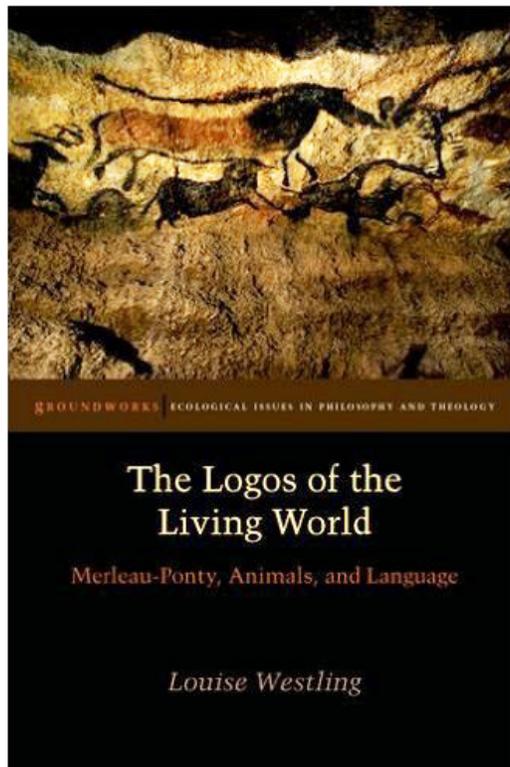


Reviews

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No Logos: Phenomenology, Animal Studies, and Logocentrism

Louise Westling, *The Logos of the Living World: Merleau-Ponty, Animals, and Language*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2014. 208 pp. \$80.00 hb; \$29.00 pb.



The Logos of the Living World adds to the emerging body of scholarship within the closely related fields of ecocriticism and animal studies on the mid-twentieth-century French philosopher of phenomenology Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Westling's monograph was one of the first books to be published in Fordham University Press's series *Groundworks: Ecological Issues in Philosophy and Theology*. It was not the first book, however, to offer a critical reassessment of Merleau-Ponty's work either in relation to ecocriticism and environmental studies or in relation to animal studies. As Westling acknowledges (146 n. 11), the volume *Merleau-Ponty and Environmental Philosophy*, based on the proceedings of the Merleau-Ponty Circle's annual conference in 2002, had already been published a few years earlier, as had Ted Toadvine's monograph *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of*

Nature. Meanwhile, David B. Dillard-Wright's monograph *Ark of the Possible* had also been published a few years earlier, although Westling does not cite Dillard-Wright's work in her book.

To be sure, Merleau-Ponty has recently emerged as one of the most important philosophers in the continental European tradition for contemporary ecocritics and animal studies scholars, and his work concerning "nature" and nonhuman animals is now being reread alongside the work of other key continental philosophers and thinkers. The volume *Eco-Phenomenology*, as its title suggests, addresses the ongoing relevance of phenomenology to environmental issues in a critical reassessment of the work of the philosophers Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Emmanuel Levinas, Friedrich Nietzsche, Merleau-Ponty, Arthur Schopenhauer, and Jean-Paul Sartre. Brett Buchanan's monograph *Onto-Ethologies* provides a careful account of the different ways in which the work of the biologist Jakob von Uexküll was taken up by the philosophers Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Gilles Deleuze. Kelly Oliver's monograph *Animal Lessons* presents a broad survey on the treatment of nonhuman animals in the work of the philosophers and psychoanalytic thinkers Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Johann Gottfried Herder, Jacques Derrida, Simone de Beauvoir, Jacques Lacan, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Giorgio Agamben, Sigmund Freud, and Julia Kristeva. *The Logos of the Living World* thus offers a substantial contribution not only to the fields of ecocriticism and animal studies but also to the growing body of interdisciplinary scholarship on Merleau-Ponty's philosophy as such.

Westling's book is aimed at demonstrating the continued significance of Merleau-Ponty's work to what is called so widely today the "animal question," as she puts it herself (xii). In a very ambitious move indeed, Westling seeks nothing less than to reorder the current intellectual configuration of the field of animal studies. She presents two main lines of argument in the introduction to her book, each one of which is wound closely around the other. In one line of her argument, Westling reaffirms the momentous impact of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy on postwar intellectual culture and the emergence of ecological awareness: "Merleau-Ponty established a radical new way of understanding the human place in the biosphere, one congruent with twentieth-century science and animal studies" (9). She further claims that Merleau-Ponty's work provides a more productive approach to animal studies than the largely deconstructionist approach that dominates the field today: "Merleau-Ponty's work on the animal question anticipated and even moved beyond the positions of most current commentators in critical animal studies" (8-9). Referring to both Jacques Derrida and Cary Wolfe in the opening paragraph of her introduction, she places their work at the

center of the current field of animal studies only to target it for a phenomenologically-oriented critique over the course of her book.

This line of Westling's argument on the continued significance of Merleau-Ponty's work, then, leads directly to her other line of argument on the biological continuity between humans and nonhuman animals. She argues that Merleau-Ponty's ongoing engagement with twentieth-century social and natural sciences, including Gestalt psychology and what eventually came to be known as ethology, attests to the biological continuity between humans and other forms of life, a continuity that Derrida himself seems to deny:

In *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, Derrida undermined the long Western philosophical humanist tradition of objectifying "the animal," playfully exposing his own animality and calling for ethical attention to animals as distinct beings. He criticized previous philosophers for ignoring the rich body of scientific animal studies, implying that theoretical claims should be measured against ethological work with real animals in order to have any validity. Yet he adamantly denied any biological continuity between *Homo sapiens* and the rest of organic life, and he himself failed to discuss the findings of modern primatology or other kinds of work on animal cognition or communication. In the 1950s, Merleau-Ponty was already doing what Derrida suggested half a century later...

[Merleau-Ponty's] investigations of the science of his time move toward the acknowledgment of an evolutionary continuum of humans and other organisms. (4, 9)

Although Westling does not accuse Wolfe of denying the biological continuity between humans and nonhuman animals, she does define her own intellectual project in contrast to his apparent dismissal of the humanities:

Cary Wolfe sees the humanities as having been left behind in a radical reevaluation of our relation to nonhuman animals that has taken place in popular culture and indeed in many scientific disciplines. The present work offers an interdisciplinary ecocritical argument that phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty actually began such a reevaluation more than sixty years ago, laying a theoretical foundation that is intertwined with the modern life sciences. Such an approach brings philosophical rigor to ecocritical theory, demonstrates how literary works

can illuminate theoretical debates in richer ways than explicit theoretical argument, and brings scientific studies of animals into dialogue with the humanities. (1-2)

Tying both lines of her argument together, Westling thus resists the deconstructionist bent of most current theoretical work in animal studies.

The remaining course of Westling's book follows the argument that she lays out in her introduction. In Chapter 1, "A Philosophy of Life," Westling provides an overview of Merleau-Ponty's philosophical project of phenomenology or what she calls his "ecophenomenology" (43). Revisiting his classic treatise *Phenomenology of Perception* as well as his posthumously published works *The Visible and the Invisible* and *Nature*, she insists that "Merleau-Ponty is the only major European philosopher who embraces the consequences of evolution and sees humans as interdependent members of the ecosystem" (14). She argues that although Husserl's, Heidegger's, and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological investigations alike "opened a new direction for Western philosophy [and provide] a crucial grounding for ecological thought," Merleau-Ponty's work "moves beyond Husserl's and Heidegger's" insofar as he maintains his focus on the body as the locus of all lived experience rather than on any transcendental subject or human essence (16-17).

In Chapter 2, "Animal Kin," Westling presents a sweeping historical account of the cultural anxiety within the Western or "European/Mediterranean" tradition (60) around the issue of biological continuity between humans and nonhuman animals or what she calls "human animality and kinship with the rest of the living community" (47). She moves rather quickly from an ecocritical reading of the ancient literary texts *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, "The Curse of Akkad," and *The Bakkhai* to a sympathetic discussion of the modern European thinkers and writers Michel de Montaigne, William Shakespeare, and Charles Darwin. She then turns her attention to a critical interrogation of both Heidegger's and Derrida's philosophical approaches to the "animal question" as well as some more recent work in animal studies by contemporary scholars including Giorgio Agamben, Kelly Oliver, Donna Haraway, Matthew Calarco, Cary Wolfe, and Timothy Morton among others. Returning to Merleau-Ponty's work, Westling argues that his later writings and lectures in particular offer a rich intellectual resource that these animal studies scholars have largely neglected to the detriment of their own work.

In Chapter 3, "Language Is Everywhere," Westling puts Merleau-Ponty's work on language, literature, and meaning — what he calls "Logos" in his posthumously

published *Nature* lectures — into dialogue with more current scientific studies on human language and animal communication. She suggests that although Merleau-Ponty himself never addressed the question of whether nonhuman animals possess the capacity for language as such, his philosophical approach to language as an “embodied and gestural” form of behavior tends to support what she claims is “the majority view among recent researchers from many disciplines that human linguistic capabilities function within an evolutionary continuum of cognitive and communicative behavior among animals” (103-104). Drawing from an interdisciplinary range of current work in cognitive neuroscience, evolutionary linguistics, and biosemiotics, she even states that Merleau-Ponty’s later work “anticipate[d]” many recent scientific discoveries concerning the “semiotic nature of all life” (112-13) before going on to present an extended reading of Yann Martel’s novel *Life of Pi*.

Finally, in the conclusion to her book, Westling considers how the practices of herding and agility training can contribute to our understanding of embodiment and interspecies relationships. She closes her discussion by returning once again to her phenomenologically-oriented critique of the deconstructionist approach to animal studies, referring specifically to Wolfe’s work: “Cary Wolfe has said that we need an ontology that takes the body as central. I trust I have been able to show that Merleau-Ponty gave us such a philosophy more than fifty years ago” (144).

Westling’s book certainly offers an intellectually productive as well as a politically provocative challenge to the current field of animal studies. However, it seems to me that Westling undercuts both lines of her own argument in some important ways. Although her criticism of the denial of the biological continuity between humans and nonhuman animals within animal studies itself is well warranted, her criticism of Derrida’s work in particular seems somewhat misplaced. Of course, Westling is quite correct in pointing out that in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, Derrida himself rejects any continuity between what he calls so cautiously “man” and “animal”: “I have ... never believed in some homogeneous continuity between what calls *itself* man and what *he* [*sic*] calls the animal. I am not about to begin to do so now” (30, emphasis in original). Yet he immediately goes on to suggest that it is not the ostensible fact or evidence of biological continuity between humans and nonhuman animals that he rejects as much as it is the discourse of “biologicistic continuism [or geneticism], whose sinister connotations we are well aware of” (30). Indeed, it is Derrida’s careful attention to the “discontinuity, rupture, or even abyss” (30) between humans and nonhuman animals — what he calls the “limit between Man with a capital M and Animal with a

capital *A*" (29) — that guides him toward a deconstruction of the binary opposition between the "human" and the "animal":

Beyond the edge of the *so-called* human, beyond it but by no means on a single opposing side, rather than "The Animal" or "Animal Life" there is already a heterogeneous multiplicity of the living, or more precisely (since to say "the living" is already to say too much or not enough), a multiplicity of organizations of relations between living and dead, relations of organization or lack of organization among realms that are more and more difficult to dissociate by means of the figures of the organic and inorganic, of life and/or death. (31, emphasis in original)

Derrida thus complicates the distinction between humans and nonhuman animals by expanding species difference rather than reducing it, multiplying it to the point that even the distinction between the living and the nonliving is broached.

It is surprising that Westling should remain so unsympathetic to this affirmation of species difference in Derrida's work. Her criticism of the denial of biological continuity between humans and nonhuman animals could have been directed more effectively, perhaps, at the decidedly deconstructionist work of some other contemporary animal studies scholars. In *This Is Not Sufficient*, Leonard Lawlor opposes "biological continuism" to "metaphysical separationism": "Metaphysical separationism is Platonism (or Cartesianism); biological continuism, in a word, biologism, is the mere reversal of Platonism" (72). Lawlor claims to reject both of these "extreme positions" (136 n. 7): "[A]ny response [to the suffering of animals] that relies on biological continuism or metaphysical separationism will be insufficient" (97). However, he continues to rely on the essentially metaphysical distinction between the "human" and the "animal" over the entire course of his book, rejecting biological continuism on the very questionable grounds that it "reduc[es] the human down to the animal, down to the biological, down to irrational instincts and forces" (25). Westling's criticism of the denial of biological continuity between humans and nonhuman animals would have been much more pertinent to Lawlor's work than to Derrida's, and yet she does not mention Lawlor's work in her book at all.

This antagonism on Westling's part toward deconstruction and Derrida's work in particular is not unrelated to her other line of argument on the continued significance of Merleau-Ponty's work to the current field of animal studies. Although Westling insists throughout her book that Merleau-Ponty's later work provides an especially rich

intellectual resource for animal studies scholars, she admits herself that “a certain tinge of human exceptionalism remains” in the final course of his *Nature* lectures, “Nature and Logos: The Human Body” (86). Addressing Merleau-Ponty’s claim that “soul” or “spirit” is “uniquely human,” she goes on to propose “that in the *Nature* lectures Merleau-Ponty was still actively working out his thinking on the human place in the animal world and in nature more broadly, and that he would have eventually acknowledged the continuum of various kinds of consciousness emerging through the evolution of myriad animal species” (86-87). While Westling thus suggests that this trace of human exceptionalism is an anomalous or anachronistic feature of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, I would suggest instead that it is a fundamental part of the logocentrism or the philosophical privilege accorded to language, meaning, and the “word” itself that is announced in the very title of her book: *The Logos of the Living World*.

To be clear, I am not suggesting in any way that Westling shares Merleau-Ponty’s ambivalence on extending the property of *logos* from the human to the animal. Yet it does remain ambiguous whether she extends this property to animality as such, to life more generally, or to nature in its entirety. This ambiguity is displayed by Westling’s frequent appeal to what Merleau-Ponty calls the “man-animality intertwining” over the course of her book on one hand (3, 6, 36, 101, 124, emphasis in original, cf. 38, 128, 143-44), and by her association of *logos* with life or the “living world” in the title of her book on the other. It appears that although Westling does not deny *logos* to life or even to nature itself completely, she does make a distinction between human or animal language and the “immanent Logos” of life or nature (78, 131, 143) — what she calls the “silent language of primordial being” (141). Westling resists the human exceptionalism that informs Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, then, but not its logocentrism:

Merleau-Ponty wanted to explain how a kind of mute meaning or Logos is everywhere in the primordial or wild Being that is our only environment and that of every organism on this planet. The function of human language and culture is to make this meaning visible and to extend it...
If human exceptionalism can be set aside and biological continuity seriously explored, we may learn in time that many other animals participate — according to their own styles — in bringing forth or displaying aspects of the Logos of primordial being that Merleau-Ponty described for human language and art, and thus also expressing and multiplying the life of the bare things. (136, 138)

In this special phenomenological brand of logocentrism, the binary opposition between the human and the animal is thus replaced by an ascending scale of increasing complexity from nature or life to the animal or the human, from the inanimate or nonsentient to the animate or sentient, from an immanent *logos* to an articulate *logos*. It is perhaps inevitable that some trace of human exceptionalism should continue to inform Westling's own work insofar as she seems to follow Merleau-Ponty in reserving the most complex form of *logos* — self-consciousness — solely for “us” humans: “Logos is what is realized in us — our self-conscious understanding of the incorporated meaning of animality...” (3).

Despite Westling's provocative argument in *The Logos of the Living World* on the continued significance of Merleau-Ponty's work to the current field of animal studies, what her book ultimately demonstrates is the critical intervention that deconstruction still has to make into this field. This is not to say that animal studies scholars must choose between phenomenology or Merleau-Ponty's work on one hand and deconstruction or Derrida's work on the other. But it is to say that we cannot rest content with simply extending the property of *logos* from the human to the animal as such. The deconstruction of logocentrism entails the deconstruction of all binary oppositions — not only the opposition between the human and the animal but also the opposition between the animate and the inanimate as well as between the living and the nonliving. To accord the philosophical privilege of *logos* to the “animal” rather than to the “human” alone is only to extend the reach of human exceptionalism itself.

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