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Abstract

Review of Louise Westling. *The Logos of the Living World: Merleau-Ponty, Animals, and Language*. New York: Fordham UP, 2014. xiv + 187 pp.

Keywords

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, critical animal studies, ecocriticism

Louise Westling. *The Logos of the Living World: Merleau-Ponty, Animals, and Language*. New York: Fordham UP, 2014. xiv + 187 pp.

Louise Westling's groundbreaking study reevaluates French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty's writings on the basis of his myriad contributions to ecocriticism, animal studies, and biosemiotics, and reveals that he anticipated debates that continue to mark the environmental humanities. She affirms that Merleau-Ponty was one of the first philosophers to engage critically with modern life sciences, incorporating knowledge from evolutionary biology, animal studies, and other fields to frame new concepts of human corporeality, language, and culture as evolutionarily continuous with the rest of life on the planet. Westling not only expands Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of "man-animality intertwining," but also models the interweaving of science, philosophy, and art that characterizes his work and that has become the hallmark of interdisciplinary ecocritical inquiry.

The structure of *The Logos of the Living World* parallels the tripartite project that Merleau-Ponty outlined in working notes shortly before his untimely death in 1961: The Visible, Nature, and Logos. In Chapter 1, "A Philosophy of Life," Westling traces the evolution of phenomenology, a philosophical movement beginning in the early 20th century that offered a new path for Western philosophy by challenging pervasive Cartesian dualist thinking that considers humans as separate from nonhuman nature. While Merleau-Ponty's writings incorporate Edmund Husserl's focus on lived human experience and Martin Heidegger's concepts of dwelling and being, he expands the work of his predecessors by accounting for nonhuman agency, the embodied nature of human experience, and the biological kinships and interactions that link humans with the rest of the biosphere. Westling characterizes Merleau-Ponty's philosophical writings as non-dualist and centered on the body as the point of contact between self and other, inside and outside, flesh and word.

An example of Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on the body is his concept of chiasmic ontology, in which all organisms are linked to the primordial "brute being" or raw substance of life (Westling 27). Since perception and experience are inherently embodied, creatures interact with the world through a chiasm or reversible space in which flesh is both touching and being touched. However, absolute merging is never fully realized because *écart* 'incessant escaping' momentarily differentiates individual organisms from the surrounding world. In Westling's ecophenomenological readings that conclude the chapter, she interprets Eudora Welty's short story "The Wanderers" as a celebration of the erotic chiasm that connects the human body with nature. Furthermore, she demonstrates how W. H. Auden's poem "A New Year Greeting" delves into the brimming (sym)biotic world of the human gut and offers an ironic affront to human exceptionalism and status as a bounded subject.

In Chapter 2, “Animal Kin,” Westling supports Merleau-Ponty’s argument, articulated in the Nature lectures (1956-1960), that any genuine consideration of human identity must acknowledge the continual evolutionary kinship it shares with other creatures. The chapter opens with a critical discussion of the ancient Sumerian narrative *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and Euripides’s tragic play *The Bakkhai*, foundational literatures that confront the drastic consequences of human attempts to transcend the network of human-animal interrelationships. Subsequently, Westling examines Merleau-Ponty’s place in Western philosophy’s lively debate over humans’ ambiguous relationship with animality. While Heidegger and Jacques Derrida remain wary of evolutionary continuism despite their attempts to deconstruct concepts of human exceptionalism, Merleau-Ponty asserts that human consciousness emerged as one among many kinds of animal awareness and that the body materializes humans’ spatial and temporal enmeshment within the flesh of the living world. Although the question of “man-animal intertwining” is rigorously debated among contemporary animal studies scholars such as Cary Wolfe and Donna Haraway, Westling laments that Merleau-Ponty’s work remains largely uncited in this discussion. The chapter concludes with a survey of recent animal studies centering on consciousness, communication, and social relationships that demonstrate the richness of animal experience and continue to narrow the tenuous gap that separates the uniquely human from the more-than-human.

Chapter 3, “Language is Everywhere,” takes up the question of semiotic behaviors in humans and nonhuman organisms as addressed in the final phase of Merleau-Ponty’s tripartite project (Logos), recorded in his disjointed working notes discovered after his sudden death. While Merleau-Ponty’s early works reconceptualize human language as embodied and gestural, his later writings suggest that human language emerged gradually and remains embedded within the biological linguistic continuum. Although Merleau-Ponty did not directly address whether animals possess language or reason, Westling’s interpretation of his fragmentary working notes, which affirm the existence of animal consciousness and culture, suggests that with more time he would have arrived at this conclusion. Incorporating Merleau-Ponty’s pioneering theories as well as recent discoveries in the fields of animal studies, anthropology, cognitive neuroscience, and biosemiotics, Westling proposes an expanded definition of language that encompasses the rich spectrum of semiotic behaviors in the living world, from the elaborate bowers of courting bowerbirds to the waggle dances of honeybees and chemical signaling between cells. In order to demonstrate how literature and art “[witness] Being as part of a larger collection of animal communication” (Westling 124), Westling concludes the chapter with an interpretation of Yann Martel’s novel *Life of Pi* as an apocalyptic allegory of human-animal communication in the face of mass extinction and environmental

catastrophe. In light of Martel's novel, Westling expands Merleau-Ponty's chiasmic ontology to account for the potential violence of human-animal interrelationships as well as the dire need for collaboration in a time of global ecological crisis.

Louise Westling demonstrates how Merleau-Ponty's efforts to restore humanity to the rich vitality of the world lay the groundwork for a deeper understanding of the complex lives of other organisms as well as our chiasmic intertwining with the rest of the biosphere. The life sciences, philosophy, and art, which both Westling and Merleau-Ponty adeptly weave together in their writings, allow us to reflect on ourselves while drawing forth the latent meanings that permeate the world around us. Through Westling's insightful discussion of his writings on the embodied nature of language, the evolutionary continuum that encompasses all creatures and capacities, and the semiotic richness of the more-than-human world, Merleau-Ponty emerges as one of the most pivotal—yet underappreciated—ecological thinkers of the 20th century.

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