Peggy Karpouzou / Nikoleta Zampaki (eds.)

Symbiotic Posthumanist Ecologies in Western Literature, Philosophy and Art

Towards Theory and Practice

PETER LANG

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Cassandra Falke

Eco-Phenomenology in the Dark

Abstract

This chapter uses the methods and insights of phenomenology – especially Maurice Merleau-Ponty's chiasmus and Jean-Luc Marion's saturated phenomenality – to articulate the symbiosis between the human subject and the natural world. By conceptualizing the human subject as felt as well as feeling (Merleau-Ponty), and as receiving experiences that overwhelm our conceptual apparatus (Marion), these two French phenomenologists prepare the groundwork for an understanding of humans as maintained and shaped by the natural forces we so often strive to instrumentalize. After clarifying ways that chiasmus and saturated phenomenality can contribute to a symbiotic, posthumanist understanding of our relationship to the earth, I describe the non-certain nature of what humans can know about the effects our life has on a given ecosystem. Moving from the metaphorical darkness of uncertainty to the literal darkness of an Arctic winter, the chapter's conclusion exemplifies the uncertain, receptive, touched and perceived nature of human personhood through a phenomenological description of being in the woods in the dark. Deprived of sight, which most humans rely on so heavily, we can experience smells, sounds, and tactile sensations without the concepts for them arriving immediately. Such an experience returns one to the "wonder before the world" that Merleau-Ponty says characterizes the phenomenological reduction, but more than that, it returns an individual human subject to his or her position as one living thing among so many.

Ted Toadvine and Charles Brown claim that "an adequate account of our ecological situation requires the methods and insights of phenomenology" because phenomenology attends to alternative ways of receiving what the natural world gives.[1] Rather than proceeding as though certain the concepts through which we try to understand the world are adequate, phenomenology addresses the plentitude our concepts miss. This chapter uses the methods and insights of phenomenology – especially Maurice Merleau-Ponty's chiasmus and Jean-Luc Marion's saturated phenomenality- to articulate the symbiosis between the human subject and the natural world. By conceptualizing the human subject as felt as well as feeling (Merleau-Ponty), and as receiving experiences that overwhelm our conceptual apparatus (Marion), these two French phenomenologists prepare the groundwork for an understanding of humans as maintained and shaped by the natural forces we so often strive to instrumentalize. In addition to returning us to the "wonder before the world" that Merleau-Ponty says characterizes the phenomenological reduction, these ideas can return an individual human subject to his or her position as one living thing among so many.[2]

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[1] Charles S. Brown and Ted Toadvine, *Eco-Phenomenology: Back to the Earth Itself* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), xii.

Before proceeding, I should specify the article's rather modest claim to being posthumanist in orientation. Since the 1990s, the concept of posthumanism has been used to question boundaries between humans and technology, humans and animals, and humans and objects. Generally, it implies a critique of human dominance of the more-than-human world and a recognition that definitions of humanity have been used historically to support colonialist and paternalistic structures. Francesca Ferrando's distinction between *post-humanism* and *posthuman-ism* offers a useful way of disentangling the various strands of posthuman thought. She defines post-humanism as "a radical critique of humanism and anthropocentrism". Post-humanism advocates care for the planet as a home to non-human species and ecosystems that support biological diversity. Much post-humanist writing also attends to specific histories of humanism to show how definitions of the human have been used to undermine those deemed less human on racialized or gendered grounds. Posthuman-ism, in Ferrando's distinction, recognizes "those aspects which are constitutively human, and nevertheless, beyond the constitutive limits of the human in the strict sense of the term".[3] She does not elaborate on this definition further, but it can usefully be applied to the epistemological elements of posthumanism – the recognition that humanness inevitably structures our knowledge but that it does so in a limiting way. There are ways of knowing inaccessible to us as a species. While this article participates in a critique of anthropocentrism, it does not focus on a history of humanism. It is also not posthuman-istic in so far as that implies a focus on technological expansion of human capability, but it does advance posthuman-ism's critique of speciesist dominance based on epistemological certainty.

Acknowledging human responsibility for current environmental crises requires that a concept of agency restricted to human actors be preserved, even though this pushes against some theorizations of the posthuman, such as Actor Network Theory or Object-Oriented Ontology. In his recent critique of posthumanist approaches that neutralize human agency, Arne Johan Vetlesen forcefully lays out the scope of human destruction:

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[2] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. by Donald A. Landes (London: Routledge, 2012), lxxvii. Merleau-Ponty is quoting Eugen Fink in this phrase.

[3] Francesca Ferrando, *Philosophical Posthumanism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 3.

> the extinction of species unprecedented in pace and scope, the loss of biodiversity, the shrinking of habitat available for nonhuman creatures and life-forms of all kinds, the acidification and plastification of the oceans, the melting of glaciers and the release of methane from permafrost and from the seabed, the dying of coral reefs, the rising temperatures and sea levels – to name but a few instances of the crisis set in motion. By humans. Humans who have, for the most part, reinforced rather than halted the crisis since being alerted to it.[4]

To face the fact that humans are, compared to other species, uniquely implicated in these effects is not to return to a humanistic ideal, but to highlight the consequences of decisions that take inadequate account of complex webs of interdependence that exceed the human.

Phenomenology is uniquely suited to describe the ways we experience this interdependence and therefore uniquely appropriate for articulating how that interdependence might be brought more readily to mind in our engagement with the more than human world. Since its beginnings in the early twentieth century, phenomenology has sought to distinguish itself from scientific or psychologically reductive approaches to what Edmund Husserl calls the lifeworld.[5] For phenomenologists, every experience offers something unique, which is always more than the sum of categorically comprehensible parts, and not only because there are more parts than one personal psyche can receive. Experience is, in fact, given in a way that transcends the categories we apply to objects and processes. Referring to objects and processes as though they had a formal existence prior to or outside of experience allows us to think about experiences abstractly, communicate about them and form expectations. The objectification of phenomena, therefore, serves several purposes, but phenomenology strives to return to the more immediate givenness of the experience. As Husserl put it in the most frequently cited definition of phenomenology's goals: "We must question the things themselves. Back to experience, to seeing, which alone can give our words sense and rational justification".[6]

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[4] Arne Johan Vetlesen, *Cosmologies of the Anthropocene: Panpsychism, Animism, and the Limits of Posthumanism* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 236.

[5] Dan Zahavi provides an excellent overview of the concept of the lifeworld, particularly in relation to science. *Phenomenology: The Basics* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 51–55.

[6] Søren Overgaard, *Husserl and Heidegger on Being in the World* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2004), 1; Original: Edmund Husserl, 'Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft', in *Essays*

Although some phenomenological thinkers preserve the concept of an ego as the source of sense, others prioritize what gives itself in experience over the human receiver. The clearest example of this anti-egoic prioritization is Jean-Luc Marion's concept of "saturated phenomenality". Within phenomenology, the attention and conceptual apparatus a person turns toward an experience are known as intentionality, and that which is given to intentionality is referred to as intuition. The common usage of the term 'intuition' shares with the phenomenological concept the sense of knowing arriving prior to conceptual articulation, but in phenomenology intuition does not forbid such articulation; it merely preserves the distinction between givenness and the concepts through which an experience might be conceived or remembered. Much of phenomenology is concerned with the paucity of intuition. There are many cases in which we direct our attention to, or intend, more than we receive intuitively. This happens with mental phenomena when we try to remember something and cannot quite manage and with physical things that we see only partially. Occasionally, as when doing math, intentionality, concept, and intuition fit perfectly. There is nothing to the number five beyond its concept and the way it functions as a value, which means we can adequately intend it. But Marion asserts that phenomenology has limited itself by not thinking more about instances in which the givenness of intuition exceeds, or as he says "saturates" intentionality. He defines categories of phenomena that are always given as saturated: historical events, our own flesh, the face of the other, works of art, and divine revelation.[7] These experiences have the capacity to 'subvert' and 'decenter' intentionality. In each of these cases, the "givenness contravenes, in its intuition, what previous experience should reasonably permit us to foresee".[8] By re-orienting phenomenology toward saturated phenomena, Marion prioritizes the givenness of an experience over the certainty a human subject can obtain about that experience. Historically, he asserts, "phenomena that do *not* appear, or appear just a bit" have been "set up as models for all the others on account of their certainty",[9] but that exchange has cost phenomenology the recognition of all those situations in which what is given is unforeseeable and irreducible.[10] The human is preserved in this reorientation toward

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and Lectures: (1911–1921), ed. by S.H. Rainer and N. Thomas (Dordrecht: Nijhoff, 1987), 21.

[7] Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. by Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 225–241.

[8] Marion, *Being Given*, 225–226.

[9] Marion, *Being Given*, 194–195.

[10] Marion, *Being Given*, 227, 189.

givenness, but is downgraded from her position as the ego that constitutes the perceived world. She rather becomes a witness to more givenness than she can ever receive.[11]

Saturated phenomena, and indeed all phenomena to an extent, escape object status because we experience them first as events. If I walk into a forest, for example, there will be rocks and trees there, but they will be given in a particular moment. The particular light, the weather, my own speed of movement and more will all combine to make one rock or tree stand out as an object and others fade into the background. Although it is practical to regard a tree as an object (if it blocks one's path, for example), much of what is given in a particular moment gets cut away in that process. Every event, Marion asserts, "can be reduced to the condition of the object".[12] And "Nothing becomes certain that does not also become an object".[13] But that certainty comes with a cost; objectifying what is given as an event ignores what exceeds our intentionality. We know this happens; we know there is an excess that we cannot know with many experiences, and yet unlike other forms of unknowing, this form of unknowing cannot be converted into knowing through further examination. That which we would know more of, the event, has passed. Marion calls this certainty that there is knowledge lost to certainty "negative certainty".

Although Marion's concept of saturated phenomenality is centrally concerned with that which exceeds human cogitation, he spares little thought for those elements of the world that are neither human nor human products. He mentions "beings of nature" only briefly, and categorizes them as common-law phenomena.[14] I would like to argue that Marion mis-categorizes "beings of nature" as common-law rather than saturated phenomena.[15] Common-law phenomena "vary in terms of their givenness"; the fulfillment of intentionality by intuition "can be adequate" but "most of the time […] remains inadequate".[16] While natural phenomena may vary in terms of their givenness, many obviously exceed human intentionality. No concept or rating system can adequately conceptualize a hurricane. No amount of forethought can predict the sweeping and apparently arbitrary destruction such natural disasters bring. A hurricane obviously arrives as a saturated phenomenon. But as Christina Gschwandtner points out, every ecosystem, from rainforests to anthills, exceeds our intentional grasp.[17] Even a singular experience in nature, like the smell of a river after years away or the sight of an animal I did not realize was watching me, can be given as saturated.

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[11] Marion, *Being Given,* 216–219.

[12] Jean-Luc Marion, *Negative Certainties*, trans. by Stephen E. Lewis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 170.

[13] Marion, *Negative Certainties*, 2.

[14] Marion, *Negative Certainties*, 195.

[15] Marion, *Negative Certainties*, 195.

[16] Marion, *Being Given*, 222.

As with other saturated phenomena, hurricanes and anthills offer an experience of overflowing givenness that we may or may not receive. With works of art, this non-reception is easy to recognize. A painting always offers infinite interpretive potential and "demands" we "change our gaze again and again" every time we see it,[18] but one may ignore this demand. A bad mood or conviction that one has seen all there is to see can "restrict the intuitive given" to what fits in a predetermined concept.[19] Similarly, experiences of animals, weather or ecosystems can be given as saturated phenomena but received in a way that strips away their excess. Part of what guides our tendency to treat certain experiences as objects instead of phenomena or common law instead of saturated phenomena is the context in which they occur. Non-human life that shapes itself in relative freedom (that which we typically call 'wild') nearly always gives itself as saturated, but it is harder to see a bird in a cage at a pet store as overwhelming. So much of the miraculous about birds is blocked out in that scenario – flight, communication, strategies for concealment. The conceptual apparatus that signals this is a pet, it can be purchased, it is owned and made for owning succeeds in limiting the experience of the bird to the extent that it is hard to question. One may think as a matter of principle that birds cannot be owned, but to release one from a store would be theft, legally and practically, so the concept of bird-as-merchandise is reinforced. But in a forest or even a yard, birds intuitively exceed what a human can foresee, adequately conceptualize, or interpret. Their particularity as individuals, the moment their call reaches through space, their navigation of the wind, these things exceed genus and species designations or wild versus domestic dichotomies. Even the question of interpreting a bird highlights the anthropocentric assumptions of the hermeneutic processes most of us are habituated to. We ask of a painting 'what does it mean?', but that is a nonsensical question when directed at a bird. It need not mean, but be.

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[17] Christina M. Gschwandtner, *Degrees of Givenness: On Saturation in Jean-Luc Marion* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2014), 80.

[18] Marion, *Being Given*, 230.

[19] Marion, *Being Given*, 223.

Marion says that, conceived as witness rather than constituting ego, a person not only finds phenomena given, but finds him or herself given through the reception of saturated phenomena. Part of what birds (or foxes or mountains or hints of petrichor) give us when, as saturated phenomena, they give us to ourselves is this absence of human meaningfulness. When a bird regards me, it does so because I mean something to it not because it means something to me, which makes it fundamentally different from a painting or work of literature, the meaning of which cannot be said to lie somewhere other than human comprehension however inadequate human comprehension might be. Mountains and smells cannot be said to regard us in the same way a bird does, and as with the bird they cannot be said to be meaningful in a way that humans can make sense of. Even more than other forms of saturated phenomena, natural phenomena (by which I mean those humans do not have a hand in making, even if we have a hand in defining them) give us to ourselves by illuminating the limitations of our interpretive horizons. The mountain I look at as I write this (Bentsjordtinden) sits right across the water from my backyard. I see it from my bedroom window as soon as I wake up; it literally shapes the horizon for every backyard game or hour tending the garden. It would be wrong to say it is meaningless, since my sense of where I am is shaped so profoundly by its presence, but I simultaneously recognize the insignificance of my location to the mountain. Were I to look at that mountain, as some of my neighbors have, every day from birth to death, the length of those days would remain profoundly insignificant compared to the time the mountain has been available for perception. I could say that Bentsjordtinden gives itself as a common-law or even intuitively poor phenomenon because, following the classic example of the cube, when I intend it, I direct my attention to the mountain as a whole and see only one side of it. But a mountain is not a cube. It reveals itself, the polar light, the seasonal growth of trees, the retreat of snowpack with more abundance than I can even notice, much less conceptualize. The process of thinking through the ways Bentsjordtinden shapes my experiential and reveals my interpretive horizon is, as Marion points out, infinite.[20] And much of what I can learn from the mountain relates to my own limitedness with regard to receiving its intuitive givenness.

The claim that Bentsjordtinden gives more than I can comprehend meaningfully is fundamentally an epistemological and hermeneutic claim. It implies already a process of coming to terms with an experience that has passed by the time I think about meaningfulness. Although the infinite hermeneutic is an important implication of saturated phenomenality, it cannot be the most important one for an eco-phenomenological examination that goes beyond anthropocentricism. Prior to conscious hermeneutic processes, experiences of mountains or birds have already revealed the human encountering them as placed, limited and embodied. Recognition of this fact is implied in Marion's discussion of the subject as witness because we are constituted as witnesses by what comes to us from outside ourselves. But it is Merleau-Ponty, more than Marion, who has elaborated this positionality in a way that is helpful for eco-phenomenology. Already in his major thesis *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty is concerned with the ways perception arrives prior to conceptualization. He points out that children perceive the world around them prior to knowing how other humans refer to things in it. Likewise, as adults there are moments when the processes of perceiving and conception can be experienced separately. If on waking, I feel that my cat is beside me, the touch of her fur and the weight of her reach me before I say to myself 'cat' or more accurately the name of my cat. Preconceptual perception is easier to recognize in a partially awakened state, and it is easier for sighted people to think about it using senses other than sight, but as Merleau-Ponty makes clear, we are never out of the state of pre-cognitive bodily perception.

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[20] Jean-Luc Marion, *Givenness & Hermeneutics*, trans. by Jean P. Lafouge (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Marquette University Press, 2013), 59.

Later in his life, the philosopher comes back to questions of perception as related to our being in the world, and he declares that he must begin to ask the central questions of *Phenomenology of Perception* again. Because he started "from the 'consciousness'-'object' distinction", in his early work, he says, the question of how we perceive is "insoluble".[21] His clearest attempt to locate another starting point is the posthumously published essay called 'The Intertwining – The Chiasm'. Here he tries to express what it is to live always in "the durable flesh of the world".[22] The figure of the "chiasm" connotes both the biological process of our optic nerves crossing to enable stereoscopic vision and the rhetorical figure of inversion. It thereby suggests both simultaneous synthesis and reversibility. Within this understanding of perception, experiences arise all at once, shaped by but not limited to conceptions. "What there is then are not things first identical with themselves, which would then offer themselves to the seer, nor is there a seer who is first empty and who, afterward, would open himself to them – but something to which we could not be closer".[23]

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[21] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*. ed. by C. Lefort, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 200.

[22] Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 123.

[23] Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 131.

The mountain is both the boundary of my sight and the thing that I see. My vision 'up against' the mountain conjures the mountain up against my vision. In the world, we are simultaneously touched and touching although we cannot capture both of these experiences. Merleau-Ponty explores the possibility that acts of sensing imply simultaneously being sensed. The body, he continues, is "bound to the world through all its parts, up against it".[24] This chiasmic understanding of our relation to the world implies that there is a correspondent pressure on what we perceive that comes from us. Since we cannot access this invisible effect, it has no epistemological value other than to designate the limit of what we know. Nevertheless, a chiasmic understanding of our interaction with the natural world emphasises that human perceptual acts matter to the more-than-human world. There is no form of human interaction with mountains, birds or trees secure from the possibility of effecting them.

Merleau-Ponty explains the chiasmus through the phenomenon of one hand touching the other. He identifies

> three distinct experiences which subtend one another, three dimensions which overlap but are distinct: a touching of the sleek and of the rough, a touching of the things – a passive sentiment of the body and of its space – and finally a veritable touching of the touch, when my right hand touches my left hand while it is palpating the things, where the "touching subject" passes over to the rank of the touched, descends into the things, such that the touch is formed in the midst of the world and as it were in the things.[25]

The operation of touch here stands in for all sensate experiences and because of Merleau-Ponty's insistence on the embodiment of all human experience, it describes the nature of all experience. The designation of sleek or rough speaks to how something gives itself, a process which gathers together prior experiences that operate through comparison and make knowledge operative. For example, the top half of Bentsjordtinden is grey, which I recognize as causally related to the low altitude tree-line in the Arctic Circle, and which suggests a hard path underfoot if I plan to walk it. The "passive sentiment of the body and its space" refers to the limited but vast possibilities my body enables – all we can look at, smell, touch, hear, and taste. The possibility of looking at the rocky top of the mountain is there, but I could instead look at the strawberry patch or the poppies or smell the poppies, but I cannot smell the rock on the mountain. Recognition of the possibility of human action in spaces dominated by non-human forces preserves the philosophical grounds on which human agency can be understood without reinforcing a human/non-human dichotomization more than is rhetorically necessary.

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[24] Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 131.

[25] Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 133–134.

For each sensually perceptive possibility, there is a correlative, which is both more than human and impossible to perceive, but that impossibility arises because of the limitations of individual human bodies and minds, not because of any form of species distinction. This correlative is the third experience Merleau-Ponty describes. If I touch my left hand with my right, I can experience my right hand touching or my left hand being touched, or I can reverse the sense of which hand is doing the touching. This is also how it is, Merleau-Ponty says, when we touch the flesh of the world. When I smell the poppies, they are being smelled. When I touch them, they are being touched. Although my smelling does them no harm, my touching easily can. When touching another person, a kind person attends to the other's experience of being touched automatically most of the time. Could a similar awareness of the non-human natural world be instilled through the habit of thinking about the correlative of our enfleshed touching the world as the world being touched? The strength of this idea, in terms of a more- than-human environmental ethics, is that it recognizes the impact human action has on the natural world without subsuming that impact under a human-centered teleology. Miners know that they impact that natural world, but they do so for the purpose of extraction. Policy-makers pronouncing an area protected know that their act, although it is a legal and categorical act rather than a physical one, impacts an area by forbidding certain future forms of activity. These forms of recognition of human "touching" subordinate the natural world to human teleologies with a confidence borne out of knowledge that claims certainty about the natural world. But pairing the concept of saturated phenomenality and the awareness of negative certainty that comes with it with the idea of the world being touched reinforces the unpredictability of every human action on ecosystems we can never conceptually understand.

Philosophers struggle to express what it is that greets the perceptual and interpretive abilities we cast out into the world with every glance. Language is much better able to contend with the visible than the invisible. Marion calls it "givenness". Merleau-Ponty describes it as the correlative or extension of bodily senses. There are visible and invisible phenomena, phenomena of human flesh and the "flesh of the world", but the boundaries between the two are always untraceable or upon being found (like the boundary between the touching and the touched hand) require one to send intentionality to the boundary's other side to find it at all. Some refer to it as a call. The tendency to look for expression of what it is among the human senses reveals both the effort to exceed what we can know as humans and the impossibility of the attempt. Within the French phenomenological tradition, it is often designated the *il y a,* the "there is".[26] Whatever one calls it, it seems impossible to know if what calls has an unity internal to itself that is simply outside of what we can perceive or whether the heterogeneous offerings of the natural, non-human world offer only themselves from themselves. What we can know is that our ability to accept these offerings is limited by the poverty of intentionality we turn toward them. Nevertheless, we respond, and in that response there are consequences for the manner in which we touch the "flesh of the world".

The "flesh of the world" includes man-made products as well as cats and ecosystems but because cats, ecosystems, mountains and other natural phenomena exceed our intentionality so consistently while also registering our impact in invisible ways (the way our left hand receives the touch of our right but without us having access to the recipient experience), a particular humility is called for with regard to these natural phenomena. Merleau-Ponty's description of the chiasmic relationship between the visible and the invisible enforces the realization that all of our acts leave traces. Some evidence of our too-rough touching of the "flesh of the world" is obvious – mountaintop removal that scars the landscape and poisons rivers – but much of it remains invisible. Sometimes this is due to lack of knowledge that will eventually be supplied. The long-term effects of carbon emissions were not understood, for example, when cars were first invented. But other invisible effects are unknowable due to our finitude, a finitude that cannot be overcome with regard to living plants, animals and ecosystems the way it might be with those things that can be reduced to objects with less certainty lost. There is something wild in nature that resists being known, something unpredictable. Viruses, mountains, moths all change in ways we cannot keep track of. I can return to a household thing, a flashlight let's say, and find out more about it. It is not without eventness – it could be the flashlight my father and I used when playing shadow animal games, and I have just found it after all these years – but not much is lost in treating most flashlights in most situations as objects. But a fox, a fox, offers much that I cannot know. If I see a fox, it is on his or her terms more than mine, and I may never see him or her again so whatever is given in the event of that encounter is given fleetingly. To point this out is not to return to a romantic sense of closeness to nature, but rather to acknowledge the plentitude of non-human life that gives itself in ways that overflow our spatio-temporally limited, conceptually pre-inscribed intentionality.

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[26] Ted Toadvine documents the occurrence of *il y a* at the *The Visible and the Invisible* in 'The Primacy of Desire and its Ecological Consequences' in *Eco-phenomenology: Back to the Earth Itself*, 153.

When I walk in a forest, see a fox, wake up with my cat, regard the alpine glow on Bentsjordtinden, more givenness than I can take in is offered to me. I may not always receive it, but it is given. That which is given may also overwhelm me in unpleasant ways as in hurricanes or cold, but there too my finitude is revealed. If I am certain there was more given in my encounter with a fox than I could take in, how much more ignorant am I about what the encounter offered to the fox? Not having any way to access animal perception, I would not speculate on the fox's intentionality, nor would I attribute to a mountain intentionality I cannot know is there, but I know that a fox that has seen me cannot return to being a fox that has not encountered a human. I know the rock that mainly composes Bentsjordtinden has been rearranged ever so slightly by my footfalls. The air that composes our atmosphere is altered ever so slightly every time I ignite the diesel in my car. The habits of prioritizing certainty over eventness, visible effects over invisible, and human perception over our often-bruising touch of the non-human world lead us to treat trees, mountains, cats and foxes as objects that we know through what we see, but as Merleau-Ponty and Marion's concepts reveal, the object-world we so often pretend to live in is not the world nature gives us at all.

To conclude, I want to describe a scenario in which the habits of certainty, reliance on vision, and prioritization of human perception are all rendered unworkable by the environment. Phenomenological thinking tends toward the descriptive rather than the analytical because of its commitment to uncovering 'the things themselves', restricting them as little as possible through pre-determined concepts. This description can reveal aspects of experience that go unrecognized because the concepts we typically bring to lived experience conceal them. The experience of being in the dark in the woods, especially where I live, reveals the limits of the aforementioned habits. I live near Tromsø, Norway at 69 degrees North, well above the Arctic Circle. After the sun sets on November 27th, it remains below the horizon until January 15th. We have 50 days known as 'mørketid', the dark time. My house is about an hour's drive from the city, perched on the side of a small mountain with the sea at the front of the house and the mountain rising behind. When there is daylight, we regularly see moose, reindeer, and white-tailed eagles; small mammals like shrews, mice and moles; and a variety of sea birds. Less often, we see otters, orcas, foxes and lemmings. Just across from my front door, a path leads up the mountain. I can walk it or ski it, depending on snow levels. There may be moonlight or a blue lightening of the horizon where the sun would be, but away from the glowing windows of houses, there is no other light. Sitting on the first ridge of the mountain and facing the sea, I can feel the openness of the air in front of me. The birches struggle to reach their full height here. With the mountainside angling down in front of me fairly sharply, none of them have enough height or thickness to impede the movement of air, which is constant near the sea. I know this ridge well and can make it up with no light.

Descending the back side of the first ridge, I turn on my headlamp. It illuminates 40 meters directly in front of me, enough to find the trail and check my bearings. As I head down into the valley behind the first ridge, the mountains close off any glow from the horizon. Unless the moon is overhead, I can see the spill of our galaxy overhead easier than the bog or snow underfoot. Up the second, higher ridge fir trees grow. I can smell them about ten minutes before I reach them if the air is dry. With the rocky mountainside above, the bog below, the small growth of fir provides a haven from the wind. If I am still, I can hear animals moving in the unmoving air. Contrary to places I have lived in Appalachia or Montana, no animals here will harm me, so no fear comes with the sounds, even if it is a large animal like a moose. What accompanies the sound is rather an awareness of how ill-equipped I am to perceive the changes taking place all around me. Moose see poorly, but can smell and hear far better than I can. Foxes, who hunt at night, see well in the dark. Unless they are pouncing, they are miraculously quiet. I rarely see them, but sometimes find their scat on rocks just uphill of the bog, where presumably they hunt lemmings, or I find feathers and footprints in my yard. In the daylight months, they are not shy about marking their territory. Sitting on the edge of the stand of fir, now with my headlamp off, I realize how many things can take my measure through sight, smell and sound without my even knowing they are there. Or if I know they are there, as with a noisy moose, without my being able to determine what direction he is facing or if it is a he or a she. A fox could have watched me cross the now-frozen bog and ascend into the trees the same way humans watch lions walk about in Botswana, but unlike the lions, I would have no awareness of being watched. Being in the forest here in the long night of winter offers a uniquely powerful experience of the chiasmic reversibility Merleau-Ponty describes. My senses are tuned to full power, but sitting just in the grasp of the stand of fir, in what my daylight mind tells me is a concealed spot with good visibility, I am much more perceived than perceiving.

I know this with what Marion calls "negative certainty". To some extent my failure to know what's around me could be mediated by night-vision goggles or pre-installed cameras, but to a large extent my existential finitude just prevents me from taking in what is happening around me. I could be straining my eyes to catch the profile of a moose I hear and miss the aurora unfurling overhead. Directing my hearing toward some small mammal, I can lose track of the falling temperature. Compared to other places in the Arctic, the winter temperatures here are moderate, but winter storms can move in quickly, making it impossible to see and difficult to move. The cold is the killer here, more nonchalant than any animal predator. Northern lights and winter storms are both obviously saturated phenomena. The rarity of the aurora and deadliness of the storm make them stand out in the range of human experience. But what prior experience has prepared me to experience those snow crunching moose sounds or even the non-appearance of a fox I know might be there. What concept do I have for the non-appearance of the animal I know I sense and the one I do not sense? Without concept, without the ability to begin perceiving the scents and displacements I leave behind when I go, how can I know what affects my human presence has had?

An eco-phenomenology based on Merleau-Ponty's chiasmic reversibility or the overflowing givenness Marion describes does not pre-determine policy or behavior. It is modest in its claims. It encourages us to make a habit of knowing what we don't know and imagining what we cannot sense. In the forest here at night, there is a minimal technological boundary between me and the local ecosystem, which makes it easier to perceive the radical finitude that impedes our decision-making with regard to the environment. It reminds me of the extent to which almost every decision has an environmental impact. Being primarily a descriptive discipline, phenomenology does not provide instructions for how to live in a more ecologically sustainable way. Instead, through attention to the invisible inverse of our perceptions and actions and the overwhelming givenness of the natural world, phenomenology can reorient us – away from dominance and certainty, toward receptivity and grateful stewardship.

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