

For the formatted, published version of this article, please see the following:

Chandler D. Rogers. 2024. "Estranged Kinship: Empathy and Animal Desire in Merleau-Ponty." *Research in Phenomenology* 54:2, 213-227.

[doi:10.1163/15691640-12341547](https://doi.org/10.1163/15691640-12341547)

Estranged Kinship: Empathy and Animal Desire in Merleau-Ponty

Chandler D. Rogers

Abstract: Merleau-Ponty suggests in his *Nature* lectures that myth provides the best way into thinking the relation of strange kinship between humanity and animality. He goes on to refigure Husserl's paradigm of the two hands touching to extend beyond merely human-to-human relations, invoking in the process the myth of Narcissus. By carefully examining Merleau-Ponty's late refiguration of that paradigm, alongside the revised conception of narcissism that it helps him to develop, we find that while human-animal empathy is made possible by a ground of intercorporeal kinship, human-animal estrangement makes possible the emergence of an ethical relation to other animals, contingent upon the sublimation of animal desire. Holding human-animal kinship and estrangement in tension reveals a nascent ideal present implicitly in the early stages of childhood development: a vision of the possibility of interspecies harmony, rooted in the bodily reciprocity that drives the process of self-maturation.

Keywords: Animality, Strange Kinship, Empathy, Myth, Narcissism, Psychoanalysis

The question concerning animality is, if not forthrightly ontological, a question about origins. Put this way it naturally invites complimentary inquiry about where we are heading as a species. Toward which cosmological ideal, or vision of human-animal interrelation, are we striving? Merleau-Ponty gives us a clue toward addressing the archeological, origin-directed question when he notes in the *Nature* lectures: "...mythical thinking indicates best the relation humanity-animality that we have in sight, (...) where there is an adherence, a strange kinship between the human and the animal."¹ If, according to Merleau-Ponty, mythical thinking offers a window into the strange kinship that adheres between these two facets of our being, then surely we would do well to attend to the specific myths to which Merleau-Ponty himself alludes when addressing this relation. These should offer further clues not only to help us better address the question concerning

¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Nature: Course Notes from the College de France*, trans. Robert Vallier (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2003), 214. The author would like to thank Daniela Vallega-Neu and an anonymous reviewer for their insightful feedback and suggestions. He would also like to thank Jeffrey Bloechl, at whose desk the initial draft was written, and who provided extensive early feedback; along with those who offered questions and responses at the virtual meeting of IAEP in October of 2021, especially Kirstin Waldkoenig, Julian Evans, and Rachel Jones, and at Gonzaga University in April of 2022, especially Somreeta Paul, Jarrad Felgenhauer, Neal DeRoo, and Daniel Bradley.

our animal origins, but also the possibility of an ethical ideal toward which to strive, encompassing our relations to animals of other species.²

Annabelle Dufourcq has recently examined at length the oneiric or dreamlike dimension of what Merleau-Ponty calls mythical thinking. We might say that the dimension she explores subtends or underlies the broader category of mythical thinking here referenced by Merleau-Ponty, as the semiotic or pre-linguistic origin of symbolic articulation.³ Symbolic articulation and the semiotic rhythms and dynamics that subtend linguistic expression are conveyed most powerfully together, precisely, in myth.⁴ Dufourcq's shift in focus from rational, objectivizing thought toward the animal imaginary that subtends it is an important step in the direction of an inter-animal ethical ideal, especially as combined with phenomenological resistance toward a common overemphasis upon a shared ontological substratum, over and against illusions of human, and by implication animal subjectivity. Yet her ontological account leaves the reader wanting with regard to ethical implications.

After introducing the term “strange kinship” to describe the human-animal relation, in his *Nature* lectures Merleau-Ponty refigures Husserl's paradigm of the two hands touching to extend beyond interhuman relations. We will examine this refiguration at length in the first section, “The Subsistence of Empathy.” In its invocation of the myth of Narcissus, this paradigm helps Merleau-Ponty to present a revised conception of narcissism that criticizes implicitly the key assumptions of Freud and especially Lacan. These criticisms will be addressed in the second section, “The Sublimation of Animal Desire.” Whereas Lacan's exposition of the mirror stage collapses human-animal kinship into human-animal estrangement, Merleau-Ponty's revised conception of narcissism holds these in tension without collapsing either into the other. David Michael Levin has noted that Merleau-Ponty's revised conception of narcissism uncovers “the roots of [human] justice” as “always already inherent in the body's order.”⁵ What our examinations will add is that

² This two-pronged approach offers our best attempt at thinking carefully about animal origins without simply reproducing what Agamben has called the “anthropological machine.” Cf. Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004); and Ted Toadvine, “The Time of Animal Voices,” *Environmental Philosophy* 11:1 (2014): 109. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5840/envirophil20142241>

³ With this phrasing we echo Julia Kristeva, primarily in *Revolution in Poetic Language*, in maintaining that renewed recognition of the semiotic, subtending the symbolic, harbors the potential to destabilize sedimented ways of thinking and speaking. We take this suggestion further by maintaining that it also harbors potential for cultivating practices of interspecies compassion by exposing the roots of a nascent ideal of inter-animal harmony. “Such a practice [of discovering the semiotic at the roots of symbolic language] would uncover the practices Kristeva believes to be inherently ethical because they challenge the subject's possible narcissism [narcissism in Freud or Lacan's pathological senses of the term] or self-enclosure.” Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei, “Language as the Flesh of Being: Merleau-Ponty and Kristeva,” in *Interrogating Ethics: Embodying the Good in Merleau-Ponty*, ed. James Hatley, Janice McLane, and Christian Diehm (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2006), 222.

⁴ Annabelle Dufourcq, *The Imaginary of Animals* (New York: Routledge, 2022). Dufourcq references the mythical throughout but stops short of addressing the specific myths invoked by Merleau-Ponty in reference to the human-animal relation. She does offer a brilliant and thorough explication of Deleuze and Guattari's conception of *becoming animal* in *A Thousand Plateaus*, in dialogue with Bachelard's theory of motor imagination and muscular lyricism, along with the latter's analysis of Lautréamont's poem *Songs of Maldoror*. That poem, as explicated through Bachelard's analysis, presents a prime example of the “mythical thinking” that provides a window into the strange kinship between human and animal. See especially Dufourcq, *The Imaginary of Animals*, 179-199. Cf. Chandler D. Rogers, “Review of *The Imaginary of Animals* by Annabelle Dufourcq,” *Environmental Philosophy* 20:1 (2023): 345-351. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5840/envirophil20232013>

⁵ David Michael Levin, “Visions of Narcissism: Intersubjectivity and the Reversals of Reflection,” in *Merleau-Ponty Vivant*, ed. M. C. Dillon (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 62.

the intercorporeal roots of justice point also toward a nascent vision of inter-animal harmony, in further need of cultivation.

I. The Subsistence of Empathy

In his third lecture course on nature, “The Concept of Nature 1959-1960: Nature and Logos: The Human Body,” Merleau-Ponty gestures in passing toward the impasse between empiricism and intellectualism that had prompted his earliest works. Recapitulating insights from the *Phenomenology of Perception*, the Husserlian paradigm of the two hands touching has enabled him to bypass that old disjunction:

The usual alternative: The body as one of the things [empiricism], or the body as my point of view on the things [intellectualism], is put back into question; it is both: thing-standard as flesh; to sense my body is also to have its posture in the world. The relation with the world is included in the relation of the body with itself. The relation of my two hands = the exchange between them; the touched hand is given to the touching hand as touching; they are the mirror of each other—something analogous in the relation with the things; they “touch me” just as much as I touch them. Not surprising: They are that on which the synergy of my body opens; they are made of the same stuff as the corporal schema; I haunt them at a distance, they haunt me at a distance. I am with them in a relation of *Einfühlung*: my within is an echo of their within.⁶

We note that Merleau-Ponty is here speaking merely of the body’s relation to *things*, not yet addressing other animate creatures. Nevertheless, the analogy is of one hand being given to the other hand, of *Körper* (the body as object) being presented to *Leib* (the body as lived). As the possessor of both hands, I experience at first my right hand, or the hand with which I reach out and touch, given as touching; I experience the left hand given passively, as touched. At some point during the exchange a Gestalt shift occurs. I now perceive my left hand as active, and my right as passive.

We can begin to extract his ontological point: from the perspective of a perceiver (*Leib*), the things perceived are presented as passively given. And yet in empathy it becomes apparent that on the other side of the exchange, from the “perspective” of the things, my body is given passively, as object (*Körper*). The things touch me just as surely as I touch them.⁷

⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Nature*, 224. The passage under consideration begins with things and proceeds to address animalia. In lived experience, however, the infant’s social relations to others (especially its parents or caregivers) precede and prepare it for these most likely secondary relations to things and animalia. O’Neill writes, “...the infant is responsive to [his] social milieu more directly than to his physical milieu. Indeed, he seeks access to the latter through his social world long before he learns to interact directly with his physical world.” John O’Neill, “The Specular Body: Merleau-Ponty and Lacan on Infant Self and Other.” *Synthese* 66:2 (1986): 214. Earlier, in a manner indicating the primacy of inter-animal empathy, he explains that “[a]t the motor-perceptual level, we are not dealing with mechanical drives, pushes and pulls, nor with instincts. Rather, we are in the presence of a physical *posture* which is capable of empathizing immediately and nonverbally with the other’s postural attitude, as though each were a physical sketch of the other.” O’Neill, “The Specular Body,” 207-208.

⁷ Like Husserl, Merleau-Ponty continues to distinguish between “matter” and “life” (*The Structure of Behavior*), or between material nature and animal nature (*Ideas II*). But this late characterization in the *Nature* lectures parts with Husserl’s analysis in *Ideas II*, or rather extends Husserl’s analysis of the constitution of *psychic* reality, in empathy, all the way down to “nature” in its most fundamental sense; namely to what Husserl addresses under the heading of material nature. This extension of an active role, or quasi-agency, to things traditionally conceived as inanimate accords with Merleau-Ponty’s descriptions, for example, of the sky thinking itself in me. Cf. e.g. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald Landes (London: Routledge, 2012), 222. This kind of extensionism provides grounding for Abram’s synthesis of Merleau-Ponty’s thought with an animism according with Lovelock’s Gaia Hypothesis. Cf. David Abram, “The Perceptual Implications of Gaia,” *The Ecologist* 15:3 (1985), 96-103; and “In the Depths of a Breathing Planet: Gaia and the Transformation of Experience,” in *Gaia in Turmoil*:

Yet there is already more at play in this passage than meets the eye. In Merleau-Ponty's recasting of Husserl's analogy, the two hands *mirror* one another, just as Narcissus reaches out to touch his image as reflected in the pool before him. That image so attracts that he longs to become one with it; he finds it reaching out in response, as if longing also for union.⁸ Yet when he tries actually to grasp it, the mirror distorts and his image disappears. Perfect coincidence is impossible, just as for the two hands in their mirroring relation. Such is also the case in the body's relation to the world. In addition, the body finds its manner of being reflected in the things that it encounters. It haunts them at a distance, even as they are reflected back to themselves in the mirror that the animate body provides. Its within, or embodied perspective, is an echo of their within.

The bidirectional nature of the exchange becomes clearer when we press on from the natural to the animal world, recalling *The Structure of Behavior's* movement from matter toward more complex structures of behavior at the level of life. Increased similarity means increased empathy:

But as a result, the corporal schema is going to be not only a relation to the things and to an *Umwelt* of things, but also a relation to other corporal schema[ta]. Among the things, there are living "similar." These are going to insert themselves in the circuit of my hand to my hand. The coupling of my two hands = recognition of a "behavior" in which appears a "thing"; the active hand lives at a distance from the other. Likewise, the coupling of my hand and the hand of another: my corporal schema as an animal of conducts lives at a distance in the living exterior.⁹

Perhaps surprisingly, due to the increased similarity, introducing animalia means admitting a more definitive distance between oneself and another, between the two hands touching. In a strange transmutation of Husserl's metaphor, Merleau-Ponty here contends that the "living 'similar'" insert themselves into what was formerly a closed exchange between *my* left hand and *my* right hand. A foreign hand now enters the analogy, as the animal's appearing interrupts an apparently solipsistic exchange with things.

As the addition of a foreign hand makes clear, this *narcissistic* relation to an animate other is not *solipsistic*. In these late lectures Merleau-Ponty invokes Freudian terminology to clarify this point; we must be careful not to overlook the shift in meaning that attends his usage. Commenting upon the entrance of that strange hand into the exchange, Merleau-Ponty continues:

There are among them a carnal relation, an extension of the narcissism of the body. This narcissism is also an opening to generality: I live the offered behaviors as my own, and I see them animated by a corporal schema. The flesh also resolves the problem here: it is because I perceive that the other is possible for me as an other perceiving the same sensibles that I perceive. Massive flesh of esthesiology, flesh of co-perception made subtle, of identification between corporal schemas. My corporal schema is projected in the others and is also introjected, has relations of being with them, seeks identification, appears as undivided among them, desires them. Desire considered from the transcendental point of view = common framework of my world as carnal and of the world of the other. They all end up at one sole *Einfühlung*.¹⁰

Climate Change, Biodepletion, and Earth Ethics in an Age of Crisis, ed. Eileen Crist and Bruce Rinker (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010), 221-242.

⁸ "Narcissus was the mythical being who, after looking at his image in the water, was drawn as if by vertigo to rejoin his image in the mirror of the water." Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The Child's Relations with Others," trans. William Cobb, in *The Primacy of Perception* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 136.

⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Nature*, 224-225. Already we recognized that the things haunt me just as I haunt them, that my within is an echo of their within; upon the entrance of the animal, that narcissistic relation of haunting—the echoing of projection and introjection—becomes still more pronounced.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 225.

In the carnal relation to an animal other, the narcissism of the body is spontaneously extended to the other's perceived behaviors, through empathy. I live its gestures and expressions as my own by projecting my manner of bodily comportment onto its movements and gestures. When I offer up expressions of my own in response, I find my bodily manner of being reflected back to me in its expressions and gestures, as in a mirror. As this process unfolds I am drawn out toward my own reflection as I find it in the mirror that this animate other becomes for me.

Unlike Freud's conception of secondary narcissism, Merleau-Ponty's revised conception of narcissism is not pathological. Rather than indicating solipsistic withdrawal from healthy social interaction, through excessive investment in the needs of the ego, this narcissism is conceived as "an opening to generality." It indicates that for all embodied beings, and especially for the human animal, socialization is the ground of individuation. The self is enticed out of secure self-enclosure, through empathy, into the terror- and wonder-filled worlds of natural, animal, and social interaction.¹¹

To be sure, Merleau-Ponty goes on to recognize, without some degree of egoity in my interactions with another—without cultivating a healthy, stable sense of self—the threat of subsumption into that other would endure. The borders and boundaries that mark the limits of the self enable the possibility of empathy (*Einfühlung*) across difference, whereby I can "live the offered behaviors as my own, and...see them animated by a corporal schema." Empathy negotiates between egoistic (in psychoanalytic terms) or solipsistic (in phenomenological terms) self-absorption, and the regressive desire to lose oneself in fusion with another.

Merleau-Ponty elaborates upon these points by further utilizing the language of psychoanalysis, indicating that *eros* draws the self into a healthy dialectical relation to *thanatos*. "Freudian Eros and Thanatos rejoin our problem of the flesh with its double sense of opening and narcissism [narcissism here in Freud's sense, as self-enclosure], mediation and involution."¹² The lecture notes continue: "Freud truly saw with projection-introjection and sadomasochism the relation of the *Ineinander* of ego and world, of ego and nature, of ego and animality, of ego and *socius*." Again we must recognize the adjusted meanings that Merleau-Ponty applies to these terms. Whereas for Freud the death drive strives toward annihilation of the individuated ego, and encompasses the aggressive and destructive forces within the psyche, in Merleau-Ponty's adjusted sense *thanatos* here corresponds roughly to the turning-inward or involution of the self. Whereas for Freud *eros* is the drive toward self-preservation, whether at the level of the individual

¹¹ Levin explains that for Merleau-Ponty, by contrast with Freud, "Narcissism...is a seduction of the ego, drawing it out of itself into a process of education." Levin, "Visions of Narcissism," 62. The ego becomes a self in and through this process: "Because the other is the medium through which this takes place, the being that is achieved constitutes an identity informed by a differentiated recognition of the other as both same and different: sharing a universal flesh, yet also irreducibly and absolutely different." On the relation of empathy as applied to actual human-animal relations, and the recognition of both kinship and difference that empathy necessarily entails, see especially Elisa Aaltola, "Empathy, Intersubjectivity, and Animal Philosophy," *Environmental Philosophy* 10:2 (2013): 80. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5840/envirophil201310215>

¹² Merleau-Ponty, *Nature*, 226. He notes just prior: "'Pleasure' is already haunted by 'reality.' The body asks for something other than the body-thing or than its relations with itself. It is in circuit with others. But this is so by its own weight, by its autonomy." Ibid., 225-226. Merleau-Ponty's adjusted senses of these terms correspond more closely to the early Schelling's conceptions of a positive, cosmic force of *eros*, and a correlatively negative cosmic force, which maps onto Merleau-Ponty's adjusted conception of *thanatos*. Sean McGrath explains, "...for Schelling it is the erotic principle, distributed throughout a living cosmos (as opposed to being concentrated in an atomistic ego, as in Freud), which if unchecked by the negative force, the *principium individuationis*, the No of the individual to endless exteriority, would bring about the total death of nature." S. J. McGrath, "Is Schelling's Nature-Philosophy Freudian?" *Analecta Hermeneutica* 3: 17.

(alimentation) or the species (sexuation), in Merleau-Ponty's adjusted sense eros refers to the seduction of the developing self out into the world, into living communion with other things, animals, and humans.¹³

Merleau-Ponty's revised conception of narcissism drives the process of education discussed above, the dialectical relation by which the seductions of eros, or love, draw the self out through empathy toward its image as reflected in the embodied gestures and expressions of other animate beings. This in turn stimulates increasing degrees of self-maturation, as desire initially invested solely in one's own preservation (eros in Freud's sense) matures into desire invested in the pursuit of more meaningful communion with other animate beings (eros in Merleau-Ponty's adjusted sense).

In this way animal desire entices the animals of the world out into the open. It aims in the direction of the healthful overcoming of a purely solipsistic self-relation, toward the transcendence of a thanotic love invested solely in preserving the reign of the monadological ego. Erotic love is directed outwardly as the developing self finds itself drawn toward its reflection as mirrored in the behavioral solicitations and responses of animate others. In the human animal, in specific, radical reflection can generate attention to the kinds of mythical thinking that help to elucidate the relation of strange kinship between humanity and animality. But engagement in such reflection requires the cultivation of a healthy sense of self, so as to guard against regressive, or perhaps thanotic seductions to lose touch with one's humanity in seeking a return to primal fusion. Radical reflection uncovers the animal before thought, pointing us archeologically toward animal origins, and developmentally toward both the sublimation of desire and the emergence of an ethical ideal: "Human desire emerges from animal desire."¹⁴

II. The Sublimation of Animal Desire

And so we ask: how to define this elusive term, *animal*? What separates the animate from the inanimate? In *le versant animal* Jean-Christophe Bailly provides a clear answer to the latter question, a springboard for further reflection. "The major difference that splits living beings into two categories is found along the line of sight, and sight is inseparable from blood and mobility—this is the world of *heterotrophic* beings."¹⁵ Which characteristics distinguish the animal from the vegetal? *Sight*, Bailly maintains, but not just sight; *blood*, but not just blood; *mobility*, but not just

¹³ In "On Narcissism" Freud recognizes that *primary narcissism* plays a role in the normal development of every psyche. Cf. Sigmund Freud, "On Narcissism: An Introduction," trans. James Strachey, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume XIV (London: Hogarth Press, 1914), 72. He draws a connection to eros, as he will later define it, which applies to all animalia: "Narcissism in this sense [primary narcissism] would not be a perversion, but the libidinal complement to the egoism of the instinct of self-preservation, a measure of which may justifiably be attributed to every living creature." *Ibid.*, 72-73.

¹⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Nature*, 225.

¹⁵ Jean-Christophe Bailly, *The Animal Side*, trans. Catherine Porter (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), 27. One should compare this astute observation concerning sight, at the origins of animality, with Portmann's work on animal morphology in the field of biosemiotics, upon which Merleau-Ponty draws in his *Nature* lectures. Dufourcq summarizes, for instance: "Thus, Portmann states that, in living beings, morphogenesis also involves a consistent orientation toward the formation of structures that can be easily spotted, delineated, and recognized and that can spark off strong affects; in other words, structures for the eye, *as if* destined for a perceptual system." Annabelle Dufourcq, "Merleau-Ponty and Biosemiotics: From the Issue of Meaning in Living Beings to a New Deal between Science and Metaphysics," in *Merleau-Ponty and Contemporary Philosophy*, ed. Emmanuel Alloa, Frank Chouraqui, and Rajiv Kaushik (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2019), 151. On compact, delimited animal bodies, see also Neil Evernden, *The Natural Alien: Humankind and Environment* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 152. Rephrasing the ecologist Paul Colinvaux, he writes: "an animal is not only a body; it is embodied limits."

mobility. In kinship with the vegetal, animal origins belie a blind searching, seeking, yearning. But by contrast with the relatively stationary disposition of the vegetal realm, that ever-expanding skein of rooted autotrophs, the search for food establishes animal mobility: the development of sanguine, compact bodies equipped with the power of vision. Animal bodies are more concretely individuated, involving a lateral or downward-looking scanning or searching in the quest for nourishment. The origins of the animal can be located in this restless, estranged lateral movement, in the search to satisfy a desire for what the separated body finds fundamentally lacking.

But the animal is not constituted by the search for food alone. Alongside the assimilation of the other to the same, in alimentation, we find the lack that drives the search for a sexual partner: “The will to live, of which the search for food and the search for a sexual partner are the high points, in fact agitates and troubles every animal.”¹⁶ If the desire for nourishment drives a search to stave off the ever-present agitations of creaturely mortality, desire for a sexual partner expresses an even more deeply rooted, even more paradoxical longing for ultimate unity and self-transcendence. In the sexual act we find the assimilation of the other to the same, or the exploitative use of another’s body for one’s own pleasure, coupled with a desire toward transcendence of the self, or the homogenous order of the same. In the sexual relation the satisfaction of lack and the excess of the other combine, or are paradoxically entangled. The result: the passing on of the form of the species beyond the lives of the individuals involved. To be an animal, then, is to be a heterotroph, but more generally it is to be driven by need toward the satisfaction of what is lacking in the flesh. To be an animal is to desire, or to be in search of wholeness.

Early in “On Narcissism” Freud recognizes that he must clarify the relation between primary narcissism and auto-erotism. To begin, he argues that “...a unity comparable to the ego cannot exist in the individual from the start; the ego has to be developed. The auto-erotic instincts, however, are there from the very first.”¹⁷ At least according to this initial account, which will be influential for Lacan’s conception of the mirror stage, autoerotism precedes the formation of the ego. The child does not yet clearly distinguish itself from the mother, yet clearly has essential needs that must be met. Most important among these needs is the need for nourishment (alimentation). Even the best mother cannot satisfy the infant’s desire every time the pangs of hunger are felt, however. Before the formation of a sense of self, and prior even to weaning, the desire that troubles the child already would indicate the condition of separation, or estrangement, from its mother and from the world.

¹⁶ Bailly, *The Animal Side*, 54.

¹⁷ Freud, “On Narcissism,” 76. In his defense of the division of libido into two kinds, sexual (invested in others) and egoic (invested in self) Freud refers to both of the essential characteristics of the animal that we have just noted. He maintains that this distinction maps onto the more widely accepted “distinction between hunger [alimentation] and love [sexuation]” before adding that this division corresponds also to the “twofold existence” of the individual animal: “one to serve his own purposes [ego-libido] and the other as a link in a chain, which he serves against his will, or at least involuntarily [sexual-libido].” Freud, “On Narcissism,” 75 and 77. Here again the early Schelling provides a bridge from Freud’s terminology to the adjusted senses in which Merleau-Ponty employs these terms. In Schelling’s nature-philosophy, McGrath writes, “[t]he highest expression of material nature is the animal: here alone does life in the proper sense—that which moves from within—appear. The universal force of attraction [*eros*] animates the animal within a coordinated system of living beings; the negative force [*thanatos*, in Merleau-Ponty’s adjusted sense] individuates it, enclosing life within a certain configuration of determinate matter. Life [*eros*] disturbs the animal [Merleau-Ponty would be more likely to say: *draws or solicits* the animal], drives it outside of itself in actions of reproduction [sexuation] and nutrition [alimentation], continually upsetting the animal’s internal balance, which the animal pursues in everything it does, but which, if it were definitively to achieve it, would bring about its death. The aim of the animal’s life is individuation, which is reached, Schelling adds, in sexuation.” McGrath, “Is Schelling’s Nature-Philosophy Freudian?”, 16.

In this situation, Freud comments, the fragmented infant is faced with the need to master excitations experienced as distressing. Formation of an ego promises to restore the wholeness, unity, and perfection once experienced as present, although only in the earliest stages of development, in utero, but by now increasingly absent. Just after his declaration that "...a unity comparable to the ego cannot exist in the individual from the start," Freud concludes, "...there must be something added to auto-erotism—a new psychical action—in order to bring about [primary] narcissism."¹⁸ Lacan pinpoints the missing action, offering insight into, if not slightly exaggerating, the unique psychological situation of the human animal.

In "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," Lacan enunciates the exaggerated estrangement that the human animal alone must suffer: "we find in man a veritable specific prematurity of birth."¹⁹ This claim offers biological background for Freud's suggestion that formation of the ego is primarily a defensive measure, undertaken for the sake of mastering uncomfortable excitations. The human infant is especially *vulnerable*, that is, in that both its survival and its maturation are especially dependent upon the care and training provided by those who form erotic attachments to it. While Lacan considers this to be evidence in favor of the paranoid hypothesis he goes on to develop, this point can also be taken as evidence demonstrating the necessarily *social* nature of the formation of the self: the point that socialization is the ground of individuation. The self does not mature healthfully in the absence of early erotic attachments, or in other words without learning from early on to respond to the loving solicitations of its parents and caregivers.

According to Lacan, at some point between the ages of six and eighteen months the infant "first experiences itself as a unity through experiencing some kind of reflection of itself, the paradigm for which would be self-reflection in a mirror."²⁰ But images are grasped only at a distance, such that identification with something that is not oneself is made possible. And since the mirror-image is actually an inverted image, Lacan goes so far as to claim that the infant's identification with that image—a psychical act, we recall, that promises further unity, mastery, and restoration of wholeness—in fact installs "a radical alienation and distortion at the very foundation of [the child's] identity."²¹

¹⁸ Freud, "On Narcissism," 76. Freud makes this point clear: "We have recognized our mental apparatus as being first and foremost a device designed for mastering excitations which would otherwise be felt as distressing or would have pathogenic effects." *Ibid.*, 84. A few sentences prior he had written that "[a] strong egoism is a protection against falling ill."

¹⁹ Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," in *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), 78. Emphasis removed. Levin notes that Lacan "played an important role in Merleau-Ponty's thinking about 'The Child's Relations with Others'" and that "his paper on the mirror stage undoubtedly encouraged Merleau-Ponty to make use of the images and concepts of narcissism in articulating the dimension of the flesh in *The Visible and the Invisible*." Levin, "Visions of Narcissism," 58. We add that Lacan's influence undoubtedly extends to the contemporaneous passages from the *Nature* lectures examined above, in their allusions to the myth of Narcissus, which have helped to draw out implications for the human-animal relation.

²⁰ William Richardson and John P. Muller, *Lacan and Language: Reader's Guide to Écrits* (New York: International Universities Press, 1982), 29; quoted in Levin, "Visions of Narcissism," 59. Cf. Lacan, "The Mirror Stage," 76. Speaking of the relationship of the inner world (*Innere Welt*) of the organism to its surrounding environment (*Umwelt*), Lacan writes: "In man... [the] relationship to nature is altered by a certain dehiscence at the very heart of the organism." He indicates further that this civilizing relation to others "structures human knowledge as paranoid." *Ibid.*, 78. The distance between the body and its mirror image begins to introduce, or perhaps magnify, the discontents shouldered by the ego as the price it must pay for its entrance into civilization.

²¹ Richardson and Muller, *Lacan and Language*, 6; quoted in Levin, "Visions of Narcissism," 60. As we will see, Merleau-Ponty acknowledges a positive moment in addition.

Out of this externalized, visual relation emerges what Freud had described as the *ego ideal*. Whereas at first the ego relates to itself as its own ideal, soon oedipal relations enter the psychical situation to ensure that the child's parents, first, and then by substitution other societal influences inform and reshape the ideal toward which the ego is striving. The love once directed toward the developing ego, in primary narcissism, is, in the maturing self, displaced onto that ideal. Freud writes: "The development of the ego consists in a departure from primary narcissism and gives rise to a vigorous attempt to recover that state. This departure is brought about by means of the displacement of libido on to an ego ideal."²² From this point on "satisfaction is brought about from fulfilling this ideal."

In addressing Merleau-Ponty's revised conception of narcissism, Levin suggests that the fatal flaw in Lacan's conception of ego-formation is his assumption that the infant identifies first with its image as reflected in a real mirror. He explains,

For Lacan, these alienations and distortions are extremely significant, because their operation within the process through which the structure of the ego is constituted means that the ego will always be predisposed to experience and relate to others in a pathologically narcissistic way; that is, with a certain paranoia, exaggerated defensiveness, and unprovoked aggressivity—with an attitude of closure, rather than an attitude of trust and openness.²³

The ego is structured narcissistically, therefore, in the pathological sense Freud assigns to the term, and this means that "[t]he 'self' formed in this way is little more than a pattern of socially imposed roles: an ego, rather than a growing, authentic self."²⁴ For Merleau-Ponty, by contrast, one's sense of self develops through one's authentic relations to others. Through the solicitous, imitative acts of its parents and caregivers, the infantile self is drawn out into the world and into increasingly meaningful relations.

By contrast with Lacan's conception of the narcissism that structures the ego at its core, Merleau-Ponty's revised conception of narcissism suggests that the emerging self is marked not primarily by thanotic aggressivity, defensiveness, and closure, but rather by an erotic "attitude of trust and openness."²⁵ This attitude renders the maturing self capable of responding in love: not only to the gestures and expressions of other humans, but also in response to the solicitations of animals of other species. When combined with an exaggerated disposition toward ethical care, generated on the basis of specifically human infantile vulnerability, that basic attitude of and openness can find application beyond the human realm. The ideal of social harmony can be developed into a broader ideal of inter-animal, cosmological harmony.

Conclusion

²² Freud, "On Narcissism," 99.

²³ Levin, "Visions of Narcissism," 61; citing Richardson and Muller, *Lacan and Language*, 31. In other words, "What Lacan calls to our attention is an incipient pathology of self-development." Levin, "Visions of Narcissism," 69. He continues: "According to his analysis, the mirroring bestows on the child an *egocentric* identity. But, for Lacan, this identity is really an illusion, a sham, because in truth it represents a certain irremediable disintegration: the child's unconscious conformity to an alien image."

²⁴ *Ibid.* Earlier Levin differentiates between ego and self: "Stated very briefly, the ego is a relatively settled, permanent structure, a defensively organized identity, mostly consisting of socially established roles and routines, and representing the individual's adaptation to prevailing social reality. The self enjoys a more individuated, more differentiated identity, carrying the process of maturation beyond the roles and routines required by socialization." *Ibid.*, 52.

²⁵ Levin, "Visions of Narcissism," 60.

So far as we yet know, the human animal is the only animal for whom animality has become a question. While our primary relation of kinship with other animals makes possible an inter-animal empathy, our estrangement from them has conditioned the very possibility of raising that question. The estrangement underscored by Freud and embellished still further by Lacan has made it possible for the anthropological machine to be set into motion. But it has also generated the possibility of an ethical ideal that extends beyond the human sphere, into our relations to animals of other species. The estranged kinship to which Merleau-Ponty draws our attention would indicate the possibility of holding human-animal kinship and estrangement in a productive tension, without collapsing either of these into the other.

If Merleau-Ponty's revised conception of narcissism does indeed describe the genesis of the self in a manner faithful to experience, as Levin suggests, then what we find upon closer investigation are the intercorporeal roots of an emerging ideal of justice. By contrast with both Freud and Lacan, Merleau-Ponty "sees (and hears) the dialectic of socialization and individuation in the narcissism of mirroring (and echoing), and demonstrates that the roots of justice are always already inherent in the body's order, the body's need for, and responsiveness to, [its] earliest relationships."²⁶ Archeological investigation reveals the beginnings of a developing ideal of reciprocity present already in the infant's erotic relations to its parents and caregivers. What our investigation of Merleau-Ponty's late refiguration of the double touching, and his revised conception of narcissism, add to Levin's findings is the insight that from almost the very beginning, intercorporeal reciprocity extends beyond the realm of interhuman relations. The ideal of justice that emerges from these roots can thereby be extended also to encompass our relations to animals of other species.

In tracing out the trajectory of his body of work, Merleau-Ponty writes that attention to what he calls "a 'good ambiguity' in the phenomenon of expression" leads to wonder. Offering a clue to a direction his unfinished project might have taken, he remarks further: "To establish this wonder would be metaphysics and would at the same time give us the principle of an ethics."²⁷ Our investigation has generated suggestions as to what that principle might entail, in addition to what Levin and others have inferred. "If individuation and socialization are inseparable processes, then the individual's quest for unity, wholeness, and perfection"—a quest that can be traced back to our animal origins—thereby "raises analogous questions for society."²⁸ If the intercorporeal roots that ground these ideals always already reach deeper than the human realm, as we have found, recalling our animal origins, then our struggles for new forms of solidarity, and the perfection of justice, can be cultivated to reach into the realm of our relations to actual animals. Estranged kinship makes possible a specifically human ethical care that extends beyond the human realm, soliciting the development of a more holistic cosmological ideal of inter-animal harmony.

²⁶ Levin, "Visions of Narcissism," 62. Emphasis removed. He summarizes his findings further: "Although of course only in a rudimentary and preliminary way that needs to be appropriately cultivated, intercorporeality already schematizes the embodiment of a self deeply rooted in an ethics of caring." *Ibid.*, 78. The maturing self can thereafter become "open to the kind of communication necessary for the building of a society truly organized by principles of justice."

²⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "An Unpublished Text by Maurice Merleau-Ponty: A Prospectus of His Work," in *The Primacy of Perception* trans. Arleen B. Dallery (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 3-11; cf. Véronique M. Fôti, *Tracing Expression in Merleau-Ponty: Aesthetics, Philosophy of Biology, and Ontology* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2013), 3.

²⁸ Levin, "Visions of Narcissism," 53. He adds that societal questions concerning the ideals toward which we as a species are striving "cannot be separated from...struggles for liberty, equality, new forms of solidarity, and the 'perfection' of justice."