

# EMBODIMENT AND EMBEDDEDNESS IN PHILOSOPHIES OF ECOLOGY:

## Deep Ecology, Confucian Ecology, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology

Ah, not to be cut off,  
not through the slightest partition  
shut out from the law of the stars.  
The inner – what is it?  
if not intensified sky,  
hurled through with birds and deep  
with the winds of homecoming.

Rainer Maria Rilke

As the crickets' soft autumn hum  
is to us  
so are we to the trees  
as are they  
to the rocks and the hills.

Gary Snyder

Chris Schlottmann  
Philosophy Senior Essay  
4.29.2002  
Profs Gangadean and Kosman

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## **Acknowledgements**

I send gratitude primarily to my first reader, Professor Ashok Gangadean, for guidance throughout this project, and throughout my varied time here at Haverford. Further, thanks to all professors who have helped me explore this perpetually puzzling field of philosophy in their different and wonderful capacities: Kathleen Wright, Danielle Macbeth, Aryeh Kosman, Steven Salkever, Christopher Pavsek, Ulrich Schoenherr, and, sadly *in absentia*, Lucius Outlaw. Finally, and perhaps least importantly, I thank my trusty computer for assuaging my academic anxieties with the steady assurance of its pulsing green light.

## **Introduction**

### **► Introduction to Three Ecological Philosophies ◄**

These three philosophies are ‘ecological’ in that they necessitate a reorientation of human philosophy to respectfully include the natural world. My impetus is the ecological crisis that humanity now faces. I assume that part of this problem is the underdevelopment of the philosophy of nature and its role in human ontology. These philosophies all describe aspects of what might be a complete ecological philosophy: embeddedness in nature, embodiment and its conceptual and ontological implications, and the interconnectedness of the natural world. There are many ecological philosophies – ecofeminism, ecological psychology, anarchist social ecology – but I have chosen these three for their unique characteristics that successfully balance and challenge each other.

There is great tension in the nature/culture and human-as-natural discussions. One side posits that if humans are natural beings, then all of their actions must therefore be natural. Humans cannot be “unnatural.” The other side states that culture and civilization have detached humans from nature, and therefore their natural qualities have been superseded or mutilated. Any action is cultural and not subject to natural limitations. The truth lies somewhere in between, but it is very difficult to determine if a prescriptive balance can be struck. Humans are obviously social, cultural and natural beings. They have the ability to imagine and reason, and are subject to their animalistic heritage. A possible balance, the one which I propose in this paper, is that humans are distinct animals, having the choice and ability to both transcend the natural world and sever themselves from the life-giving qualities of nature. For instance, if a philosophy not only abstracts, conceptualizes and reflects, but does so to the point of disembodiment and loss of individuation, then it has functioned to sever humanity from nature instead of simply differentiating it. What I propose as a co-operative relationship does not sever humanity to the

point of dangerously altering the environment (e.g. global warming), or damaging human health (e.g. pollution). It does not entail either human subjugation or a reconciliation with nature. The former is naïve ecocentrism; the latter is utopian. But a more harmonious relationship is assuredly possible, and does not entail the losses often feared, such as cultural richness, economic success and capitalist industry<sup>1</sup>. This essay is moving in this middle ground between complete ecocentrism and complete anthropocentrism, attempting to clarify and tease out a more sustainable and mutually beneficial relationships between man and nature from a philosophical perspective.

### ► Introduction to Deep Ecology ◀

To describe the environmental movement, which not only seeks political reform, but rather a new metaphysics and cosmology, Bill Devall uses the term “Deep Ecology,<sup>2</sup>” borrowed from Arne Naess, the movement’s founder. He characterizes the qualities of such a movement and philosophy instead of positing an entire philosophy. This paper will attempt to elucidate, clarify and challenge the philosophical grounding of such a philosophy of ecology. One of Devall’s premises is that our ecological crisis is due to an ill-conceived environmental consciousness, and that a more appropriate philosophy of ecology will help enable the reformation of the current dilemma. It is “deep” for at least three reasons: because political solutions to environmental problems are considered “shallow” unless a comprehensive philosophy that truly understands the human role in nature is fully integrated into human understanding; it is largely based on the unorthodox notion that nature has an inherent value that we should not disturb; and it attempts to

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<sup>1</sup> William McDonough and Michael Braungart’s *Cradle to Cradle* and Paul Hawken, Amory Lovins and L. Hunter Lovins *Natural Capitalism* propose a more sustainable model, and give numerous substantive and successful attempts at a more harmonious relationship with nature entailing gain for humans, not loss.

<sup>2</sup> Devall, Bill. The Deep Ecology Movement, *Natural Resources Journal* 20 (April 1980): 299-313.

replace any anthropocentric philosophy for an ecocentric one. According to Devall, there are five sources of Deep Ecology's philosophy.

The first is Eastern spiritual traditions that value nature both aesthetically and spiritually. The second is Native American traditions, which do not understand nature as "wild" but rather as mysterious, revered and tame. The third source is Western religious and philosophical traditions which re-evaluate man and nature outside of a dominating paradigm. These traditions "could have provided the West with a healthy basis for a realistic portrayal of the balance and interconnectedness of three artificially separable components (God/Nature/Man) of an ultimately seamless and inseparable Whole."<sup>3</sup> The fourth source has been the science of ecology, as long as it does not "enhance" or "manage" the environment. The final influence is "artists who have tried to maintain a sense of place in their work."<sup>4</sup> Ansel Adams and others who embrace a "spiritual-mystical objectivism" are included in this group. This assemblage of philosophies and ideas forms the foundation upon which deep ecology functions.

Other movements have been derived from Deep Ecology, such as ecofeminism, which sees natural domination as deeply connected to human domination, and ecoterrorism, which, at one very rare extreme, will value all natural habitats over human life<sup>5</sup>. Since its view of nature is idealistic, dangerous philosophies such as natural romanticism reminiscent of Nazism have taken root in the movement<sup>6</sup>. Similarly, its mysticism has been used to avoid serious philosophical questions, such as the differentiated role of humans, and to avoid non-spiritual understandings of

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<sup>3</sup> George Sessions, "Spinoza and Jeffers on Man in Nature," *Inquiry* 20 (1977): 481.

<sup>4</sup> Devall, Bill. The Deep Ecology Movement, *Natural Resources Journal* 20 (April 1980): 308.

<sup>5</sup> An example is EarthFirst!. Its president, David Foreman, is a devout misanthropist, and fails to see human rights issues from any perspective other than a narrowly focused ecological one. For instance, immigrants are frowned upon because they increase the U.S.'s overpopulation, and AIDS is lauded as a natural population thinner.

<sup>6</sup> See Michael Zimmerman *Contesting Earth's Future* (UC: Berkeley, 1994), pp. 150-183.

nature. In the Deep Ecology movement, human embeddedness in nature is often misused to either subjugate humans to nature, exclude them, or treat them as solely animals. A sustainable human distinction from nature, along with nature's vital role in human sustenance, are the two balancing points that Deep Ecology needs to develop. The central role of humans in nature is why Confucian ecology is so useful as a comparison to this ecocentrism.

### ► Introduction to Confucian Ecology ◀

The reason I have chosen Confucian ecological philosophy over a more obvious choice such as Buddhism or Taoism is its applicability to the human interaction with nature. All Eastern religions offer a deliberate philosophy of human interaction with nature. Confucian ecology makes the interaction somewhat more explicit in its framework. Some texts, such as Kenneth Kraft's *Dharma Rain*<sup>7</sup>, do with Buddhism what I intend to do with Confucian ecology, namely, to explicate the role of humans in the natural environment without humans being either dominant or subsumed. I plan to compare and contrast certain Confucian ecological philosophies with the main Deep Ecology theorists in order to grasp an environmental philosophy that engages human communities while acknowledging and eliciting the appropriate valuation of the natural world. Human embeddedness is made explicit in the dynamic, interrelated function of life energy, *ch'i*. According to recent studies of this life-energy, one's body is intimately connected to the natural environment, and relies upon it for possible transcendence. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology supports these reoriented philosophies not by prescription, but by shifting the ontological and perceptual grounds of humanity.

### ► Introduction to Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology ◀

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<sup>7</sup> *Dharma rain : sources of Buddhist environmentalism* edited by Stephanie Kaza and Kenneth Kraft (Boston : Shambhala, 2000).

Maurice Merleau-Ponty's later phenomenology, especially in *The Visible and the Invisible*, attempts to establish a human ontology that accounts for the embeddedness of humanity in the world. "The invisible" (thoughts, reflection, 'that which transcends') is present in every part of the visible-invisible world. The nature of our perception is one that grants subjectivity to everything in this world - the world that is our "Flesh." To conceive of the human experience without seriously accounting for the entire natural environment would be incomplete according to this perspective, as our existence is filtered through our body and limited by the world. Giving primacy to perception as a method of discovering that-which-transcends challenges the worldview based on disembodied transcendence and the prospect of an objective, abstract understanding of the world. I will use David Abram's reading of Merleau-Ponty to flesh out its ecological content. This reading places the body in the forefront of human experience: "The living body is...the very possibility of contact, not just with others but with oneself – the very possibility of reflection, of thought, of knowledge."<sup>8</sup> Therefore, the body's function in philosophy must be integral, along with the influence of the world around us.

### ► Why Nature as Context? ◀

These ecological philosophies necessarily challenge "artificial" splits between mind and body, reason and emotion, self and other, and man and nature. They blame much of the Western tradition, especially Descartes, Plato, and capitalism. For example, Plato's Socrates speaks of the inability to think clearly in the countryside: "I'm a lover of learning, and trees and open country won't teach me anything, whereas men in the town do."<sup>9</sup> The result of this fragmentation from the natural universe is a philosophy that fails to grasp the embedded state of humans in the world, or the value of nature. Ecological philosophies often offer fruitful elucidation of important

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<sup>8</sup> *Spell of the Sensuous* 45.

human qualities, such as quality of life, creativity, sensual experience (other than as distraction), play, and the natural world. A misused subject/object dualism is a strong brace for the domination of human beings, nature and ourselves, as objectified beings lack the value that is granted to sentient subjects.

Philosophy is used to explain either human nature or the human condition, whether separated or socially. The problem I hope to elucidate is the lack of natural context in explaining the human experience. Eliciting some possible roles of the body and environment in philosophy can create some starting points for an ecological philosophy. Giving primacy to nature in human understanding would challenge much of the Western philosophical canon, and probably necessitates the cultivation of faculties which are less rationalizable, repeatable and “objective” than those we currently use. A “sensuous rationality” would be such a faculty. Science and technology would have to reduce their reductionistic tendencies. The task is daunting, and I believe that environmental destruction (with everything from ecological to philosophical implications) is deeply ingrained in our culture. Deep Ecology offers a young starting point. Confucian ecology offers an “ethical anthropocentrism” that distinguishes humans from the environment while fostering a co-operative relationship. Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology convincingly argues for a philosophy that accounts for human embeddedness in the natural environment. I hope to draw some philosophically fruitful connections between man and nature from these movements, and clarify the role of embeddedness and embodiment on the path to a philosophy which constructively accommodates the natural world and physical body.

## **Ecocentrism and Ethical Anthropocentrism**

### **► Themes of Deep Ecology ◀**

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<sup>9</sup> Plato *Phaedrus*, trans. R. Hackforth, in *Plato, The Collected Dialogues*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1982), 230d.

The basic treatment of nature in both Eastern and Western traditions are being challenged by the deep ecology philosophy. Man/nature dichotomies, relationships of domination, and hierarchical rankings are all rejected in favor of a less clear alternative, an “ecological consciousness.” Many philosophers of ecology are utopian or romantic. Such idealism is impractical and too detached from practice. The starting point for Devall’s exposition of deep ecology themes is Aldo Leopold’s prescription, that one must “think like a mountain”: “Deep Ecology begins with Unity rather than dualism which has been the dominant theme of Western philosophy.<sup>10</sup>” “Thinking like a mountain” entails a fundamentally non-anthropocentric perspective, viewing changes over many years, and considering oneself as part of a larger, unified vision. Deep ecology is attempting to posit a philosophy that unifies man with nature in some sense. This point seems to be a negative one that rejects what it considers destructive dualism. A positive ecological philosophy has never been as historically urgent. Facing the state of the environment today, many philosophies lack the ability to adequately comprehend the natural world and, subsequently, to justify environmental conservation. Deep ecology is a hopeful prospect in establishing a means to understanding the human place in nature.

Two major characterizations of the movement are crucial to understanding the scope of the philosophy behind it: “Deep Ecology is liberating ecological consciousness,” and “The goal is to have action and consciousness as one.” Like the green Marxists,<sup>11</sup> the goal of a sound philosophy of nature is to liberate one’s consciousness by tapping into the life-giving qualities of nature. Therefore, the dichotomy of nature vs. human is avoided. A unified action/consciousness is deep ecology’s attempt at grounding its philosophy in the spontaneity and unity of nature’s

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<sup>10</sup> Devall, Bill. *The Deep Ecology Movement*, *Natural Resources Journal* 20 (April 1980): 307.

<sup>11</sup> Georg Lukács, T.W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, and Jürgen Habermas.

influence. The eco-centric/anthropocentric choice is complex, since human liberation is intimately tied to natural conservation and cultivation.

George Sessions proposes that the predominant Western anthropocentric worldview be replaced with an eco-centric one. Two examples of the dominant Western environmental view which he uses are especially useful in elaborating the opposite of eco-centrism: “the desanctification of Nature” and “the concept of private property giving rise to economic systems designed to treat the earth exclusively as a human resource and as a commodity.<sup>12</sup>” The significance of this means of thinking is that it allows the prospect of an enchanted nature as opposed to the instrumental reason of contemporary technology and science. The latter deals with objectifying, reifying and commodifying the world outside of humans. A vital, and controversial, point, which counters the dualistic Cartesian conception of nature, is that nature might not only be an object, but rather a subject in itself. To treat nature as an object with a value only in relation to humans is to detract from its inherent quality and its right to exist for its own sake. That an economic system can create or strengthen this philosophical ideal of objectification of nature is clear. Just as the Marxists see environmental degradation from the standpoint of alienated labor and human disempowerment, deep ecology often sees it as resulting in human incompleteness and disembeddedness. Perspective is a key difference between these two: Marxists use man and nature as standards; deep ecologists use nature itself, with humans only benefiting from it, as their standard. In both cases, environmental destruction both arises from *and results in* an incomplete human experience. George Santayana concurs, criticizing the philosophical tradition that condemns nature:

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<sup>12</sup> Sessions, George. Ecocentrism and the Anthropocentric Detour *ReVISION* 13, no. 3 (Winter 1991): 109-15.

a Californian whom I had recently the pleasure of meeting observed that, if the philosophers had lived among your mountains their system would have been different...from what those systems are which the European genteel tradition has handed down since Socrates; for these systems are egotistical; directly or indirectly they are anthropocentric, and inspired by the conceited notion that man, or human reason, is the center and pivot of the universe. That is what the mountains and the woods should make you at last ashamed to assert.<sup>13</sup>

Santayana's point goes back to Socrates' inability to think in the countryside. Just because living in a city is possible does not mean that philosophical statements regarding humanity can exclude the role of nature. Santayana calls for human humility in the face of the inherent value of nature. Without it, humans would perish and lack a significant source of aesthetic pleasure<sup>14</sup>. The philosophical tradition Santayana speaks of has been created without natural context, resulting in a disembodied, denaturalized notion of humanity. Philosophers would like to understand the state of humans in our world - what is real, what is right. Philosophically, a misuse or overuse of disembodied and abstract thinking has resulted in the detachment of man from the natural world, and a failure to elicit nature's potential emancipatory qualities.

Perhaps this has not been a serious issue for philosophy because environmental devastation has not been a pressing problem in the past. The serious risk to the future of humanity posed by pollution, global warming and overpopulation calls into question any exploitative, objectifying relationship to nature. Populations have always been significantly smaller, and the ability and desire to exploit resources has never been more developed. The vital connection between nature and human welfare is finally being realized, even if only from the standpoint of human disease and disorder. The prospect of a harmonious, non-exploitative

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<sup>13</sup> George Santayana, "The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy," in *Winds of Doctrine* (New York: Scribner's, 1926).

relationship with nature is not conceivable with the currently predominant tools of reductionist, fragmentary science, powerful technology for its own sake, and a minimal level of representative discourse in government. A philosophy of ecology is at best in its infancy (at least as an explicitly philosophical enterprise), and is vital to helping humanity sustain itself and understand its context. The fact of embodiment, and the argument for embeddedness in nature, are both opportunities to ground a philosophy in a more co-operative relationship to nature.

### ► Deep Ecology and Confucianism ◀

Confucianism offers many philosophical avenues through which a better understanding and application of Deep Ecology might develop. In Confucian ecology, the prospect of inherent life and value in nature is primary. Similarly, the Confucian religious tradition focuses on practical experience, emphasising the body and sensuous world as vital components of being human. Deep Ecology is distinct from Confucianism in many ways; it grew in the contemporary West, does not necessitate a spiritual cosmology, and is a more specific philosophy than an entire religion. Yet, the similarities are important for this exploration. They share a view of nature that is inclusive, harmonious and reciprocal, giving nature value in its own right.

A starting point for this comparison is the Confucian cosmology, which sees the world and heavens as composed of *li* (principle force) and *ch'i* (material force). There is an embodied transcendence in the interaction of the three realms: Heaven, Earth and Humans. Both cosmology and interaction involve nature as a vital component of human and spiritual existence. Of the forces, it is important to note that there is a constant interconnection and interaction between these universal constituents. Material force can be cultivated in one's body into spiritual

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<sup>14</sup> Herbert Marcuse actually grounds liberation in the aesthetic qualities of nature. "Ecology and the Critique of Modern Society," *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism* 3, 11 (NY: Sept. 1992), p. 29-38.

energy (*shin ch'i*)<sup>15</sup>. There is a microcosm/macrocosm exchange, which, while distinguishing between internal and external environment, also blurs that distinction. Therefore, one can be profoundly spiritually engaged by a natural environment that has a particular high-quality energy.<sup>16</sup> For instance, a Zen garden is supposed to embody the flows of energy and power of nature in this cosmology. Many temples are built in such a position as to maximize the natural flow of energy into the temple, which is then cultivated into personal spiritual energy. The quality of material forces is determined by the undisturbed or properly used state of the natural environment. The state of the natural environment is therefore closely related to the possibility of personal cultivation and spiritual growth. Human embodiment and embeddedness is therefore necessarily ecological. Enlightenment itself becomes intimately related to a co-operative relationship with nature.

In this cosmology, man is seen as a distinct, but completely embedded, part of nature.

Man is integral, and part of the flow of the universe:

Nature...has an inherent unity, namely, it has a primary ontological source (T'ai chi). It has patterned processes of transformation (yin/yang) and it is interrelated in the interaction of the five elements and the 10,000 things. It is dynamic through the movements of material forces (*ch'i*).<sup>17</sup>

Man's role in this cosmology is not to become part of nature by becoming animalistic, but rather by following and accommodating the natural flow of the universe, which is the ontological source, while maintaining his unique qualities. Further, balance is seen as the ideal relationship between man and nature. Nature is primary, since it is the ontological basis. To attribute

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<sup>15</sup> Yuasa, Yasuo. The Body, Self-Cultivation and Ki Energy. (SUNY: Albany, 1993).

<sup>16</sup> Later Confucian thinkers such as Miura Baien (1676-1750) adopted the logical next step, a "monism of *ch'i*".

<sup>17</sup> Tucker, Mary Evelyn. Confucianism and Deep Ecology in Deep Ecology and World Religions ed. Barnhill, D. and Gottlieb, R. (SUNY: Albany, 2001). p. 130.

ontological and spiritual primacy to nature counters scientific reductionism, and places human nature completely within the realm of nature.

Reorienting nature to be integral to man's existence (and, in the case of Confucianism, enlightenment) also redefines the notion of transcendence. What is posited in the traditional understanding of Descartes is that man and mind must transcend nature. A rigid split is presupposed, which results in a hierarchical attitude of domination and of natural inferiority. Enlightenment-as-transcendence is seen as a hierarchical relationship, in which the mind's distance from the body and natural world is desirable. A different sort of hierarchy is preferred in the Confucian cosmology. Distinctions are vital, but they do not entail relationships of superiority or dominance. They are based upon a balance between humans, nature and God. Since the heavens, earth and humans are intimately reliant upon one another, enlightened transcendence does not involve leaving the natural world, but rather involves appropriate immersion in it. The fallacy is the same in theology: to look for enlightenment outside of yourself is to avoid it altogether. Nature and body should be seen as unavoidable and potentially co-operative - not dismissed as distractions or "coffins." This coordinates with the Confucian ideal of being harmoniously related to nature: "Human realization implies understanding the continuities of nature in its daily rhythms and seasonal cycles.<sup>18</sup>" Similarly, "Nature functions in this world view as great parents to humans, providing sustenance, nurturing, intelligibility, and guidance. In return, nature requires respect and care from humans.<sup>19</sup>" This worldview suggests that social and personal directions are strongly guided by nature, and that a divorcing from nature results in a disconnection with the universe and with the right moral direction. "Human realization" is located **within** nature, and one can be directed towards it via the study, partial

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* 132.

emulation, and acceptance of nature, rather than its domination. Merleau-Ponty's notion of the invisible, transcendent world within the visible, immanent world works remarkably well with this notion.

Mary Evelyn Tucker states that, in Confucian ecology, nature “is both the container and the context for human action.<sup>20</sup>” Embeddedness in nature is a fact of human experience that can be seen as a liberatory device rather than a limiting one. In the sense of human's animality, nature can be seen as a limitation (e.g. scarcity and toil) that has been largely overcome in the industrialized world through technological advancement. But humans as more-than-animals, capable of imagination and reason, could arguably benefit from the use of nature as a liberatory tool, especially in its aesthetic capacity<sup>21</sup>. The concept of nature as a container for human action gives sovereignty and freedom to humans, while establishing an order, limitation and direction. According to this model, humans should find connections with the natural world, and act in accordance with it in order to be free. “Nature as a container and context” is identical in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, at least in terms of perception. According to both, the world is both the limitation of human action and contains the transcendent/invisible. Instead of finding enlightenment by leaving the natural, embodied world, in these philosophies enlightenment is immanent in the natural world.

Confucian ecological philosophy holds many significant, subtle similarities with deep ecology. They both reject the “man-in-environment” idea in favor of “the relational, total-field

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid* 135.

<sup>21</sup> See my work “Liberation and The Great Refusal: Marcuse's Concept of Nature”, a truly revolutionary piece available upon request, for an exploration of the Critical Theory philosophy that Nature holds emancipatory qualities for humanity.

image.<sup>22</sup>” This includes realizing that one entity cannot be defined to the exclusion of another. (Merleau-Ponty’s interrelated philosophy supports this notion.) Naess, the founder of the Deep Ecology movement, furthers this point: “The attempt to ignore our dependence and to establish a master-slave role has contributed to the alienation of man from himself.<sup>23</sup>” This overlap is fundamental to understanding the philosophical significance of deep ecology, Merleau-Ponty and Confucian ecological philosophy. If humans are embodied and an integral part of nature, then a disharmonious split from this context will result in humans not realizing their own potential or understanding themselves. Karl Marx, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer<sup>24</sup> and Herbert Marcuse all made this point in the context of political and sociological philosophy as early as 1844<sup>25</sup>. Marxist ecological theory sees inner and outer nature as necessarily relating to one another, with the domination of internal nature (alienation) manifesting itself as ecological destruction, and ecological destruction limiting the ability of man’s inner nature to liberate itself. Confucian ecology makes the same point regarding inner and outer nature, as they are determined by essentially the same energy, *ch’i*. Merleau-Ponty sees the world as necessary to conceptualization and thought formation. Deep Ecology has many peers in this school of thought, as they share the same characterization of nature as necessary and liberating.

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<sup>22</sup> Naess, Arne. *The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movements Inquiry* (Oslo), 16 (1973). Reprinted in *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century* ed. George Sessions, Shambala: NY, 1995. p. 151.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid* 152.

<sup>24</sup> “The subjective spirit which cancels the animation of nature can master a despiritualized nature only by imitating its rigidity and despiritualizing itself in turn.” Adorno, T. W. and Horkheimer, Max. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (NY: Continuum, 1997). Tr. John Cummings. p. 57. Adorno and Horkheimer argue that Western conceptual thought is itself the problem, reducing things into concepts, abstractions and generalizations without remainder, denying individuality, uniqueness and particularity. An alternative lies in the aesthetic realm (in this case, where non-instrumental rationality is predominant) and the doctrine of mimesis. For further interpretation of different rationalities in a Marxist context, see C. Fred Alford *Science and the Revenge of Nature* (USF: Tampa, 1985), p. 157+.

<sup>25</sup> Marx *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* ; Adorno and Horkheimer *Dialectic of Enlightenment* ; Marcuse *Counterrevolution and Revolt* , *Eros and Civilization* .

### ▶ Ch'eng Hao and Ch'eng I ◀

Some specific Confucian thinkers represent the environmental ethic resulting from interconnectedness particularly well. Ch'eng Hao (1032-1085) writes: "The human person forms one body with all things comprehensively.<sup>26</sup>" Nature must be taken up as an integral part of a human's being. These are the ethics of filiality and responsibility extended to the natural world. The clear delineation that the human body has between itself and the outside world is being challenged, as are the borders between the personal and communitarian. Ch'eng I (1033-1107) writes: "The humane person regards Heaven and earth and all things as one body.<sup>27</sup>" Ch'eng I explicitly makes the connection between the natural order and morality by referring to the "humane person." Exploitation, domination and violation of the natural environment are disallowed as a detriment to the individual and the community, in addition to being violations of the natural order of the universe. Considering that without nature, humans would not be able to sustain themselves, and never will, this ethic has a very sound utilitarian aspect. Further, an exploitative approach to nature in turn destroys human health. But functionality is not what drives this ethic, or in the other Confucian ethics so far discussed. The potential for enlightenment is the impetus. Nature has intrinsic ontological value, which humans have been slow to acknowledge or realize, and which should not be violated.

An extension and further explication of this philosophy which coordinates well with deep ecology comes from Chang Tsai (1020-1073):

Heaven is my father and earth is my mother, and even such a small creature as I finds an intimate place in their midst.

Therefore, that which extends throughout the universe I regard as my body and that which directs the universe I consider my nature.

All people are my brothers and sisters, and all things are my

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<sup>26</sup> *Sources of Chinese Religion*, comp. Wm. Theodor de Bary, Wing-tsit Chan, and Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), 559.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid* 530.

companions.<sup>28</sup>

There is no essential gap between nature, heaven, and people. Significance is found at all levels (“even such a small creature...”) and is universal. While building an environment ethic, this idea also establishes a human rights ethic. Understanding of interconnection between all material or physically manifest things (“body”) in the world necessarily evokes minimal, if any, domination or exploitation. This is strikingly similar to the “relational, total-field image” of Arne Naess’ deep ecology writings. While sharing this idea, deep ecology is less anthropocentric than Confucianism in this sense. These few Confucian ideas suggest a strongly interconnected, harmonious “path” in the world (to what degree choice exists is debatable), while acknowledging that humans have a distinct role (society building, arts, etc.), and therefore granting humans further responsibilities. On the contrary, deep ecology is eco-centric, modelling its goals on natural rhythms and seeing humans as almost completely subsumed by the natural processes. In its view of humanity’s place in the world, Deep Ecology accounts for constructive human differentiation less than these Confucian ecological philosophies do.

The pertinence of a philosophical reassessment of nature as part of the solution to the ecological crisis is disputable. It is vital to note that Deep Ecology was developed in a world of unprecedented environmental devastation. China around 1000 CE did not have such problems, nor could anyone conceive of environmental devastation at such a large scale.

### ► **The Place of Humans in Deep Ecology and Confucian Ecology** ◀

A central tension between deep ecology and the Confucian ecology thus far explicated is the role and place of humans within the natural world. The role of nature is clear in both, but exactly how

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid* 524.

man fits into the environment varies quite a bit. The main reason I consider deep ecology to be reactionary to an existing situation is that it responds to the destruction of animal species by advocating a biocentric, or eco-centric, perspective of the world. Humans are barely distinguished from non-human animals. Therefore, deep ecology is quick to advocate equal worth to all species. This is quite distinct from attributing intrinsic value to all living beings, as Confucian ecology does. Even the possibility of man as steward or land user is discouraged, if not forbidden, in deep ecology<sup>29</sup>. Deep ecology's stance is therefore problematic if humans want to keep using nature for pleasure, personal development, and even sustenance. While deep ecology acknowledges the need for sustenance from nature, it *theoretically* opposes such use. The land ethic and Confucian ecological philosophy grant humans a more active and distinct role in nature.

Confucian ecology offers a co-operative role for humans in nature. Philip Ivanhoe calls this "ethical anthropocentrism," which he ascribes to Hsün Tzu. This ethical anthropocentrism entails that:

human beings have intellectual capacities that enable them to form communities and recognize social roles, norms, and obligations in unique and powerful ways, ways that set them both apart from and *above* other creatures...this makes them "the most noble creatures in the world."<sup>30</sup> This is also what enables them to subjugate and make use of other creatures, such as oxen and horses, which are physically superior to – stronger and faster than – human beings.<sup>31</sup>

While this goes further than deep ecology in explaining the exact role of humans in the natural world, it has some difficulties. Firstly, man's role is well described here, including intellectual

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<sup>29</sup> Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac*, on the other hand, accommodates and encourages such an active role of humans in the natural order.

<sup>30</sup> Watson, Burton (tr.) *Hsün Tzu: Basic Writings*, (NY: Columbia, 1963) 45.

capacity, social patterns and potential. Humans exist in a role and capacity that is very distinct from other animals, which also puts them in a position of responsibility, creativity and potential. Hsün Tzu suggests that the ability to perform an action (in this case, subjugation of animals) is a right or an obligation, instead of simply describing human abilities. How humans should go about choosing which abilities to use is a very important issue considering the present state of technological and scientific knowledge and control over nature. But the other side of the same problem is worth pursuing further: the responsibility endowed to humans in the position of power over aspects of nature. Deep ecology would simply argue that humans should not use any of this power, other than to fix the problems already created. There must exist a sustainable balance between using our power destructively, which is often the case today, and barely participating in the process of nature other than as animals. I think that deep ecology does not help answer this question terribly well, being primarily a reactionary philosophy. The Confucian philosophers dealt with here, especially Ekken, offer more in the sense of creating a complete world view which can help mold a co-operative way that man might interact with nature.

Another significant tension between deep ecology and Confucian ecology (in this case, Hsün Tzu) is the inherent value of nature. Deep ecology argues that nature is most valuable by itself, having inherent value. Ivanhoe's Hsün Tzu problematizes the point: value, either aesthetic or ethical, is given to nature by humans in their particular context and philosophy. This argument calls into question that nature has its own value without humans. (I doubt that this opinion is a clear representation of Confucian ecology as a whole, since nature is in many ways profoundly spiritual by itself.) Ivanhoe is making the point that certain values are very anthropocentric, and

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<sup>31</sup> Ivanhoe, Philip J. *Early Confucianism and Environmental Ethics in Confucianism and Deep Ecology in Confucianism and Ecology* ed .Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Berthrong, Harvard: Cambridge, 1998. p. 59-76.

therefore can't exist unless ascribed by a human world<sup>32</sup>. It is possible that nature is unfairly devalued by this argument. A strong argument by deep ecologists is that humans simply do not know the values and functions of nature well enough to be deciding its fate, so it is wiser to ascribe to nature ultimate worth. Ivanhoe's stance for protecting the environment in its own right is vague.

► **Chang Tsai, Lo Ch'in-shun, Kaibara Ekken and the Monism of *Ch'i*** ◀

The philosophy of *ch'i* in Confucian thought is integral to an understanding of ecology. It offers a cosmology in which matter and spirit are intimately interconnected and nondualistic. Mary Evelyn Tucker refers to the significance of this cosmology as “provid[ing] the cosmological basis for a profoundly this-worldly spirituality which affirms the importance of matter, of the body, of human emotions, of change, and of investigation of the natural world.<sup>33</sup>” She follows this with a thesis that describes the severing of humans from nature: “We have lost a sense of reciprocity with and relatedness to nature, the cosmos, and other species and forms of life in part because we have privileged the spiritual as a transcendent entity and have drained it from the world of matter.<sup>34</sup>” The philosophy of *ch'i* is exactly the type of approach needed to counter this claim, as it places the transcendent within the world of matter, just as Merleau-Ponty's visible-invisible world does. From such models, detachment from nature entails a loss of potential human realization.

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<sup>32</sup> Marcuse makes the same fallacy in ascribing anthropocentric qualities to nature itself.

<sup>33</sup> Tucker, Mary Evelyn. *The Philosophy of Chi as an Ecological Cosmology in Confucianism and Ecology* ed. Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Berthrong, Harvard: Cambridge, 1998. p. 187-207.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid 189.

Chang Tsai's contribution to the philosophy of *ch'i* is his account of change in the universe without reverting to the Taoist and Buddhist concepts of nothingness or void. He posits that *ch'i*, constantly changing and transforming, is the material and spiritual basis for the world. He sees the phenomenal world as a manifestation *ch'i*. Instead of a Void, Chang Tsai speaks of *ch'i* as both the Great Vacuity (*t'ai-hsü*) and the Great Harmony (*t'ai-ho*). This allows for both the "nothingness" of substance not yet formed, and the deliberate force and form which it takes on. This theory allows for a "constant unity of being and non-being."<sup>35</sup> The void becomes a source of life, only one form of *ch'i*. The unmanifest is the creativity and possibility of the universe, and the manifest is the harmony and direction of it. The unmanifest and manifest are analogous to Merleau-Ponty's invisible and visible, and interact identically in that they are coexisting and intimately connected. The goal of Chang Tsai's philosophy of *ch'i* is to overcome the dualism of substance (*t'i*) and function (*yung*) that was common in his predecessors. He sees unmanifest and manifest, substance and function, spirit and matter, as constantly intermingling and changing in a reciprocal relationship. The complete saturation of the world by *ch'i* is described by Chang Tsai:

Spirituality or extension is the virtue of Heaven  
Transformation is the way of Heaven  
Its virtue is its substance, its way, its function  
Both become one in the ether (*ch'i*).<sup>36</sup>

*Ch'i* becomes the omnipresent medium through which humans find a moral and ethical path.

Harmony with the universe is considered righteousness, and this harmony includes the understanding that transformation is an integral aspect of experience. Forms of beings are seen in this cosmology as secondary, as they are only temporary. The natural world is therefore

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<sup>35</sup> T'ang Chun-I, "Chang Tsai's Theory of Mind," *Philosophy East and West* 6 (July 1956): 123.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid 126.

understood as constantly changing, material-spiritual energy, which humans are embedded in. Chang Tsai's goal is to harmonize human nature and the Way of Heaven through sincerity and enlightenment. Due to the potentiality of *ch'i*, humans are able to identify with and function harmoniously with nature and each other. The other side of this responsibility is the potential to dramatically destroy the natural world. The theory of *ch'i* enchants matter and considers embodiment and embeddedness integral to human realization, as humans would otherwise be detached from the potentially emancipatory natural order in the world. Merleau-Ponty's point is very similar: that so much of our being is determined by our embodiment and embeddedness that even our concepts and being are derived from our world. Therefore, separation from this fact leads to an incomplete existence and philosophy of living.

Lo Ch'in-shun contributed to the philosophy of *ch'i* by forcefully arguing against Chu Hsi's *li/ch'i* dualism. He contended that placing the principal (*li*) separate from the material resulted in an artificial transcendence that de-spiritualized the material world. By repositioning *ch'i* as both unitary and omnipresent, and *li* as ordering, the unity of the two principles can be attained while maintaining the structure, unity and dynamism of the world. The two concepts are distinct, yet strongly interconnected, hence the difficulty of logically articulating this point. The clearest definition of *li* describes it as an aspect of *ch'i* that cannot exist on its own, yet that has different principles than *ch'i* (namely, order). Lo further describes the distinction: "*Li* must be identified as an aspect of *ch'i*, and yet to identify *ch'i* with *li* would be incorrect. The distinction between the two is very slight, and hence it is extremely difficult to explain. Rather we must perceive it within ourselves and comprehend it in silence.<sup>37</sup>" With this idea, Lo challenges the common dualism of human nature (often used to explain evil). Human nature is unified, and does

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<sup>37</sup> *K'un-chih chi* (Knowledge Painfully Acquired) tr. Irene Bloom (NY: Columbia, 1987) 134. (I was tempted to "comprehend it in silence" for this essay, but a wise man suggested that I defer.)

not have different essences, but rather different manifestations of the same energies. The integration with the rest of being is further explained: “Heaven (or nature) and humans are basically not two. There is no need to speak of combining them.<sup>38</sup>” Particularizations are varied and many, but the reliance of heaven, earth and humans upon one another is clear. That all are created from *ch’i* is a profound monism that connects all three at an intimate level. Another characteristic of human nature that arises from this insight is that sensory and experiential knowledge are given a significant role in human understanding. Again, Merleau-Ponty makes the same point that transcendence can be found in that which is often avoided – the body and world. The need for abstraction or spiritual transcendence is diminished, so the world becomes (re)enchanted.<sup>39</sup> The antagonism between human desires and the principles of nature is similarly called into question with the reassociation of physical and spiritual nature. This challenge to mind-body and spirit-matter dualism could be incredibly useful in understanding today’s many social and environmental problems, as it offers a potentially co-operative relationship between humans and the natural world.

Kaibara Ekken (1630-1714) takes Lo’s monism of *ch’i* further by focusing on humans’ role in the interchange between themselves, heaven and nature. Essential life-inducing capacities, such as creativity, self-cultivation and self-expression, could all be fortified and nurtured through this harmonization with the Way. Ekken hoped to discover a natural direction by exploring nature and deriving moral principles from it. As with Lo, Ekken’s metaphysics is one in which *li* and *ch’i* are one. In Chu Hsi, *li* is seen as the Way above forms (noumenal). And *ch’i* is seen as yin and yang within the realm of forms (phenomenal). Fearing an “artificial” dualism, Ekken

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid 161-2.

<sup>39</sup> David Abram (*The Spell of the Sensuous*) (later discusses) and George Lakoff And Mark Johnson (*Philosophy In The Flesh : The Embodied Mind And Its Challenge To Western Thought*) both explore the topics of sensuous experience and embodiment extensively.

attempted to join the two by positing that the nature of reality is *both* unity and multiplicity. Like Lo, he saw evil as a different formation of *ch'i*, not as a different heavenly nature. In seeing the world as intimately connected, morality is derived from the natural order:

[H]eaven and earth are the heart of living things. Humans receive this heart and it becomes their own. This is humaneness. Nourishing life and [practicing] humaneness are not two different things. Nourishing life belongs to heaven and humaneness belongs to humans.<sup>40</sup>

The nourishing of life, both in social relations and in relation to the natural world, is morality and humaneness according to this picture. Exploitative, objectifying, and dominating relationships to humanity and nature are anathema. What's interesting about this passage, as related to deep ecology, is the implicit role of humans as caretakers and stewards. The prospect of (at least some) nature requiring man to fulfil a heavenly potential is intriguing, and decidedly anthropocentric. The Confucian triad of Heaven-Earth-Human is more explicit about this. It does not include animals as a distinct group, only allowing for them under the realm of Earth. It is important to keep in mind that this triad and these qualities are not hierarchies in the sense of superiority-inferiority relationships, but rather roles and potentialities which should be fulfilled. In an attempt to understand the patterns behind these distinctions, Ekken focused largely on practical learning (*jitsugaku*), like medicine and agriculture. In this exploration based on a cosmology of the monism of *ch'i*, Ekken creates a holistic recognition of humanity. For instance, he thought practicing medicine would be of minimal use unless the understanding that a person is supposed to nourish life and encourage humaneness is integrated into the practice. Described as a "this-worldly spirituality" by Tucker, the philosophy of Ekken and Lo Ch'in-shun is able to comprehensively and completely embrace other people, the natural environment, and a sense of the whole. Working on a unity of matter, spirit and energy allow this cosmology to take place. It

also results in the understanding of nature as inherently quality-laden, not simply a materialistic entity to be treated instrumentally. Understanding nature as life, dynamism, energy, spirit, transformation and potential helps one to see it as a source of life and morality instead of simply as a resource. That humans are a vital part of this cosmology is a significant distinction from deep ecology, which considers humans just another piece of the picture. Both philosophies put man in the position of embeddedness in nature, but Confucianism can be described as more anthropocentric than deep ecology, while not being exploitative, as deep ecology argues any anthropocentric perspective of nature must be.

### **Perception, Nature and Flesh: Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology**

#### **► Abram's reading of Merleau-Ponty as an ecological philosopher ◄**

This third section deals with David Abram's reading of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, primarily his *The Visible and the Invisible*. Abram's interpretation attempts to support "an animistic or participatory account of rationality."<sup>41</sup> By positing a unity to the visible-invisible world, this reading assesses the human situation embedded inside of the phenomenal world. Disclosure of the world must therefore be from within, reciprocally defining, and inter-subjective. The natural world takes on an enchanted and primary role in human existence, lending greater significance to natural patterns and subjectivity than modern scientific and economic worldviews allow. Abram's is a creative reading, and this essay will not critique his reading of Merleau-Ponty, but rather Abram's interpreted philosophy. Along with deep ecology and Confucian ecology, sensuous ecological phenomenology radically resituates humans, giving new ontological significance to the natural environment.

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<sup>40</sup> Jigoshu, *Ekken Zenshu*, 3:182-83.

<sup>41</sup> SS 303 (fn. 2).

Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is presented without concessions to pre-existing philosophies. He writes that his philosophy "must be presented without any compromise with humanism, nor with naturalism, nor finally with theology."<sup>42</sup> If a reinterpreted phenomenology compromises these other ideals, so be it. His philosophy convincingly reorients and deconstructs significant aspects of all three of these ideals.

► **Abram's "Merleau-Ponty and the Voice of the Earth"** ◄

A phenomenology that uses perception as a primary standard necessarily shifts one's view of the natural world. Such a philosophy involves changing the role of nature in humanity from objectified material sustenance to the foundation of conceptualisation and ontology. Humanity becomes immersed in the world and cannot separate its being from it, thereby intimately relating itself to the natural world. Our perception, intellectual processes, creativity and sensuousness are completely dependent upon the sensuous world. If the body is the "conscious subject of experience," it no longer holds a fragmented relationship between body and mind. The body becomes the locus of consciousness, not a vessel through which a transcendental mind acts on the world.

Instead of a transcendental consciousness that separates itself from the body, this transcendence is embodied:

Transcendence, no longer a property of the abstract intellect, becomes... a capacity of the physiological body itself – its power of responding to other bodies, of touching, hearing, and seeing things, resonating with things. Perception *is* this ongoing transcendence, the ecstatic nature of the living body.<sup>43</sup>

Ordinary human experience is being "transcended" in order to discover an invisible ordering to the universe. Yet, this invisible realm is less detached than under a disembodied transcendence.

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<sup>42</sup> VI 274.

<sup>43</sup> Abram "Merleau-Ponty and the Voice of the Earth" 84.

Its integrity in ordering the world remains, but its location and character is not “above” and abstract (i.e. Forms), but immanent and subject to the subjectivity of the body and perception. This position necessarily limits human understanding of “the invisible” as eternally far off, and challenges common claims of detached objectivity. The focus of subjectivity is therefore shifted to the “body-subject” or “lived body” (later, “the flesh”), not a disembodied mind with objective perception. Further, awareness and understanding becomes subject to the limitations of the body and the senses. Creativity, thought patterns, and comprehension rest upon this limitation. The notion of transcendence *above* could be derived from the dimension of depth, for instance<sup>44</sup>. Experiences are differently conceived under this premise: “the experience of depth is not *created* in the brain any more than it is *posited* in the mind.<sup>45</sup>” Humans obviously have the faculties of imagination and creativity that are relatively removed from the natural world (e.g. abstract geometries), but according to Merleau-Ponty, more of our ideas are formed by perception than would be under a disembodied model. But if this pattern forms our perception, how does correct perception come into being? What are the standards for a perception that accounts for human immersion in the world?

Abram describes this new understanding of perception as a paradigm shift: “examining the contours of this world not as an immaterial mind but as a sentient body.<sup>46</sup>” The human inclusion and immersion in the natural environment as a result of this perspective intimately ties human ontology to the material world. Objectification is easily justified when the standpoint of a philosophy is an immaterial mind removed from the world. Similarities between humans and the world are diminished, and differences increased, especially under reductionistic sciences. But

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<sup>44</sup> Merleau-Ponty writes: “The structure of the visible field, with its near-bys, its far-offs, its horizon, is indispensable for there to be transcendence.” *The Visible and the Invisible* 231.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid 85.

<sup>46</sup> Abram “Merleau-Ponty and the Voice of the Earth” 85.

there must also be qualitative changes, not simply similarities and differences. Immersion, on the other hand, inevitably involves one in the experience of the world:

A renewed attentiveness to bodily experience...enables us to recognize and affirm our inevitable involvement in that which we observe, our corporeal immersion in the depths of a breathing Body much larger than our own.<sup>47</sup>

This is the fundamental tenet of an eco-centric philosophy such as deep ecology - the reassessment of human context in the world. A phenomenology that gives perception primacy is a humbling one to the current, dominating role of humans in the natural environment. It also challenges the notion of scientific and philosophic detachment and objectivity, which is no longer possible if sensible objects are also both subjects and themselves sensing. As with deep ecology, this particular step does not fully establish the human role in nature, but bolsters the interrelatedness of humans and nature.

Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty argues that thought rests fully upon this perceptual and worldly basis: "it is by borrowing from the world structure that the universe of truth and of thought is constructed for us."<sup>48</sup> This contrasts with Platonic Forms, which are eternally static, predetermined, otherworldly and disembodied. On the other hand, the horizon and the dimension of depth inform the thoughts and thought patterns that Merleau-Ponty speaks of. Platonic Forms might fit into this picture, but in an immanent sense, not as disembodied images. Merleau-Ponty is arguing that our perception, while ultimately grounded in this body and environment, has strayed in various ways. Abstraction too far removed from perception and removal from the natural environment hinder the maturation of a complete embodied perception. Instead of offering a solution, this way of perceiving defines the tension between the imaginative/abstract realm and bodily/perceptual.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid 85.

According to Abram, Merleau-Ponty's earth "names a more diverse phenomenon, at once both visible and invisible, incorporating both the deep ground that supports our bodies and the fluid atmosphere in which we breathe."<sup>49</sup> Continuing along the progression of Husserl and Heidegger<sup>50</sup>, to establish the earth as the grounding for our reflection, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology encompasses the earth to include the "invisible", and the entire sensuous environment. Transcendence, "mind" and "soul" therefore are all included in the visible-invisible world. The "mind" or the "soul" has a carnal genesis<sup>51</sup>. Categorical oppositions between mind and body, transcendence and immanence, soul and body, and pure and impure are melded into the one reality of the sensuous human body. The differentiation between the categories of visible and invisible is difficult to ascertain in Merleau-Ponty's work, though. Transcendence becomes local and corporeal, but somehow maintains its distinct qualities. Classical oppositions are also changed:

If the soul is not contrary to the body, then human beings are no longer suspended between a dense inert Earth and a spiritual sky, no more than they are suspended between Being and Nothingness.<sup>52</sup>

Distinctions, as that between the soul and body, are blurred if transcendence occurs at an immediate level. The human place in the world can also be seen as complete immersion: placement *within* the spheres of the Earth and atmospheres, envelopment by a continuous sky and Earth. Merleau-Ponty speaks of both a fundamental non-opposition<sup>53</sup> and of "the sole

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<sup>48</sup> VI 13.

<sup>49</sup> "Merleau-Ponty and the Voice of the Earth" 87.

<sup>50</sup> Edmund Husserl, "Foundational of the Phenomenological Origin of the Spatiality of Nature," in *Philosophical Essays in Memory of Edmund Husserl*, ed. M. Farber (Boston: Harvard, 1940) and Martin Heidegger, "Building, Dwelling, Thinking," in *Basic Writings*, ed. D. F. Krell (NY: Harper and Row, 1977).

<sup>51</sup> "Merleau-Ponty and the Voice of the Earth" 87.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid* 88.

<sup>53</sup> VI 264.

sensible world, open to participation by all, which is given to each.<sup>54</sup>” A unified view of the visible and invisible worlds threatens existing categorizations and major oppositions, such as those mentioned above. But distinction itself does not seem to be challenged, simply distinction as “artificial” separation. Nonetheless, how this reoriented visible and invisible is defined is open-ended. The distinction within a unified system is analogous to the way that *ch’i* has various manifestations. To see the sky and earth as unified in the invisible does not diminish the underlying being of the sky or earth, but proposes that the two are unified by the same organizing principle, and that their separation is more conceived than actual. Magic tricks might help elucidate this. Optical illusions prove to us that humans can be perceptually deceived, either by seeing an object appear or disappear, or by “filling in the blanks” and attempting to explain the illusion with imagination (e.g. thinking that one sees a wire or mechanism in a coin trick). Our perceptions and conceptions fill in the blanks if the image in front of us does not make sense according to the way that we conceive the world. Our abstract conceptions of the worlds, like the treatment of the sky as heavenly and divine and the earth as limiting and material, can be imposed onto our everyday perception. What is seen is given significant objectivity in our minds, whereas the degree to which it is influenced by our mind, and not in accordance with the subjectivity of the perceived, is great. Perception, if “misused”, is deceptive, yet is still a vital instrument for conceptualization.

In Merleau-Ponty’s model, thinking and conceiving (“transcending”) are not disembodied, but informed by our sensuousness and our interaction with the natural environment. Nature is therefore not seen as an inhibition or distraction. At the same time, it is a limit to the application of our imagination and abstraction. Nature becomes the grounding for the workings of our thought and imagination. Concepts that exist outside of material manifestation

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<sup>54</sup> VI 233.

are influenced by our physical world. Transcendence might very well be grounded in the phenomenon of depth. The fact that we cannot escape our embodiment and perception attests to the subjectivity of the human experience, and Merleau-Ponty suggests that we embrace this fact and appreciate the degree to which our existence is dependent upon our visible-invisible universe. This is why he speaks of his project as “an ontology from within.”<sup>55</sup>

To summarize this aspect of Merleau-Ponty’s thought, and to more substantively bring this new ontological basis into an ecological project, there are two bases from which to continue: 1) the unity of the visible-invisible world which can serve as a new human ontology, and 2) the idea that human and non-human animals are immersed within this Being, and therefore must disclose it from *within* it<sup>56</sup>. The latter is made clear by the reciprocal nature of perception:

[H]e who sees cannot possess the visible unless he is possessed by it, unless he *is of it*, unless...he is one of the visibles, capable, by a singular reversal, of seeing them – he who is one of them.<sup>57</sup>

An objective, disembodied perspective cannot account for the subject itself being perceptual. To see, one needs a physical organ, the eye. Therefore a new means of accessing the invisible, transcendent must be developed. For Merleau-Ponty, this is best characterized as “the Flesh” (of ourselves, and the earth). Abram describes the concept as one that discloses the mystery of the non-distinction between the lived and objective bodies, in hopes of finding a “truly primordial perception.”<sup>58</sup> This might entail a relocation of transcendence not just from intellect to body, but from humans to all of nature. Our transcendence is tightly bound to Nature: “Do a psychoanalysis of Nature: it is the flesh, the mother.”<sup>59</sup> Merleau-Ponty is making the step from

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<sup>55</sup> VI 237.

<sup>56</sup> Abram 88-9.

<sup>57</sup> VI 134-5.

<sup>58</sup> Abram 89.

<sup>59</sup> VI 267.

placing humans phenomenologically in the natural context to grounding ontology in perception. Further, he seems to be moving towards the possibility of transcendence as a shared experience. It is uncertain what would distinguish humans from animals if this were the case. Visible and invisible are interconnected in such a way that both must be fully understood in order to comprehend either: “the visible is pregnant with the invisible,...to comprehend fully the visible relations one must go into the relation of the visible with the invisible.<sup>60</sup>” Thought and reflection is ultimately derived from the invisible patterns of the perceptual world. But a tensions still exists, as this phenomenology does not account for fallibility. If Abram’s argument is that humans have lost a grounding in perception based in the natural world, then how a false perception arises must be given an account within this phenomenology. Can thought be severed from the world if it is based in it? Again, Merleau-Ponty asserts the dependence of thought on the visible: “[all invisibles] are necessarily enveloped in the Visible and are but modalities of the same transcendence.<sup>61</sup>” The non-opposition of transcendence and immanence, visible and invisible, and thought and perception are established by this notion. At the same time, this fusion confuses the delineation between these concepts. An understanding of the transcendent must then be based on both the invisible and visible. Humans must recognize this as part of their perception: “The visible can thus fill me and occupy me because I who see it do not see it from the depths of nothingness, but from the midst of itself; I the seer am also visible.<sup>62</sup>” Again, the distinction between man and nature is diminished, leaving one to wonder what actually distinguishes one from the other. There are both ecological benefits and philosophical problems arising from this placing of perception completely within the natural world.

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<sup>60</sup> VI 216.

<sup>61</sup> VI 257.

<sup>62</sup> VI 113.

If one's conceptions, perception and being are rooted in the natural world, then the domination of it must have deep physiological and psychological implications. To destroy wilderness is in some sense to destroy one's own flesh and grounding, and to deny the value of the foundation of our thought. But, if nature is the grounding of thought, what faculty allows natural domination and destruction? This phenomenology challenges some fundamental tenets of Western thinking: "Precisely what has to be done is to show that philosophy can no longer think according to this cleavage: God, man, creatures."<sup>63</sup> Confucian philosophy does not use this cleavage ontologically, but rather descriptively, and seemingly in accordance with principles of a harmonious relationship with the environment, not abstract cleavages. By accounting for the fluidity and dynamism of life energy, the three concepts have distinctions without being severed from one another. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology appropriately draws out the shortcoming of this God-man-creatures relationship, and attempts to place all three in one world. This new phenomenology would allow for an enchantment of the natural world, positioning humans as an integral and reliant component:

It is the body which points out, and which speaks... This disclosure of an immanent or incipient significance in the living body extends, as we shall see, to the whole sensible world, and our gaze, prompted by the experience of our own body, will discover in all other "objects" the miracle of expression.<sup>64</sup>

Our notion of subjectivity can extend to the rest of the world. If Merleau-Ponty's *Flesh* is the body of both animals and humans, and if the invisible binds us all, then creating distinctions outside of this natural pattern becomes destructive. Humans are the object of other subjects also. This understanding will allow humans to see our actions as part of the larger framework of the

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<sup>63</sup> VI 274.

<sup>64</sup> *Phenomenology of Perception* 197.

visible-invisible world, not as their own. Therefore, language and expression are something expressing itself through us, with our alterations, not something that we wholly create:

That the things have us, and that it is not we who have the things... That it is being that speaks within us and not we who speak of being.<sup>65</sup>

Much of human thought comes through us from the world instead of from a disembodied realm or our own isolated creation: “Logos...as what is realized in man, but nowise as his *property*.”<sup>66</sup>

The ordering to the universe is one that comes from this humble understanding of the visible-invisible and not from something like the Platonic Forms. There is a perceptual logic that structures the universe, but we must look for it *in* this embodied world:

The sensible *world* is this perceptual logic...and this logic is neither produced by our psychophysical constitution, nor produced by our categorical equipment but lifted from a *world* whose inner framework our categories, our constitution, our “subjectivity” render explicit.<sup>67</sup>

This Logos is neither an abstract, disembodied framework (as the Forms are), nor one hopelessly determined by the human condition. It is a logic elicited from the world around us, which we have access to due to our immersion and embodiment. But this perspective must include the fact of our immersion in this environment, as a fish in the sea. A privileged, disembodied standpoint is not accessible to us, if to anyone. Merleau-Ponty argues that we should elicit this framework, but be aware that this framework is not the traditional one.

Merleau-Ponty sees that pre-reflective perception as a reciprocal action between humans and the world. Such perception is grounded in the invisible, and gives grounding to language<sup>68</sup>. This framework is embodied, prevalent in the entire world, and is the invisible that orders and connects our experience to the natural world and to others.

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<sup>65</sup> VI 194.

<sup>66</sup> VI 274.

<sup>67</sup> VI 247-8.

### ▶ The Problem of Reflection in a Sensuous Rationality ◀

A significant tension develops from integrating sensuousness with rationality. Sensuousness and emotion do not seem to have the quality of self-reflection, as intellect does. Sensuous rationality is therefore not subject to this corrective mechanism, and seems to be less verifiable. Merleau-Ponty's visible-invisible reorientation allows for this disparity by differentiating the visible and invisible (thought/transcendence), yet positing their simultaneous, same-world presence. Humans can and do reflect, in order to analyze, imagine and perceive from a removed perspective, although they are sensuously embodied. The degree to which this reflection is accurate is still questionable, though, as emotions cannot reflect, whereas intellect can. According to this model, the disembodiment and abstraction of some Western rationality can be seen as a misuse of reflection, either an overuse of the faculty, or of abstraction. Reflection is vital to intellectual and psychological development and verification, but reflection has in many schools become a decontextualized tool instead of one that includes the fact that humans can never perceive from a wholly disembodied perspective. That humans perceive from within (not above) the sensuous world is an integral aspect of what would be considered proper reflection in Merleau-Ponty's model. Without it, humans become severed from the world:

When reflection's rootedness in...bodily, participatory modes of experience is entirely unacknowledged or unconscious, reflective reason becomes dysfunctional, unintentionally destroying the corporeal, sensuous world that sustains it.<sup>69</sup>

Similarly, there is also fallibility to abstract, embodied intellect. Environmental destruction and some dominating ideologies that grew from Enlightenment thinking (such as reductionistic

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<sup>68</sup> VI 194.

<sup>69</sup> *Spell of the Sensuous* 303 (fn. 2).

science) are examples<sup>70</sup>. Again, if the problem lies in the tension between the abstract, disembodied rationality and non-reflective sensuous rationality, a sort of balance must be struck between the two, which accommodates the necessity of each.

## **Conclusion**

This project was based on the following premise: that the philosophical grounding for a new ontology is necessary if humans are to exist in a sustainable relationship with the environment and, therefore, to survive. Ultimately, humans should thrive in such a relationship. It is partially based on the assumption that our current philosophies are lacking in this area. Deep ecology offers one angle: the prospect of the complete subsumption of humans in the natural environment. It begins to develop a worldview that is not anthropocentric or hierarchical, but does not seem to be able to accommodate for human rationality, technological advances, and advanced political societies. I argue that it is an eco-centric reaction to dominating anthropocentrism, but not a complete philosophy itself. Later Confucian religious philosophy accounts for the human experience in this world by connecting the natural environment to humanity and to Heaven, while maintaining some form of distinctions. Abram's interpretation of Merleau-Ponty approaches the dilemma of human/nature interaction phenomenologically. By shifting the basis of human perception and concept building from abstract, disembodied reason to a universal, immanent grounding which permeates everything, the distinction between man and environment diminishes. Human distinction remains in the form of humanity's distinct patterns of thought, reflection, reason and being. This phenomenology suggests an altered ontology, and therefore a new philosophical project.

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<sup>70</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* gives many examples of the destructive implications of some Enlightenment thinking.

Tensions that arise in the problem of an ecological philosophy generally deal with potentiality and human grounding. If humans are grounded in nature in a particular sense, what allows them to violate it? If the answer is a set of patterns or rules, how does this allow for freedom? Is there a relationship between humans and nature that maximizes human potentiality without destroying nature? Is there an inherent conflict? All of these uncertainties need to be explored in order to determine what possible modes of natural interaction exist, whether or not ontology should be a form of ecology, and whether or not the human-nature interaction is inherently a destructive one.

All three philosophies collectively sketch aspects of an ecologically engaged philosophy of humanity. They each deal with select aspects of a philosophical whole. The appealing aspect of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is its rich possibility for understanding thought and philosophy from a different perspective. The concept of an immersed humanity could lead to new language more descriptive of the human condition, and a better understanding of the natural world. All three ecologies offer different angles for approaching a genuinely ecological philosophy of humanity. Much maturing and development must occur before such a philosophy is fully refined. By exploring the human context of embodiment and embeddedness, these philosophies offer grounds for a reorientation of philosophy to fully incorporate the natural world.

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