience, with the capacity to feel pleasure and pain, and with the interest to survive, while morality begins with the capacity to sympathize and empathize with other humans (and even other non-human species), and with the ability to dialogue with other human beings in order to establish what is fair for all. Ethical values, then, are rooted in life and sentience, which are a part of, and which emerge from nature. We, perhaps, cannot make moral judgments about nature itself, although we can make moral judgments about which conditions in nature support life. The goal of the present essay will be to demonstrate that Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, or, more specifically, his theory of nature and human nature, of levels of natural being, and of overlapping ontologies provide the basis not only for a human ethics but for an animal and environmental ethics as well. That is to say, it is Merleau-Ponty’s overlapping ontology that allows us to make moral and ethical claims, with respect to nature, plants and animals, and humanity. Let us now turn to this ontology.

It should be immediately stated that Merleau-Ponty does not accept, and works feverishly to overcome, the mind/body dualism that has been in place in Western culture and philosophy since Descartes. This dualism, particularly in the hands of industrialization, has encouraged the placement of the human mind outside of and even above nature and its species. This ontological arrogance and its condescending exclusion of nature has obviously led to a sense of moral superiority with regard to all other living things and to the sense that humans could do anything to nature without reprisal and even without repercussion or harm to ourselves. Nature and all living things within it were considered to be under the control of humanity, or, more starkly, “under the dominion of man.” We controlled nature, and insofar as natural conditions harmed humanity, it presented itself as all the more subject to our control, domination, and even destruction. Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of levels, of overlapping regions, and, more specifically, of a consciousness that is intertwined with a body that is intertwined with the world quite obviously shifts us away from this sort of exclusory dualism and towards a human life and mind that is intimately bound up with the world. Moreover, if this is correct, if matter, life, and human consciousness are all bound together, then we can no longer ignore the ethical consequences of the now obvious claim that what we do to nature we do to ourselves and all living things.

Let us now turn to the details of Merleau-Ponty’s position. The first thing that a philosophy must establish, he argues, is the proper characterization of human perception, the proper characterization of our aware, embodied openness upon the world, since this openness upon the world is the basis for all human knowledge. Perception cannot be understood as *tabula rasa* empiricism, since perceptual meaning cannot be understood as the passive reception of isolated units in external relations but must be grasped as the human body’s active and meaningful encounter with the patterns of the world. The lines drawn on the piece of paper before me, the light that first strikes them and then my eyes, are certainly required for perception to occur, yet these necessary conditions do not fully account for the fact that I can perceive these lines as a meaningful gestalt figure, as either a duck or a rabbit. The parts of the visual field are related meaningfully and not just as discrete units in external relations. Yet this meaning is concrete and perceptual and thus should not be confused with or equated to the internal relationships of conceptual meaning. Thus, even though the perceptual event would not occur without the physical, physiological and neurological events, and even though the meaning of the gestalt figure clings to these events, this meaning does not appear to be fully reducible to them, since it appears as meaning, and not merely as units in external relations. Yet, since the meaning does cling to the particularity of the events, to the body’s specific perceptual and sensual encounters with its surroundings, the meaning cannot be treated as a mere construct of either language or thought. Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of the *Fundierung* relationship is helpful here. Nature provides the basis for the perceptual form and meaning, yet the orientation of an aware em-
bodied act of perception is needed not only to more fully bring the form to light but also to help articulate it more precisely and thus more meaningfully. A variety of different articulations always remain possible, and there is no definitively correct articulation, yet some are better, more clarifying, than others, and this is because there is something already there to help articulate. Moreover, even though the meaning of the perceptual forms requires the presence of the embodied perceiver, this does not mean that we perceive only phenomena, since objects present themselves as existing independently of the act of perception. Nature necessarily presents itself to us through the avenues of the aware and oriented human body, but it also presents itself as existing independently of us. Again, then, when we perceive the world, we are aware of really existing patterned structures that we take up as oriented embodied beings and help articulate as meaningful perceptual forms.

Forms are most generally defined by Merleau-Ponty, and by the Gestalt psychologists that he generally follows here, “as total processes whose properties are not the sum of those which the isolated parts would possess.” Moreover, he proceeds, “we will say that there is form whenever the properties of a system are modified by every change brought about in a single one of its parts and, on the contrary, are conserved when they all change while maintaining the same relationship among themselves.” Yet, along with this more general characterization of form, Merleau-Ponty is able to identify three qualitatively different types of more specific yet still general structures: physical, vital, and human. Structure in physics is identified “as an ensemble of forces in a state of equilibrium,” (SB 137) but, as we have just witnessed above, even though the basis for this form is the physical structure in itself, form must be defined not as an in-itself but as a meaningful perceptual whole, to which both the embodied perceiver and the world contribute, with the world doing so more primarily (see SB 143). Proceeding to the next level, we observe that vital structures must be recognized as qualitatively different because living beings “present the particularity of having behavior, which is to say that their actions are not comprehensible as functions of the physical milieu and that, on the contrary, the parts of the world to which they react are delimited for them by an internal norm,” a norm that “is simply an observation of a preferred attitude, statistically more frequent, which gives a new kind of unity to behavior.” Living behavioral acts, then, must be understood as having a meaning: “they are not defined, even in science, as a sum of processes external to each other” (SB 159). “In recognizing that behavior has a meaning and depends upon the vital significance of situations, biological science is prohibited from conceiving of it as a thing in-itself (en soi) which would exist, partes extra partes, in the nervous system or in the body; rather it sees in behavior an embodied dialectic which radiates over a milieu immanent to it” (SB 161). Moreover, it is the biological structure of the species that influences and even determines the behavioral and perceptual norms of the species, as, for example, the species nature of the spider determines that it responds to movement in its web rather than visual cues. In addition, when we perceive various forms of species behavior, we are able to distinguish between behavior that is lost in its structure and behavior that is gradually gaining awareness of itself. The following three types of behavioral structure or form thus reveal themselves: syncretic, amovable, and symbolic. Syncretic form is recognizable as a structure of behavior that is completely pre-programmed by the biological make-up of the species. For example, as just mentioned, the spider is programmed to respond to vibration it its web. Amovable form is identifiable as a species behavior that begins to move away from pre-programmed responses to the environment but that still remains closely tied to a practical engagement with its field. For example, a chimpanzee will use a box as a ladder to reach food just out of reach, yet seems unable to do so if another chimpanzee is using the box as a seat. The varying of perspectives here remains tightly bound to practical need and remains difficult, especially if the animal is already immersed in one perspective. And finally, symbolic form is readily observable in human behavior and in the human ability to take up multiple perspectives, to be able
to more or less freely vary these perspectives, and, subsequently, to treat signs not simply as signals for a specific response but as bearers of general meaning. This leads Merleau-Ponty to the recognition of a third general structure, to a human structure. Human structure is different from the other structures of life, for the reasons just mentioned, and, obviously, from physical structure as well.

We have just seen that Merleau-Ponty has identified three general forms or structures in nature (roughly physical, biological, and human), yet we must now ask about their relationship to one another. They definitely should not be entertained as three totally distinct types of structures, since the properties of each structure are not totally exclusive to just that structure, even though they may be that structure’s dominant characteristic. The properties that are characteristic of each structure can be found in the others as well, even if in a lesser degree. Here is how Merleau-Ponty expresses it:

Quantity, order and value or signification, which pass respectively for the properties of matter, life, and mind, would no longer be but the dominant characteristics in the order considered and would become universally applicable categories. Quantity is not a negation of quality, as if the equation for a circle negated circular form, of which on the contrary it attempts to be a rigorous expression. Often, the quantitative relations with which physics is concerned are only the formulae for certain distributive processes: in a soap bubble as in an organism, what happens at each point is determined by what happens at all the others. . . . In the internal unity of these [physical] systems, it is acceptable to say that each local effect depends on the function which it fulfills in the whole, upon its value and its significance with respect to the structure which the system is tending to realize. (SB 131)

On the one hand, then, it is acceptable to say that physical systems display order and meaningful order, since local effects follow the functioning of whole systems, and since physical systems display an internal unity. In fact, from biology we have learned about organic wholes, wholes whose parts mutually and internally influence each other but do so in a way that is not reducible to the internal relations of conceptual meaning, and it is this insight that allows us to catch a glimpse of unity in physical structures, even if to a lesser degree. Moreover, from psychology and the analysis of human knowledge we have learned that “taken as a being in nature, existing in space, the form would always be dispersed in several places and distributed in local events, even if these events mutually determine each other; to say that it does not suffer this division amounts to saying that it is not spread out in space, that it does not exist in the same manner as a thing, that it is an idea under which what happens in several places is brought together and resumed. This unity is the unity of the perceived objects” (SB 143–4). Physical forms, then, and as we have already witnessed above, cannot be understood simply as forms in themselves. They must be understood as perceptual forms, and they must be understood as displaying order and meaningful order. This order is suggested by the physical structures but it is brought more precisely to light and more fully articulated in the embodied act of aware human perception.

Yet, on the other hand, if the structural relations (i.e., orderly, qualitative forms) found in physics can be quantified, i.e., meaningfully expressed in various types of mathematical abstractions, then the structural relations found in biology and psychology can be quantified as well, since biological functions and psychological life rest upon the physical and are never completely freed from physical structures, even as they emerge from them with new properties. “The advent of higher orders, to the extent that they are accomplished, eliminate the autonomy of the lower orders and give a new signification to the steps which constitute them” (SB 180), eliminate the autonomy of the lower orders but do not eliminate them, do not completely eliminate their influence. New properties emerge, but as they emerge they do not simply or completely leave the old structures behind. As the new properties emerge, the preceding conditions are sublimated by and integrated into the new structure. There is thus a reciprocal influence up and down the hierarchal scale, with lower and higher structures influencing each other simultaneously, with the
physical originally giving rise to new structures, yet with these new structures folding back upon their predecessors and integrating them in new ways. The structural properties of the biological and psychological are thus amenable to quantitative abstraction and analysis, since they continue to be influenced by the physical, and, as we have just seen, since the structural qualities of physics are not expressed as units in external relations but as parts of a system that mutually influence one another, terms that are borrowed from biology and psychology, we must recognize that the structures of biology and psychology are applicable to physical structures.

It is the above ontological levels, as Merleau-Ponty has revealed them, and especially their overlapping boundaries and mutual influence, which will allow us to understand the ethical claims that can be made within the context of his philosophy, or, more generally, it is the above ontological levels that help provide the basis for a human ethics as well as an ethics that can be applied to nature and all living things. Before we turn to this relationship between ontology and ethics, let us briefly consider Merleau-Ponty’s treatment of time in his great middle work, *Phenomenology of Perception,* and the ontological investigations of his later work, *The Visible and the Invisible.* It should also be mentioned here that these ontological levels are not explicitly named in his later lecture notes that come to be published under the title of *Nature,* but also that what we do find revealed there is consistent with them, with the “emergent materialism” that is outlined in *The Structure of Behavior,* as well as with the general ontological themes revealed in *The Visible and the Invisible.* Nature, then, can be thought of as a connecting link or bridge between Merleau-Ponty’s early and late work.

The problem of the existential modality of the social is here at one with all problems of transcendence. Whether we are concerned with my body, the natural world, the past, birth or death, the question is always how I can be open to phenomena which transcend me, and which nevertheless exist only to the extent that I take them up and live them; how the presence to myself (Urpräsenz) which establishes my own limits and conditions every alien presence is at the same time depersonation . . . and throws me outside myself. (PhP 363)
oneself can also be a depresentation) by turning
to his understanding of the nature of time. Time,
he argues, must be understood as the primary
model for ek-stasis, as a leaping out of itself that
remains in contact with itself. Time is not a col-
lection of discrete moments with each taking its
sole turn at existence. The present moment of ex-
perience gradually slips into the past and toward
the future. The present moment of experience is a
gestalt, for the present foreground opens to a ho-
rizon that includes it and extends infinitely in
both directions. The past cannot be fully present
to me, for if it were, it would lose its status as past.
The present moment of experience thus opens to
a past that runs beyond it yet with which it re-
 mains in contact. While it is true that the remote
past (one’s birth, for example) remains out of
reach, it is nevertheless true that one’s present
opens to a past that also has a past that it opens
upon, and so on. “If anything of the past is to exist
for us, it can be only in an ambiguous presence,
 anterior to any express evocation, like a field
upon which we have an opening. It must exist for
us even though we may not be thinking of it, and
all our recollections must have their substance in
and be drawn from this opaque mass” (PhP 364).
Thus, even when I reflect on a past moment of my
own experience, which is fundamentally tempo-
ral in its structure, I am in touch with something
that temporally slips away from me. To repeat,
the pre-reflective and the reflective do not coin-
cide, since they are necessarily separated by the
flow or spread of time, yet the reflective remains
in touch with the pre-reflective as it gradually
slips away in time. Moreover, this is also the way
that I experience others, the world, and even my
own body. The other remains on the horizon of
my experience, yet I remain in contact with the
other. The world’s horizon remains out of reach,
even while I remain in contact with it through my
present perspectives. And I am obviously in con-
tact with my body, just as its pre-reflective open-
ness upon the world remains out of reach of a
complete reflective representation, for it exists
prior in time and any attempt to capture it always
and necessarily occurs after it. Thus, I am in con-
tact with the past, the world, others and myself
but without fully possessing them. There is over-
lapping but also separation. I am in lived contact
with them, but I do not fully coincide with them
in reflective thought. Moreover, as we have al-
ready seen, this same lived-through contact that
puts me in contact with an abundance of being,
because it opens out upon a field, also opens me
to this field by way of a perspective, which means
that presence (the perspective) and absence (the
field) always occurs together (PhP 364f.). This
idea of pre-reflective and reflective experiences
folding into one another but also remaining
spread apart (or, more generally, of fields with
overlapping boundaries) is confirmed and deep-
ened by the ontological studies of Nature and re-
efined in Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of the two-
dimensional structure of the human body in The
Visible and the Invisible.

Yet, it is clearly the early study of the ontolog-
ical levels of being, especially their overlapping
boundaries (in The Structure of Behavior), and
the early and later study of nature and the emer-
gent nature of biological structures (in The Struc-
ture of Behavior and Nature), that pave the way
for Merleau-Ponty’s late understanding of the
special two-dimensional nature of the human
body (in The Visible and the Invisible). It is the
body’s reflexivity, its unique reflective relation-
ship to itself, the fact that it is awareness of itself
as a perceiving being, that it can see itself seeing
and touch itself touching, the fact that it is aware
of itself as being a part of the world upon which it
opens, that defines it as a linking bond with
things. As my left hand touches the surface of an
exterior object, I am able to touch this left hand as
an embodied exterior object with my right hand.
Yet my right hand is also able to capture a
glimpse of my left hand’s touching, since they
occur in the same body, even as this touching
slips away from it, since the body as experiencing
and the body as experienced overlap and cross
into one another but never completely coincide
because they are always separated by the spread
of time. I am thus aware of myself as a thing that
is capable of touching, as a touching thing, as a
being that is embodied like other embodied be-
ings, but that also opens upon them. The aware,
embodied human subject is bound up with the
world, is made of the same stuff as the other em-
body objects of the world, only knows them be-
cause it is like them, because it is an embodied

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being turning back upon other embodied beings, but is also different from them because it is the being that is aware of being, its own and the world’s. “There is vision, touch, when a certain visible, a certain tangible, turns back upon the whole of the visible/tangible of which it is a part, or when between it and them, and through their commerce, is formed a visibility, a tangible in itself. . . . It is this Visibility, this generality of the Sensible in itself, this anonymity innate to My-self that we have previously called flesh” (VI 139). As Merleau-Ponty has already said in the earlier *Phenomenology of Perception*, and as he repeats here in the posthumous work, it is the lived-through body that provides, or is, our overlapping bond with the world. I experience my body as mine but also as that upon which my personal life rests, as an anonymous set of functions that carry me into the world whether I will it or not (PhP 215f., 440). My personal perceptions thus open upon a world that includes me and these perceptions; my specific perceptions open out to and are included in a general space of possible perspectives, upon a world to which I am bound and of which I feel a part. My bodily perceptions form a system with a world that also runs beyond me and includes me. The experiencing human body and the world thus cross or chiasm or flow into one another (ineinander). They ontologically overlap, are in one another, are a part of one another, since worldly stuff composes the human body and the aware human body contributes to (but does not constitute or construct or create) what is experienced as worldly.

To reiterate, I’m in contact with the world but the world (as other) outruns me, and it is the ontological structure of the body, its two-dimensionality, the fact that it is both sensible and sentient, and the fact that the sensible and sentient cross into one another without becoming one, that allows this to occur. Moreover, Merleau-Ponty explicitly mentions that the human body’s dehiscence, its splitting open and subsequent two-dimensionality, “is a prototype of Being, of which our body, the sensible sentient, is a very remarkable variant, but whose constituent paradox already lies in every visible. For already the cube assemblies within itself incompossible *visibilia*, as my body is at once phenomenal body and objective body” (VI 136). Thus, even though Merleau-Ponty argues that we must recognize the role of the aware, perceiving subject in all experience, he is not just substituting an embodied subject (or an embodied subjectivism) for a disembodied one, for the disembodied subjectivism of Cartesian Modernism. Even though he does make this substitution, and even though this substantially changes how we are to understand human experience (by way of a sensing, aesthetically attuned body rather than detached, conceptually dominant mind), he is even more substantially arguing that human experience is not just the projection of an embodied subject. We must take the aware, embodied perceiving subject into account, but we must also recognize that this awareness recognizes itself as coming second, as being a part of a greater world, and as being structured by it. The embodied perceiver and the world cross into and influence one another yet remain distinct, with the world acting as the more primary term.

It is helpful to say here, when speaking of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, particularly of his use of chiasm or the crossing into one another of experiences or ontological regions, that we should use the terms “divergence (écart) and encroachment, rather than identity and difference.”15 We must recall that Merleau-Ponty, here as elsewhere, is attempting to overcome the dichotomies of Western culture and philosophy, including the complete separation of inner and outer, subjective and objective, etc. When speaking of his philosophy, then, and in this particular case, when we are speaking of the transcendence of the world and others, we must speak of a transcendence that occurs within the context of immanence. Human experience cannot be denied or doubted away, nor can it be constructed from the outside by using discrete units in external relations or from the inside by using abstract concepts and internal relations of meaning, but must be approached from the point of view of the experiencing perceiver. We cannot deny and must even begin with human perceptual experience as it is lived, but this embodied experience immediately opens us upon a world that is always already
there, upon a world that always already runs beyond us both temporally and spatially. Thus rather than exclusive experiences or regions, we have the overlapping of experiences and regions. Rather than an internal projection vs. an external imposition, we have an overlapping of internal and external; we have the overlapping and simultaneous mixture of projection and imposition. Merleau-Ponty’s use of the Funderung relationship once again helps here: we have the perceptual openness upon and the perceptual taking-up of the more primary patterns of the world, the patterns that motivate (not cause or logically require) certain perceptual holds or orientations, orientations that nevertheless fold back upon these patterns to help frame, articulate, and express them more precisely. The other (as world, as animal, as other human beings) encroaches upon me, but I am able to take-up the other actively and interpretively. We are bound together and mutually influence one another, with the world, especially, remaining as the more primary term.

We are now in the position to see how Merleau-Ponty’s theory of nature, with its ontological levels of overlapping being, and his theory of the human body, with its two-dimensionality, provide the basis for an environmental ethics, for an ethics with regard to our treatment of animals, and for a human ethics. We have seen that human beings are not outside or above the world. Our “spirit” is not a separate entity that is placed above the world, as it is in the tradition of Cartesian dualism. Human nature and the human awareness that comes along with it have evolved and emerged from nature and remain bound up with it. We have seen that we can recognize the world as other because of the two-dimensionality of the human body, because of its dehiscence, because the body as a sensible mass is also sentient, because the body as a sensible mass opens out in a way that puts it in contact with a world (because the world is likewise and similarly embodied) but that also puts it in contact with a world that runs beyond it (because the world is embodied but differently embodied). The human body opens out (ek-stasis) to a world that is experienced as running beyond and as different from the embodied perceiver but also, as embodied, as that with which the embodied perceiver remains in contact. Since the human body and the world are both embodied beings there is a sort of sympathy between them, or at least the human being is aware that its embodiment is similar to the embodiment of the world and that it is intimately bound up with it. In addition, if we recall the general structures of Merleau-Ponty’s emergent materialism, we recall that the structures of matter, life, and human life overlap, even while life and human life emerge from matter with new properties. This means, again, that human life and embodiment are intimately bound up with the embodiment of the world, and this means that what we do to the world we also do to ourselves, and, even more, since we are connected to all living things through this world, what we do to the world, we do to all living things. Moreover, since what we do to the world can potentially harm all living things, including human life, what we do to the world has an ethical component.

Ethically, then, since human beings are able to recognize the earth as other, are able to recognize the earth as an ethical other, we can have sympathy for the earth, as being similar to us, as being embodied, even though differently embodied, and, as embodied, as being open to degradation and thus ethical mistreatment. We can especially recognize the earth as the homeland for all living things, since all living things emerge from it, still reside in it, and unquestionably rely on it for their continued sustenance and existence. Moreover, and subsequently, we can thus recognize that certain earthly conditions are more conducive to the support of life than others, and that human behavior takes on an ethical component as it either encourages or discourages these conditions.

In addition, since human beings are able to recognize plant life as other, as similar to us (as possessing life) but also as different (as possessing little or no sentience or power of reflective self awareness), since we are able to recognize plants as living beings that can grow robustly or wither and die, and since life has intrinsic value, the human treatment of plants as living things has an ethical component. Ethically, we can recog-
nize plant life as other, can recognize plant life as an ethical other, can have sympathy for plants (as being similar to us—as being embodied, possessing life and as thus open to derogation and death, if not sentient pain), then via the observation of the norms of healthy life in a species and of the conditions that support or disrupt these norms, we can at least state some guidelines for the ethical treatment of these living things.

In addition, since human beings are able to recognize animals as other, since we are able to connect with them, to see them as similar to us (as living, sentient, feeling, suffering beings) but also as different (as possessing different powers of integration and perhaps little power of reflective awareness), since our experience is able to couple upon and overlap with their behavior and experience but is also able to differentiate from them, and since we are able to see this both experientially and via the study of overlapping ontological regions, we can and should be able to recognize a moral relationship to animals. Animals are beings that we are able to recognize as living, sensing, suffering beings, and since all life has intrinsic value, and since the presence of pleasure and the lack of pain generally possess intrinsic value, the human treatment of animals, insofar as it is supportive of life and pleasure and discourages death and pain, has an ethical component. Ethically, we can recognize the other as animal, can recognize the animal as an ethical other, can have sympathy for the animal (as being similar to us, as sentient embodied, living, feeling, suffering creature), then via the observation of the norms of healthy behavior in a species and of the conditions that support or disrupt these norms, we can and should state some at least general guidelines for the ethical treatment of these animals.

And finally, since human beings do recognize humans as other, as being similar to oneself (as living, sensing, feeling, suffering, more or less self aware and integrated beings) and yet as also different from oneself (as being individuated in a different body with different though still similar experiences), since our experience is able to couple upon and overlap with their behavior and experience but is also able to differentiate from them, since we are able to sympathize and even empathize with the joys and pains of others, and since all human life is of equal intrinsic value, we can and should be able to recognize a moral responsibility toward all human beings. Ethically, we recognize the other as human, can recognize other humans as an ethical other, can have sympathy for the other (as being similar but also different), then via dialogue with the other we can attempt to move toward principles fair for all, even while recognizing differences.

Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of overlapping levels of being and his theory of the two-dimensional ontology of human nature allow us to recognize the other as other, as similar and different, and thus subsequently allow us to recognize the other ethically. His ontology of overlapping levels of being also allows us to recognize the value of all living things but, additionally, that not all living things are equal in value. We should consider this claim more closely, and we should do so by briefly considering two alternative views, one that tends towards an objective grounding of values and one that tends towards a subjective grounding of them. Tending toward the objective, Aldo Leopold has stated that evolution has moved toward diverse environments, with their many parts holding each other in balance.16 If this balance is not present, if one or a few species are not held in check, they will tend to dominate the environment. Leopold’s ethical implication here is that diverse environments are better or healthier because they support a greater variety of life forms. Again, by implication, since life is of intrinsic value, and since evolution has moved toward environments with diverse life forms, the variety of different life forms is of value as well. Thus life is of value and the variety of life is of value. Moreover, this latter judgment appears to be an “objective” judgment, since it is based on an assessment of natural history and the natural direction of evolution. Leopold proceeds to offer an explicit ethical claim with regard to the environment. “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise” (Leopold 263). Tending toward the subjective grounding of values, Arne Naess has

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stated that "the right of all forms to live is a universal right which cannot be quantified. No single species of living being has more of this particular right to live and unfold than any other species."17 "Many," he proceeds to say, "contend that living beings can be ranked according to their relative intrinsic value," and he recognizes that one of the claims for "rankable value" is based on the ability to be conscious of oneself and one’s actions. Yet in Naess’s opinion this claim has not been “substantially justified” (Naess 167). Rather than using “rank” as a justification to “kill other living beings” in order to eat and consume them, Naess posits another argument:

it is against my intuition of unity to say ‘I will kill you because I am more valuable’ but not against the intuition to say ‘I will kill you because I am hungry’. In the latter case, there would be an implicit regret: “Sorry, I am now going to kill you because I am hungry.” In short I find obviously right, but often difficult to justify, different sorts of behavior with different sorts of living beings. But this does not imply that we can classify some as intrinsically more valuable than others. (Naess 168)

Two points of response should be mentioned here with regard to what we have seen Merleau-Ponty develop above. First, his ontology of overlapping regions helps us overcome the divide between the objectivism of facts and the subjectivism of values in a way that traditional Western dualism does not. Merleau-Ponty’s use of the Fundierung relationship is once again helpful here: just as “bare facts” suggest expressed articulations of them that fold back upon them in a way that expresses them more clearly, meaning that nature (as the more primary term) suggests certain expressions or interpretations that are nevertheless required to bring them more fully to light, meaning that object and subject (including human values) must be taken together, with the object as still more primary, so also human biological instincts (generally, to seek pleasure and avoid pain) suggest certain moral expressions that fold back upon them in a way that attempts to express them more clearly and precisely. Scientific and ethical judgments (which are really in-separable from one another) are thus “grounded” in nature but are not “caused” by it.18 Human interpretation and judgment, as they relate to these natural patterns and instincts, are needed to more fully form, express, and clarify them. Human judgment doesn’t just create or construct the patterns but more fully forms, articulates, and clarifies them. Moreover, we have already seen that a number of judgments are always possible, that there is no definitively correct expression, but also that some remain more clarifying and compelling than others. These moral judgments, then, are neither completely caused by nature nor completely arbitrary linguistic agreements. They are suggested by nature but require ongoing evaluation and articulation by members of a shared linguistic community. Thus we have the coming together of the natural (“objective”) patterns and human (“subjective”) interpretation. Nature suggests certain natural and instinctual patterns that are more primary but that must be brought to more precise clarification by the natural interpretive powers of the human species in ongoing linguistic dialogue, debate and the crosschecking of expressions against shared experiences. Thus values are neither objective nor subjective but result from the coming together of the natural and the naturally subjective. Meaning, including ethical meaning, is formed as the human body meets the world and as human beings, as embodied beings, are able to “identify” and empathize with nature, other living bodies, and other humans—as we have seen above.

Secondly, Merleau-Ponty’s theory of overlapping ontological regions allows us to see the value of all living things, but without accepting the claim that all living things are of equal value. While we must accept the value of all life forms, it seems counter-intuitive (and more than just anthropomorphism) to claim that the life of a human being, the life of a pig or a snail, and the life of a dandelion are of equal value. Or, to restate this in the form of a famous illustration, if a human, a pig, a snail, and a dandelion are all in a burning building, and we have time to save only one, it seems counter-intuitive to choose either the pig, or the snail, or the dandelion, and not the human. Moreover, it is Merleau-Ponty’s theory of overlapping ontological regions that allows us to see the value of all the living things, but without accepting the claim that all living things are of equal value.

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of overlapping ontologies that allows us to ground this intuition. Merleau-Ponty accepts here the still widely accepted biological notion that all things have evolved from earlier and simpler life forms, that, for example, eukaryotes (basically cells with organelles), from which fungi, plants and animals have developed, evolved from simple forms of bacterial life. As living organisms evolved they continued to become more complex. As species continued to evolve and become more complex they continued to develop different properties and qualities. True, we should respect all life, but, since the variety of living things display vastly different properties and capacities, it would be irresponsible for us to make moral decisions that do not take these differences into account. True, we should respect the earth because it supports life. We should respect life because it has intrinsic value. We should respect animals because they feel pleasure and pain. And we should respect humans because humans feel not only bodily pleasure and pain but also psychological joy and discomfort. True, we should value all life . . . but in different ways and not equally. We owe more respect to those more complex living beings that feel pleasure and pain (animals rather than plants, for example), to those that have a greater variety and a more acute awareness of these pleasures and pains (humans and other mammals more than crustaceans or insects, for example), and to those that have a more integrated reflective awareness of them (humans). Moreover, it is the human species that has the capacity to fully grasp and reflect upon these natural patterns, that can grasp and reflect upon the consequences of their behavior, for the present and future, and that can subsequently grasp and reflect upon the ethical consequences of their behavior and the behavior of other species. It is humans that have the greatest awareness and thus the greatest chance of recognizing and managing the integrity and stability of biotic communities, that have the greatest chance of managing these communities with some ethical principles and consequences in mind. Thus if organizing the environment ethically is a primary concern, if it is of value, then we owe greater respect to the species that is able to enact this organization. With the different qualities and capacities of different species, then, comes a difference in value and a difference with respect to our moral responsibility toward various species, and, again, it is only the human species that is able to recognize this. What is therefore troubling about Naess’s philosophy is that it does not recognize the ethical implications of these ontological differences, and, in fact, argues against them, and does so primarily by appealing to conflicting, unresolved, and ungrounded intuitions. Moreover, the intuition that it is alright to kill because we are hungry seems to imply, in principle (if not intuitively), that it is alright to kill other humans (and not just plants and animals) if we are hungry. Contrarily, what has been offered above as an ethics based on Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy does attempt to ground these relative moral intuitions in an ontological framework. It seems, then, that these relative moral intuitions can be based on something more than just intuition. They can be and seem to be based on real ontological and species distinctions that humans are capable of making, using the best of our contemporary science and philosophical reflection. Grounding the right to kill and consume in an ontological framework such as the one that Merleau-Ponty has been able to provide thus seems both more intuitively consistent and more intellectually and ethically responsible.

Before we proceed to an attempt to refine Merleau-Ponty’s claims we should briefly consider one more objection to his work. Some have argued, Jacques Derrida among them, that Merleau-Ponty cannot develop a genuine ethics because he does not have a genuine concept of the other, that he reduces the other to the same. Yet it seems clear from the above, and from the commentary of both M. C. Dillon and Jack Reynolds, that this is a poor understanding of Merleau-Ponty’s thought. We have seen that within the context of his philosophy there is difference as well as identity, that, even if by way of immanence, a transcendence does appear, that there is divergence (an egression or moving or spreading out) as well as encroachment (an ingestion or moving or overlapping inward). We have briefly seen that there is no complete coinci-
dence of self with self, of self with other, or of self
with the world, because of the “spread” of the
natural dimension of time. Moreover, when
Merleau-Ponty speaks of the relationship to
other human beings, he speaks of both projection
and encroachment, of the fact that we “create oth-
ers from our own thoughts” and “borrow our-
selves from others,” and he does so at the level of
lived-through perceptual experience rather than
the Modernist level of abstract representational
thought. If, as we have seen argued above, ethics
requires the recognition of the other, and if
this recognition requires both identity and differ-
ence (i.e., divergence and encroachment), then it
is Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy that has provided
the possibility of this far more than either Des-
cartes’s Modernism or Derrida’s Postmodern-
ism, since Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy insists
that we need both, while Modernism focuses on
identity and Postmodernism focuses on differ-
ence. Or, it is more accurate to say, since both
Descartes and Derrida reduce the other to an ab-
solute other, both must rely on projection in order
to speak of the recognition of the other. Yet the
problem remains the same for both: projection of
this sort does not provide a genuine recognition
of the other. Let us address this briefly.

Derrida, who focuses on the creative power of
language, argues that language is a trace of a
trace, a trace that erases its origins, is a faint copy
of a perception that itself erases its own origins,
since each perception always refers beyond itself
both spatially and temporally. This, for Derrida,
means that language is never fully present to it-
self, that each word or sentence always refers be-
yond itself to other words and sentences in a par-
ticular language or culture. Derrida here, as
well as with the recognition of the other, focuses
on difference: the other remains other, and, since
this is the case, the relationship to the other must
be based upon projection. As Jack Reynolds
informs us, what thus troubles Derrida about
Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, since it apparently
denies that the recognition of the other is based
on projection, is that it “runs the risk of reconsti-
tuting an intuitionism of immediate access to the
other . . . runs the risk of reappropriating the
alterity of the other.” First, this seems like an
odd point for Derrida’s Postmodernist philoso-
phy to be making, since it appears to be part-
nering with Descartes’s Modernism, at least
regarding the important role of projection when
attempting to account for the recognition of the
other. Now certainly there is little of Descartes’s
philosophy that Derrida would accept, and most
certainly not the isolated rational ego in full pos-
session of itself, the basis of Cartesian projection.
Nevertheless, Derrida does agree with Des-
cartes’s recognition of the other by way of anal-
ogy and projection. However, if this is the case,
we might ask of Derrida’s philosophy, with a per-
sonal, philosophical, authorial subject that is so
diminished, that is reduced to almost nothing,
that is a product or expression of the (mostly
written) language of a particular culture, who is it
that does the projection? Since Derrida develops
a transcendental philosophy that equates writing
and time, that equates words and moments that
are constantly referring and deferring to other
words and moments that remain, somehow, out-
side of the personal intentions of the author, and
even outside the contingencies of real history and
time, we may ask of his philosophy, who is it that
does the projection? Just as with language, we
should argue that it is not a matter of presence
versus absence but that they must occur together,
that the word or moment referred to cannot com-
pletely erase its connection to its referring word
or moment, as Derrida claims, since no spacing
could then occur between them, as Derrida re-
quires, so also with the recognition of the other,
we should argue that presence and absence must
occur together, since for one person to project
some sort of personal life into another, the first
person must remain present long enough to do so.
Yet for Derrida, there appears to be no personal
subject left to recognize another personal sub-
ject. Again, what Modernists focus on is pres-
ence, identity, sameness, and stability, while
Postmodernists focus on absence, difference,
otherness, and instability. Merleau-Ponty fo-
cuses on a balance of both, on presence within the
context of absence (like the foreground of a ges-
talt figure against an inarticulate background), on
divergence and encroachment together, on same-
ness and otherness together, and on stability

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within the context of flux and change. The theory with the greatest explanatory power is the one we should accept. Generally, this theory must explain all that needs to be explained, and, in this particular case, it must explain both identity and difference, not just one or the other, and, since they appear together in experience, must explain how they are woven together. It is Merleau-Ponty’s theory that at least begins to move us toward this greater, more integrated comprehension.

Secondly, Derrida seems to miss the historical context of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy and thus the main thrust of many of his arguments. Merleau-Ponty is trying to escape the Cartesian tradition, the idea that I have a complete awareness of myself, a full presence to myself, and that no one else has access to my interior. He is trying to overcome the individualism and subjectivism of Western philosophy and culture, and he is trying to overcome the representational theory of consciousness that forms a relationship with the other only by way of the abstract argument by analogy,26 by way of the projection of an isolated interior into a similar looking exterior. Merleau-Ponty doesn’t accept this version of projection and analogy because it does not offer a genuine recognition of the other, since it is merely the projection of one’s own interior (or this interior constructed by language) into the other as an external shell, with no real experience of the other’s experience. There is no real overlapping of my lived-through perceptual experience with the perceptual experiences lived-through by others. Now, Merleau-Ponty does argue that, since there is individuation, I will never have complete access to the mind of another, but he just as explicitly argues that I can perceive, at least in part, what another perceives, since our bodies open upon and aim at the same world, like two search lights illuminating the same field, and since our bodies open upon the same world in similar ways. Since the libidinal body desires a coupling with the world and other bodies for its completion (Na 218), and since the perceptual and motor functions of a single body form an integrated system as they relate to the world together (PhP 9), they are able to overlap and form a system with other human bodies as they also relate to the world. Thus, when I perceive another’s actions, I am able to couple onto them.27 Or, to state this differently, the perceptual and motor functions are so integrated in the human species that perception itself must be considered a type of activity. Perceptions are already actions, already an active taking up of the patterns of the world, already reveal an operative intentionality, and already reveal an operative, meaningful orientation toward the world. Intentions, then, are not merely buried in the depths of a private consciousness, but, rather, are primarily the aware body’s active and meaningful orientation toward the world. As such, rather than as an isolated interior, it is easier for me, by way of my aware, oriented body, to recognize the aware orientations of other bodies. This is what “The Child’s Relations with Others” refers to as “postural impregnation,” or what we might call a postural coupling (PrP 145), and what Phenomenology of Perception mentions as a sort of re-enactment of an “alien existence” (PhP 352). In both texts we see that children are able to live or couple onto the behavior of another. If one child cries, for example, others nearby will tend to cry as well (PrP 124). Or, if an adult playfully bites a baby’s fingers, the baby will tend to mimic the biting motions with its mouth (PhP 352). Or, if I stand with another adult before a landscape, “then, through the concordant operation of his body with my own, what I see passes into him, this individual green of the meadow under my eyes invades his vision without quitting my own, I recognize in my green his green” (VI 142). Merleau-Ponty’s point here is that there is a genuine pre-reflective, pre-conceptual, non-representational recognition of the other’s bodily orientation, perceptions, and even perceptual consciousness, since one lived-through body is able to couple onto another, and since both perceptually open upon a common world in similar ways. Since there is a genuine recognition of and partial overlapping with the perceptions lived-through by others, individuals do not live in a world that is just of their own making, or that is just a projection of their own rational interior, or that is just a projection of an abstract language. These perceptions are
recognized as being genuinely experienced by the other, since they occur in another body, in a body that is experienced as independent of me, but also as being similar to my perceptions, since our perceptions point to and open upon a common world in similar ways. This sharing and overlapping of perceptual experiences that also respects and maintains differences is what Merleau-Ponty refers to as a “lateral universal” (Signs 120). While it is correct that he does claim that “there is no problem of the alter ego because it is not I who sees, not he who sees, because an anonymous visibility inhabits both of us, a vision in general” (VI 142), in saying this, he does not deny that there is individuation and difference. When, for example, I experience the space around me, I do so in a way that opens out to a world that includes me but also to a world that refers back to me, that relates back to the perspective that opens upon it. The experience of space, then, is both general and situated, both public and personal, and is so in a way that has them crossing into one another and as appearing together. And, more generally, even though our perceptual experience of the world opens out to a public space, to a public (or even anonymous) world and a space that is populated by other people, it is experienced as a natural and social space that reflects back to the particular perspective that opens upon it. The public world is experienced as transcending me but as also remaining in contact with me and as encroaching back upon my experience. Also, with respect to language, the public and the personal must again be seen as occurring together. Our personal perceptual experiences suggest certain linguistic expressions just as these expressions cross back into our perceptual experiences to help articulate them more clearly and precisely. While a multitude of linguistic expressions is always possible, and while there is no definitively correct expression, as we have seen above, some remain more clarifying than others, since there is a really existing perceptual field already there for them to help articulate and clarify. Thus, just as a particular perceptual perspective opens upon a general field of space that crosses back into and even helps define it, so also a particular perceptual perspective suggests and opens out to a general field of linguistic meanings that cross back into and help define it, yet with perception here remaining the primary term. Moreover, since self and world and self and other humans cross into one another, because of the collaboration of the perceptual and motor functions in the human body, and since I am able see other embodied creatures and see myself, “the schema of the body proper . . . can be shared by all other bodies.” Moreover, this means that we must recognize that “the body schema is a lexicon of corporeality in general, a system of equivalences between the inside and the outside which prescribes from one to the other its fulfillment in the other.” For Merleau-Ponty, then, embodied perceptual experience is the way toward universal, shared meaning, but it is also the way toward the recognition of difference and individuation. Human embodied perceptual consciousness is ek-stasis, an opening out upon a public world that transcends the perceiver yet that never completely leaves the specific, situated, embodied perceiver behind. As we have seen above, he insists on both divergence and encroachment, on both projection and imposition, on both similarity and difference, and on their overlapping that is never a complete coincidence. He is thus able to account for a genuine recognition of the other, with both overlapping contact and separating difference, and he is able to do so in a way that can’t be grasped by either Cartesian Modernism or Derridian Postmodernism. Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, then, allows him to speak of an inter-corporeality and, subsequently, of an inter-subjectivity, of a world of shared, embodied perceptual experience that comes to be articulated, expressed, and shared more precisely in language, but that also accounts for and allows for difference and individuation. It is this theory that thus provides the best outline for an ethics, since an ethics requires the recognition of both similarity and difference, not just one or the other.

In his 1952 application for the philosophical chair at the Collège de France, Merleau-Ponty briefly lays out, in a highly condensed form, the arc and direction of his philosophical research. He concludes this brief prospectus of his work

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With the claim that what his works have established “would be metaphysics itself and would at the same time give us the principle of an ethics” (PrP 11). With this in mind let us conclude with a brief summary of what is presented in the prospectus—which will also allow us to summarize what has been presented above.

The Structure of Behavior (1942) and Phenomenology of Perception (1945), he says, mark out perception as an original source of meaning, i.e., that perceptual meaning (as we have already seen) cannot be constructed from the outside using units of sense data in external relationships, as empiricism claims, for perspectives are related meaningfully. Nor (as we have already seen) can it be constructed from the inside using the internal relations of conceptual meaning, as rationalists claim, for perceptual meaning possesses contingent aspects. The perceptual process itself, as a lived-through interaction between the embodied subject and the world, must be studied as the place for the emergence of perceptual meaning. In the years following the Second World War and the publication of Phenomenology of Perception in 1945, Merleau-Ponty turns to a consideration of the human knowledge that carries us beyond perception, not by leaving it behind but by sublimating it, by taking it to a higher level of abstraction and integration. This, he hopes, will lead to a theory of truth and a related theory of intersubjectivity, or, more accurately, a theory of lived-through intercorporeality. Here in the 1952 prospectus he remarks that “knowledge and the communication with others that it presupposes not only are original formulations with respect to the perceptual life but also they preserve and continue our perceptual life even while transforming it. Knowledge and communication sublimate rather than suppress our incarnation.” Abstract thought “recaptures our corporeal existence and uses it to symbolize” (PrP 7). This means, then, that the study of language should help us more completely understand intercorporeality, inter-subjectivity, and human relations in general. In fact, this study of language should help us better understand the general character of symbolic relations, social institutions, and even human history. We learn, for instance, that social institutions and human history, interpreted more broadly in terms of symbolism, must not be understood as external to us. Social institutions, as symbolic systems, cross into our individual lives and help us articulate and form our common experience, even our common humanity and history. We have witnessed above how this is possible but may summarily restate the following: My lived-through, embodied perceptual experience opens upon a public world that is experienced as shared and common. A rational system can be formed when my perceptual profiles agree with each other and agree with those lived-through by others—and, again, they do so because they open upon a common world. This means, in addition, that our lived-through perceptual experiences must be articulated and expressed in a language that sublimes our perceptual life in a way that makes sense of it even while folding back upon it and transforming it. As we have seen, different symbolic systems always remain possible, but some will tend to make more sense than others because they are more clarifying, and they are more clarifying because they are more accurate, and they are more accurate because they more closely approximate the stable structures of the world that is always already there. Again, as we have already seen, already in the experience of space, with a specific perspective opening out to others that include it, conditioned as it is by the two-dimensional structure of the human body, by a perceiving that is perceived, we see the emergence of a space that is both general and yet still tied to a particular perspective, that “looks” back at me as I open out upon it. In the same way, language is a more general and integrated horizon that sublimes my perception while remaining attached to it. A new meaning emerges that supervenes that from which it has arisen, while, nevertheless, remaining connected to it, and this new meaning is always brought to expression within and with the assistance of already existing and always already available linguistic systems.

All of this leads Merleau-Ponty to what he calls a “methodological rationalism” (PrP 10). We can call it a methodological rationalism because it is a method that helps us arrive at what we have seen labeled a “lateral universal.” This lat-
eral universal, again, is rooted in similarly embodied, situated and perceiving subjects, whose perceptual experience is sublimated by a language that helps bring it to a more clarified expression. This lateral universal is rooted in the stability of perceptual experience, which presupposes both a stable world and a stable human body, but becomes more fully formed and articulated by way of language in an ongoing dialogue. The universal (as an abstract rational concept) does not already exist, as some sort of metaphysical essence. It is an outcome, it is arrived at through a process or method, through a continued cross checking of perceptions, and a continued refinement of what is experienced by way of an ongoing dialogue with others. What we find in the world are patterned structures, structures that are stable but also open and ambiguous, structures that provide the basis for shared linguistic expressions, but that are open to a variety of interpretations, structures that will support a variety of interpretations, but not infinitely so, since there is some stability already there to interpret. Here, says Merleau-Ponty, his works rejoin classical metaphysics, not by starting with Nature in itself or Reason for itself, but by starting with a "constantly experienced moment, the moment when an existence becomes aware of itself, grasps itself, and expresses its own meaning" (PrP 10–11). Embodied human awareness opens upon a patterned public world that impacts upon it. As this active embodied awareness takes up this world and folds back upon it, as the aware human body and the world cross into one another, meaning is formed. As perceptual meaning is articulated and refined by a continued cross checking of experiences and by way of a continued dialogue with others about them, our view of reality becomes expressed and articulated. It is a view of reality (a metaphysics in the broad sense) that is thus linked to the articulations of perceptual and linguistic processes, but that also has its bases in the shifting but also stable patterns of the world. As Merleau-Ponty expresses it, "the study of perception could only teach us a 'bad ambiguity,' a mixture of finitude and universality, of interiority and exteriority. But there is a 'good ambiguity' in the phenomenon of expression," for the expressions of language help me pull together my experiences, help me pull together my past experiences with those of my present, help me pull together my experiences with the experiences lived-through by others, both past and present, and, acting together, help us pull together and articulate our experience of the world that runs beyond us. Understanding how this happens (the move from my perception to shared perceptions, from our shared perceptions to the shared expressions of language) gives us a metaphysics, a theory of what exists, including an ontology, but also the basic principles of an ethics, since we must attempt to recognize each human other as he or she attempts to voice and articulate his or her needs in relation to the world and others. And, even more, we must attempt to recognize all living things, and even the earth, as an ethical other, not by listening to their voices per se, but by attempting to calculate the norms for the health of living things and by attempting to assess the conditions within nature that most support these norms.

This, then, is the best way for us to attempt to understand human societies and, more specifically, ethical human societies: engaged, perceiving, embodied individuals open upon and cross into both the natural world and a social world that is a sublimation of it; the embodied, engaged, perceiving individuals take up the natural and social patterns of the past and present, attempt to gain recognition within them, and attempt to move them in new directions as well, including new ethical directions. This, then, is also how we should attempt to understand history, how history moves: human individuals seek recognition (including ethical recognition) for the full range of their human needs and do so within the context of already existing material conditions and social institutions, including the institution of language. Moreover, in the context of this philosophy, the just or moral situation for humans is the situation within which each recognizes the full humanity of all the others and, finally, is the condition considered humane by all. Expanding this ethical recognition, as we can within the context of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy and the ontological framework that it provides, the just or
moral situation for all living things is the situation that recognizes the value of all living things and, subsequently, the value of the natural conditions that support life in all of its variety. Yet, the just or moral or rational situation is not already established but remains to be established. It will be established only by listening to all voices, including the “voices” (or value) of all living things, only by moving toward general conditions that are acceptable to all, and only by accepting the general conditions that also allow us to live with differences.31

NOTES


8. Mathematical and instrumental formulas and algorithms, within the context of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, must be regarded as abstractions. As he puts it in Phenomenology of Perception, perception and nature are always richer than thought (viii–xi), and as he expresses it in his remarkable essay “Eye and Mind,” in his The Primacy of Perception (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), instrumental formulas can be extremely useful as long as we remember to place them back within the context of our lived-through perceptual contact with the world, as long as we do not substitute them for this contact (160). The Primacy of Perception is hereafter referred to inline as PrP. See also Douglas Low, “Merleau-Ponty on Nature, Animal Biology, and the Emergence of the Human Body,” http://www.uwf.edu/dlow/mp_on_nature.pdf.


MERLEAU-PONTY, ONTOLOGY, AND ETHICS

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19. Even though it is generally accepted that there is some degree of hierarchical development in biology, from bacterial life to eukaryotes and so on, it is just as generally accepted with respect to specific lines of species evolution that it is impossible to claim any sort of hierarchical “tree” with a precisely defined trunk, branches, twigs, etc. Rather, it is now known that there are regressions, dead ends, and the development of a great variety of species that do not follow a precise linear upward scale. Merleau-Ponty is in full agreement with these claims, and it goes without saying that he does not adhere to the antiquated theological world view that God created, once and for all, a rigid hierarchy of species that fit eternally into unchanging classes, with humans placed outside of and above all other species. It is certainly difficult, then, to make any claims for a precise hierarchy of values based on either the non-hierarchical evolutionary schema provided by science, or on the now largely discredited hierarchy of species based on religious ideology. Yet the claim that is being made here on behalf of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy is that it is still possible to assign relative value to different properties and qualities of different species. Even though the evolutionary changes that give rise to the human species are not neatly hierarchical, as if they occurred in a series of upward steps, they nevertheless have produced what must be regarded as qualitatively different properties and capacities, some of which may be accorded greater value. As is well known, J. S. Mill draws a distinction between higher and lower values/pleasures, between the appreciation of art and music, for example, and the mere enjoyment of physical pleasure. As he puts it, we must accept “that some kinds of pleasure are more desirable and more valuable than others,” and, he goes on to argue, “few human creatures would consent to be changed into any of the lower animals, for the promise of the fullest allowance of the beast’s pleasure.” Moreover, most would agree with his well known claim that “it is better to be a human dissatisfied than a pig satisfied.” John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (London: Longmans, Green, 1897), 10–14, in *Great Traditions in Ethics*, Chapter 13, “John Stuart Mill: The Greatest Happiness Principle.” To emphasize this point for the present essay: certain properties, capacities, or abilities possessed by the human species (because of the evolutionary development of the species) seem to accord greater value to various human experiences. After all, most would agree that it is better to have the following than not to have them: the ability to reflect, to create, to understand and act according to principles, to act with a degree of freedom, etc. Moreover, as we have seen above, it is Merleau-Ponty’s ontological studies that help us understand how this is possible in the human species and not in others. See also his discussion of evolutionary theory in *Nature*, “First Sketch” through “Sixth Sketch,” 209–66, see especially 212, 214, 246–48, 252, 257–58, 263–64. See also Marjorie Grene “Merleau-Ponty and the Renewal of Ontology,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 29 (1976): 605–25, especially 608ff.
27. Reynolds draws attention to these arguments (ibid., 322). See also Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “The Child’s Relations with Others” in The Primacy of Perception, 9.


30. Humanism and Terror, 111.