Phenomenology and the Charge of Anthropocentrism

In discussions of environmental thought, 'anthropocentric' tends to be used as a term of abuse – not as abusive as 'sexist' or 'racist' perhaps, but fighting talk nonetheless. Yet what exactly does 'anthropocentrism' mean in such contexts?

The term is often used to denote a general thesis about what has value. To be anthropocentric, on this conception, is to suppose that the nonhuman – or, if you like, more than human - world has value only because, and to the extent that, it serves human interests (see, e.g., McShane 2007: 170). So, for instance, when Aristotle (1995: 23) implies that all nonhuman lifeforms were 'made by nature for the sake of men', he seems to be espousing this sort of anthropocentrism. In some contexts, however, 'anthropocentrism' is used to denote a general thesis about what sorts of things exist. It is used, that is, to pick out a family of ontological, rather than axiological, positions. To put the point roughly and figuratively, a position is taken to be ontologically anthropocentric if it fails to allow for the existence of anything beyond the sphere of the human. For example, when environmental thinkers such as George Sessions (1995), Holmes Rolston III (1997) and Eileen Crist (2004) complain that what they call postmodernism is anthropocentric, they are using the term in this, ontological sense. It is anthropocentric, they claim, for postmodernists to hold that what we usually take to be the nonhuman world is in fact nothing more than a cultural artefact, a social construct, the outcome of negotiations between interested parties, or in some other way a reflection of what goes on in the human world.

Ontological anthropocentrism is thought to have several shortcomings. First, many forms of it are believed to be false (and some forms of it certainly are false). Second, merely endorsing some kinds of ontological anthropocentrism seems, arguably, to indicate a flaw in one's character. (Witness Bertrand Russell's (1967: 92) claim that 'Greatness of soul is not fostered by those philosophies which assimilate the universe to man' or Thomas Nagel's (1986: 109) statement that idealists betray 'a lack of humility'.) Third, ontological anthropocentrism might be thought to encourage the morally dubious position of axiological anthropocentrism. For instance, it might be supposed that although the nonhuman world is valuable in its own right, one cannot value it as such if one regards it as nothing more than a reflection of what goes on in the human world (see, for example, Coates 1998: 185).

Speculative realists such as Quentin Meillassoux argue that phenomenology is inherently anthropocentric in an ontological sense.[1] Phenomenologists, they maintain, focus all of their attention on how reality discloses itself to us human beings, dismissing

speculations about ‘the autonomous reality of the nonhuman world’ (Sparrow 2014: 19; cf. Carman 2008a). Furthermore, some speculative realists claim that this ontological anthropocentrism should worry those who are concerned about environmental problems. For example, Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek and Graham Harman associate phenomenology with ‘an anthropocentric stance towards nature’. It is, they maintain, unclear whether any such approach will help us to face up to ‘the looming ecological catastrophe’ (Bryant, Srnicek and Harman 2011: 3-4). Tom Sparrow, another speculative realist, agrees. He claims that ‘the antirealist reduction of reality to human reality’ which one finds in the works of phenomenologists, goes hand in hand with ‘the anthropocentrism that… fuels the current climate crisis.’ (2014: 19)

In the following, I draw on the works of Maurice Merleau-Ponty to challenge these accusations. Phenomenology, I contend, need not be ontologically anthropocentric.

I.

We are human, so whichever way we turn we see things in distinctly human ways. For example, when I visit Yellowstone National Park, I see it through the eyes of a white, middle-class, educated British man. My perceptions of the place have been influenced by a range of cultural factors: by the writings of Henry David Thoreau and John Muir, by the paintings of the Hudson River School, by countless wildlife documentaries I have seen, by various notions about wildness, colonialism, masculinity, private property and the American West. And at a deeper level, my impressions of the park have been shaped by the fact that I think and feel like a human being rather than, say, a wolf, and that I have a human body rather than four padded paws, a tail and a supersensitive nose. This holds true, moreover, whether I am actually perceiving the park or simply imagining it. It holds true even if I am merely thinking about Yellowstone without calling any sort of mental image to mind. The general upshot is clear. Although I might like to think that in visiting Yellowstone I am confronted by a starkly nonhuman world in which nonhuman things go about their nonhuman business in their own nonhuman ways, my impressions of the place have in fact been thoroughly shaped by various ‘human’ factors.

The general thought here is that:

(A) What we take to be the world, its nonhuman parts included, is necessarily and thoroughly shaped by various ‘human’ factors.

Suppose, for argument's sake, that (A) is true. One response would be to suggest that:

(B) The world, its nonhuman parts included, is nothing more than a combination of various 'human' factors.

(B) is clearly an ontologically anthropocentric conception in the rough sense sketched above. It clearly does not allow for the existence of anything beyond the human. According to it, the world may be likened to an onion. Onions don't have cores: one can strip away layer after layer until one ends up with nothing at all. Similarly, if (B) is true, then stripping away all the 'human' factors that shape our impressions of the world would leave us with nothing at all.

II.

So far as I am aware, no phenomenologists would endorse (B). Merleau-Ponty, for his part, certainly would not. On the contrary, he insists that the world, its nonhuman parts included, is *not* merely what we humans make of it. Thus he chastises transcendental idealists for regarding the world as 'immanent in consciousness', thus occluding the 'aseity of things' (1962: xv-xvi). And he expressly rejects the claim that 'the world is constituted by consciousness' (1962: 432). The truth of the matter is, he insists, that the world 'is always "already there" before reflection begins – as an inalienable presence', one which consciousness can neither 'embrace nor possess' (1962: vii, xvii). Indeed, this, he suggests, can be borne out in perception. If we 'suspend our ordinary preoccupations' and regard any particular thing with 'disinterested attention', we find ourselves confronted by a 'hostile and alien' presence, one which harbours a 'non-human element' (1962: 322).

It might be objected that the mere fact that Merleau-Ponty made these realist-sounding claims fails to prove that his phenomenology does not entail the truth of (B), for he might have made them them *despite* his phenomenological commitments.[2] But that is not the case. Even writers sympathetic to speculative realism concede as much.[3] In sum, Merleau-Ponty is not rationally committed to the particular variety of ontological anthropocentrism implied by (B). He need not – and does not – suppose that the world is nothing more than a projection of the human mind, a social construction or some other combination of 'human' factors.

III.

Merleau-Ponty would not endorse (B); his phenomenology is not ontologically anthropocentric in that sense. But is it ontologically anthropocentric in some other sense?

We have seen that to endorse (B) is to buy into a certain form of ontological anthropocentrism. Furthermore, one can certainly reject (B) without endorsing any sort of ontological anthropocentrism. It is, however, a further question whether one can consistently reject (B) and nonetheless be committed to some form of ontological anthropocentrism.

Meillassoux would say that this is possible. In his view, two sorts of ontological anthropocentrist would reject (B). *Weak correlationists* follow Kant in supposing that although there *is* a way that the world is, independent of any 'human' factors, finite beings like ourselves could never know what this world 'in itself' is like. *Strong correlationists*, by contrast, would say that although one might be able to conceive of worlds for nonhuman subjects, the notion of a world that is not a world for any possible subject makes no sense. For the strong correlationist, it is therefore pointless to speculate about how the world might be in itself.

Endorsing strong correlationism does not commit one to the truth of (B). One can be a strong correlationist and yet deny that the world is simply what we make of it. The strong correlationist can accept that we find ourselves inhabiting a world which resists our attempts to comprehend it with our minds or shape it with our hands. But she will reject speculations about how this world might be in itself. For her, any world is always 'lit up' in terms of the concerns, moods, etc. of those beings for whom it is (or would be) a world.

The Merleau-Ponty of *Phenomenology of Perception* seems, on the face of it, to be a strong correlationist. True, he signals his rejection of (B) by claiming that the world is 'always "already there" before reflection begins', yet the fact that he places 'already there' in scare quotes seems to indicate his continued allegiance to correlationism (1962: vii; cf. Sparrow 2014: 45). To be sure, he says that when we suspend our ordinary preoccupations, we find ourselves confronted by a hostile and alien thing. But he immediately adds that it 'can never be actually *in-itself* because its articulations are those of our very existence, and because it stands at the other end of a gaze or at the terminus of a sensory exploration which invests it with humanity.' (1962: 320) It is merely an '*in-itself-for-us*' (1962: 322). Once again, underneath the realist-sounding language, Merleau-Ponty seems to remain correlationist. For him, the world is, it would seem, a 'human' world (cf. Cooper, this volume, [insert page numbers]).

For Merleau-Ponty, then, what we perceive is indelibly coloured by our distinctly human concerns, 'overlaid', as he puts it, 'with anthropological predicates' (1962: 320). And he suggests that this holds true, also, of anything we might be able to *conceive*.'[W]e cannot conceive anything', he claims, 'which is not perceived or perceptible.' (1962: 320) This is why he dismisses speculations about what things are like in themselves, divorced from any relation to a subject. It is why he famously took issue with A. J. Ayer's claim that the sun existed before human beings (see Toadvine 2014). And it is why he takes the line he does in the following passage from *Phenomenology of Perception*:

> To our assertion… that there is no world without an Existence [i.e., a being for whom there is a world] that sustains its structure, it might have been retorted that the world nevertheless precedes man. [But] what precisely is meant by saying that the world existed beyond any human consciousness? An example of what is meant is that the world originally issued from a primitive nebula from which the combination of conditions necessary to life was absent. But every one of these words, like every equation in physics, presupposes *our* pre-scientific experience of the world, and this reference to the world in which we *live* goes to make up the proposition's valid meaning. Nothing will ever bring home to my comprehension what a nebula that no one sees could possibly be. (1962: 432)

IV.

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, as presented in *Phenomenology of Perception*, seems therefore to be an example of strong correlationism.[4] Speculative realists such as Meillassoux would say that, as such, it exemplifies the anthropocentrism which marks so much post-Kantian thought. Be that as it may, even if the position developed in *Phenomenology of Perception* really is ontologically anthropocentric, it is a further question whether the same may be said of Merleau-Ponty's other contributions to phenomenology, still less those of Husserl, Heidegger, Marcel, Sartre, *et al*.

The first thing to note, in addressing these further questions, is that it is misleading to refer, as I have just done, to Merleau-Ponty's *position*. Neither Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, nor any other form of phenomenology, is best conceived of as such. Phenomenology is, rather, an *approach*. The key question, then, is whether adopting such approaches must lead one to ontological anthropocentrism. And, as David Morris (2013: 327)

argues, before concluding that the answer must be 'yes', one ought to look to see where the paths of phenomenology do in fact lead. In the remainder of this paper, I shall argue that they can lead one beyond the sphere of the human.

V.

Return to Merleau-Ponty's account of our perception of things. The thing's articulations, recall, 'are those of our very existence' (1962: 320). So, for instance, when I turn my attention to the semi-precious stone – a tiger's eye - sitting on my desk, what I perceive is conditioned by my memories, my cultural context, my body as well as by a host of other 'human' factors. Since it's a hot day, the stone reveals itself to me, even before I touch it, as having a pleasantly cool surface. It reminds me of visiting a seaside town with my mother many years ago. Furthermore, my perception of the stone – both what I perceive and how I perceive it - is shaped by the norms of the various cultures to which I belong. The stone stands out in my field of perception as mattering, yet as neither expensive nor sacred. And as Merleau-Ponty would emphasise, my perception of the stone is also conditioned by my body. Indeed, this remains the case even when I am not touching the thing. I don't need to reach out to know that it is within reach: I *see* it as being within reach. I do not need to make contact with my fingers to feel its hardness or smoothness: I *see* it as hard and smooth.

Much more could be added here; however, no observations of this sort would allay the worries of Meillassoux *et al*. For, to the speculative realist, any phenomenological account of the perception of a stone – or of anything else – will continue to portray what we take to be part of external reality as a correlate of the body-subject. To be sure, the phenomenologist uses what Sparrow (2014) calls a 'rhetoric of realism'. She tries, through a clever use of words, to evoke the presence of an external world. Yet the speculative realist will insist that the basic position remains correlationist. The stone remains a stone-for-us.

Even so, the phenomenologist's description *points beyond* ontological anthropocentrism. Return to the tiger's eye. I reach out to touch it - but what exactly is going on here? My hand is not an instrument I use to explore the thing, for talk of instruments implies that the agency in perception lies entirely with me and a more thorough phenomenological investigation reveals that that isn't the case at all. Rather, the stone's surface invites my touch. It 'sets a kind of muddled problem for my body to solve', writes Merleau-Ponty; it 'summons' me and my body 'welcomes' it (1962: 214, 318; 1964: 164). I find that my hand has already adopted the posture required to perceive the stone's surface.

The muscles in my fingers are relaxed; they extend towards the stone, anticipating smoothness.[5] They have already come alive as sentient, and the stone's surface as smooth, even before they make contact. Just as my fingers in this sense create the stone's smoothness, so that smoothness gives birth to my fingers as sentient organs. So it is not as if I use my fingers to explore the stone. No, in a sense, I am touched by the stone, just as it is touched by me. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, in such cases 'it cannot be held that one acts while the other suffers the action, or that one confers significance on the other. Apart from the probing of my eye or my hand, and before my body synchronizes with it, the sensible [i.e., in this case, the stone] is nothing but a vague beckoning.' (1962: 214)

It is these ideas which point the way beyond ontological anthropocentrism. Granted, the *content* of perception, *what* I perceive, is indelibly coloured by my human concerns. Like everything else I perceive, the tiger's eye continues to display 'the human face it acquires in a human gaze' (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 54). Yet the perception itself is not entirely my doing, for the agency – if that is right word - lies partly with the thing (cf. Toadvine 2009: 86). As Merleau-Ponty puts it, the thing *invites, summons, welcomes* or *beckons* my hand.[6]

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty maintains that perception presupposes a basic accord between the pre-personal self which, as he puts it, 'perceives in me' and the surrounding things by which this 'natural self' finds itself invited, summoned, welcomed or beckoned (1962: 215, 440). In his later works, he adds that that accord is possible not only because the self is situated *in* the world, but also because it and the world it inhabits, perceiver and perceived, are of the same 'stuff' – not matter or mind, but a common 'element' which he calls 'flesh' (*chair*) (2003: 218; 1968: 139, 146). That suggestion might conjure up a mental image of a relation between two distinct relata, a fleshy perceiver and a fleshy world it inhabits. Yet in his final, unfinished work, *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty makes a radical suggestion: that what might, in other circumstances, be called an act of perception should be conceived as something like an event from which both perceiver and perceived are abstractions: a 'coiling over' or 'intertwining' of a single flesh (1968: Chapter 4).

VI.

There is not enough space, here, to give a full account, still less a defence, of Merleau-Ponty's notoriously abstruse account of flesh. Suffice to say that there has been a great deal of debate about how that account should be interpreted. Some claim that it marks the man's

rejection of phenomenology for metaphysics – a move which not all applaud.[7] Others disagree (e.g., Madison 1990: 32). Some maintain that the account of flesh signals Merleau-Ponty's rejection of correlationism; others hold that it remains thoroughly correlationist.[8] And of course quite a few people think that Merleau-Ponty's claims about flesh are mostly false. Still, whatever the answers to these questions, two things are clear. First, even if (which is by no means clear) the account of flesh marks a decisive break with the phenomenological tradition, it is clear that it was arrived at *by means* of a phenomenological approach. Second, even if that account remains correlationist, even if, in fact, it cannot ultimately be justified, it is clearly not ontologically anthropocentric.[9] In *Phenomenology of Perception*, recall, things are described as being 'overlaid with anthropological predicates' (1962: 320). In *The Visible and the Invisible*, by contrast, Merleau-Ponty insists that he does 'not mean to do anthropology, to describe a world covered over with all our own projections, leaving aside what it can be under the human mask.' (1968: 136) Instead the reader is invited to think of flesh as 'the concrete emblem of a general manner of being': a way of being which, to be sure, expresses itself in what I call my perception, but which extends beyond this to encompass 'the whole of the sensible of which [the body] is part, and… the world' (1968: 147, 138). As such, it is thought to exist 'in other fields' (1968: 144) – not just in the stone's welcoming of my hand, but in the foliage inviting the elephant's trunk or the river the kingfisher's dive. In such cases, too, sensible calls to sentient – these are also events of nature, intertwinings of flesh.

To repeat: with these thoughts, the focus has shifted away from the *content* of perception – which presumably continues to display the human face it acquires in a human gaze – to what might be described (though imperfectly) as the *act* of perception.[10] That is to say, the guiding question is no longer 'What is perceived?' but 'Who (or what) is perceiving?' And in addressing *that* question, Merleau-Ponty found himself drawn towards a conclusion prefigured in the works of thinkers such as Schelling, Schopenhauer and Coleridge: that what we misleadingly call *our* experience is the manifestation of some wider and deeper upsurge of being (see further, James 2009: Chapter 5).

In sum, then, it was precisely phenomenological inquiry which eventually led Merleau-Ponty away from ontological anthropocentrism. The claim that all forms of phenomenology are ontologically anthropocentric ought therefore to be rejected. Perhaps phenomenology has some essential flaws, but ontological anthropocentrism isn't one of them.

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[1] Meillassoux himself espouses what he calls 'speculative materialism' (Harman 2011: 168). For present purposes, however, 'speculative realism' and 'speculative materialism' may be regarded as synonyms.

[2] Cf. Tom Sparrow 2014: 50-1. Incidentally, Sparrow isn't being entirely fair here. After all, isn't what eminent self-proclaimed phenomenologists *say* the best guide to what phenomenology *is*? It would surely be unfair to insist that phenomenology is essentially anti-realist and then to dismiss any realist-sounding statements phenomenologists make as contrary to the spirit of the tradition.

[3] Even Sparrow admits this. 'Merleau-Ponty's lesson at the end of the day is', he writes, 'that the world we perceive is always more than what we perceive, and it is perception that discloses this to us.' (2014: 44)

[4] I say *seems* since that claim is open to question. Consider Merleau-Ponty's account of the thing-in-itself-for-us. It is not supposed to convey scepticism – the thought that although there seems to be more to the thing than we can perceive there might in fact be nothing more to it. Nor is it as if we encounter the thing and *then*, by means of inference or some other mental operation, conclude that it exists independently of us. No, its independence from us is partly constitutive of the thing as perceived. This may be one of the points Merleau-Ponty means to convey by speaking of *horizons*. Just as a distant horizon both lies within and points beyond my visual field, so the thing both lies within and points beyond the correlation. For an illuminating discussion of this difficult issue, see Toadvine 2009: Chapter 2.

[5] Granted, there is room for error here. Perhaps the smooth-looking surface turns out to be rough. But error is only possible because there is a basic harmony between perceiver and perceived.

[6] Don't let these words mislead. This basic accord between sentient and sensible is also the condition for the possibility of one's being repelled by the things one encounters, as when one's hand spontaneously recoils from something sharp or slimy.

[7] For instance, Taylor Carman (2008b: 241 n. 38) expresses doubts about the trajectory of Merleau-Ponty's later, increasingly ontological inquiries. By contrast, Bryan Bannon suggests that in his later works Merleau-Ponty was moving in a more promising direction: away from 'the traditional project of phenomenology' and towards a Whitehead-inspired 'speculative process philosophy' (2014: 185 n.40). I take no stand on this issue here.

[8] The former view is defended in Madison 1973: 205-207 (cf. Merleau-Ponty 1968: 131). By contrast, Sparrow (2014: 49, 81, 155) argues that the account of flesh remains correlationist. I suspect that Meillassoux himself would claim that in his later works Merleau-Ponty 'absolutizes' the correlation (see further, Meillassoux 2008: 37).

[9] And even if it were, it would be a further question whether, as Sparrow *et al* seem to assume, ontological anthropocentrism is necessarily at odds with environmental concern. A comparison with artworks may be useful here. The world of art is clearly anthropocentric in the sense that claims about art make no sense when they entirely abstracted from references to the attitudes, concerns, etc. of beings, like us, which are capable of appreciating art. Yet no one would claim that since, say, Michelangelo's *David* is anthropocentric in this sense, the statue may legitimately be used as a makeshift drying rack for wet laundry or broken up for ballast. Likewise, it is not clear why someone who believes that the natural world is a 'human' world must be inclined to regard it as a collection of mere stuff to be used in any way she sees fit. (I would like to thank David E. Cooper for suggesting this point to me.)

[10] Merleau-Ponty expresses his misgivings about talk of perceptual acts at 1962: x-xi and 1968: 244.