Thinking Across Species Boundaries: General Sociality and Embodied Meaning

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Abstract
Denying special traits like the use of language to nonhuman animals has often been a basis for the creation of a stand-alone human sphere, apart from and above the animal world and the environmental milieu. Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology shows that human communication arises from the semiosis in the extra-human world and is not self-contained. Given many recent insights in scientific studies of nonhuman animals, only a few of which are cited here, it becomes impossible to say that animals are mute, reactive entities. They too share many of the same features of communication with human beings. That said, articulating an interspecies ethic of sympathy or concern must take into account species and individual differences.

Keywords
Merleau-Ponty, Levinas, sympathy, gesture, language

Introduction
Inter-species concern or sympathy begins with the recognition that no distinctive human order exists apart from the networks (semiotic, vital, and material) that connect people to the other creatures and things on the earth. Just as each human being congresses with sky and soil through digestion, respiration, and circulation, human culture as a whole cannot function without the nonhuman actors who co-constitute it. Human meanings, infused with content from the swarming, crawling, leafy world, derive from the interplay of orders of signification that take place among other kinds of life. The old dichotomies of nature and culture, mind and body, human and animal give way to an interactive milieu in which actors (animal, vegetable, and mineral) commune with one another across the synapses of the world. Consciousness, once conceived as the guarantor of human privilege and domination, can now be
identified as inherently social, not only in an intra-human fashion but also as occurring between the diversity of living and non-living things that share the earth with people. Once the hubristic model of autonomous human reason collapses on itself, the field opens for an inter-specific ethic of interrelation. Arriving at such an ethic requires a tour through the borderland of bodily and linguistic signification, taking cues from the signs of other creatures and the philosophies of Merleau-Ponty (1958, 1963, 1964a, 1964b, 2003) and Levinas (1994, 1998). The clarification of consciousness in this way, as irreducibly thinking with and through others, results in a human order not effaced but enriched by its co-constitution.

**Gesture as Language and Language as Gesture**

Language must be understood as itself gestural, arising from bodily contexts, and not as a production of the mind alone. Gestures, likewise, cannot be separated into those that produce intentional meanings and those that merely satisfy some material need or creature comfort. Kendon (2004) begins with the following statement: “Wittingly or not, humans, when in co-presence, continuously inform one another about their intentions, interests, feelings, and ideas by means of visible action” (p. 1). Gesture does not merely attend spoken language as an addendum but contributes in its own right to the creation of meaning between subjects. The slightest variance in tone of voice or in the arch of an eyebrow or in the curve of a smile changes the meanings of words uttered entirely or, rather, communicates even without the words. Ella Fitzgerald’s voice is no less sultry or playful when she is singing scat than when she is singing “normal” lyrics. A police interrogator can recognize a hundred signs of a lie not visible to most people. A yawn can signal boredom, anxiety, or just plain fatigue. Kendon (2004) recognizes multivalence attached to the significance of gesture; however, his opening statement also neglects a whole world of gesture—the gestures used by nonhuman animals to contribute information, to convey emotions (yes, emotions), or to initiate group action.

In addition to delimiting gesture to the human sphere in the phrase “humans, when in co-presence,” Kendon (2004) also unnecessarily delimits gesture to intentional, positive movements (p.1-8). For example, Kendon brackets “involuntary” actions as not belonging to the sphere of gesture proper:

The word “gesture” is not usually employed to refer to the movements that people make when they are nervous, movements such as hair-pattings, self-groomings, clothing adjustments, and the repetitive manipulation of rings or
necklaces or other personal accoutrements. In ordinary interaction, such movements tend to be disregarded, or they are treated as habitual or involuntary. In addition, although they are revealing and may sometimes be read by others as symptoms of the individual’s moods or feelings, they are not, as a rule, referred to as “gestures” (p. 8).

Such “merely practical” actions do not merit classification as gestures because they lack intentionality and are subject to ambiguity; inasmuch as these gestures contribute to the gestalt of personal meaning, they must be admitted to be signals or signs sent to the other partner in dialogue. Words can carry unintentional meanings just as effectively as these creaturely nervous habits and are just as subject to indeterminacy as a stifled yawn or a tapped foot; Meaning, as such, is ambivalent; therefore, that these creaturely habits are subject to multiple interpretations does not separate them from other forms of communication (spoken and written speech).

Merleau-Ponty (1958, 1964a) situates spoken and written speech within gesture and argues that all meaning is subject to the same indeterminacy and ambivalence. Merleau-Ponty (1964a) writes that

> ...if we rid our minds of the idea that our language is the translation or cipher of an original text, we shall see that the idea of complete expression is nonsensical, and that all language is indirect or allusive—that it is, if you wish, silence. The relation of meaning to the spoken word can no longer be a point for point correspondence that we always have clearly in mind. (p. 43)

Giving up the idea of direct correspondence between ideas and language frees linguistic utterance from full determination: Interpretation must always be active for words to “mean,” and no interpretation has the final say about the meaning of the spoken or written word. Language is “taken apart and put together again by thought, [and it] bears the meaning of thought as a footprint signifies the movement and effort of a body” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a, p. 44). Kendon (2004) remarks that one person may wonder about the meaning of an interlocutor’s yawn, but this same indeterminacy and multivalence is present in spoken and written speech as well. Because there is no one-to-one correspondence between word and idea or between word and thing, all communication is gestural.

Attempts to schematize forms of communication into gestural and linguistic subdivisions run into problems because they fail to recognize the gestural nature of even syntactical speech. American Sign Language (ASL), for example, is both syntactical and gestural, if the gestural is defined as communication via bodily movement. Speakers may gesture in preparation for speech;
Because signers are more bound by convention and syntax (Emmorey, 1999, p. 144), they do not use these idiosyncratic, preparatory gestures. Preparatory gestures used by speaking people do not derive from a “shared computational stage that precedes articulation,” but are the computation, a thinking with the hands that not only precedes linguistic utterance but also communicates in its own right (Emmorey, p. 144; Scheler, 1979, p. 10; Dillard-Wright, 2007). When someone struggles to form a sentence, an interlocutor will often supply the needed words based on the prior context and the bridge provided by these inchoate gesticulations. Signers may not produce these preparatory gestures, but signers do have particular phrases that they prefer when struggling to articulate themselves, and each signer also has a certain unique style of signing when engaged in this anticipatory phase. Similarly, non-linguistic pointing gestures are still used in ASL; however, they are differentiated from pronouns by subtle variations in hand position that would be unnoticeable to non-signers (Emmorey, 1999, p. 148). Given these variations, no hard and fast line can be drawn between linguistic and non-linguistic meaning; even “preparatory” gestures have a certain syntax and standardization. Conversely, linguistic meaning is mediated by the individual gestural style of the speaker or signer. Even written text is subject to non-linguistic meaning; otherwise, publishers—professional and amateur—would not spend so much time selecting fonts and designing graphics to give the words a mood. More attention should be given to the reading and writing of text as a bodily activity: the postures taken toward the book, the computer screen; the fingers tracing the lines on the page—the waxing and waning of wakefulness and attention. These bodily attitudes should not simply be dismissed as beside the point of language; they disclose the gestural, animal dimensions of text.

It might be tempting to say that these considerations have nothing to do with the communications of nonhuman animals; however, examining the standardization and syntacticity in the signing activities of nonhuman animals reveals that similar features attend the semiosis of nonhumans. For example, scientists have recently discovered that mice sing, placing them within an elite group of mammals that includes whales and humans. Holy and Guo (2005), biologists who were among the first to make this discovery, found that male mice serenade their prospective female partners upon the scent of female urine. The songs of the male mice are ultrasonic and occur alongside the other audible chirps that mice make. In calling the mice articulations “song,” Holy and Guo build on previous definitions of that word:

The term “song” has been used with a variety of connotations, so that Broughton offers three different definitions of song: a *sensu latissimo*, a “sound of animal origin which is not both accidental and meaningless,” which includes relatively simple vocaliza-
tions often described as "calls." a sensu stricto, a "series of notes [or syllables], generally of more than one type, uttered in succession and so related as to form a recognizable sequence or pattern in time," and a sensu strictissimo, a "complete succession of periods or phrases," in which a song consists of several distinct motifs, often delivered in a characteristic sequence. (p. 2)

Holy and Guo (2005) recorded the songs, made them audible to the human ear by means of an algorithm, and then compiled data from numerous recordings to determine if the above senses of song were present. The study found that the previously unnoticed mice utterances were indeed song in that they had distinct syllables, phrasing, and repetition and exhibited "richness and complexity... approach[ing] that of many songbirds" (p. 8). This study shows that syntacticity and standardization do not distinguish human communication from the forms of communication present in the extra-human world.

Recent studies of “one of Madagascar’s less-studied hissing-roach species, Elliptorhina chopardi,” also reveals evidence of standardization in the vocalizations of this species in the form of “surprisingly complex, birdlike sounds” that must be produced by the male of the species in order to mate with a female (Milius, 2006, p. 165). “Hissing roaches are among the very few insects who communicate with a breath-powered voice as birds and mammals do,” and the specialized songs include sounds that might also be received by “vibrations traveling through the wood under the roaches’ feet” (Milius, p. 166). Whistles used specifically for wooing mates have “bands of sometimes-criscrossing frequencies from two voices,” and males who fail to produce the appropriate bi-tonal sounds do not successfully mate (Milius, p. 166). As with the songs of mice, the hissing-roach songs had previously gone undetected, in this case because of their very low volume and the role that vibrations play in the sounds. The combination of elements or syllables and its insertion within a social context produces the “right” sound. Although differences between species and between individuals certainly change the appropriate social and environmental setting for these sounds, the fact remains that the milieu plays a constitutive part in the formation of meaning.

**Human and Animal Cultures in the Structure of Behavior**

Given this continuity between human and nonhuman communication, studies of human communication should begin with extra-human communication. This is exactly the move that Merleau-Ponty (1958, 1963) makes when he revises the psychology of stimulus and response in such a way as to highlight the emergence of humanity from animality. Merleau-Ponty might have agreed with Derrida’s remarks in “Eating Well” (cited in Wolfe, 2003):
if one defines language in such a way that it is reserved for what we call man, what is there to say? But if one reinscribes language in a network of possibilities that do not merely encompass it but mark it irreducibly from the inside, everything changes… These possibilities or necessities, without which there would be no language, are themselves not only human. (p. 30)

Derrida hints that the conditions of the possibility for linguistic communication are by no means limited to the human sphere and that one might “mark” sociality and gesture as some of the “possibilities or necessities” that give rise to both human language and the communications of other species. It then becomes possible to talk of a “mark in general,” a communication active whenever animals “sign” to one another. Despite the fact that humans make a fetish of the written word, those markings take their meanings from prior “bodily meanings,” from gestural significations that are sensible for other lived bodies (Shapiro, 1985, pp. 37, 40). Inter-corporal concern need not be made manifest in language in order to mean; rather, language takes its power from this default condition (Acampora, 2006, pp. 27, 28).

It should be noticed here that Merleau-Ponty’s (1963) discovery of a general “structure of behavior” need not imply that humans are simply no different from other animals or that a plant is somehow the same as a chimpanzee. Merleau-Ponty’s third section carefully applies the principle of the structure of behavior to the various modes of being, here recalling the problematic of the material versus the mental. Materialist biology would insist that “mind” is simply a designation for a complex material process that occurs in the brain; according to this thinking, “[t]he fact of becoming conscious adds nothing to the physical structures; it is only the index of particularly complex physical structures” (Merleau-Ponty, p. 136). This materialism would subsume everything under the rubric of causal explanation and determination, such that speaking of a distinctive human order—although convenient—is illusory. Mentalism counters materialism by simply positing an equal and opposite force to which it is opposed, and Merleau-Ponty seeks a solution to this “antimony… [in] the synthesis of matter and idea,” which takes place when form is recognized as adhering within matter (p. 137).

Because both human and animal actions occur under the general category of behavior, the human and vital orders are distinguished not in kind but in the degree of abstraction of which the members of these large groupings are capable. Vital behavior reconfigures the organism with respect to a specific task by means of a dialectic between the organism and the environment (Merleau-Ponty, 1963, pp. 146-148). In the vital order, moments of genuine learning exceed the purely physical and call into being an ideal content; indeed, the organism must be conceived as an ideal construct, an “equivocal expression”
that subsumes numerous physical systems underneath its organizing unity (Merleau-Ponty, p. 151).

Behavior, whether at the animal or human level, cannot be explained through mechanistic physiology alone but has its unity and coherence in meaning itself, a “coordination by meaning” that becomes visible when the organism adapts to new circumstances (Merleau-Ponty, 1963, p. 156). If meaning resides even at the bodily level—on which Merleau-Ponty elaborated in 1958 and suggested in 1963—then he could be accused of simply lumping all embodied existence into a rough equivalence. Because the organization of bodily experience depends upon the coherence of the world, even the distinction between body and world blurs significantly. Merleau-Ponty (1963) introduces the three orders of the physical, the vital, and the human specifically to prevent a kind of primordial soup idea of embodiment. Merleau-Ponty (1963) devotes sober attention to the distinctions between these orders, even as he readily acknowledges that they build upon each other.

If the distinction between the physical and the vital is made through meaningful behavior and the arisal of learning in new circumstances, the human is distinguished from the rest of the animal sphere by means of an increased capacity for abstraction and an increased ability to detach from the present circumstances. If a monkey picks a branch in order to reach a goal, it is because it is able to confer a functional value on an object of nature. But a monkey’s scarcely succeed at all in constructing instruments which would serve only for preparing others; we have seen that, having become a stick for the monkey, the tree branch is eliminated as such—which is the equivalent of saying that it is never possessed as an instrument in the full sense of the word... For man... the tree branch which has become a stick will remain precisely a tree-branch—which-has-become a stick, the same thing in two different functions and visible for him under a plurality of aspects (p. 175)

The use-objects of human beings, in contrast to those of other animals, arise “not under the pressure of a de facto situation” but are “orient[ed]... in relation to the possible, to the mediate” (Merleau-Ponty, 1963, pp. 175, 176). Human action and communication are not merely oriented to the exigencies of a given situation but are open to ceaseless referentiality and indeterminacy, preserving ambiguity at every moment of their unfolding. If the animal order is the order of the novel, the human order is the order of the possible. Each object opens upon its past transfigurations—the total system of relations through which it has journeyed—and upon its future, that system of possible relations to which it has yet to be conjoined. “What defines man [sic] is not the capacity to create a second nature—economic, social, or cultural—beyond biological nature; it is rather the capacity of going beyond created structures in order to create new ones” (Merleau-Ponty, p. 175).
That Merleau-Ponty (1963) distinguishes the human from the animal in this way does not commit him to a dualism of man and beast or a rend between soul and body. The human order carries the animal order within it in such a way as to transfigure the animal into a new system. The human mind cannot be opposed to animal flesh, as if the flesh were merely a container for this higher faculty: “[T]he appearance of reason and mind does not leave intact a sphere of self-enclosed instincts in man. Cognitive disorders which affect the categorial attitude are expressed by a loss of sexual initiatives” (Merleau-Ponty, p. 181). The higher and the lower, the intellectual and the physical, the spiritual and the libidinous, are joined in human beings to form a new whole that merits a separate order for human life. Where the Medieval Chain of Being promoted human life based on its ability to separate the spirit from the flesh, Merleau-Ponty values the synthesis between the ideal and the empirical that is the human body as lived. Despite this important difference between Merleau-Ponty and the classical conception, there is no doubt that Merleau-Ponty’s tripartite typology of being in this section reproduces a hierarchy of humans over other animals, over the rest of nature. Although each order builds upon the earlier ones and would be impossible without them, each order also surpasses what occurred in the “lower” groupings. However, before rejecting Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy (1963) as overly anthropocentric, his de-privileging of representative and linguistic consciousness should be recognized (p. 173). If Merleau-Ponty distinguishes the human sphere from the animal, he also opens the human order from its rigid determination as strictly thetic, or positing, consciousness.

Merleau-Ponty (1963) articulates an “implicit conception of consciousness,” which is not dependent on linguistic labels or acts of judgment (p. 173). Even before the recollection of experience by memory or its analysis in language, consciousness is active in an as-yet-undetermined sense, carrying out its intentions without rehashing the “contents” of experience. Merleau-Ponty uses an example to clarify this phenomenal layer of consciousness:

In entering an apartment we can perceive the character of those who live there without being capable of justifying this impression by an enumeration of remarkable details, and certainly well before having noted the color of the furniture. (p. 173)

Consciousness is “lived rather than known,” and “the possession of a representation or the exercise of a judgment is not coextensive with the life of consciousness” (Merleau-Ponty, 1963, p. 173). In other words, “[t]here is not something separate behind the thinking that acts as thought’s cause” (Acampora, 2006, p. 59). A “network of significative intentions,” consciousness may
sometimes be self-reflexive, analyzed in representation and language; at other times, it remains in the sphere of unreflective attention (Merleau-Ponty, p. 173); in either case, thought is formed in symbiosis with other entities.

**Consciousness as a Network of Significative Intentions**

Consciousness does not “inhabit” a neutral “milieu” but instead takes up its activity from its setting, giving all consciousness an external, public dimension (Merleau-Ponty, 1963, pp. 168, 169). Because consciousness is a network of “significative intentions,” consciousness is a negotiation between the setting and intentional action. The milieu that individual subjects inhabit is connected with all other consciousnesses that inhabit that same horizon, whose intentions are also signified through intentional action. Merleau-Ponty uses the example of a football match to discuss the ways in which individual perceivers are suffused with the requirements of their setting, enmeshed in a dialogue with their surroundings:

For the player in action the football field is not an “object,” that is, the ideal term which can give rise to an indefinite multiplicity of perspectival views and remain equivalent under its apparent transformations. It is pervaded with lines of force (the “yard lines”; those which demarcate the “penalty area”) and articulated in sectors (for example, the “openings” between the adversaries) which call for a certain mode of action and which initiate and guide the action as if the player were unaware of it. The field itself is not given to him, but present as the immanent term of his practical intentions; the player becomes one with it and feels the direction of the “goal,” for example, just as immediately as the vertical and the horizontal planes of his own body. (pp. 168, 169)

The gridlike, Cartesian lines of the football field belie the fact that the player is always immersed within a setting, which is to say that action cannot be determined from some privileged position, as if “from above.” The player is pervaded with lines of force, caught up in various vectors or currents that, in turn, make up the very material on which that player’s consciousness acts. The player is not merely making split-second judgments about turning left or right; the thought is given with the milieu such that secondary reflection occurs only after the fact. Some of the vectors or lines of force are, in fact, other consciousnesses with which the player contends or cooperates, whose intentions are signaled through action. Other vectors are instantiated by the game itself: the rules for “off sides,” the color of the uniforms, the referee’s flags. The social dimensions of the game move through the individual players almost automatically, and even cheating has a certain standardization and codification. This is to say that the game does not take place as the collected
individual thoughts and actions of the separate players; however, it is to say that each player inhabits a collective milieu, that the players, the field, and the rules of the game constitute a new whole that tacitly operates on each player. Consciousness is not a separate sphere that is inserted into a situation but arises with the setting at the same time as it transforms that setting.

Merleau-Ponty’s (1963) description of networks of intention and “lines of force” anticipates Latour’s (2004, 2005) actor-network theory and Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) metaphorical theory of language. Conceiving of consciousness in terms of “significative intentions” means that no strict opposition can be made between “internal” ideas and “external” data; the minute an intention—already suggested by the milieu—is taken up, it signifies to the “outside” the direction and mood of the knower/actor who chooses that particular vector or line of force. Every action, whether initiated by a human, an animal, or a nonanimal is simultaneously a communication and is invested with meaning that is knowable both to the actor and co-actor(s); every action “tips the hand” of the actor, is a revelation of a state that can equally be called interior or exterior, active or passive. One of Merleau-Ponty’s examples (1963) of this latent communication is the face:

A face is a center of human expression, the transparent envelope of the attitudes and desires of others, the place of manifestation, the barely material support for a multitude of intentions. This is why it seems impossible for us to treat a face or a body, even a dead body, like a thing. They are sacred entities, not the “givens of sight.” (p. 167)

Far from being a sentimental advocacy for consideration of others, Merleau-Ponty here (1963) points out the very nature of expression; as expressive, the face belongs both to the persons smiling or frowning and their interlocutors.

Thoughts are not formulated first in the mind and then sent to the muscles of the face, but the thought is given with the face, is articulated, even formulated, with the face. This is the meaning of the popular expression, “You know me better than I know myself.” The face has an ambiguous signification, is both internal and external, and is not a “sign” of something else from which it is separate. Even a lie presumes its own possibility, as when poker players wear sunglasses to hide their eyes. The sunglasses admit the body’s complicity in inward intention and are an outer witness to an inner possibility.

**Facing Animals**

Levinas is correct to say that “the Face, with all its meaningfulness brought out by analysis, is the beginning of intelligibility,” but the strictures placed on “the Face” by Levinas (as strictly applying to “the inter-human relationship”) are
unnecessary, as the body, also, issues a “corporal plea” (Levinas, 1998, p. 103; Acampora 2006, p. 80). “The face extends down the whole length of the body,” and analysis must be not expanded but clarified to include the visceral response to the styles of other bodies (Lingis, 2003, p. 180). A language before representation occasions analysis: “an elemental, pre-existent matrix of flesh which is inherently social, and which already sets down each [body-] subject’s incontestable and inalienable kinship with all other sentient and mortal beings” lies at the heart of consciousness (D. M. Levin, cited in Acampora, 2006, p. 72). The term “consciousness,” while it might sometimes imply a unitary, encapsulated self, need not be abandoned as long as its etymology is recalled: A “knowing together,” consciousness requires community.

Although Merleau-Ponty does not take up the theme of the expressiveness of animal faces, he does not disallow the possibility that animal faces could be equally revealing. Because the human sphere is not conceived as entirely separate from the animal but as a transformation of the animal, the antecedants for human expression must be found in the animal sphere. Merleau-Ponty (1963) also states that “representative consciousness is only one of the forms of consciousness” (p. 173). An over-determination of linguistic meaning obscures the way in which everyday experience works. To return to the apartment example, we know the kind of people who live in a given space because of the “feel” of the place, without necessarily being able to name the color of the paint. This opens the possibility that, in this pre-linguistic experience, humans and animals share more than has previously been admitted in Western philosophy. Animals are part of the human milieu and therefore constitute human consciousness; however, beyond sharing in the general milieu, what might be called the face of nature, animals inhabit vectors of intention and gesture expressively.

Just as humans inhabit a milieu and take up intentional stances toward objects, animal bodies also participate in a dialogical and communicative interplay with their surroundings. Shapiro (1997) relates how his dog, Sabaka, selects a place to lie in the family home. “As he approaches a prospective place his bodily posture already begins to assume the contour and, as well, appreciate the lookout that the prospective place would offer” (p. 285). The dog is not “programmed” to select such-and-such a location, even though evolutionary factors do come into play (such as the genetic inheritance from wolf ancestors). The instinctual or biological drives are just one set of factors involved in the contextual unfolding of behavior, which can by no means be restricted to mechanistic understanding. Shapiro continues with a phenomenological description of Sabaka:
He begins to circle [the location] and to curl and lower his body... He is, as it were, trying it on for size. He is seeking a kind of space which he already knows bodily. It is an optimal resting place that provides a sense of the protection and lookout advantage given by a partial enclosure. It also allows comfort, the warmth of the sun, or the softness of the carpet. As a vantage point it is both a lookout or rather smelling station or listening post for detecting outside threat and, at the same time, it is a place that allows him to keep track of our presence and that gives him a sense of being with or close to us. In it he is in the family lair (pp. 285, 286).

Just as Sabaka is able to select a location for lying in the house, Shapiro (1997) is able to interpret this interchange with the setting by means of the dog’s bodily comportment. The dog is not intending to signify with this selection-of-a-place-to-lie-down ritual any more than a human being intends to signify boredom, fatigue, or nervousness by yawning mid-sentence. Nevertheless, these gestures already mean without the conscious intent to signify: Sabaka does intend to choose a good location for lying on the floor, and this action, through the expressivity of his lived body, does communicate the dog’s desires. Shapiro’s description of Sabaka is also reminiscent of the section of Merleau-Ponty (1958) that describes the “optimum distance” for viewing an object (1958, p. 352). The lighting of the room, the size and detail of the object viewed, and a myriad of other factors all interplay, constituting an embodied or structural ideal that influences the viewer’s position relative to the object.

Consider also the expressiveness of a cat’s tail: Like the human face, it is the “transparent envelope” that reveals the attitudes of the animal. An upraised, flicking tail indicates a willingness to play, while a tightly wrapped tail can signal that the cat is cold or threatened (Overall, 2006). As with other sign systems, human and nonhuman, various communicative gestures combine to generate the total meaning. In feline communication, the tail combines with the face, the overall posture, and the position of the paws to convey the cat’s “state of mind.” An animal who is simply cold will

... crouch down, fold [its] ears down, bury [its] nose... and make [its body] as small as possible,” along with the aforementioned wrapped tail, while a cat who is threatened will sit upright with a closed-body posture, lay the ears back, raise a paw as if to swat, and also wrap the tail (Overall, 2006, p. 14).

Although it is true that the observer can have no access to what the cat is thinking, the same is also true of other humans. Without saying a word, the cat’s attitude is written on the cat’s features in much the same way as human body postures convey the intentions of the person speaking. Is it too anthropomorphic to say that the cat is angry or playful or even cold? Merleau-Ponty (1963) points out that something in the behavior of the animal must previously
lend itself to the anthropomorphic designation before it is applied by human knowers (p. 156). Excessive worry about anthropomorphizing belies a tacitly idealist epistemology that locates meaning not in the phenomena but in the legislating consciousness of the individual knower. Merleau-Ponty (1958, 1963, 1964a, 1964b, 2003) frees meaning from being the provenance of an isolated mind to being a shared creation that every actor (and even inanimate objects “act” in the sense of sending out their surfaces to be seen and touched) facilitates. Animal gesture does not begin to mean something once human investigators codify and label it; it is intentional meaning from the start. This intentional meaning need not be purposive or teleological, though it may arise as a result of practical exigencies; it could better be described as a communicative style of motion exhibited in the lived body.

**Highe and Lowe Forms**

In his later work (1968, 2003), Merleau-Ponty is more explicit with regards to the communications of animal bodies. In 2003, Merleau-Ponty wrote the following:

> The study of the appearance of animals takes on interest when we understand this appearance as language... the same muscles of the face (those, for example, for the occlusion of the eye) have a utilitarian function in lower vertebrates (that is, to protect the eye), and in higher animals, an expressive function... The form of the animal is not the manifestation of a finality, but rather of an existential value of manifestation, of presentation. (p. 188, emphasis added).

Here, Merleau-Ponty (2003) could not be clearer about what he considers to be the communicativity of the animal body: the appearance of the animal is on the level of language because it communicates to others, sometimes in a “utilitarian,” and sometimes in an “expressive” fashion. Merleau-Ponty preserves the language of “higher” and “lower,” but even these distinctions take place within the larger unity of “manifestation” or “presentation.” Animals communicate in their own right, contributing vectors of signification to the general milieu. In this complex interchange, each vector effects the others, such that a kind of improvisational field of meaning is generated.

Consciousness as “significative intention” means that finding the originary point or points in the process of the formation of intention may be impossible; for, if the Husserlian principle is correct, every thought, every “mental” event, bears upon some object. If all consciousness is consciousness of something, it follows that no meaning is strictly private and that all meaning opens upon the milieu. The creation of intentionality and meaning is dialectical, that is,
circular; in addition, no pure beginning exists—either in the “world” or in the “subject”—that could somehow stop the ceaseless process of referentiality.

I disagree with the way that Sullivan (2001) characterizes Merleau-Ponty’s notion of “projection” as somehow imperialistically imposing order on an otherwise meaningless world: this sounds more like Sartre’s notion of project (pp. 65, 67). Circular causation means that, yes, the knowing subject draws meaningful themes from the surround, but these themes are already suggested to the knowing subject by the others the subject encounters. A symphony does not have a melody only because the listener “projects” that melody on otherwise random notes; the music actually has a melody to which the listener is attuned. There is much more commonality between Merleau-Ponty’s account and Sullivan’s “transactional account” of knowing (2001) than she admits in the chapter devoted to Merleau-Ponty (pp. 56-58; 65-87). The words “coition,” “dialogue,” and “communion,” repeated throughout Merleau-Ponty (1958) are all attempts to avoid a one-sided imposition of the terms of one consciousness onto a world given as meaningless. True, “coition” can be read as a dominant masculinity penetrating the world with categories of thought, but it can also be read as the embrace of lovers in which the world rises to meet the knower, penetrates the knower with the depths of its already-meaningful surfaces.

The milieu or field in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy (1958, 1963) includes other consciousnesses, including nonhuman consciousnesses, and the interplay of these vectors transforms the setting for new intentional action. An “‘individual’… is traceable to a second-hand loaner from the current culture” (Shapiro, 1989, p. 186), and culture ought to include borrowings from the extra-human: All selves, including animal selves, constitute their selfhood in reference to the maelstrom of meaningful currents in the milieu. “The true is the whole,” and human knowledge and language do not escape its arisal within the sphere of animal meanings; it depends upon a vast network of previously meaningful relations (Hegel, 2005, p. 102).

Conclusion: Interanimal Ethics

Merleau-Ponty (1964b) writes that Koehler’s contribution in Gestalt psychology was to take animal perception as the starting point in understanding human perception; far from simply lumping the human and the animal together, the Gestalt psychologists and Merleau-Ponty recognized an organized whole particular to each species having its own inner integrity (p. 84). The structure of behavior, the coherence of each species’ relations with its environment, reveals an immanent logic, a fleshly ideal, governing perception.
and action. The immanent ideal of each species does not work in isolation but contributes socially to the unfolding of the general milieu, the face of nature. The unfolding of the general sociality (the social world shared by rocks, trees, animals, and humans) takes place through communication, which is present in a myriad of different forms. Gesture, speech, and signing are all forms of communication that contribute to meaning in the animal world; however, by no means are the semiotic processes of human—or even other animals—the only form of meaning-making, as the world itself is already meaningful. Animal knowing is instantiated through the latent meanings of the world, the “thoughtscape,” and returns back to the world in ceaseless referentiality (Acampora, 1999, p. 122). Consciousness would not be possible without the network of relations that constitute it. This is not to revive some form of empiricism, as the network of relations is not mere passive reception but is a dialectical, transformative process in which all the actors in the unfolding system contribute to the meaning of the whole.

A redescription of ethics along the lines of this thoroughgoing relationality would not neglect the contributions of all members to the whole of meaning. An ethical philosophical anthropology recognizes the contributions of the animal to human understanding and probes the overlaps and disjunctions between humans and other species. A responsible philosophical anthropology need not simply say that all animals are the same: Indeed, such a move would make it impossible for humans to treat other animals with respect. To be true to the ways in which human consciousness is structured and to behave fairly toward other creatures, human actors must attend to the immanent logic of other species, recognizing how other species interact with their environments in ways that have an inner integrity. Without this kind of attentive wonder, human beings will ride roughshod over the differences that characterize each species, blinding themselves to the depths of meaning inhabiting each vector of the human and extra-human world. Because they potentially ignore the particularities that make each species—and indeed each individual—valuable in its own right, the animal rights activist who believes that all animals are equal and the human exceptionalist who believes that humans are inherently more valuable than other species are in the same position. An interanimal ethic will have to be able to think difference without thinking hierarchy, a tall order that involves a heretical, “wild” reading of philosophical texts combined with an attention to new insights into animal lives arising from science and the (post) humanities.

This redescription of ethics along the lines of “interanimality” admittedly shares some commonalities with the Kantian dictum of “each person as an end,” perhaps with some modification to the word “person.” The word “organism” or
“actor,” perhaps even “thing,” might well do. The “kingdom of ends,”—to work within a broadly evolutionist, ecological, pro-animal perspective—must remain open-ended, placing no limits on what can be considered an “end.” An “interanimal” ethic values each animal precisely as what the animal is and in relation to other entities that cooperate with the animal in the animal’s unique form of incarnation. Such an ethical impulse, or proto-ethics, does not begin with a logical formula but with embodied participation. As Levinas (1994) writes, “sociality . . . is irreducible to knowledge and truth”; it is only in lived participation in the world, which is actually a suspension of rationality, that the truly ethical, the ethics beyond or before ethics, takes place (pp. 23, 26).

Human linguistic meanings derive from the larger patterns of animal communication and do not differ in kind from the communications of ants, bees, and wolves. Making such a claim does not flatten species-difference but does acknowledge underlying commonalities in animal communication that give rise to human culture. Just as there is no one “body” that could ground human or interspecies acts of sympathy, there is no generic “animal” who could serve as the linkage between species. Species do, however, overlap one another, and comprehension does not take place only within a particular species. Communication seizes upon occasions for its enactment and happens across the edges of species. The social cannot be delimited to this or that self-enclosed sphere but continually opens to the outside in an unfolding milieu of gestural interplay.

As Evernden (2004) says, “[t]he difficulty is that we seem to have two separate and contradictory views of ourselves, one as a suprabiological being, the other as a material body discernible through normal scientific procedures” (p. 117). At the heart of the question of human relationship to other creatures is the use of language, which has been seen as one of the principal markers of the human. A denial of language to other animals has been a principal means of consolidating and authorizing control of nonhuman nature; because animals are mute, the prevailing opinion goes, it matters not how we treat them. Such cosmopolitical deployments of human supremacy ignore the fact that communication is the norm in both the plant and animal worlds and that the communications of other species, expressed in sound and movement, are not fundamentally different from human language (Stengers, 2003). Discussion of the relationship between language and (human and nonhuman) gesture inevitably involves consciousness more generally, and I conclude that consciousness, like language, is social (in the largest, interanimal sense) and is not possible for isolated minds. A critique of language as a plank in a platform of human exceptionalism entails a critique of a second plank, that of self-consciousness. Human language and gesture, indeed human consciousness,
arise from the more general context of animal communication; this basic connection “places [humanity] back among the animals” (Nietzsche, cited in Acampora, 2004, p. 4).

Becoming human, then, requires acknowledging this already-existing continuity with the nonhuman who prevents the error of imagining a self-sustaining, self-enclosed human world. The production of human cultural meaning cannot happen without the dense, interconnecting layers of signs that constitute it; nor can an individual consciousness exist without the general sociality that gives rise to it. “Humanity” has never existed except as an articulation or fold within the general fabric of interrelations called “world,” “environment,” “umwelt,” or “surround.” This general milieu comes to humanity not as a neutral backdrop but as an already-meaningful home teeming with other lives, other minds. The world-synapses, the gaps and junctures between things and persons, allow signification to arise across the differences between species. Thinking of meaning-production as an interstitial phenomenon more honestly embeds “human” cultural productions within larger processes of interrelation, marking within language, within writing, an opening to other modes of signification.

Notes

1. Thanks to Ralph Acampora, Jessica Dillard-Wright, and the anonymous reviewers for providing comments that contributed to the final version of this article. For an expanded treatment of this topic, see my forthcoming book, Ark of the Possible: The Animal World in Merleau-Ponty. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009.

2. Merleau-Ponty uses the example of the football field in order to contrast embodied space with Kantian space, which exists apart from and before actual spaces, and Cartesian space, a neutral grid of interchangeable points. Merleau-Ponty would not deny that we can have abstract conceptions of space: it is just that abstract space derives from lived space. This does not amount to a form of empiricism: perceivers can toggle back and forth between objective space and lived space and the two points of view are mediated by the body itself. The map and the terrain (the objective and situated points of view) are two parallel realities that remain distinct, but motility unites them in ad hoc decision-making.

3. Here I agree with Levinas and Buber that the self or ‘I’ can only be constituted after the fact, from outside the relation in the “third” of community. The face of the other issues a command, “Thou shalt not kill,” bearing down upon me before I even think of myself as separate, as an ‘I.’ Here I contrast my point of view with Levinas by saying that 1.) Animal faces are also expressive and 2.) Their faces also issue a command. I expand what is meant by the face to include not only animal faces but the expressive surfaces of other entities as well (rocks, trees, rivers), what might be called the face of nature. With regards to violence towards other creatures and the environment, human beings may well violate (indeed will violate) the command issued by the face. Such violence cannot be excused, but neither can it be stopped entirely. As people who are always already guilty (there is always another other), we cannot get “off the hook” by diminishing the status of the others who face us. Human beings must make choices, must
discriminate, and in so doing should limit violence as much as possible. The impossibility of non-violence, both a limit and an ideal, issues a call to human beings to approach it as far as possible.

4. I also want to point out that Sullivan (2001) like Butler (1993) rightly flags the assumption of a neutral “body” as problematic: the neutral body is already gendered masculine. Traces of this awareness appear in The Visible and the Invisible (1968); for example, in a footnote Merleau-Ponty writes “the problem of the other is not reducible to that of the other” (p. 81). In other words, we must always deal with particular others and not the other. Similarly, we cannot speak of “the body” but only “bodies.” The melodic, rhizomatic phenomenologies of Toadvine (2004, 2005) and Deleuze and Guattari (2007) also press on this point, asking what “the Flesh” hides in its univocality.

References


