

# The Institution of Life in Gehlen and Merleau-Ponty: Searching for the Common Ground for the Anthropological Difference

Jan Halák<sup>1</sup>  · Jiří Klouda<sup>1</sup>

© The Author(s) 2018

**Abstract** The goal of our article is to review the widespread anthropological figure, according to which we can achieve a better understanding of humans by contrasting them with animals. This originally Herderian approach was elaborated by Arnold Gehlen, who characterized humans as “deficient beings” who become complete through culture. According to Gehlen, humans, who are insufficiently equipped by instincts, indirectly stabilize their existence by creating institutions, i.e., complexes of habitual actions. On the other hand, Maurice Merleau-Ponty shows that corporeal relationship to the world is already indirect because it is based on pre-established and readjusted “standards” or “norms” of interaction with the environment. Merleau-Ponty then calls these norms “institutions” and views culture as readjustment of institutions which operate already on the level of corporeal existence. The anthropological figure of confronting humans and animals thus cannot produce, as in Gehlen, a contrast between an allegedly “direct” relationship to the world in animals and a supposedly “indirect” relationship to the world in humans. The Herderian approach can be meaningfully retained only if interpreted as an invitation to confront the norms of indirect interaction with the world in animals and in people, that is, if viewed as a comparison of their respective institutions.

**Keywords** Gehlen · Merleau-Ponty · Anthropology · Anthropological difference · Institution · Culture · Nature · Animality · Corporeality · Human body

---

✉ Jan Halák  
jan.halak@upol.cz

Jiří Klouda  
jiri.klouda@upol.cz

<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Physical Culture, Palacký University in Olomouc, 115, Třída míru, 77111 Olomouc, Czech Republic

## Introduction: The Herderian Schema as the Cornerstone of Cultural Anthropology

One of the most significant sources from which Modern secularized humanity draws knowledge about itself is a comparison between humans and animals. Such an approach requires a *tertium comparationis*, a common ground for comparison, and that, not surprisingly, has been identified with corporeity. If corporeity is understood as the “animality within us,” question nevertheless remains as to how one ought to conceive of corporeity as such. The problem cannot be approached from a purely biological perspective because from that point of view, humans are viewed as an animal species to start with. From a philosophers’ point of view, one still needs to articulate, with respect to the natural and the human order, “a sense of sameness without falling back into the traditional, factorizing conception of something generically given to which a specific difference is added” (Moyle 2007: 164). In other words, we still need to conceive of a human “as neither opposed to nor reducible to the animal” (Toadvine 2007a: 41).

The issue of corporeity as the common ground for a comparison of humans and animals, i.e. an articulation of the anthropological difference, has been dealt with in various ways.<sup>1</sup> Our aim is to critically review one of the dominant answers to this problem, according to which humans are by nature “deficient” or “incomplete” animals who become complete and acquire knowledge of themselves in culture.

This anthropological schema occupies a significant, albeit different, position in the works of our two main authors, Arnold Gehlen and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Before going on to explain their views in detail, let us briefly outline some influential thoughts of the first thinker who emphasized the aforementioned schema, Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803).<sup>2</sup> Although Herder deals with the issue of human nature in the context of the Book of Genesis, he does not explain it based on theological considerations. Instead, he draws on contrasts and parallels between humans and animals. Such comparisons have appeared already in antiquity,<sup>3</sup> but Herder formulated them with a specifically Modern accent. Instead of merely stating that humans are insufficiently equipped with specialized organs, he emphasizes the “subjective” insufficiency of humans, weak and unfocused nature of their sensory perception, and a relative absence of instincts. Then he formulates a rule according to which the smaller the sphere within which living beings execute their actions, the sharper and more acute is their perception and instincts (Herder 2002: 78–80). And since humans are not adapted to any particular type of environment and their perception is not linked to any particular type of stimuli, they are, in Herder’s words, in a “whole ocean of sensations” (Herder 2002: 87).

<sup>1</sup> Heidegger, for instance, refused it altogether when he stated that our bodily kinship with animals is “scarcely conceivable” (1998: 248).

<sup>2</sup> It is significant that Herder is a pioneer of the philosophy of culture (not, for example, a biologist) and that he discusses this subject in his treatise on language, the principal symbolic system; *Treatise on the Origin of the Language* (*Anhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache*); first publication 1772. We quote from Herder (2002).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Heidegger’s presentation (1998: 244–247).

In order to grasp, disambiguate, and clarify the turbulent world of perceptions, humans attribute names (signs) to things. Names, in their turn, are the basic building blocks of the correlative dimensions of language and reason, since language enables reflection, and of culture (Herder, pp. 85–87). Based on his description of differences between human and non-human sensory organs and instinctive equipment, Herder concludes that culture is a specifically human achievement, based on which people transform non-human nature and eventually recognize themselves as human.

After Herder, the figure of man as a “deficient” animal reappears in the works of numerous other thinkers, including Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, and Max Scheler. And aside from this explicit impact, the notion clearly continues to exert significant influence on our understanding of the essence and the function of human culture (see, e.g., Geertz 1973: 49; Scott 2010: 15–23, 160). Importantly for our intents and purposes, however, the Herderian figure was adopted by Gehlen who developed it into what can now be viewed as its classical form. According to Gehlen, there is a particular way in which humans both conserve and overcome their animal corporeity: as “internally” unspecified, human corporeal nature becomes externally specified and objectified by “institutions”.

Based on the way in which Gehlen adopts and maintains the Herderian schema, the aim of our article is to confront Gehlen’s and Merleau-Ponty’s interpretation of the notion of institution and thereby critically review the Herderian figure as one of the cornerstones of contemporary cultural anthropology. We proceed in three steps, divided in nine sections. First, we explain how Gehlen contrasts the animal order with its supposedly direct relationship to the world that is based on instincts, with the human order, which is said to have an indirect relationship to the world that is based on institutions. At this point, we show that Gehlen does not take a full advantage of the far-reaching philosophical implications of his theory of institutions because he interprets institutions too narrowly, primarily as a restrictive mechanism. In the second step, we present some of Merleau-Ponty’s interpretations of embodied subjects in order to demonstrate that Gehlen’s initial supposition that animals have a direct relationship to the world is implausible and cannot therefore serve as a starting point for comparing humans and animals. We then follow Merleau-Ponty’s other works in order to show that embodied experience, and even the ontogenetic unity of embodied subjects, must be interpreted as already plastic, based on systematic but flexible “norms” of interaction with the environment. In the third step, we explain that Merleau-Ponty’s description of embodied subjects must itself be understood through the prism of his generalized concept of “institution” and, in turn, confronted with Gehlen’s idea of institutions.

Our goal is to demonstrate some important implications of the Herderian figure for our understanding of the anthropological difference and culture. Instead of viewing humans, who transcend their environment and become “open” to the world (*Weltoffenheit*), as “deficient” animals and seeing culture as the means by which this deficiency can be overcome, human “openness” ought to be conceived of as a *correlate* of culture, and culture itself not as the stabilizing, materializing agent of an out-worldly subjectivity but as a “prolongation of the [human] body” (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 255; 2007: 354).

## Gehlen's Herderian Account of Man as a Deficient Being

As mentioned earlier, Gehlen explicitly adopts Herder's schema of comparing animals and humans (Gehlen 1988: 73–76) and elaborates it using the findings of various important biologists of his time, such as Jakob von Uexküll, Louis Bolck, Fredrik Buytendijk, Konrad Lorenz, and Adolf Portmann. His attempt to develop a new anthropological approach evolved within the framework of his more general project, where his aim was to reform philosophy by incorporating the results produced by empirical sciences, especially those which had bearing on comparing humans and animals. Gehlen's project proceeded in two steps, each with a slightly different emphasis. The first stage, formulated mainly in his book *Der Mensch. Seine Natur und seine Stellung in der Welt* (1940),<sup>4</sup> focuses on characterizing humans as deficient beings (*Mängelwesen*). The second stage is implemented mainly in his book *Urmensch und Spätkultur* (1957). In this and subsequent texts which develop this line of enquiry, Gehlen investigates various issues of the theory of culture and its genesis, thus moving closer to a sociological perspective.

Let us now examine Gehlen's anthropological schema, which interconnects the biological and cultural dimension of his anthropology, in more detail. When developing Herder's original schema and expanding it using observations adopted from the aforementioned biologists, Gehlen emphasizes differences between humans and animals. To him, these differences are categorical, "structural," not merely quantitative (Gehlen 1988: 16, 21). Gehlen claims that unlike animals, humans are endowed with stable innate instincts only to a very limited extent. Humans have only residual instincts and they are not adapted to any specific environment. Human behavior is therefore not rooted in instinctive motoric patterns. Human motor activity is for the most part acquired and learned, whereas in animals, the range of learned motor skills is significantly limited. This is linked to the plasticity of human nature, which enables humans to adapt to a wide variety of living environments. While animals are, as it were, embedded in their environment by their specialized sensory (*Merk-*) and effector organs (*Wirkorganen*), thereby relating to the "world of receptivity" (*Merkwelt*) and the "world of efficacy" (*Wirkwelt*),<sup>5</sup> humans are relatively open to a wide variety of sensory impulses.

According to Gehlen, animals' instinctive needs thus closely correspond to their environment, whereas humans live in a world that is constantly changing and they are not similarly pre-adapted. Gehlen views human behavior as "problematic" because in his view, people are by nature instinctually unstable, i.e., their reactions are not guided by reliable biological guidelines. Such a reduced instinctual equipment puts humans constantly at risk and makes them "open" to a wide range of "impressions". In Gehlen's view, human world is formed by an "ocean" of stimuli, whereas animal environment consists of natural clues and signals that can be anticipated.

<sup>4</sup> We rely on a later edition, Gehlen (1988).

<sup>5</sup> Terms used by von Uexküll (1957).

It is important to note that Gehlen emphasizes the inherent precariousness of human condition much more than Herder or the biologists whose work he uses to support his theory.<sup>6</sup> In the rest of our paper, we intend to demonstrate that this difference of emphasis has far-reaching implications for philosophical anthropology.

Although Gehlen's transition from biological to cultural anthropology adequately reflects his idea of culture as a completion of human biologically incomplete nature, only his later books on cultural anthropology were usually perceived as controversial. The polemical reactions they provoked targeted mainly Gehlen's emphatically conservative political perspective (e.g., Habermas 2001), while the principal anthropological figure itself and its implications remained largely neglected.

Even critical interpretations which did focus specifically on Gehlen's anthropology for the main part did not deal with the principal anthropological figure he had adopted from Herder. For instance, Rehberg (1988) wrote an informative introduction to Gehlen's *Der Mensch*, but no more than one page is dedicated to the principal anthropological figure (Rehberg 1988: xviii–xix) and no criticism is offered. Other commentators tend to focus on different subjects. Böhler (1973) explains how Gehlen's early critique of traditional epistemology fails to leave the boundaries of solipsistic subjectivism, since although he replaces the rational subject of knowledge by a non-rational subject of action, he still conceives of it in a solipsistic fashion, and moreover, this problem is latently conserved even in Gehlen's philosophical anthropology. Honneth and Joas (1988: 41–70) later expanded on Böhler's critique and demonstrated that Gehlen had insufficient understanding of the communicational aspects of human action: his "decisionistic" conception is somewhat similar to the existentialist thought of his time but both of these approaches tend to underestimate the intersubjective dimension of human existence. More recently, Schacht has clarified how both Nietzsche and Gehlen use Herder's anthropological schema as their starting point, and how, compared to Nietzsche, Gehlen overestimates the role of the sense of self-preservation in animal behavior. Schacht thus compares the anthropological schema in Gehlen with a different conception, but he does not offer any criticism of the schema itself (2015: 57f).

The principal Herderian schema comparing humans and animals was critically addressed neither in any of the works we have just listed nor in other recent works. Our aim will be therefore to fill this gap by scrutinizing the basic Herderian schema adopted by Gehlen and showing its fundamental implications for our contemporary understanding of the anthropological difference. In particular, an analysis of Gehlen's model of institutions in the following section should help us reevaluate the seemingly unproblematic biological starting point of his theory.

<sup>6</sup> See Gehlen (1988: 28): "... man's world-openness might appear to be a great burden. He is flooded with stimulation, with an abundance of impressions, which he somehow must learn to cope with." In the original German version, the formulation is even stronger (Gehlen 1962: 36; see also 39, 41). Gehlen takes advantage of the ambiguity of German expressions "übersehen" and "Übersicht," which mean both "to have an overall view of" and "to overlook": humans relate to a situation as a whole only because the inherent multiplicity of impressions has been restricted, simplified, or schematized (see Gehlen 1961: 35, 1962: 50, 63).

## Gehlen's View of Man as a Being Finalized in Institutions

One of the basic elements of Gehlen's anthropology is the concept of action (*Handlung*). Gehlen assumes that instead of separating body and mind, anthropology ought to work with intelligent—and thus also intelligible—embodied action. But how can human action acquire its ordinary, self-evident intelligibility, stability, and predictability, if it lacks the solid internal guidelines which are in animals provided by instincts, and if it is moreover exposed to a vast array of ever-new sensory and affective impulses?

Human action attains its solid form and a character intelligible both to the agent and to others only thanks to external, that is, non-biological, culturally acquired support which stabilizes it and guides it on the basis of habitual behavior. This is how our tools, but also material objects we deal with, work. When performing a habitual action, our behavior usually proceeds from what is to be dealt with (a tool, a task) and it is thus not guided by what we feel or perceive at the moment. Moreover, because of the use of tools, the same action can be executed in an approximately same way by different persons and at different times. This externally driven character of habitual actions, Gehlen adds, then becomes the source of interpersonal understanding. Moreover, habituation introduces a distance between on the one hand the original individual impulses and needs we might have employed at the beginning of the action, and the habitual action which eventually becomes largely independent of the original motivation on the other hand. The realities as they ordinarily show themselves in our surrounding world, Gehlen asserts, thereby acquire a transcendent character, i.e., they transcend an individual's momentary affective attitude towards them. We deal here with an inner-worldly type of transcendence, a transcendence into this world (*Transzendenz ins Diesseits*; see Gehlen 1964: 14f, 55f). This ought to be understood in contrast to transcendence beyond the world, which emerged only with the advent of monotheistic religions. In this way, Gehlen provides an original interpretation of a classical philosophical thesis according to which humans are capable of encountering things themselves (the being itself) as opposed to encountering merely “impulses”.<sup>7</sup> Beyond that, Gehlen notes that habituation enables humans to better discriminate and to focus on finer details. This in turn provides the basis for a division of labor, which is a fundamental feature of cultural production on many levels of action, work, and knowledge.

Habits are formed on the basis of material tools but also symbolic non-material systems, such as language or gestures. Here again, the external, that is, the non-inherited and non-instinctive character of these systems is essential for Gehlen. In his view, human relationship to the world and to themselves is specific in being indirect (see Gehlen 1961: 53, 1988: 56). Animals, on the other hand, are supposed to have a “direct” relationship to their environment in which they “embedded”. Consequently, Gehlen believes that animals cannot act but only react. To access

<sup>7</sup> This motive is present in the works of many influential twentieth-century philosophers, see in particular Heidegger (1995), Scheler (1961); and even Merleau-Ponty in some Schelerian passages in his early works (e.g. Merleau-Ponty 1963: 175f). We will return to this point later.

and clearly understand the world and themselves, humans have to build mediating instances, which makes them, as it were, “beings of the media”.

The systems of division of such habits are what Gehlen calls *institutions* (*Institutionen*; Gehlen 1964: 23). One of the essential functions of institutions, which are defined as complexes of habitual actions,<sup>8</sup> is a reduction of the experiential strain (*Entlastung*). This negatively sounding German term, which literally means “relief from a burden” or “disburdening,” is linked primarily to the idea that humans are threatened by being overloaded by the large quantities of impressions and “non-specified impulses” among which they ought to decide. As the example with the practical use of tools demonstrates, however, “relief” in this context does not imply just a restriction on the quantity of impressions or their selection; rather, it makes the action more indirect. Ultimately, it leads to an autonomization (*Verselbständigung*) of action with respect to its original motivation, a separation of the motive from the purpose (*Trennung des Motivs vom Zweck*; Gehlen 1964: 31).

Importantly, this kind of “relief” opens a new level of experience, the level of action and knowledge, where we can encounter phenomena that would otherwise remain inaccessible and incomprehensible. Gehlen provides several examples of such an “increase in motives” (*Motivzuwachs*; Gehlen 1964: 28) based on a separation of actions from their original motivation. In the domain of sporting games, for instance, once we sufficiently master the moves required by the game, we experience new motives, such as the joy of movement, emulation, companionship, prestige, etc. In other words, once we no longer need to consciously control and manage our movements merely to play the game, once the movements become habituated and the play becomes a goal in itself in which we immerse and forget ourselves, we can start looking for new ways of expressing our existence and its new dimensions (Gehlen 1964: 38).

The principle of relief thus serves, within Gehlen’s framework, also as a foundation of an account of a human experience of freedom that avoids the dangers of an “empty,” transcendental freedom. The distance from the original motives created by the mediating role of institutions and, consequently, the increase in motives which opens new levels of meaningful experiences, i.e., the “inner-worldly transcendence,” is constitutive of what could be called inner-worldly freedom.

## Gehlen on Institution and Action

At this point, it may be already evident that Gehlen’s interpretation of action, knowledge, and freedom is formulated as a repudiation of spiritualistic and rationalistic philosophical positions. While in the traditional rationalistic way of thinking (which is, in fact, still quite commonplace), action (*Handlung*) is viewed as an external realization of an individual, internally existing aim, Gehlen provocatively rejects this tradition and turns it upside down. In his view, humans can “purposefully act”

---

<sup>8</sup> It ought to be noted that this definition covers all of the material aspects of culture. As noted above habits are themselves “guided” by tools and other material cultural products.



only because supra-personal, external institutions “liberate” them from their unstable internal motivations and needs. An authentic human action, characterized by its purposeful nature, freedom, and ethical relevance, is therefore possible only thanks to institutions, that is, complexes of actions habitual to a degree where they become autonomous and purpose-free.

Gehlen moreover holds that the relief, that is, the “unburdening” and strain-reducing function of institutions, endows human actions with their effectiveness and certainty, thus filling the role that instincts play in animals (see Gehlen 1964: 23). As “complexes of habits,” institutions are multivalent, they create a “surplus of determination” (*Überdeterminierung*; Gehlen 1964: 67, 84). Gehlen explains this operational logic of institutions using a well-known example of the relation between sexuality and the institution of marriage (Gehlen 1964: 65ff; 73ff). In contrast to animal instincts, human impulses tend to be more variable, less unambiguously oriented toward an object and less strictly linked to any motor pattern. The same applies to human sexual instincts, which are not limited to a specific behavior during a short mating season but underpin various behaviors and affect humans in a “chronic” manner. In marriage or any other culturally conditioned form of cohabitation, sexuality has its place alongside a variety of other habitual forms, such as the need of companionship, shared interests, economical function, the upbringing of children, etc. Thanks to this “surplus of determination,” marriages and other forms of human cohabitation are more durable and stable than any momentary sexual desire. On the other hand, sexual desire acquires its concrete and particular form based on how it is actually fulfilled in marriage. This applies to specific sexual behaviors, various rituals and “games,” but also to the way in which the human sexual instinct becomes focused: ideally, the object of sexual desire in marriage is not any man or woman but one’s wife or husband. Sexuality therefore cannot be understood here as a simple “natural” need, destined to be satisfied as quickly as possible and thereby eliminated. It acquires autonomy and value in itself. Sexual desire in humans is “enriched,” it becomes an expression of emotional and erotic culture, just like gastronomic culture starts where food is no longer just the means of satisfaction and elimination of hunger. This autonomous sexuality which lost the simplicity of a direct need can become, for example, a manifestation of something else (such as one’s relationship to a partner), it can be instrumentalized (e.g., for the purpose of career-building) or repressed (as in asceticism). In any case, it is not a mute natural given but rather an indication that speaks to myself and to others and can be assessed in various ways.

Gehlen’s conclusions are similar to what Merleau-Ponty states already in his early work: “What defines man is not the capacity to create a second nature—economic, social, or cultural—beyond biological nature; it is rather *the capacity for going beyond created structures in order to create others*” (1963: 175; italics added). Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of human capacity to “go beyond created structures” is similarly illustrated by his interpretation of the relationship between sexuality and the work of an artist or even human character. Sexual motives neither simply determine the work of art or human character, nor are they completely irrelevant to it: they “found” or “institute” it (Merleau-Ponty 1992: 21–25, 2003a: 78–88, 2010a: 41–49). Echoing the Freudian hypercathexis, Merleau-Ponty even himself speaks of “overdetermination,” by which he means the fact that for humans, “any entity can be



*accentuated* as an emblem of Being” (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 270). We will return to this point later (see below, “[Merleau-Ponty on Institution](#)” section).

Analogically, Gehlen often notes that the formation of human instincts is mediated by language, i.e., he understands language also as an institution that has a formative effect on human impulses and needs.<sup>9</sup> On the one hand, institutions in a sense elevate actions to the level of cultural expression, but on the other hand, they also provide stability and durability to phenomena usually understood as ideal or purely spiritual. According to Gehlen, thanks to institutions our thoughts can even materialize, become “embodied,” because the interconnected habituations help them acquire a more durable form than they would have in the “unstable” dimension of subjectivity (see Gehlen 1961: 76ff).

Here again, Gehlen’s ideas converge with Merleau-Ponty’s. The latter, for example, repeatedly quotes Cassirer’s dictum that language is the “flywheel” of thought (Cassirer 1957: 331) because it “supports” the thought and “rescues it from the transitory” (Merleau-Ponty 2000b: 43). Unlike Gehlen, however, Merleau-Ponty does not understand the supporting role of language as primarily “restrictive”. Instead, he attributes to it a positive, productive function (we return to this issue below, in our discussion of institution in Merleau-Ponty, “[Merleau-Ponty on Institution](#)” section).

We have seen how for Gehlen, institutions underpin practically the entire human life,<sup>10</sup> and how consequently almost all human behaviors can be understood as actions in the strong sense of the word (i.e. as opposed to reactions). Human behaviors can therefore be viewed not only as natural facts that can be either ignored or accepted, but as something that can be understood and thus also misunderstood, i.e. adopted by us or others in a more or less appropriate way. Accordingly, any factual human behavior is more than factual: it is always at the same time normative. As such, it is open to evaluation, and even more strongly, to ethical evaluation. In Gehlen’s conceptual framework, the natural and cultural aspects of humanity are thus no longer two separate regions. They overlap. Moreover, human behaviors can now be evaluated based on the overdetermination mediated by institutions, i.e., independently of a subjective intention and thereby also some specifically human “faculty”.

---

<sup>9</sup> Gehlen even claims that instincts are “oriented to language” or “analogous to” it (*Sprachmäßigkeit der Antriebe*); see Gehlen (1964: 47, 75, 78, 91). He does, however, have a strong tendency to understand all mediating dimensions negatively, as modes of restriction or restraint of a direct relationship to the world, and this applies also to his interpretation of language. Thus, as Honneth and Joas (1988) have shown, although Gehlen does analyze the role of language in his *Der Mensch* (Gehlen 1988: 181f.), he underestimates its role as a means of communication and a fundamental element of intersubjective relationships. In his subsequent works dedicated to cultural anthropology, Gehlen’s focused mainly on sociology and paid little attention to the “instituting” role of language. This contrasts with the fact that after the linguistic turn, cultural anthropology adopted the Wittgensteinian concept of language game as its principal model; see Geertz (1973) and Apel (1973).

<sup>10</sup> It should be noted that according to Gehlen, systems of habits include also the moral and spiritual domains; see Gehlen (1964: 23).

## Problems with Gehlen's Views: Institution as an External Imperative

We have now seen how Gehlen's cultural anthropology seems to rather successfully overcome the traditional dualisms in several respects and meaningfully bind together the notions of body and soul, nature and culture, action and knowledge, and even facticity and normativity. As such, Gehlen's theory of institution could be viewed as an interesting outline of a general theory of experience. In our opinion, however, Gehlen did not adequately develop this theory nor did he pursue all the advantages it offers. Before looking more closely on how this shortcoming could be addressed with the help of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, we ought to have a closer look at the main reasons of Gehlen's failure.

Firstly, the main ambition of Gehlen's anthropology, which he understood as "empirical philosophy," was to systematize the results of certain specific sciences. This is why he tends to pay little attention to the subjects treated by traditional philosophical disciplines. Secondly, Gehlen's texts in cultural anthropology, which followed his writings inspired by biology, express a markedly conservative political stance which prevented him from seeing some of the productive aspects of the theory of institutions as outlined above. In particular, Gehlen's main goal as a political philosopher was to defend traditional institutions (i.e., the major institutions in the sociological sense of the word) against modern subjectivism and the Enlightenment-inspired idea according to which the legitimacy of social behavior stems from a rational public discussion. Gehlen believed that rationalism of the Enlightenment and its critical discussions are destroying traditional institutions without being able to replace them by something else. In other words, he believed that an exchange of individual subjective opinions cannot invest human behavior with stable supra-personal forms and can only result in self-destructing chaos. Due to this conservative accent of his cultural anthropology, Gehlen's outline of a generalized theory of experience based on institutions cannot take advantage of the full positive potential of the anthropological framework he proposed. Gehlen shows that, for instance, the flexible dimensions of language, perception, and thought are intertwined and function as habitual acts which contribute to establishing relationships with the world both on an individual and intersubjective level. On the other hand, he fails to fully appreciate these "soft" symbolical systems, as one could call them, because his primarily focus is on "hard" social mechanisms.

It is due to the two factors outlined above that Gehlen was unable to appreciate the more general value and more general implications of his theory of institution. We saw how he explains that unlike animals, humans encounter realities in the world as multi-dimensional, polyvalent phenomena because of the "surplus of determination" introduced by institutions. On the other hand, however, Gehlen interprets the binding character of things—thanks to which our actions are supposed to be true actions and not merely (quasi-)causal mechanical processes—as an imperative that is experienced as an external pressure when we execute a habitual act (see Gehlen 1964: 29). Since these acts follow their own intrinsic rules, any question related to their meaning is suspended: Gehlen asserts that

a subject has to let himself be “consumed” by institutions (Gehlen 1964: 8). A development of action is bound by institutions to such a degree that it excludes all reflection and allows at most mere observation.<sup>11</sup> Gehlen thus concludes that action retains some cognitive validity only to the extent to which it realizes a habitual pattern and registers it passively.

This problem is also apparent when we analyze the ambiguous nature of Gehlen’s central concept of “relief” (*Entlastung*), which he often interprets in a purely negative way. The relief provided by institutions is then merely something that is supposed to limit the strain posed by the wide variety of perceptual and affective impulses among which humans would have to discriminate and choose were they not assisted by habits and institutions (see Gehlen 1964: 43). In this way, the other important positive aspect of the “relief,” namely the creative process of the “increase in motives,” is interpreted by Gehlen rather unconvincingly as a process through which subjectivity is consumed or alienated from itself.

This aspect of Gehlen’s account of institutions is, however, clearly incompatible with the other essential trait which he describes, namely the fact that human behavior, inasmuch as it is mediated by institutions and founded on them, becomes polyvalent and can no longer be understood as an unequivocal, one-dimensional given. We have seen how due to their richness of meaning, actions do not invite us to, as it were, objectively register their development, but on the contrary, to take a stand and evaluate them. If this were not the case, the actions of humans, beings whose relation to the world is supposedly “indirect,” would be rather paradoxically based on unequivocal impulses or clues and directly determined by an imperative normativity. Correspondingly, subjectivity would then be situated as if outside the world and presented with an array of equally distant and transparent, unequivocal options, among which it would choose (see Böhler 1973).

We must therefore conclude that Gehlen did not entirely succeed in overcoming the metaphysical dualisms, in particular those of body and mind, nature and culture, and facticity and normativity. He relocated the motivation of human behavior from the supposedly unstable interiority of human subject to the apparently stable, “external,” imperative institutions. In doing so, Gehlen succeeded in developing an anti-mentalist model of human experience, but his excessively narrow understanding of institutions turned them into a mere counterpart and complement of an out-worldly subjectivity. On the one hand, one could say that these limitations of Gehlen’s thought are the price he pays for his politically conservative decision to narrow down the concept of institution so as to include only the “major” institutions in the sociological sense of the word. On the other hand, however, this decision seems deeply rooted in the Herderian figure of man understood as an animal whose unspecified, and therefore unstable and unprotected, inherent nature needs to be protected from the outside by culture. In the following parts of our paper, we will try to show that this understanding of institutions is fatally one-sided, and one ought to be able to find a way of retaining the positive and productive aspect of institutions.

---

<sup>11</sup> See Gehlen 1964: 26: “One cannot act and reflect at the same time, only observe (*anschauen*) one’s actions”.

## Merleau-Ponty on the Ontological Status of Embodied Subject

Our goal in the following part of the paper is to explain how one could further elaborate Gehlen's inspiring, but nonetheless not fully developed, account of human "instituted" relation to the world with the help of Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of embodied subjectivity. From a general point of view, there is no doubt that Merleau-Ponty's lifelong effort to "understand how man is simultaneously subject and object" (Merleau-Ponty 2000a: 12) has important implications for anthropology. Moreover, this is an issue that has not yet been explored with respect to Gehlen.<sup>12</sup> A comparison between these two thinkers is all the more appropriate because they share several important sources of inspiration.<sup>13</sup> Based on these and other sources, Merleau-Ponty's philosophy offers an elaborate account of how living, corporeal beings relate to perceptual environment and how, even on an organic level, this relation is subject to various transformations whose structure is similar to what Gehlen described in terms of institutions. A confrontation between Gehlen and Merleau-Ponty should thus help us better understand the dynamics and changes imposed on these organic conditions by culture and human institutions, and more generally, by human production. Interestingly, we will also see how Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of embodiment leads back to a generalized idea of institution which we have outlined based on Gehlen's writings.

The core idea of Merleau-Ponty's thoughts on embodiment consists in arguing that we ought to retain the idea of organism as a whole, a structured totality, without reducing it either to an effect of a transcendent essence, as in vitalism and idealism, or a sum of causal processes, as in mechanism and naturalism. An organism is neither an entelechy (or, in Kantian terms, a pure "constitution" of meaning) or point by point causality, i.e. a mechanism. It is "*both* a physical being and a meaning" (Merleau-Ponty 2003b: 150; italics added). Merleau-Ponty believes that living beings, counterexamples to an ontology based on the subject-object dichotomy, invite us to positively describe a "third [ontological] order" (Merleau-Ponty 2003b: 182, 1995: 238), where the ontological dimensions of subject and object would be integrated and not mutually exclusive.

Correspondingly, Merleau-Ponty feels that an ontology based on counterposing the subject and the object prevents us from understanding concrete empirical

<sup>12</sup> The relevance of Merleau-Ponty's works for anthropology has been systematically explored by Bimbenet (2004, see 2011), who also explains Merleau-Ponty's "Cartesian" way of dealing with the anthropological question in terms of subject and object, or body and soul (see Bimbenet 2004: 10–16). Bimbenet, however, mentions Gehlen only marginally and not directly in relationship to Merleau-Ponty's thought (see 2004: 272, 2011: 94f).

<sup>13</sup> The influence on Merleau-Ponty of the ethological authors listed above was initially mediated by his knowledge of Buytendijk's and Goldstein's works (Merleau-Ponty 1963, 2012). In his lectures on Nature (1995, 2003b), he later directly studied the works of von Uexküll (1909, 1957), Portmann (1960), Lorenz (1953, 1970), and other biologists. Both Gehlen and Merleau-Ponty were inspired by Scheler's (1961) idea of human "world-openness". For a more elaborate summary of Merleau-Ponty's relationship to his biological sources, see in particular Buchanan (2008: 123ff) and Toadvine (2007a, b, 2009).

“variants” of subjectivity, for instance pathological, infantile, or animal subjects.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, such an ontology prevents us from understanding what typical “human subjects” share with other “variants” of subjectivity, to wit those found in animals.<sup>15</sup>

We will now show that Merleau-Ponty’s descriptions suggest that the “third ontological order,” which lends itself to considering a continuum between animal and human subjectivity, should be approached using the concept of “norms” of interaction with the environment. Based on such norms, subjectivity appears as something systematic but simultaneously open to change and variation.

Already in his early works (1963, 2012), Merleau-Ponty clearly states that physical and chemical environments and living beings differ not in substance but in structure.<sup>16</sup> External and internal events acquire meaning for the organism depending on its specific way of “being in the world,” although an organism cannot be observed independently of the events in the physical world.<sup>17</sup> Somatic processes themselves are, in Merleau-Ponty’s words, “understandable and predictable” only if we describe organism’s relations to its environment, the *Umwelt* implied by an organism’s structure and activity (Merleau-Ponty 1963: 151). In other words, to understand an organism, we must observe what it is open to, i.e., what could be integrated in the range of its possible actions and what can thereby show itself as a meaningful phenomenon to it. Merleau-Ponty also notes that an animal itself “projects the norms of its milieu and establishes the terms of its vital problem,” whereby a body is “a power for a certain number of familiar actions” by means of which the subject settles into its surroundings “as an ensemble of *manipulanda*” (2012: 80 and 107). Every organism thus embodies a “norm” by reference to which a specific set of objects and events acquires—and only through which it can acquire—meaning as a stimulus,

<sup>14</sup> See Merleau-Ponty (2012: 138). Merleau-Ponty keeps returning in his writings to the subject of children, madmen, primitive people, and animals as “quasi-companions,” “variants of the successful *Ein-führung*” as we usually experience it with other subjects (1968: 180; see, e.g., 2004: 70ff). This is a Husserlian motive found in the *Crisis* (Husserl 1970: 187); for a more detailed commentary, cf. Hainämaa (2016: 87ff).

<sup>15</sup> We ought to note that Merleau-Ponty sometimes formulates his thoughts on the matter in quite a Gehlenian manner, for instance when he states that “by renouncing a part of his spontaneity, by engaging in the world through stable organs and pre-established circuits, man can acquire the mental and practical space that will free him, in principle, from his milieu and thereby allow him *to see* it” (2012: 89). This motive recurs in Merleau-Ponty’s early writings (cf. in particular 1963: 175f) and is clearly due to Scheler’s (1961) and Gurwitsch’s influence (see Embree 2008: 64–66).

<sup>16</sup> Cf., e.g., Merleau-Ponty (1963: 180). Merleau-Ponty also writes, for example, that a living being is “not another positivity” but a “singular point” of the physicochemical world, “where another dimensionality appears” (2003b: 212, 224/1995: 268, 277, see 1970: 126).

<sup>17</sup> Merleau-Ponty uses the concept of “being in the world” throughout his *Phenomenology of Perception* (2012) to differentiate his idea of subject from the Kantian perspective. Cf. Merleau-Ponty (2012: 322, note 23): “when it comes to the subject of perception, we replace consciousness with existence, that is, with being in the world through a body.” Moreover, Merleau-Ponty attributes “certain manner of treating the world, [...] ‘being-in-the world’” not only to humans, but also to animals (1963: 125f, see 2012: 80). Although this characterization is too general and will require further clarification, it shows that Merleau-Ponty conceives of both animals and humans as perceiving and acting beings, which thereby share a common ground.

a phenomenon meaningful to the corresponding organism.<sup>18</sup> A norm in this context should be understood as a “transverse” phenomenon (Merleau-Ponty 2000a: 14, 2012: 77),<sup>19</sup> that is, as something that transcends the linear relationships between an organism’s exterior and interior and regulates them with respect to the organism as a whole. (It should be noted here that Merleau-Ponty’s interpretation of an animal’s relation to the *Umwelt* differs from Gehlen’s conception, according to which an animal is not a whole and consequently does not possess the “transverse” function we have just described.) In short, the notion of a “norm” of an organism’s interaction with its environment is a designation of the “third ontological order” which Merleau-Ponty wants to describe using the phenomenon of an organism.

Merleau-Ponty’s idea of a norm will ultimately lead us to his investigations linked to the concept of institution, which will be discussed in more detail below. Before embarking on that, however, we will use several concrete examples of Merleau-Ponty’s analysis to elucidate the idea of a “normative” character of an organism.

## Merleau-Ponty on the Ontogenetic Unity of the Body

The aim of a number of Merleau-Ponty’s descriptions is to demonstrate how the norms that guide an organism’s relationship to the environment vary in concrete situations. One of Merleau-Ponty’s examples of this variability is based on his interpretation of the Gestalt-psychological account of the perception of orientation (2011: 71–79, 2012: 254–265). The understanding of objects in space as, for example, vertically oriented cannot be explained solely on the basis of perceived contents or the subject’s position, because orientation can change (e.g., what was perceived as oblique is suddenly seen as vertical) even when both the contents and the position remain the same. Using descriptions of several experiments, Merleau-Ponty demonstrates that spatial orientation is determined by a relationship established and variously maintained between so-called “anchorage points” (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 259), that is, between privileged segments of perceived space which guide our movements. Our actions are then “anchored” by such points, so that for instance doors are perceived as something one can walk through based on a relationship between their frame, handle, etc. As agents, we actively enter our environment via the range of actions we are capable of, our environment provides “footholds” for these actions, and the concrete form of intersection between these two aspects acquires a normative value with respect to which any particular sensory contents and actions subsequently acquire their perceptual value, for example the index of a

<sup>18</sup> Regarding the concept of a norm, see Merleau-Ponty (1963: 148, 154, 159; see Toadvine 2007a: 45). Merleau-Ponty formulates the same idea in several different ways, for example when he speaks of a living being in terms of an embodied “regulative principle” (2003b: 150/1995: 200) or “an ensemble of principles of discernment” (2003b: 174/1995: 228). The notion of norm can be compared to the Uexküllian idea of an animal’s building plan or the “theme” of its life, without necessarily adopting the attendant Kantian framework; cf. Moyle (2007: 173ff).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. in particular Merleau-Ponty (1963: 14, 47, 89, 205). The original source of this notion is probably Wertheimer, who spoke of “transverse functions”.

particular orientation. Any particular perception of orientation (e.g., “I hold myself upright” or “the image on the wall is askew”) is thus possible only as a variation of a certain pre-established but constantly readjusted standard of intersection between our actions and our environment supporting them. In other words, phenomena oriented in space are given to the perceiving subject only in reference to a provisory, variable norm of orientation. Merleau-Ponty demonstrates this structural relationship using a variety of other perceptual phenomena,<sup>20</sup> ultimately concluding that the relationship between an experiential norm and a deviation from it, in the sense we just explained, is the fundamental principle of all perception.<sup>21</sup>

This establishment of a momentary perceptual norm is, however, still only part of a broader process in which organism-defining norms undergo various transformations. For example, norms through which perceptual phenomena acquire their meaning are codetermined by an individual’s stance and exploratory movement (Merleau-Ponty 2011: 126ff, 2012: 82ff). Our “body schema” is a “point from which there is something to do in the world” and functions as an intuitive “register” where our situation with respect to a particular perceptual and action-related goal is recorded and with respect to which it is transformed (Merleau-Ponty 1970: 7, see 2011: 126ff; Halák 2018). Based on examples of several pathologies of the body schema, Merleau-Ponty shows how perceptual norms can shift beyond adjustment with respect to a perceptual goal. For example, cases of phantom limbs show that subjects can perceive sensory contents even when the corresponding object is absent. And similarly, in anosognosia subjects fail to perceive particular sensory contents although the corresponding object is present (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 78–89). In these cases, an organism’s overall cohesion in regard to its environment displaces or fills in the contents where they are supposed to be present or absent depending on a previously established norm of perception.<sup>22</sup> Inversely, for instance a phantom limb gradually disappears as actions attempted by the amputee systematically fail and the subject “acknowledges” the limb’s absence, in other words, as the subject’s norm of possible actions and perceptions is adjusted. Merleau-Ponty’s descriptions of pathologies of the body schema are based on studies of humans but similar conclusions can be drawn also concerning animals. For instance, the phenomenon of “limb substitution” shows that the use of limbs does not depend on their physiological availability to the animal, but rather on a norm that establishes the animal’s relations to the world (1963: 39ff, 2012: 80). Merleau-Ponty shows that the establishment and transformation of experiential norms is neither the result of a direct external causality, nor a centrifugal intellectual process involving, for example, a presumed faculty of judging and thereby some “intellectual” capacities. The transformation of experiential norms is related to what the embodied subject can do as an agent situated in the

<sup>20</sup> Especially perceptual depth and movement, see Merleau-Ponty (2011: 71–126, 2012: 265–293).

<sup>21</sup> See Merleau-Ponty (2011) where this question is dealt with in terms of mutual “expression” or circularity between perceiving and the perceived. Merleau-Ponty states that this relationship is “the essence of perceptual consciousness” (2011: 176).

<sup>22</sup> See Merleau-Ponty (2012: 84): “To have a phantom limb is to remain open to all of the actions of which the arm alone is capable and to stay within the practical field that one had prior to the mutilation.”



world. As such, the notion of norm should be applicable to both human and non-human organisms.

In his later lectures from the Collège de France, Merleau-Ponty studied the phenomenon of “imprinting” (*Prägung*) which further confirms the idea of ontogenetic unity based on the principle of a norm and deviations from it.<sup>23</sup> Just like an organism relates not to the physical environment as such but to an environment that has a meaning for it and incites to a particular action (*Umwelt*), so too, the organism’s early ontogenesis can be viewed as a series of responses to “expressive,” “significant” stimuli (Merleau-Ponty 2010a: 17/2003a: 51), “formative events” (Merleau-Ponty 2010a: 22/2003a: 56). If, during the crucial moments of its life, an animal is exposed to particular stimuli, they acquire a normative status and open a field of meaning with respect to which the animal’s subsequent life will be organized and oriented. Similarly, Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical interpretation of several biological studies<sup>24</sup> show that early morphogenesis cannot be explained by recourse to the notion of an innate morphological or neural structure or finality. Following Gesell’s research, Merleau-Ponty concludes that morphogenesis is akin to slowed-down behavior (see Merleau-Ponty 2003b: 140, 145ff/1995: 188, 194ff). For instance, the nervous system, which has to be considered “dynamic,” has “an intrinsic potential for growth” depending on how “it is reacting to its surroundings in the manner of an organism” (Merleau-Ponty 2003b: 143/1995: 192).

In sum, ontogenesis can be completed only through reactions which have a preliminary meaning for the species, but which also direct and steer the development of the organism in a unique way by a process of “impregnation” by conspecifics and key events occurring in the organism’s environment. The imprinting and morphogenetical dynamism are thus phenomena which demonstrate that stimuli perceived by animals as meaningful can in principle be substituted, although plasticity of the organism is limited in space and time depending on the species, the development phase of the organism, the emplacement of the effect, and other factors. Much like the process through which our sense of orientation or our body schema can be transformed, the norms which regulate organism’s behavioral or even ontogenetic interaction with the environment, thus should not be understood as either based on a causal mechanism, nor on an a priori logic: they are systematic, but also provisory and continuously re-established.

<sup>23</sup> Merleau-Ponty uses the works of Lorenz (1953, 1970): see the lectures on institution (2010a: 17ff/2003a: 51f) where Merleau-Ponty follows Ruyer’s overview (1953); in his lectures on Nature (2003b: 194ff/1995: 253ff) Merleau-Ponty refers directly to Lorenz. Already in his earlier lecture at the Sorbonne (2010b: 87), Merleau-Ponty worked with Chauvin’s writings (1941) where he encountered the idea that an animal’s morphology is co-determined by the image imprinted by its peers.

<sup>24</sup> In particular the works of Coghill and Gesell, see Merleau-Ponty (2003b: 140–153/1995: 188–204).

## Merleau-Ponty on Institution

In Merleau-Ponty's philosophical interpretation of organisms, briefly outlined above using the concept of norms or standards of interaction with the environment, one ought to emphasize two particular points:

1. The phenomena described in the previous section all suggest that impulses coming from the environment indirectly refer to the range of actions an organism is capable of carrying out, i.e. they cannot be interpreted as simply external to it. To an embodied subject, to perceive a meaningful phenomenon is tantamount to actively situating his/her own living possibilities in the spectacle by adopting an appropriate stance towards it, and thus to having the phenomenon situated toward himself/herself. Even animal environment must therefore be viewed as an indirect expression of an animal's way of being and a reference to it, and not as merely sum of external quasi-objective "signals" or "clues" that directly and mechanically launch an internally pre-given instinctual behavior.<sup>25</sup> Probability of catching predatory fish on spinner bait is high not because the bait *faithfully copies* their prey, but because it *emphasizes* a particular set of characteristic signs of their prey (see Ruyer's discussion of "supra-normal stimuli," 1953: 838f; referred to by Merleau-Ponty 2010a: 17/2003a: 51). The prey is not an exact external counterpart of an internal instinct, and therefore neither an infallible clue for it. Rather, it is a *more or less appropriate* foothold for a predatory activity, which is an animal's particular way of understanding its environment.
2. Since the way in which an organism interacts with its environment is not based on a closed circuit between a quasi-mechanical clue and a blind instinct, but on an open circuit between an activity and a foothold for it, it is fundamentally dynamic. We have seen how the norms of interaction between an organism and its environment are preliminarily determined by the initial states of organisms (which, of course, change in the course of evolution) and further determined throughout the organisms' lives (e.g., by imprinting). Moreover, they are acquired and transformed as organisms learn to execute particular activities (e.g., in habits), and regulated with respect to particular perceptual situations (e.g., in maintaining of orientation in space by adopting an appropriate stance). Analogically, they can be permanently destroyed and wiped out by neurological pathologies (e.g., apraxia in humans) or mechanical injuries (e.g., phantom limb; limb substitution in animals). Animal behavior is therefore plastic to some degree, which means it could proceed otherwise if the events transforming the norms on which it is based were different. In Merleau-Ponty's words, meanings to which organisms are initially

---

<sup>25</sup> Merleau-Ponty also refers Lorenz's statement that instinctual behavior does not need any clue at all (behavior "without object," Merleau-Ponty 2003a: 190/1995: 249) and that it primarily expresses an animal's existence. Similarly, Merleau-Ponty is critical of a mechanistic way of applying cybernetics to the problem of living beings' relationship with the environment. In his view, to interpret impulses as quasi-mechanical "signals" is an "artificialist" reduction and does not correspond to organism's behavior (2003b: 226/1995: 289).

open, their “innate [instinctual] schema,” have to be “specified,” “filled [...] with a being not foreseen by Nature” (Merleau-Ponty 2003b: 194/1995: 253). Goslings instinctively follow not their mother but an object that was imprinted in them with the *value* “mother” (Lorenz referred to by Uexküll 1957 59f; see Merleau-Ponty 2010a: 17/2003a: 51, 2003b: 193ff/1995: 251ff). The event of imprinting has fundamental implications for animal’s life which certainly transcend any implications “foreseen” by Nature as derived from the presence of a real biological mother.

These two points are of a fundamental importance for the problem we started investigating in relation to Gehlen because they define what Merleau-Ponty himself calls institution as a specific “kind of being” towards which we are “not sovereign,” and yet within which we are “not enclosed” (Merleau-Ponty 1970: 46). For Merleau-Ponty, a subject who establishes, maintains, corrects, and possibly loses its unity and its relationship to the environment that is based on “standards” or “norms,” in the sense described above, is an “instituted–instituting subject” (*sujet institué–instituant*; see Merleau-Ponty 1970: 40, 2010a: 6/2003a: 35).<sup>26</sup>

Let us now have a closer look on Merleau-Ponty’s use of the concept of institution, so we could contrast it with Gehlen’s. The notion appears in Merleau-Ponty’s works primarily as a translation of Husserl’s concept of *Stiftung* linked to the problem of idealities.<sup>27</sup> According to Husserl, the ideal meaning of, for example, a geometrical entity, while “objective” and “necessary,” does not preexist as an object independent of its relationship to subjects. Rather, this meaning is produced, that is, formulated through writing and maintained in a tradition of those who adopt it and revive its original evidence. Merleau-Ponty takes this Husserl’s idea and shifts it in a different direction. He understands the “primally instituting act” (*Urstiftung*) not as aiming at and eventually embracing the “core” of the meaning, as a grasping or evidencing a total, complete truth, mathematical or any other “essence,” but rather opening a yet-undefined field of meaning which will require rectifications, re-establishments, or re-effectuations (*Nachstiftung*).<sup>28</sup>

Having re-interpreted the concept of institution in this way, Merleau-Ponty then uses it in a much more general sense and beyond the limits of the issue of ideality. In the oft-quoted summary of his course dedicated to the generalized idea of institution, he writes that “what we understand by the concept of institution are those events in experience which endow it with durable dimensions, in relation to which a whole series of other experiences will acquire meaning,” or those events which “sediment in me a meaning, not just as survivals or residues, but as the invitation to a sequel,

<sup>26</sup> The possibility of interpreting Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of life, and possibly also of the anthropological difference, through the concept of institution has been noticed by other interpreters as well. For instance, Gléonec suggests that we ought to “understand birth as institution” because “the birth, which constitutes the meaning of life [...], is the institution of a future” (Gléonec 2012: 110 and 126; see also 123, 126ff and 2017: 47–63).

<sup>27</sup> See esp. Husserl (1989), Lawlor and Bergo (2001), and Merleau-Ponty (1998; 2010a: 50–57/2003a: 89–97).

<sup>28</sup> We cannot develop this important subject in more detail here. See the insightful papers of Bojanić (2007), Hass and Hass (2000), Lawlor (2001, 2002), Robert (2000) or Vallier (2005).

the necessity for a future”.<sup>29</sup> Especially in his lectures on institution and on Nature, Merleau-Ponty applies the concept of institution to the context of living beings and specifically to the phenomenon of imprinting.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, he quotes Bergson’s statement according to which an organism is “a register in which time is being inscribed” (Bergson 1983: 16) and explains that what “Bergson thereby designates is an institution, a *Stiftung*, as Husserl would say, an inaugural act that embraces a becoming without being exterior to this becoming” (Merleau-Ponty 2003b: 59/1995: 88).<sup>31</sup>

When using the notion of institution this way, Merleau-Ponty clearly does not mean institutions in a sociological sense, as Gehlen ultimately did. Nevertheless, it is obvious that he speaks about the same philosophical and anthropological problem. The phenomenon of imprinting, for instance, shows that animal life includes moments of “decision,” when external events co-determine the form of an instinct or even the animal’s morphology. Animals, too, are therefore *at some distance* from the “natural” impulses, since the meaning of impulses—which can be viewed as organic or natural—is mediated by external formative events, which thus function as a sort of mediating factors. And while we cannot claim that an animal chooses between values like an autonomous agency, there is some space for “decisions” or “choices,” as attested by the potential for fatal errors (such as goslings following not their biological mother but Konrad Lorenz, or predatory fish attacking spinner bait).

We must, therefore, conclude that the mediated, “instituted” nature of relationship to the world is not exclusively human. Even on a vital level, the relationship to the world is first established as a norm (that is, originally instituted), which henceforth serves as a reference system for any future experiences that the living beings under consideration perceive as meaningful (i.e., instituting), and it is re-established or re-effectuated through events of a systematic value. Described in these terms, the logic of organic relationship with the world fundamentally changes how one ought to understand “institution” and culture.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Merleau-Ponty (1970: 40f). Lefort (2003: 7) notes that it is “unnecessarily restrictive” to say that meaning sediments “in me,” since “some characteristics of institution can be discovered already at the level of life” and on an intersubjective level.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. section “Institution and life” in his lectures on institution (2010a: 16–27/2003a: 49–62; and the corresponding summary: 1970: 41; based on Ruyer 1953). Merleau-Ponty speaks here of “animal institution” (2010a: 9 and 18/2003a: 39 and 52) and “vital institution” (as opposed to “human institution”; 2010a: 20/2003a: 54). Similar claims appear also in his lectures on Nature (2003b: 214/1995: 276; see 2003b: 208/1995: 269).

<sup>31</sup> A number of other Merleau-Ponty’s statements support a conclusion that he understands the logic of organic development as analogous to the logic of the Husserlian *Stiftung*, although he does not always refer to it explicitly (see, e.g. Merleau-Ponty 1968: 253 and 212, 2012: 195). For example, in his discussion of Coghill’s works, Merleau-Ponty states that an “embryo is not simple matter, but matter which refers to the future.” It is “a reference to the future,” because an embryo develops “a certain power—‘what [the organism] can do’” and thus “transfers” the solution of an earlier problem to a problem posited later (2003b: 144/1995: 193).

<sup>32</sup> Subsequently, Merleau-Ponty explicitly claims that “we can speak in a valid way of an animal culture” (2003b: 198/1995: 258), because “just as the significations of our verbal concepts can be developed into different significations [...] so too does [animal] behavior take on different significations” (ibid.), for instance when an animal “uses the same object [...] to different ends” (2003b: 176/1995: 231). Concerning the latter, Merleau-Ponty refers to Köhler’s work on chimpanzees (1925), also interpreted by Scheler (1961: 31f); for more detail, see Embree (2008).

## Conclusion: Gehlen Versus Merleau-Ponty on Institutions

We have seen how Gehlen, as well as some other influential twentieth-century authors, asserts that humans should be characterized by their distance from “natural” impulses, that is, by the fact that their actions gain a degree of autonomy large enough to open space for deliberate acts. Moreover, Gehlen asserts that human distance and autonomy from nature is due to the fact that humans are “deficient beings” who have no direct relationship to the world and that the relationship to the world is indirectly “imposed” on them from the outside, by social institutions.

With Merleau-Ponty, on the other hand, we explored the dynamic nature of organisms’ ontogenetic unity and relationship to the environment, and saw that Gehlen’s interpretation of the underspecified nature of human organs and instincts is implausible. In particular, the lack of specificity that is characteristic of humans cannot be interpreted as a “great burden,” a threat to our stability linked to the fact that we would be “flooded with stimulation, with an abundance of impressions” (Gehlen 1988: 28; cited above, note 6). Merleau-Ponty explicitly rejects the commonplace Herderian idea, which is also central in Gehlen, that a larger amount of impulses would lead to an increase in the quantity or intensity of perceptions and sensations.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty replaces this idea by an interpretation of organisms in terms of systematic but open “standards” of interaction with their environment, that is, institutions.

It follows that the function and purpose of human institutions cannot be merely to imperatively stabilize our “indeterminate” subjectivity, which supposedly requires an external completion if it is to discover and maintain the meaning and direction of its own actions. If the instinctive “certainty” and “close connection” between animal organs, their instinctive equipment, and their environment is to lead to what has been described as the “blindness of instinct” and thus also possibly to “errors” in interactions with the environment (see Merleau-Ponty 2012: 81f), then human “openness” to the world (*Weltoffenheit*) and instinctive “uncertainty” (*Unsicherheit*) cannot be interpreted according to the Herderian figure, i.e. just negatively as the unreliability and indefiniteness that needs to be imperatively fixed by institutions. First and foremost, human “openness,” “deficiency,” and “distance” from impulses that come from the environment must not be interpreted as negative or privative traits. These characteristics should be understood positively as a potential for a richer variety of possible actions that corresponds to a greater capacity to discriminate among the impulses and to make them “fit” a wider variety of types of meaningful situations.

Gehlen’s institution-based anthropology was an attempt to overcome a subjectivist conception of human experience, but rather than overcoming it, it ultimately became its antithesis, its counterpart. When comparing humans and animals, Herder emphasized that instinctive animal behavior is certain of itself, whereas Gehlen focused on its automatic character and internal origin (see Herder 2002: 77: “strength and sureness of instinct”; Gehlen 1988: 17). When he then described the analogy between

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Merleau-Ponty’s critique of the “constancy hypothesis” (2012: 8; 77f).

the instinctive reactions of animals and habitual behavior of humans (Gehlen 1964: 23), his excessively narrow interpretation of instinct as something automatic and internal was mirrored by his one-sided interpretation of habit and thus of institutions. In Gehlen's interpretation, habit and institution thus become merely a way of excluding some of the possibilities among which we must choose in our actions (he characterizes habit as a "suspension of the question of meaning," Gehlen 1964: 26). Institution, as Gehlen views it, is then an *imperative* exclusion of some possibilities which were given in excess, determination of the undetermined, and objectivization of the unstable.

According to Merleau-Ponty, on the other hand, institution ought to be understood in terms of establishment of an experiential norm, initial position from which a living being interrogates its environment (as opposed to being subjected either to the imperative of instinct or to external social institutions).<sup>34</sup> Both the sensory and effector equipment of animals and the corporeity, habits, and cultural instruments of humans should then be understood as the initial experiential norms or standards, starting points of a specific range of actions, with respect to which the world reveals itself as a range of "footholds" for these actions, which in turn modify the standards. Correspondingly, human openness, the ability to transcend closed environment, should be understood as correlative to the distinctive way in which the norms or standards of interaction with the environment are established, conserved, and modified in humans.<sup>35</sup> Human openness should thus be understood as based neither on an initial absence of such norms (as presupposed by Gehlen), nor on a different "faculty" beyond these norms and corporeity in general (such as an autonomous reason, linguistic structure, Scheler's spirit, etc.).

We believe that it is only in the light of such a generalized understanding of institution as a "manner of being," which we managed to identify in the course of our critical interpretation of Gehlen and Merleau-Ponty's works on embodiment, that we can better understand some of Merleau-Ponty's oft-quoted formulations that touch more directly upon the anthropological difference. When Merleau-Ponty suggests that humanity is "another corporeity,"<sup>36</sup> we should read this corporeity as referring to a different experiential norm as we described it. Similarly, if Merleau-Ponty asserts that the relation between man and animal is not hierarchical but "lateral" (2003b: 268/1995: 335), or that "animality and humanity are given only together" (2003b: 271/1995: 338), this should be understood based on the concept of the body

<sup>34</sup> Merleau-Ponty not only views perception—and later even experience in general—as "interrogation": he defines living organism as "interrogative being" (2003b: 156/1995: 207; see Gléonec 2012: 122; Toadvine 2007a: 49).

<sup>35</sup> Merleau-Ponty states, for instance, that human *Umwelt* is "open, transformable" and becomes a world (*Welt*) because the body "is armed with instruments of observation and action" which enable humans the "projection of a *nonnatural system of equivalence and of discrimination*" (Merleau-Ponty 2003b: 222/1995: 283; translation modified; italics added). Merleau-Ponty interprets Uexküll's works on higher animals analogously: their differentiation of sensorial givens and their response to them "by fine actions" makes their *Umwelt* "no longer a closing off, but rather an opening" (Merleau-Ponty 2003b: 171/1995: 225).

<sup>36</sup> Merleau-Ponty (2003b: 208/1995: 269): "before being reason, humanity is another corporeity [...] another manner of being a body".

as a norm that can be modified and thus allows for “variants.” The “immense difference” between animals and humans, which Merleau-Ponty explicitly acknowledges (2010a: 18/2003a: 52), is then not about animals *not* having an “instituted” relationship to the world. Rather, it amounts to claiming that animal institution “does not have infinite productivity” (2010a: 9/2003a: 39), that it does not lead “to an indefinite elaboration” (1970: 41). That is, the difference here is not in animal norms of interaction with the environment not undergoing transformations, but in that the imprinting event is not “conserved” in the animal (e.g., 2010a: 9/2003a: 39) as a norm for any subsequent activity, as in humans.

The goal of our paper was not, however, to analyze the anthropological difference itself and this is not the place where we could discuss the issue of differences in the “productivity” of instituting events and norms established through them. Our aim was to shed light on what should be viewed as a question preliminary to that task, namely how a generalized concept of institution, as investigated by Gehlen and Merleau-Ponty, can serve as a common ground for describing animal and human relationship to the world.

**Funding** This study is a result of the research funded by the Czech Science Foundation as the project GA ČR 16-19311S “Models of bodily experience in the theoretical foundations of experiential education and its kinanthropological context”.

**Open Access** This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license, and indicate if changes were made.

## References

- Apel, K.-O. (1973). Arnold Gehlens “Philosophie der Institutionen” und die Metainstitution der Sprache. In *Transformation der Philosophie*, I (pp. 196–221). Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Bergson, H. (1983). *Creative evolution* (trans: A. Mitchell). Boston: University Press of America.
- Bimbenet, É. (2004). *Nature et humanité. Le problème anthropologique dans l'oeuvre de Merleau-Ponty*. Paris: Vrin.
- Bimbenet, É. (2011). *L'animal que je ne suis plus*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Böhler, D. (1973). A. Gehlen: Die Handlung. In J. Speck (Ed.), *Grundprobleme der großen Philosophen. Philosophie der Gegenwart, II* (pp. 230–280). Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Bojanić, P. (2007). To institute, to primarily institute (Stiften, Urstiften). Husserl’s first readers and translators in France. A possible origin of continental philosophy. *Filozofija i društvo*, 2, 235–245.
- Buchanan, B. (2008). *Onto-ethologies*. New York: Sunny Press.
- Cassirer, E. (1957). *The philosophy of symbolic forms. Vol. 3. The phenomenology of knowledge*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Chauvin, R. (1941). *Contribution à l'étude physiologique du Criquet pèlerin et du déterminisme des phénomènes grégaires*. Paris: Société entomologique de France.
- Embree, L. (2008). A beginning for the phenomenological theory of primate ethology. *Environmental Philosophy*, 5(1), 61–74.
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- Gehlen, A. (1961). *Anthropologische Forschung*. Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt.
- Gehlen, A. (1962). *Der Mensch. Seine Natur und seine Stellung in der Welt* (7th revised edition, 1st edition 1940). Frankfurt am Main – Bonn: Athenäum.



- Gehlen, A. (1964). *Urmensch und Spätkultur* (2nd revised edition, 1st edition 1956). Frankfurt a. M. – Bonn: Athenäum.
- Gehlen, A. (1988). *Man: His nature and place in the world* (trans: Clare McMillan and Karl Pillemer). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Gléonec, A. (2012). Corps animal et corps humain: l'« effacement » de la propriété. À la naissance de l'institution chez Merleau-Ponty. *Studia Phaenomenologica*, 12, 109–132.
- Gléonec, A. (2017). *Institution et Passivité. Lectures de Merleau-Ponty*. Grenoble: Jérôme Millon.
- Habermas, J. (Ed.). (2001). Symbolischer Ausdruck und rituelles Verhalten. Ein Rückblick auf Ernst Cassirer und Arnold Gehlen. In *Zeit der Übergänge. Kleine politische Schriften*, IX (pp. 63–82). Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Hainämaa, S. (2016). Transcendental intersubjectivity and normality: Constitution by mortals. In R. T. Jensen & D. Moran (Eds.), *The phenomenology of embodied subjectivity* (pp. 83–104). Dordrecht: Springer.
- Halák, J. (2018). The concept of “body schema” in Merleau-Ponty’s account of embodied subjectivity. In B. Andrieu, J. Parry, A. Porrovecchio, & O. Sirost (Eds.), *Body ecology and emersive leisure* (pp. 37–50). London: Routledge.
- Hass, M., & Hass, L. (2000). Merleau-Ponty and the origin of geometry. In F. Evans (Ed.), *Chiasms: Merleau-Ponty’s notion of flesh* (pp. 177–187). Albany: SUNY Press.
- Heidegger, M. (1995). *The fundamental concepts of metaphysics* (trans: William McNeill and Nicholas Walker). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Heidegger, M. (1998). Letter on humanism. In *Pathmarks* (trans: W. McNeil). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Herder, J. G. (2002). Treatise on the origin of the language. In *Philosophical writings* (trans: M. N. Forster) (pp. 65–154). Cambridge: University Press.
- Honneth, A., & Joas, H. (1988). *Social action and human nature* (trans: Raymond Meyer). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Husserl, E. (1970). *The crisis of European sciences and transcendental phenomenology. An introduction to phenomenological philosophy* (trans: David Carr). Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Husserl, E. (1989). The origin of geometry (trans: David Carr). In J. Derrida (Ed.), *Edmund Husserl’s origin of geometry: An introduction* (trans: J. P. Leavey Jr.). Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press.
- Köhler, W. (1925). *The mentality of apes* (trans: Ella Winter). New York: Harcourt Brace and Co.
- Lawlor, L. (2001). Verflechtung: The triple significance of Merleau-Ponty’s course notes on Husserl’s “the origin of geometry”. In L. Lawlor & B. Bergo (Eds.), *Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Husserl at the limits of phenomenology. Including texts by Edmund Husserl* (pp. 9–37). Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Lawlor, L. (2002). The legacy of Husserl’s “Ursprung der Geometrie”: The limits of phenomenology in Merleau-Ponty and Derrida. In T. Toadvine & L. Embree (Eds.), *Merleau-Ponty’s reading of Husserl* (pp. 201–223). Dordrecht, Boston, London: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Lawlor, L., & Bergo, B. (Eds.). (2001). *Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Husserl at the limits of phenomenology. Including texts by Edmund Husserl*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Lefort, C. (2003). Préface. In M. Merleau-Ponty, *L’institution—La passivité. Notes de cours au Collège de France (1954–1955)* (pp. 5–28). Paris: Belin.
- Lorenz, K. (1953). *Les animaux, les inconnus*. Paris: Éditions de Minuit.
- Lorenz, K. (1970). *Studies on animal and human behavior* (trans: R. Martin). London: Methuen.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1963). *Structure of Behavior* (trans: A. L. Fisher). Boston: Beacon Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1968). *The visible and the invisible* (trans: H. Barnes). Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1970). *Themes from the lectures at the Collège de France, 1952–1960* (trans: J. O’Neill). Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1992). Cézanne’s doubt. In *Sense and non-sense* (trans: H. L. Dreyfus and P. A. Dreyfus) (pp. 9–25). Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1995). *La Nature. Notes. Cours du Collège de France*. Paris: Seuil.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1998). *Notes de cours sur L’origine de la géométrie de Husserl*. Paris: P.U.F.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (2000a). Titres et travaux—Projet d’enseignement. In J. Prunier (Ed.), *Parcours deux* (pp. 9–35). Paris: Verdier.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (2000b). Un inédit de Merleau-Ponty. In J. Prunier (Ed.), *Parcours deux* (pp. 36–48). Paris: Verdier.

- Merleau-Ponty, M. (2003a). *L'institution—La passivité. Notes de cours au Collège de France (1954–1955)*. Paris: Belin.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (2003b). *Nature. Course notes from the Collège de France (trans: R. Vallier)*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (2004). *The world of perception (trans: O. Davis)*. London: Routledge.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (2007). Eye and mind (trans. J. M. Edie). In T. Toadvine & L. Lawlor (Eds.), *Merleau-Ponty reader* (pp. 351–378). Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (2010a). *Institution and passivity. Course notes from the Collège de France (1954–1955) (trans: H. Massey)*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (2010b). *Child psychology and pedagogy: The Sorbonne lectures 1949–1952 (trans: T. Welsh)*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (2011). *Le monde sensible et le monde de l'expression*. Grenoble: Metiss Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (2012). *Phenomenology of perception (trans: D. Landes)*. London: Routledge.
- Moyle, T. (2007). Re-enchanting nature: Human and animal life in later Merleau-Ponty. *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, 38(2), 164–180.
- Portmann, A. (1960). *Die Tiergestalt: Studien über die Bedeutung der tierischen Erscheinung*. Basel: Verlag Friedrich Reinhardt.
- Rehberg, K.-S. (1988). Arnold Gehlen's elementary anthropology: An introduction. In A. Gehlen, *Man: His nature and place in the world (trans: C. McMillan and K. Pillemer)* (pp. 9–36). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Robert, F. (2000). Fondement et fondation. *Chiasmi International*, 2, 351–372.
- Ruyer, R. (1953). Les conceptions nouvelles de l'instinct. *Les Temps modernes*, 1953(11), 824–860.
- Schacht, R. (2015). Gehlen, Nietzsche and the project of philosophical anthropology. In P. Honnenberger (Ed.), *Naturalism and philosophical anthropology* (pp. 49–65). London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Scheler, M. (1961). *Man's place in nature (trans: H. Meyerhoff)*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Scott, T. (2010). *Organization philosophy: Gehlen, Foucault, Deleuze*. Dodrecht: Springer.
- Toadvine, T. (2007a). How not to be a jellyfish: Human exceptionalism and the ontology of reflection. In C. Painter & C. Lotz (Eds.), *Phenomenology and the non-human animal. At the limits of experience* (pp. 39–56). Dodrecht: Springer.
- Toadvine, T. (2007b). 'Strange Kinship': Merleau-Ponty on the human–animal relation. *Analecta Husserliana*, 93, 17–32.
- Toadvine, T. (2009). *Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of nature*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Vallier, R. (2005). Institution: The significance of Merleau-Ponty's 1954 course at the Collège de France. *Chiasmi International*, 7, 281–303.
- von Uexküll, J. (1909). *Umwelt und Innerwelt der Tiere*. Berlin: Springer.
- von Uexküll, J. (1957). A stroll through the worlds of animals and men. A picture book of invisible worlds. In *Instinctive behavior. The development of a modern concept* (trans. and ed. C. H. Schiller) (pp. 5–80). New York: International Universities Press.