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Cet ouvrage constitue une transcription commentée de conférences, cours et notes de Maurice Merleau-Ponty, datant de la période 1946-1949. Ces manuscrits totalement inédits s'inscrivent dans le prolongement de la *Phénoménologie de la perception* de 1945, gravitent autour d'*Humanisme et terreur*, et anticipent certaines analyses des premiers cours au Collège de France. Ils possèdent une grande spécificité par rapport au corpus déjà publié, et offrent comme une sorte de vivier de la pensée du philosophe, lequel est demeuré englouti pendant plus de 70 ans. Tous ces essais témoignent de la richesse et de la vitalité de la pensée de Merleau-Ponty en ces années d'après-guerre, en dialogue avec de nombreux courants de pensée de son époque. Une édition scientifique exhaustive incluant des variantes ainsi que le traçage systématique des références aux auteurs et aux notions évoqués par Merleau-Ponty.

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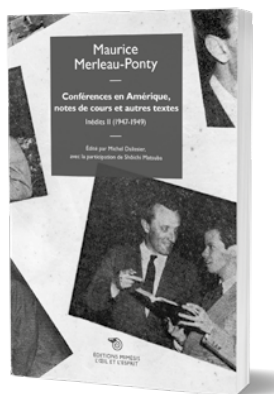
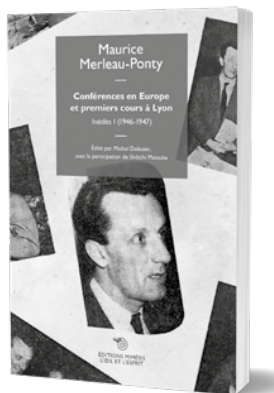
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THINKING THE ANTHROPOCENE DEBATE WITH MERLEAU-PONTY
PENSARE IL DIBATTITO SULL'ANTROPOCENE CON MERLEAU-PONTY

Sous la direction de – Edited by – A cura di
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FEDERICO LEONI

AN ECOLOGY WITHOUT NATURE? MERLEAU-PONTY, SIMONDON, LATOUR

Towards Nature

When Maurice Merleau-Ponty comes to the question of nature, towards the end of the 1950s, he has two declared polemical targets. They are Descartes and Sartre. On the one hand, a mechanistic idea of nature.¹ On the other an idea of freedom that runs the risk of being all dependent on that mechanism, carved at the purely negative margins of that mechanism. On the one hand, in other words, an idea of nature as a discrete being, made up of *partes extra partes*, one part operating on the other in an inertial and deterministic manner. On the other hand, an idea of freedom conceived as an exception to that inertia and determinism, a negative exception thus finding its place and support in that inextended being, and in this exact measure totally interior and somehow arbitrary.

Maybe it is not so important that Descartes himself made room in his system for a kind of Archimedean point, which cannot be described either according to the logic of the discrete or according to that of the continuous, either according to that of extension and exteriority or according to that of intensity and interiority. Merleau-Ponty himself will read Descartes' *cogito*² as a sort of event, of active-passive performance, of material-immaterial operativity, which from a certain point of view is that very processuality, that very plane of immanence Merleau-Ponty himself was looking for in the direction of his notions of nature, raw being, flesh. Maybe it is not so important that Sartre himself was posing at the end of the Fifties or the beginning of the Sixties the question of the practico-inert, which from its very title eschews the alternatives of the evoked dualisms, determinism and freedom, materiality and intentionality, extension and intensity. Perhaps everyone, and Merleau-Ponty is no exception, has to find his own words and has to construct his own adversaries, to say what his own adversaries are sometimes already saying with other words.

From a certain point of view, nature is the merleau-pontyan word for the cartesian *cogito*, this event unassignable to the active and unassignable to the passive, to the egological subject and to that object which is the negative pole of subjectivity. And maybe nature is also in some way the merleau-pontyan word for the sartrian practico-inert, for the spectral activity of a body that is a kind of phenomenological paradox, simultaneously Leib and Koerper,

finally freed from the limits of modern subjectivity and inscribed in a web of differences and implications that concatenate it with every other Leib-Koerper around it, be it human, animal, vegetal, mineral. Flesh, more precisely, is the name of this web of differences and implications, Merleau-Ponty says in a famous chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible*.³ It is a sort of fabric made more of empty spaces than of fullness, more of distances than of belongings, which brings the still tendentially subjective body of phenomenology towards an extension that in a certain sense is all subjective and in another sense reveals that it is the subject that is the infinite fold of an infinite animated extension, a ripple of a natural fabric that is not made of flesh except in the very special sense in which flesh is the name of a kind of living processuality which is situated beyond or before the distinction of the organic and the inorganic.

Merleau-Ponty, naturalist and artificialist

Merleau-Ponty is therefore working on the idea of nature, and it is within the framework of this work that he writes three pages of notes on Gilbert Simondon.⁴ In particular, on his, at the time, recent doctoral thesis on *Individuation in the light of the notions of form and information*.⁵

The viewpoint of his reading of Simondon is constituted by the notion of raw being, which, as is well known, constitutes one of the most constant preoccupations of Merleau-Ponty's courses on nature. Merleau-Ponty emphasises the pre-individual, infra-objective quality of that raw being, "in contrast with the constructed and absolutely dense being of Cartesian-Sartrean ontology", as Emmanuel de Saint-Aubert has pointed out.⁶ Thus, Gilbert Simondon becomes, for Merleau-Ponty, first and foremost the poet of that pre-individual and the infra-objective, or, put another way, of the not fully constituted and the unrealized.

One might say that Simondon's work helps Merleau-Ponty to avoid that sort of compactness, of monumentality, that his "curious fleshism", "pious and sensual", as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari polemically said,⁷ could entail and did occasionally entail. Consider when Merleau-Ponty writes that the flesh documents "one sole massive adhesion to Being".⁸ Words and concepts have an inertia of their own, which drags philosophers where their good intentions would not like to go. Simondon enables Merleau-Ponty to accentuate the mobility of flesh, the processuality of nature. Or perhaps we should start saying "of natures". These are all aspects that the merleau-pontyan idea of nature can disclose, provided that we abandon that kind of imagination of homogeneity, that is sometimes implied in the very idea of flesh or in the very idea of nature, if only for the fact that the very idea of nature seems to say that all nature is precisely natural, that all nature is homogeneously natural, that all nature is homogeneously foreign to that sphere we call technique, artificiality, maybe humanity.

Simondon shows him that nature is *natura naturans*, and thus nature which is naturing in many different ways, styles, rhythms, directions. Behind the title “nature” lie many lines, perhaps infinite lines, each endowed with a certain style, innervated by a certain rhythm, configured as a certain plane of immanence, heading towards a series of internal concretions and consequences. The compactness of nature is dissolved, at the cost of what we might see on the horizon as the possibility, and perhaps the declared intention, of an integral artificialization of what was called nature by our tradition. Maybe the very idea of *natura naturans* contained this perspective from the beginning. If nature is naturing, all nature is artifice. All nature is the effect of that original but empty efficacy, a construction that takes shape in that workshop that is the natural terrain on which the most diverse artefacts continually sprout. If nature is the art of God, all nature is artificial, said a sharp Baroque physician and writer named Thomas Browne.⁹ It is a perspective that Simondon the technologist could have subscribed to. Perhaps on the condition of specifying that God is precisely the name of this variety of independent directions, or to put it in more openly neo-platonic terms, that the One is the name of the many and is nothing else than the name of the many – that the One is the name of the integral heterogeneity and divergence of the directions of its *proodos* (a notion that not by chance covers, also literally and ethymologically, the sphere we nowadays indicate in terms of processuality).¹⁰

Such a perspective is not entirely new for Merleau-Ponty. “In man everything is artificial and everything is natural”, he had written fifteen years earlier in *Phenomenology of Perception*.¹¹ A certain instability and incompleteness would entrust the human being to this ambiguous status, which other living species would not know. The novelty of this last “Simondonian” phase would, if anything, lie in the attempt to extend to nature itself what *Phenomenology of Perception* attributed to the human exception alone, precisely in virtue of its exceptionality with respect to nature. Now, fifteen years later, Merleau-Ponty is on the verge of seeing nature as a space which is wholly made of exceptions, human and non-human. The still crypto-humanistic phrase contained in *Phenomenology of Perception* could now have found, through Simondon, a more baroque and at the same time post-modern reformulation. In nature everything is natural and everything is artificial. All nature is *natura naturans*, namely nature is a workshop, a factory, an industry, and all *natura naturata* is fabricated nature, heterogeneous nature, entrusted to divergent and contrasting lines of fabrication, all of them mutually exceptional, all of them irreducible to one another.

Postmodern Presocraticism

It is true that this perspective remains in some way unresolved or unexploited. Merleau-Ponty does not elaborate on this Simondonian direction. Merleau-Ponty's nature will continue to oscillate, will continue

to tend now to the homogeneity of the flesh, now to the heterogeneous assemblage of animality, vegetation, stone. Maybe the very choice of the term “flesh” is the mark of this unresolved oscillation on the border of the old epistemological temptation of phenomenology.

But it is well known that Merleau-Ponty dedicates some dazzling notations to the question of the pre-Socratic “elements” in *The Visible and the Invisible*. It is in this direction we can find something that resonates with Simondon. With the pre-Socratic Simondon, we might add. It is not without reason that this same journal, years ago, integrated the three pages of unpublished Merleau-Ponty notes on Simondon with another unpublished text, this time by Simondon himself, and dedicated to pre-Socratic “ontology”.

From a certain point of view, the other precondition of Merleau-Ponty’s encounter with Simondon, alongside the strategy of the flesh, is in fact Merleau-Ponty’s “pre-Socraticism”. That is to say, his sensitivity to that lexicon of the elements that is so characteristic of those thinkers who are usually inscribed *ex officio* in the history of philosophy without being properly philosophers. It is well known they stand halfway between the magician and the scientist, between the realm of theory and the field of practice. In some way, it is precisely this strange position that could speak eloquently to someone who in his own way stood at the end of an ontological tradition and searched for other ontologies, or searched for something other than ontology.

These Merleau-Pontyan pages have been studied many times.¹² Let’s recall their general logic. It is the lexicon of elements that attracts Merleau’s attention. The word “element”, in particular. He is speaking of the “flesh”, and he adds: “To designate it, we should need the old term ‘element’, in the sense it was used to speak of water, air, earth, and fire, that is, in the sense of a general thing, midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea, a sort of incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being. The flesh is in this sense an ‘element’ of Being.”¹³ The monumentality of Merleau-Pontyan “carnism” is diluted. Flesh is not a general matter. Being is not a peaceful background but a struggle between elements. Nature is not a homogeneous plane but a collection of heterogeneous lines. The very word “collection” becomes of dubious pertinence. To speak of a collection is to postulate a genus of which the species would be species. For example, a general matter of which air or water would be successive individuations. But this idea of the relationship between the elements, if it is not entirely foreign to the pre-Socratic world, is nonetheless a later understanding of their own meditation. The pre-Socratic world seems to be made up of heterogeneous elements, free of a higher plane of homogeneity. Presocratic ontology is resolutely polemical. Which is as much as to say that it is not an ontology, if those beings are irreducible to a common, pre-individual being, and are on the other hand irreducible to particular, individuated entities. Is it not, after all, this very intermediarity, this avoidance of the alternative of being and entity, of idea and individual, of generality and specificity, that seduces Merleau-Ponty when he evokes the term “element”?

So here is the point of contact with Simondon. Simondon is very clear about the status of the pre-Socratic elements: “Natural models like the cloud, air, and water make tangible this connection between unity and homogeneity. Homogeneity is not only the absence of limits; positively, it is the condition for coherence: the like adheres to the like, by virtue of an internal connection of homogeneity. Homogeneity is continuity; indivision is coherence. Elementary water for Thales, air for Anaximenes, the apeiron for Anaximander, are these continuous elements and are one by virtue of their fundamental homogeneity.”¹⁴ But Simondon continues: “However, to this first character of coherence and consistency is added a dynamism of development, of growth, more universal and more powerful than that which makes plants and animals grow: *physis*. This dynamism pushes the homogeneous element to draw within itself a heterogeneity whose terms are symmetrical with respect to the primitive state of undivided homogeneity; the element condenses and rarefies, generating the derived elements that distinguish themselves and distribute themselves in discontinuous but internally ordered series: water becomes air by rarefying, then with a further rarefaction it becomes fire, which is lighter than air; while, by condensing, it becomes earth. There can also be intermediate states between these degrees of condensation and rarefaction, testifying to the continuity of the process of *physis*: before being air, water is cloud, vapour. Before it is earth, water condenses in the form of ice, more compact than water but less compact than earth.”¹⁵

Being and history of being in dark times

The resonance between Simondon and Merleau-Ponty is even more evident when we pay attention to a marginal observation that Simondon appends to his reconstruction of pre-Socratic thought.

Simondon notes that epochs such as classical Greece, or fully realised Romanity, subordinate the understanding of individuality to a vision imbued with a certain sense of completeness and coexistence. “It is according to the order of simultaneity that the principles of individuality are discovered”,¹⁶ in times when a certain philosophical and scientific culture reached its zenith. “The temporal and operative characteristics of individuality are not neglected, but are subordinated to structural characteristics and to the actuality of established relationships.”¹⁷ Those same temporal and operative characteristics of individuality need another cultural climate to find attention and to gain that centrality that fascinates Simondon: “It is in a hidden manner, within sects of an initiatory nature, or late, with the start of the decadence of ancient civilisation, that the temporal and operational characteristics of individuality assume primordial status, while the characteristics of simultaneous relation and of structure are subordinated and reattached, as consequences, to the others.”¹⁸

One might ask whether this Simondonian notation should be understood as a psychological notation. A more uncertain humanity would imagine

being in conformity with her uncertainty, depositing in the secret of being something like the imprint of its collective metastability. A sort of projection in the psychoanalytic sense. Not, however, the projection by a single subject onto its object, but by an entire culture onto that integral object that would be being. But this is not the only way in which we can understand Simondon's observation. Indeed, it could be said that it is only in the eyes of a system of thought that interprets itself as concluded, that that past will appear as less concluded, less systematic, possibly lacking something, claudicant. That past, when it was present, did not have this external gaze on itself, and could not attribute a lack or a claudication to itself. He felt he was on a journey, perhaps, but not in the sense that he had not yet reached his destination. The late epoch or the hidden cenacles that fascinate Simondon simply did not enjoy the distance from the practices and the operations of everyday life that a certain richness, cultural hegemony and refinement of customs sometimes allows to gain.

Maybe the kind of being they projected was projected from the practices in which they were caught up, not from the lack of completion we now may see in them. This projection projected something of a processuality, not of an incompleteness. It projected something from the standpoint of the ongoing fabrication, not of failure. After all, we might ask ourselves, is it not a climate marked by the end of the possibilities of reflection, by the exhaustion of metaphysical peace, by the waning of traditional ontological guarantees, that suggests to Simondon and Merleau-Ponty a kind of philosophical sympathy for the pre-Socratic vision of being as entirely centred on becoming, on the bricolage of the elements, on the metastability of what had seemed stable to the hegemonic metaphysics? In dark times, being does not take the path of being, nor even the path of non-being, but that of becoming, of becoming divergently, of becoming through a fundamental gamble. A time of decadence or an experience of marginality is perhaps spontaneously inclined to dismissing ontology and its great necessities, for something like an occasionalism of the lines of becoming, a deconstruction of being in the perennial bricolage of many partially composable elements, an atomism of contingent encounters and concatenations among heterogeneous lines of becoming.

Notes on an "and"

We said that what first appeared with regard to man, as Merleau-Ponty still called it in the 1940s, reappears in the final years of his career shifted and radicalised on this new front, i.e. with regard to nature. Nature itself begins to appear all natural and all artificial.

But it remains to be thought about the meaning of this Merleau-Pontyan naturalism, a naturalism that, moreover, is not only Merleau-Pontyan, and indeed is interesting in Merleau-Ponty because it is that naturalism that our time seems to claim in every way and direction. What remains to be thought

about, in particular, is the “and” that connects what the West has normally thought of as disjointed. What does it mean that nature is all natural “and” all artificial? Are both propositions true? What happens if we put the emphasis on one or the other possibility?

We could, for example, say that nature is nothing other than the incessant production of artifices, it is nothing other than the name we have given to this processuality that relentlessly brings into the world traces, sediments, artefacts, products of synthesis. To put it very simply: things that were not there, new things, new materials and new forms, or rather new things that lie somewhere between materials and forms, if it is true that matter itself is a naturalist phantasm and form itself is in turn an artificialist phantasm. Everything is artificial, and natural is that condition which implies that there is nothing but artifice. It goes without saying that there is nothing but artifice, in all senses of that phrase, “it goes without saying”, including the sense in which nature is that great *automaton* whose functioning, whose literal “going without saying”, “going by itself”, without the need for anything else, without reference to an external cause or an external end, is therefore itself a continuous production of something else, a continuous alteration and adulteration, a continuous alteration in the absence of an identity presupposed to that alteration. The secret at the very heart of the *automaton* is always that there is no *autos*, if the automatism of the *automaton* is nothing other than its going, its generating things, its productive power. *Natura naturans* is always an empty space.

But we could say the opposite. All this incessant production of artifices is precisely what takes place within the perimeter of nature. If artifices are what comes out of the womb of what we call nature, it is also evident that nothing is really coming out of it, that nature does not properly envisage something as an outside. If nature is all there is, then what we call the outside is still nature, is still an inside. Nature is a space or a concept which does not envisage alterity, but only internal alteration, intimate metamorphosis. What we call the outside, is nothing but a part of the inside, which for some reason we are isolating and placing in a certain relationship with another part of the inside, a part we have isolated for some reason which is not inherent to that part, but to our interests in that part. The inside/outside is in this sense an entirely tactical distinction, a momentary, superficial, occasionalist and in this sense absolutely contingent and contingently absolute opposition. This inside is so inescapable that even the term of inside is quite odd and finally inadequate. Nature would simply be a name of the great plane of immanence, a name of the absolute. Everything is natural, in this sense, and artifice is the name we give to an all-natural strategy and a set of effects that are also all-natural, effects that come from nature and return to nature. Or rather that do not come and go at all, properly speaking, since there is no inside and outside with respect to which we can say that something comes out of something else, or that something returns to something else. No translation, no movement we can conceive as the movement of a point on a prescribed line. We call artifice, artificiality, this pulsation of nature, this motionless undulation of the identical.

The oxygen industry

We all know that Merleau-Ponty's paradoxical phrases want to indicate an intermediate region. Yet in fact the intermediate does not cease in his discourse to tilt to one and only one of the two sides he is supposed to mediate. One would say that Merleau-Ponty inclines towards this second reading. Everything is natural and everything is artificial, but that everything is artificial means that everything is naturally artificial.

After all, the words he relies on are flesh, nature, not artifice, not steel, not plastic, as a Cronenberg of philosophy might say. Who, on the other hand, among our contemporaries, has gone further, exploring what we might call the reverse of this naturalistic accentuation, is perhaps Bruno Latour. It is Latour, that Cronenberg of philosophy to whom one might look, in order to better understand the first reading of our phrase. He is the one who thinks that yes, one never goes outside nature, but nature is nothing but this going outside and always being, in every sense of the expression, including the most comical and the most trivial, outside of itself, beside of itself, out of its mind.

Let us take a couple of passages from his book *Facing Gaia*,¹⁹ which show with some evidence this radically artificialist inflection. Latour is talking about oxygen, this strange substance that is an indispensable precondition of our metabolism, and at the same time a dangerous substance, with infinite unpredictable consequences for those very living beings that take advantage of it. Latour writes bluntly: "This dangerous poison is the unforeseen consequence of the action of microorganisms that have given to the other actors, from which we descend, the opportunity to develop. In other words, we are the atmosphere. Oxygen is a relative newcomer, a massive case of pollution that was grasped by new forms of life as a golden opportunity, after it had annihilated billions of earlier forms of life. This dangerous poison is the unexpected consequence of the action of microorganisms that have given other actors, from which we are descended, the opportunity to develop. In other words, oxygen is a relative novelty, a serious example of a pollutant that has been seized by new life forms as a golden opportunity, after having annihilated billions of previous life forms."²⁰

Then, Latour gives the floor to James Lovelock, the patron saint of his book on Gaia: "Oxygen is poisonous, it is mutagenic and probably carcinogenic, and it thus sets a limit to life spans. But its presence also opens up abundant and new opportunities for organisms. At the end of the Archean, the appearance of a little free oxygen would have worked wonders for those early ecosystems [...] Oxygen would have changed the environmental chemistry. The oxydation of atmospheric nitrogen to nitrates would have increased, as would the weathering of many rocks, particularly on the land surfaces. This would have made available nutrients that were previously scarce, and so allowed an increase in the abundance of life."²¹

Then Latour picks up the thread again: "If we live now in an atmosphere dominated by oxygen, this is not the result of a preordained feedback loop. It is because the organisms that transformed this deadly poison into a powerful



accelerator of their metabolism have multiplied. Oxygen is there not simply as a component of the environment, but as the extended consequence of an event continued to our day by the proliferation of organisms.”²² That is to say, oxygen is natural if we look at it from the point of view of those living beings that take advantage of it, finding it already done since time immemorial, a natural and indispensable precondition of their metabolism. But it is artificial if we look at it in its making, in its coming into the world as a product, even as a waste product, of the metabolism of those ancient living beings who bequeathed it to us. Just as the distinction between inside and outside is entirely tactical, strategic, not so much true as useful, not so much objective as oriented towards emphasising certain relationships and certain possibilities for action, so the distinction between natural and artificial is entirely opportunistic. It is opportunistic in the best sense of the term, so to speak. It does not describe a reality, but highlights opportunities and dangers. Opportunities and dangers that in turn are not such in general but with respect to someone or something, with respect to a certain future and a certain success, with respect to a certain practical interest or another.

Macro-ontology and micro-politics

We can now begin to put our guiding phrase in perspective. In nature, everything is natural and everything is artificial. A proposition that we can read and appreciate as paradoxical, on a logical or ontological level, as long as we question its truth, its adequacy to things, its ability to describe a certain state of being, but this is a last metaphysical dream, and from this dream we should have awoken. Since all of this supposes the existence of being, and thus its intermediate, paradoxical, undecidable, and so on, character. Or, a proposition whose paradoxicality immediately dissolves when we begin to see its political nature. Political in a very ancient and one might say natural or naturalistic sense. In that sense, that is to say, in which the politics of the polis is nothing but a particularly recent and refined example of that much older and, to our eyes, coarse dynamic of reciprocal adjustment of interests and opportunities which intercept each others, and use, and challenge, and sometimes overwhelm each others.

It is not so much a question of asking whether it is true that everything is artificial or it is true that everything is natural. Natural and artificial do not indicate something that pertains to being, but something that pertains to the use of a certain being by another being, to the utility or harm that certain beings derive from the other beings, of the affinity and proximity in time, space, life, that certain beings feel and promote and derive with respect to other beings. We ourselves could and perhaps should ask ourselves: what becomes possible if we emphasise that nature is but the production of artifices? What does it become possible to do, if instead we place the emphasis on the fact that all artifice is made from nature, and ultimately by nature itself? Those two perspectives are both



true, but they are not both vital. One would say: those two perspectives are as different as life and death are. Or, at least, as a plus of life and a minus of life are.

It is a question of survival, in other words, in the sense that what we call survival oscillates between the more of life and the less of life, between living more, living above, and living less, below the threshold of life, almost at the edge of death. And our survival, in the time of Anthropocene, has perhaps to do with that uncertain accent, with the choice of where to drop that uncertain accent our reading of Merleau-Ponty's phrase. Will we survive if we put the accent on the first or the second possibility? Does the possibility of survival lie more on the side of those who say that everything is natural, or on the side of those who say that everything is artificial? Does survival, for us, today, have more to do with seeing that all artifice is, however, nature, a product of nature, a waste of nature, a return to nature? Or does surviving have more to do, for us, today, with seeing that nature is but a name for artifice, artificiality, production of artifices, artificiality as underlying pattern of every so-called natural processuality?

If the question is logically and ontologically undecidable, and gives rise to the delights of hyperdialectics, it is instead decidable on the political level, both in the narrow sense of politics and in the broader one, we already recalled. That is, both in that recent and refined sense of politics, that of the *polis*, and in that older and only in the eyes of the *polis* less refined sense, which in reality is made up of millimetric adjustments, of an infinity of attempts and errors in the interception of one interest by another, and then of the immense memory of those attempts and mistakes, a memory that is almost imperceptible and unthinkable to us humans, since it is so vast, out of all proportion to human remembrance, and written in characters that human beings have only recently begun to decipher. But the history of evolution is entirely political in this sense, since it is the history and the memory of a series of struggles, as someone used to say. Maybe the history of evolution is itself a totally political, a totally cultural, a totally artificial history?

If we think that everything is ultimately natural, we raise the great phantasm of nature, with all the procession of little ghosts that every phantasm brings with him. We will sooner or later think that there is such a thing as nature. And the only way to suppose that there is such a thing like nature is to look at it from the outside, to contemplate it as a vast landscape, to admire it as a magnificent antecedent. There is something monumental about this arrangement of things. Great blocks begin to face each other, so colossal that they make our gestures almost impracticable. No one ever feels they are destroying nature if they abandon a plastic bag on the bank of a river. Nature is disproportionately large. It is down there, across the river, a kind of eternal and overwhelming background. A bag is tiny, and the act of abandoning it is also tiny. Where could the infinitely small and the infinitely large ever meet? And when it is shown that the single abandoned bag adds up to millions of other bags, effectively destroying the magnificent landscape we continue to call nature, no one will feel they can do anything to save the landscape any more.



If nature is disproportionately large, the destruction of nature also becomes disproportionately large. Artifice becomes also a colossal heap of poisonous materials, an immeasurable expanse of elements foreign to the matter of nature. What is the point of picking up a single plastic bag from the ground? Thinking in large blocks paralyzes. And what is worse, thinking in large blocks soothes the anguish of paralysis, allowing the paralysis to continue indefinitely. We are justified, in our doing or not doing. Those objects are so out of scale with respect to our modest dimensions. Nature is absolutely indestructible and already completely destroyed. And as if that were not enough, we feel ennobled, in our immobility, by our contemplation of such sublime dialectics. The other side of paralysis is aestheticism. And how much ecologism, how much philosophy of nature are essentially paralyzing, i.e. aestheticizing, phenomena.

If we think that everything is ultimately artificial, we can learn to crumble those sublime and paralyzing blocks. We can learn to dismantle the great nature/culture dualism, and by that route also to avoid the monumental monism that sometimes seems to solve the dilemmas of dualism. Certain bacteria release oxygen as a waste product, certain other living things make oxygen their metabolic precondition, and the oxygen comes into existence, assumes that quality we call being, becomes nature. Nature is not on the side of the cause and the past, but on the side of the effect, of what we could call, from a grammatical point of view, the future anterior. Only when this knot of two artifices is tightened, does oxygen begin to exist as an element of nature. Maybe oxygen is the name, not of an element, but of this node of two processes. In the place of dualism and in the place of monism we find a pluralism that is a swarm of polarities that are always local, tactical, momentary, circumscribed, highly efficient in their perimeter, always revisable in the light of other perimeters. We have a pluralism of polarities that presents us as speckled surface. Each stain on that surface is the unity of a difference between natural and cultural. Each stain is the absolutely local assemblage of a naturalness and an artificiality that are themselves the operative effect of a set of partial and revisable operations. Nowhere is there a nature that encompasses all natures, that nature so motherly inclusive being simply another local and partial effect, fabricated by another being, as the consequence of another metabolic singularity, existing with respect to certain practical operations. For example, those of a certain species that at a certain point of his trajectory has been captured by certain cognitive and practical operations and has begun to produce that very special form of life that is composed by western metaphysics, the technology that follows from it, the disasters that accompany that technology, and the ecologism that attempt to remedy those disasters. Nature is the effect of that form of life.

Patrice Maniglier, in his beautiful book on Bruno Latour, takes stock of what he defines as “the great theoretical proposal of our time”, i. e. the tendency to erase the dualism between nature and culture and the cascade of dualisms traditionally connected with it. This is what, following other illustrious names in the contemporary debate, such as Philippe Descola, Eduardo Viveiros and



Marilyn Strathern, he calls “flat ontology”, emphasising that this definition “in no way implies that all beings have something in common”. On the contrary, it is precisely this flatness that is a condition for “relations between ontologically heterogeneous terms to be established locally”²³. I would add for my part that this is precisely the reason why flat ontology is the least flat thing there is. Its flatness simply means that wherever a process is taking place there are effects of being, or if we want effects of nature. More precisely, wherever a process is at work, effects of being are produced whose characteristic is to manifest themselves in a polarised manner, as a tension between two or more ontological planes, as a chaining between two or more heterogeneous kind of being. The nature/culture polarisation is one among many, and it is only operating within those absolutely practical and situated boundaries we mentioned. Of that process or any other process, we should not say, properly, that it “locally establishes relations between heterogeneous terms”, but rather that it establishes heterogeneous terms by simultaneously relating them to one another. In this sense, the flat ontology is precisely an ontology of many planes, each one fractured and polarised by the processual line of its genesis, and each fractured and polarised by other planes and other processual lines of genesis.

The immediate implication of this flatness is, so to speak, its anfractuous structure, its continuous production of stratified fractures and sutures, its continuous work of disassembling and reassembling certain local and temporary ontological effects. It is this way of thinking, which can dismantle the risk of that naturalistic aestheticism and of that sublime inclination to paralysis we evoked. There is no encompassing nature to contemplate, and no global disaster to fear. We begin to see everywhere small deposits of nature sedimented by old human or animal or plant or bacterial cultures, and small metabolisms that intercept those sediments making them their own nature. We begin to detect an archipelago of heterogeneous processes capturing other heterogeneous processes, making them their own matter and their own nature, while others capture them in turn and make of them matter, nature, premise, condition of possibility, prestigious past, mythical origin. It is a much less majestic landscape, seen through these much less metaphysical eyes. The result is not an appeal to cosmic continuity, not an admiring macro-ontology of the implication of everything in everything. The result is a prosaic art of disassembling and reassembling, a daily practice which isolates the many natures hidden in what we call nature, a humble exercise of retracing the many trajectories that led those natures to become natures, and of intersecting those many trajectories with other unpredicted trajectories. We might call this art of tiny adjustments a micropolitics, but the effect of this micropolitics is paradoxically macroscopic, since each of its tiny adjustments has nothing less than the effect of giving birth to a new nature. What we call nature is perhaps nothing but the future anterior of this art of knotting the unstable anfracts of an eternal flatness.

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NOTES:

- 1 M. Merleau-Ponty, *Nature. Course Notes from the Collège de France (1956-1960)*, ed. by D. Séglaard, engl. transl. by R. Vallier, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 2003; see in particular the “Note on Bergson and Sartre”, p. 70.
- 2 M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Possibility of Philosophy. Course Notes from the Collège de France 1959-1961*, ed. by S. Menasé, engl. transl. by K. Whitmoyer, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 2022; see in particular “Course Notes 1960-1961. Cartesian Ontology and Ontology Today”, pp. 89-166.
- 3 M. Merleau-Ponty, “The intertwining, the chiasm”, in *The Visible and the invisible*, engl. transl. by A. Lingis, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 1968, pp. 130-155.
- 4 M. Merleau-Ponty, *Unpublished working notes*, in “Chiasmi International”, n. 7, 2005.
- 5 G. Simondon, *Individuation in Light of the Notions of Form and Information*, engls. transl. by T. Adkins, Minnesota University Press, Minneapolis 2020.
- 6 E. de Saint-Aubert, *From brute being to man. A contextualization of two unpublished Merleau-Ponty Notes*, in “Chiasmi International”, 7, 2005, p. 32.
- 7 G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, engl. transl. by H. Tomlinson and G. Burchell, Columbia University Press, New York 1994, p. 178.
- 8 M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, cit., p. 270.
- 9 Thomas Browne, *Religio medici*, part I, section 16, it. transl. by V. Sanna, Adelphi, Milano 2008, p. 103.
- 10 For this “processual” reading of Neoplatonism, cf. Henri Bergson, *Cours sur Plotin (1898-99)*, in *Cours sur la philosophie grecque*, ed. by H. Hude, P.U.F., Paris 2000, pp. 17-78, in part. chapter 5, “L’âme du monde”.
- 11 M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Gallimard, Paris 1945, pp. 221: “Tout est fabriqué et tout est naturel chez l’homme”; the current English translation says: “Everything is both natural and manufactured in man” (*Phenomenology of Perception*, engl. transl. by C. Smith, Routledge, London 2002, p. 220); we adopt a slightly different and more literal translation.
- 12 Tra i contributi più significativi, M. Carbone, *Flesh. Towards the history of a misunderstanding*, in “Chiasmi International”, 4, 2002, pp. 49-62; “The Words of the Oracle”, in *An Unprecedented Deformation. Marcel Proust and the Sensible Ideas*, engl. transl. by, pp. 49-58; J. Garelli, *De l’Entité à l’événement*, Mimesis, Paris-Milan, 2004.
- 13 M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the invisible*, cit., p. 139.
- 14 G. Simondon, A history of the notion of the individual, in “Chiasmi International”, 7, 2005, p. 56.
- 15 *Ivi*, p. 57.
- 16 *Ivi*, p. 56.
- 17 *Ibidem*.
- 18 *Ibidem*.
- 19 Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia. Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, engl. transl. by C. Porter, Polity Press, Cambridge 2017.
- 20 B. Latour, *Facing Gaia*, cit., p. 105.
- 21 J. Lovelock, cited in B. Latour, *Facing Gaia*, cit., p. 105.
- 22 B. Latour, *Facing Gaia*, cit., p. 105.
- 23 P. Maniglier, *Le Philosophe, la terre, le virus. Bruno Latour expliqué par l’actualité*, Éditions Les Liens Qui Libèrent, Paris 2021, p. 48.



An Ecology without Nature? Merleau-Ponty, Simondon, Latour

The article examines the main features of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of nature and, more specifically, the reasons that led it to some consonance with that of the young Simondon. At the center of this recognition, the question of processuality and the pre-Socratic suggestions about a philosophy of the elements. The aim is to derive a need, which, if it remained unfulfilled in Merleau-Ponty, was instead expressed in Simondon and in many contemporary philosophies of nature, e.g. that of Bruno Latour, to whom some space is devoted. That is, the need to bring into focus that substantial indiscernibility between nature and technique, which becomes an evidence if one enters into the idea of process. It is to the ethical and political consequences of this indiscernibility that the article's conclusions are dedicated. More precisely, these conclusions suggest that only a thought of the indiscernibility between nature and technology has ethical and political consequences, i.e. allows the design of a system of regulations capable of concretely and sustainably modulating the human impact on the planet.

Une écologie sans Nature ? Merleau-Ponty, Simondon, Latour

L'article examine les traits principaux de la philosophie de la nature de Merleau-Ponty et, plus précisément, les raisons qui l'ont conduite à une confrontation et à une consonance avec les réflexions du jeune Simondon. C'est surtout le domaine de la processualité et les suggestions « présocratiques » concernant une philosophie des éléments, qui sont étudiés et mis côte à côte dans ces pages de comparaison entre les deux auteurs. Le but est celui d'en dégager une exigence, restée inachevée chez Merleau-Ponty, mais exprimée chez Simondon et dans un grand nombre de philosophies contemporaines de la nature, comme celle de Bruno Latour. Exigence de mettre en lumière l'indiscernabilité substantielle entre nature et technique, qui se manifeste au moment où l'on va plus au fond dans une pensée du processus. C'est aux conséquences éthiques et politiques de cette indiscernabilité que sont consacrées les conclusions de l'article. Ou mieux, ces conclusions suggèrent que seulement une pensée de l'indiscernabilité de nature et technique a des conséquences éthiques et politiques, c'est-à-dire permet de concevoir des actions capables de moduler concrètement et durablement l'impact humain sur la planète.

Un'ecologia senza Natura? Merleau-Ponty, Simondon, Latour

L'articolo esamina i tratti principali della filosofia della natura dell'ultimo Merleau-Ponty e più in particolare le ragioni che l'hanno portata a un confronto e a una consonanza con quella del primo Simondon. Sono soprattutto i temi della processualità e le suggestioni "presocratiche" circa una filosofia degli elementi, ad essere studiati e accostati in queste pagine di confronto tra i due autori. Lo scopo è quello di ricavarne un'intenzione, che se è rimasta incompiuta in Merleau-Ponty, si è invece espressa in Simondon e in molte filosofie contemporanee della natura, ad esempio nel pensiero di Bruno Latour. Si tratta cioè dell'esigenza di mettere a fuoco quella sostanziale indiscernibilità tra natura e tecnica, che si evidenzia nel momento in cui ci si addentra in un pensiero del processo. È alle conseguenze



etiche e politiche di questa indiscernibilità che sono dedicate le conclusioni dell'articolo. Per meglio dire, tali conclusioni suggeriscono che solo un pensiero dell'indiscernibilità tra natura e tecnica ha conseguenze etiche e politiche, consente cioè di progettare interventi capaci di modulare concretamente e sostenibilmente l'impatto umano sul pianeta.