

# ECO-PHILOSOPHY: THE EXTENSION OF PERCEPTION AND THE VALUE OF NATURE

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## Abstract

This article discusses the connection between phenomenology and eco-philosophy. Ecological philosophy involves both human and natural world relationships and their value systems. It criticizes the power of science, but does not deny it. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's embodied intentionality, which does not separate the body from consciousness and the body from the world, is taken as an example, showing an integral part of a human and global connection. Clearly, we can understand more than it is given. Our perspective is limited, but it always seeks to understand more and to see what comes outside of our vision. In this sense, a person goes beyond himself/herself, which is possible due to the body extensions. This means that the perception of the world is not limited only by personal experience. Other people are necessary to understand and sense more in order to create a dialogue with the world. So others and the whole environment should be validated as a living world, not only as the material for scientific materialistic study.

**Keywords:** eco-philosophy, phenomenology, living body, extensions, value.

## Introduction

There is a popular belief that the analysis of environmental problems is only associated with natural sciences. But it is clear that the environment is not limited by natural problems. If nature is regarded as cultural, eco-philosophy becomes a way of trying to help people get back to their living environment and an understanding of the inner value of nature. Ecological philosophy involves both the human world and the natural world relationships, their value systems, the intrinsic value of human and natural philosophical studies, and moral values of community boundaries. Ecologists are not only exploring nature, but also inviting other people to understand and start looking at the relationship between nature and humanity, and to rethink both the human and natural significance.

Thanks to ecology, it is possible to understand how a human being and other living beings depend on an ecosystem. Eco-philosophy can be seen as an opportunity to re-establish a dialogue

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between humans and the world that surrounds them. In the modern world it is forgotten that a person is a part of the world and senses the world through his/her body. The purpose of this article is to show the connections between ecology and phenomenology, to discuss Merleau-Ponty's concept of the living body, the possibility of extensions of perception, and to show how it affects the value of the living environment.

Although M. Merleau-Ponty did not speak directly about eco-philosophy, his perception of phenomenology and the eco-philosophy have a lot in common. Merleau-Ponty's conception of the body is employed by many other philosophers who are trying to look at the nature from the living body's perspective. The living body, according to Merleau-Ponty, is not a temporary body, which I use as a tool for personal choices and is confined to this world, but what each individual adds to the global project.<sup>2</sup> My body is the world's body. Based on the philosophical concept of the body, the perception of the world is made possible through the perception of the body.<sup>3</sup>

The perception of the environment as being valuable on its own is not trying to distinguish the nature from human cultural life. It helps to feel the responsibility for the environment, which is the essence of eco-philosophy. An eco-phenomenological attitude towards the living world helps us to understand that the world is not limited to a visible area. Extensions of perception are possible thanks to the human body. Eco-phenomenology shows that the living world is not only sensible and experienced directly, but it can also be experienced indirectly. It reaffirms the human and global connections and also the need for a dialogue between a person and his/her living environment.

### **The relation between ecology and phenomenology**

Ecology teaches a sense of responsibility for the environment. However, the more the importance of technology increases in human everyday activity, the less space remains for respecting the environment. Therefore, eco-philosopher L. Embree asks himself and his readers a question of «how the environment can be seen not only as naturalistic, but also as cultural»<sup>4</sup>. He is asking about how to bring back the value of the living environment. The discussion on the environmental value proves that naturalism has been understood only scientifically.

Science and technology analyze the structures of the causes and consequences, but it is not always self-critical enough. In order to succeed in showing the importance of the environment, first it must be shown how nature is related to the cultural world.<sup>5</sup> And as phenomenologists

<sup>2</sup> Merleau-Ponty M. *Phenomenology of Perception*, Transl. C. Smith, London/ New York: Routledge Classics Press, 2002, 296.

<sup>3</sup> Behnke E.A. Pasaulis be opozicijos / Pasaulio kūnas, *Literatūra*, 48/6 (2006), 126.

<sup>4</sup> Embree L. 'The Possibility of a Constitutive Phenomenology'. In: C.S. Brown, T. Toadvine (eds.) *Eco-Phenomenology. Back to the Earth Itself*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003, 38.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

put it this nature that is related to the cultural world is not accidentally often called the «living world nature»<sup>6</sup>.

In this paragraph the links between ecology and phenomenology will be discussed. It will question why the phenomenological knowledge of the world can be a great help returning ecology back into human life. According to Embree, «phenomenologists ought to oppose scientism, but not science»<sup>7</sup>. According to the philosopher, technical science should not limit the perception of the world and the environment, and it should not try to fit everything into frames of scientific knowledge. In order to understand and sense the environment, it is not enough to see everything as objects that can be known only on the basis of naturalistic sciences. The phenomenological attitude can help to learn a lot more without the need to reject science as a possible source of knowledge.

Ecologists see environmental damage as a single symptom that suggests problematic relations between humanity and nature. Another eco-philosopher, Ch.S. Brown, says:

«It is embedded within the way nature and humanity are experienced in daily life, in myth, in literature, and in abstract thought»<sup>8</sup>.

The ongoing environmental destruction is a consequence of change in the hierarchy of values and the fact that a different value is assigned depending on the perspective. The ecological critique of it, according to the author, should criticize the meaning of what a person is and what he/she is meant for by nature. What value can be assigned to the environment if people's needs are considered as the most important ones?

Phenomenology, as well as eco-philosophy, is based on the experience of the world, which is an integral part of the individual. Science and technology limit the individual's relationship with the world. The direct relationship is replaced by the wisdom of nature through technology and science. So a person keeps distance from nature and that creates alienation of a person and his/her living environment. Phenomenology as a method describes the forms and structures of experience and allows to look at it critically. At the same time,

«the description of experience is an attempt to return to the “things-themselves”... Phenomenology seeks to describe the meaning within experience and to uncover the experiential phenomenon...»<sup>9</sup>.

Phenomenology encourages us to return to the direct experience, to the things themselves, while «to return to things themselves is to return to that world which precedes knowledge, of which knowledge always speaks, and in relation to which every scientific schematization is an abstract and derivative sign language»<sup>10</sup>. Eco-philosophy and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception do not propose to construct the

<sup>6</sup> Embree, op. cit., 39.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Brown C.S. 'The Real and the Good' In: Brown, Toadvine (eds.), op cit., 4.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>10</sup> Merleau-Ponty, op. cit., 11.

realities of the world, they only offer a chance to describe everything in the same way as it occurs in the experience and, in this way, to achieve perception and a closer relationship with the surrounding/living world. This is a phenomenological look at the world which helps us to understand that a person can see more and experience more than what can be touched by hand.

A scientific-materialistic conception of the world is increasingly dominating in the world where both the knowledge of the living world and the relationship with the living world become based not on the phenomenological experience, but on scientific and technological principles.

«In everyday moral experience, we intuitively find that both the consequences of our actions and respect for the subjective integrity of the other are morally relevant, and we also find both humans and nonhumans to be worthy of moral regard».<sup>11</sup>

Humanity and nature are valuable in themselves, and one must act responsibly to themselves and others for nature.

According to phenomenology, the world «opens the space of perception by calling for the response of our bodies»<sup>12</sup>. This means that, according to philosopher T. Toadvine, a person is always in a relationship with his/her surrounding environment, so he/she does not need to look for new options how to structure a dialogue with the world. As a part of the surrounding world an individual responds to it through his/her actions and behaviour.

### **Maurice Merleau-Ponty: body as the possibility of perception**

After a short review of the commonalities between phenomenology and eco-philosophy, we can proceed to the connections between M. Merleau-Ponty and eco-philosophy. If we understand ecology as a dialogue between a human and nature, it becomes clear why modern eco-philosophers follow Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception. In this paragraph it will be shown how Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception can be understood as a part of eco-philosophy. This paper will argue that a person is embodied in the world and the perception of the living body becomes an option for extensions of perception. As follows, a person becomes a part of the world and his/her body becomes a world's body. Here starts the responsibility for the living world. A person is in the world by attending to it and by his/her acts he/she engages into a dialogue with it.

Merleau-Ponty's concept of the body as well as the phenomenology of perception can be considered as a beginning of eco-philosophy. The goal of eco-philosophical is to draw attention to the existing environ-

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<sup>11</sup> Brown, op. cit., 10.

<sup>12</sup> Toadvine, T. 'The Primacy of Desire and Its Ecological Consequences'. In: Brown, Toadvine (eds.), op. cit., 149.

mental problems, to show how much people are a part of this and to restore the dialogue with the surrounding world.

Phenomenologists disagree on seeing the living body as given, as a condition for allowing access to the experienced world. The body and what is experienced in the body are the most important aspects of the human being in the world. We are sensual beings and thus we relate to the world. Merleau-Ponty criticized the subject and object, mind and world separations existing in Western philosophy. If the consciousness and body were separated, there would also be separation between a human and nature.

«Merleau-Ponty cares about a person's direct contact and practical interaction with the world, the flesh, the sensual and gestural experience».<sup>13</sup>

The body is a conscious and living body, also described as its own body and a part of the world. A person is an embodied being, so he/she is a part of the world. Merleau-Ponty's conception of the body allows eco-philosophers to show the links between a person and his/her living world.

According to Merleau-Ponty, all people are in the same world, along with the rest of living nature. The physical distance is irrelevant here. The fact that some part of the world is not accessible to direct sight or direct experience does not mean that a person cannot experience what happens beyond direct experience. Eco-philosophy encourages a direct and open dialogue between an individual and the living world that goes beyond the limits of direct experience. Merleau-Ponty's philosophy first begins with how we perceive ourselves and how we are able to live our lives among others. Ecology starts with the relationship with another, either social or natural being.

The extension of perception that Merleau-Ponty is talking about is one of the aspects of eco-philosophy, showing the human its environment links. In the flesh and the dialogic nature, a person maintains contact with the surrounding world. Just as a flesh responds to the world, daily human experiences turn into a dialogue with the living world.

If an individual is perceived as a part of the world, the human body becomes the world's body. At the same time, as Merleau-Ponty said, intentionality can be ascribed not only to a person, but to the entire living nature. It is once again a reminder that the person and the nature are inseparable. According to M. Harney, ecological relationship becomes a mutual, communicative relationship between an organism and its environment.<sup>14</sup> Although we look at the world from the embodied first-person perspective, the presence of another and the world's participation in the formation of perception are integral and inevitable processes.

<sup>13</sup> Merleau-Ponty M. *Akis ir dvasia*, Transl. A. Sverdiolas, Vilnius: Baltos lankos, 2005, 9.

<sup>14</sup> Harney M. 'Merleau-Ponty, Ecology, and Biosemiotics'. In: S.L. Cataldi, W.S. Hamrick (eds.) *M. Merleau-Ponty and Environmental Philosophy. Dwelling on the Landscapes of Thought*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007, 135.

In the analysis of the phenomenology of perception it is clear that Merleau-Ponty's body is always communicative, open and accessible. In addition, bodies are sure to link to each other and they are possible interlocutors in the dialogue. A person reflects what is going on around him/her, what is going on not only when directly experienced by the surrounding environment, but also in the wider sense: he/she reflects what is happening around the living world. World experiences, other people's experiences are settled in the person. In the same way, human actions are reflected in the surrounding environment. This is a two-way relationship, which is emphasized by ecologists.

We view everything from a certain angle. We can see without a perspective, thus vision is always embodied. The body can be seen as the zero point of orientation, the beginning of comprehension, the way how a human is in the world, the way of being. However, we can also perceive what goes beyond the limits of direct experience. There are things, according to Merleau-Ponty, which, in light of our own experience, we do not actually realize.

«Experience can be co-ordinated with that of the previous instance and that of the following, and my perspective with that of other consciousnesses...»<sup>15</sup>

Perception is always within time and space, as the perception of contexts. However, the most important thing here is that there is a possibility for extensions of perception, because nothing is completely finished.

What is experienced refers to what has not been experienced. It means that we are not limited by an existing situation, our own bodily sensitivity. There are always links to other contexts. According to A. Lingis, «the speed, sluggishness, and changes of our movement were determined by visible movements»<sup>16</sup>. But, according to the philosopher, others transfer their experience to us just as others arouse their existing experiences through us. One cannot separate himself/herself from the living environment, as he/she is embodied and integral. According to Merleau-Ponty, we are not tied to the senses, but we are crossing them. Our experiences go beyond the limits of our body, and there is a possibility to extend our perception through other people and through the whole nature.

Eco-philosophy encourages considering environment and the others as able to feel and experience. Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of perception suits it. According to phenomenology, I know that the others see the world differently, but I also know the other perspective. In a sense, I can see from another perspective. It would be ideal if it were possible to see from all perspectives, still such a perfect vision is not possible. But based on the phenomenological concept of body sensitivity, one can see more than his/her body allows to. Such predictions open wide horizons of

<sup>15</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, op. cit., 62.

<sup>16</sup> Lingis A. *Pavojingos emocijos*, Transl. I. Skaržinskaitė, Kaunas: Poligrafija ir informatika, 2002, 33.

perception. If we are looking at any object, we realize that the thing has not only the visible part, but also another side. It is not visible, but it exists, there's no question about that. Perception begins with the body, but the body does not limit it. A person lives in the world and he/she recognizes himself/herself in this world. According to eco-philosophy and phenomenology, we are in the world by taking part in it not as viewers, but as acting, experiencing participants who are discovering new perspectives of perceptions.

Merleau-Ponty uses the concept of double senses to show how the body is included in the world's system. The duality of experienced and experiencing body appears not only in its own but also in other bodies. Therefore, other bodies become perceived not only as physical objects, but as subjects of experience. This allows understanding why the body is not closed in itself, but is lived as intentionally directed towards another and taking into account the other.<sup>17</sup> In terms of a touching and touched body, there is an important distraction of attention. This is how embodied extensions of perception, related to the living world, occur. The world and the body are inseparable: if you touch one, you touch the other too. My body is the body of the world. Another body is the same – «he sees himself seeing, touches himself touching, and is visible and felt to oneself»<sup>18</sup>. My senses are intertwined with other bodies and senses, with the whole world – social and natural.

Merleau-Ponty encourages returning to the same direct experience that has to be present during the reflection of experience, otherwise, the experience is distorted. There is an error when not only a person himself/herself is interpreted as a physical, chemical system, but also the perception is being explained as a physical stimulation. The philosopher calls for the rejection of such scientific objectivist view to the experience of the world.

«There is a nature, which is not that of the sciences, but that which perception presents to me...»<sup>19</sup>

Science, unlike phenomenology, does not take into account the variables that are not only physical in nature. Perception always depends on the context. The person is dependent on the surrounding world, and on how he/she behaves in the world. This state also applies to eco-philosophy, because by destroying nature a person also destroys himself/herself. There is always a mutual relationship.

The world is never objective. It is always dependent on the individual living body and its perspective – it is always the world that I am connected to with intentional relations. The interpretation of one's own living body is not only that of an object/instrument, which is limited, but it helps to realize that not only the boundaries of my world expand, but that other bodies can just as well be sensible and capable of extending

<sup>17</sup> Jonkus D. *Patirtis ir refleksija: fenomenologinės filosofijos akiračiai*, Kaunas: VDU, 2009, 104.

<sup>18</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Akis ir dvasia*, op. cit., 47.

<sup>19</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, op. cit., 527.

my experience, as the rest of the world does. Human perception and sensation boundaries are limitless. The body, as the opportunity to experience more, neither has nor imposes limits. On the contrary, it provides all the capabilities to understand more than the body allows. Perception is always a reference to other contexts. Our whole world is what we experience and perceive. And we can always understand more than the immediately given.

### **The problem of the environmental value**

After discussing the importance of the human body and the relationship between the body and the world, we can see what the value of the living environment is. A person is involved in the world due to the whole his/her environment. A person can extend the limits of perception beyond the field of vision, so the living environment becomes especially valuable.

Magazines are full of the most beautiful images of nature, in which a wild, untouched ecosystem is captured. In a way, the value of nature can be specifically dependent on how well it is presented, and, according to Embree, it can be the perfect material for the phenomenological analysis of nature. As the philosopher said, «millions of people look at perfectly similar magazine pages and thereby experience and appreciate the self-same part of the environment»<sup>20</sup>. However, it must be noticed that such presentation of nature distorts its value, because nature becomes perceived as an object, as a thing that can be used according to the needs. The same relation exists between people. For its purpose, the environment value would be perceived as important for every individual; the ideas on environmental policy should be visible in people's daily lives and should reach everyday human relationships. Eco-philosophy would be a perfect practice of environmental knowledge.

Philosopher Toadvine raises questions about how much nature surrounding a person is valuable because of the person's given certain value and how much nature is valuable in itself. He also asks: «Is the question of "intrinsic value" a right question?»<sup>21</sup> Or is it only the practical/technological value?

«The intrinsic value of nature becomes an issue within a worldview that conceives culture dialectically; the naturalization of culture and the culturization of nature are simply modalities of this dialectic».<sup>22</sup>

The possibility that an individual starts to value the living environment and starts to feel a sense of responsibility for nature is not as obvious as it may appear at first sight. The dialogue with the environment can occur when a person starts to realize that not all nature can be reduced to something flat, easily understandable and predictable. Nature

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<sup>20</sup> Embree, op. cit., 44.

<sup>21</sup> Toadvine, op. cit., 139.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 140.



is not just an object or something completely separate from a person. The living environment includes both nature and a human.

According to Toadvine, if «we can be ethical only in relation to something we can see, feel, understand, love, or otherwise have faith in»<sup>23</sup>, it doesn't seem strange that a person feels responsible only for his/her closest environment, only for the people who are around and does not feel interested in or responsible for what is happening beyond his/her immediate view. People do not pay attention to the fact that they depend on the world and the world is an opportunity to extend their experience.

Some individuals do not understand that the living world includes a much larger area (and distance) than it can be experienced personally and physically. Extensions of perception are possible through the environment. Nature, which can be seen in magazine photos, is a part of person's living world, so he/she is responsible for its use or attempts to preserve it. It is important to accept yourself as «a person-as-a-part-nature», but not as «a person-apart-from-nature»<sup>24</sup>.

The author notes that the devaluation of nature is especially noticeable in modern times, when humanity, along with an individual's authority, has raised science above nature and nature itself has been separated from the living world. The modern definition of nature determines that, according to another eco-philosopher Brown, nature is understood as losing its value morally, socially, and politically, because it is defined in an objective and rational way. There is no place for questions about the inner value in the rational discourse.

According to Toadvine, «the world is already open, which means that we have always already responded to the call, we are already along the way of perception and thought»<sup>25</sup>. The world is open, it is necessary, and it is valuable. A man is always in the relation with the world. The environment, if it is not understood only within the framework of rational science, helps to sense more than eyes can see.

We have to admit that a huge environmental damage and devaluation started to emerge when everyone began to believe that science and technology would make the world better. Technologies have been meant to help to minimize the consequences of human desires. However, the results have been contrary to the expectations. Individuals have embroiled in the circle of life destruction and environment devaluation even more.

«Dreams of technological Utopia have been replaced overnight by nightmares of ecological holocaust».<sup>26</sup>

The technological progress, without the change of human thinking, cannot change the human-nature relationship without doing damage.

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<sup>23</sup> Toadvine, op. cit., 141.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>26</sup> Brown, op. cit., 5.

The development of science and technology leads to the rise of humanity and, at the same time, it creates the conditions for underestimation of nature. Technology intervenes between nature and human being by increasing the distance between them, thereby eliminating the value of the living environment.

## Conclusions

What is eco-philosophy? It's a relationship between a human and the environment that occurs through the body which then becomes the world's body. Through the flesh and the dialogic nature a human being maintains contact with the surrounding world and because of the flesh he/she is able to respond to the world.

We are in the world by taking part in it. «That is why we say that in perception the thing is given to us 'in person,' or 'in flesh'». <sup>27</sup> We perceive it not as viewers, but as acting, experiencing participants who perceive by discovering new perspectives. The interpretation of my own living body not only as a limited thing, helps to realize that not only the limits of my visible world expand; however, other bodies and the entire world can just as well be sensible and it can extend my experience. The rest of the world is the extension of myself, so it is necessary for me and, therefore, valuable in itself. The problem of environmental value is particularly important in modern times when everything is taken into the view as an object that can be used practically. People use nature according to their needs. The same material value applies to the people.

Eco-phenomenology does not tie an individual to his/her living environment. It only aims at bringing back the importance of a living place. No matter where an individual goes, he/she must realize that he/she is responsible for the natural world, and that by destroying it he/she destroys his/her cultural world. Social ties are created rather through direct experience than through technology. Relationships with the world of direct responsibility provide more opportunities for an individual to develop.

The perception of the world is not limited by personal experience. Others and the entire world are necessary in order to realize and perceive more. According to Merleau-Ponty, all people are in the same world, along with the rest of living nature. The physical distance is irrelevant here. The fact that some places in the world are not accessible to direct view or direct experience does not mean that a person cannot sense what is happening beyond his/her direct view. Eco-philosophy encourages a direct and open dialogue with the living world that goes beyond the limits of direct perception. So the other's/world's body, as a possibility for extensions of perception, becomes the foundation for eco-philosophy. Eco-philosophy shows the value of the environment, which is not only something that can be seen in magazines.

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<sup>27</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, op. cit., 373.