



## Book Reviews

**Vinciane Vinciane, *What Would Animals Say if We Asked the Right Questions?* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016. 276pp. (PB) \$30.00. ISBN: 978-0816692392 (HB) \$105.00. ISBN: 978-0816692392**

Through the unusual form of the abecedary, Vinciane Despret's "scientific fables"—as Bruno Latour characterizes the twenty-six vignettes that make up *What Would Animals Say If We Asked the Right Questions?* (vii)—are a refreshing contribution to the rising field of animal studies. Organized in alphabetical order, these fables invite us to rethink how we think about and interact with animals in various settings, especially scientific ones. Each entry tackles a specific concept (from "A for Artists" to "Z for Zoophilia") that shapes human-animal relations and that, as far as Despret is concerned, stands in need of rigorous philosophical critique.

Professional philosophers who read this work will, no doubt, be immediately taken aback by the extreme brevity of the chapters (generally no more than six to ten pages long) and by their non-linear organization. Unlike more traditional philosophical texts that embrace a thesis and defend it from start to finish, *What Would Animals Say If We Asked the Right Questions?* offers us something else: a series of isolated micro-interventions that at times seem to have no obvious connection to one another other than the superficial one imposed by the abecedary form itself. Yet, as one moves from one letter of the alphabet to the next, one quickly realizes that the book's seemingly fragmented structure conceals a deeper unity that Despret hints at throughout the text with parenthetical notes that point the reader at critical moments (literally, with pointer-finger icons) to other related entries that might be of interest. The twenty-six fables contained in the book, then, are not isolated islands that stand and fall on their own. They are an archipelago in which each island has its own ecosystem while still being interconnected with its neighbors—both close and far—in byzantine, but thought provoking, ways.

Owing to this interconnectedness, Despret stresses that her book is not a dictionary (xvii). Neither is it a glossary of critical terms. Readers interested in how experts in animal studies define key concepts should pick up a copy of Lori Gruen's recent edited collection *Critical Terms For Animal Studies* (The University of Chicago Press, 2018) because, at least as far as definitions go, *What Would Animals Say If We Asked the Right Questions?* is a dead-end. But this, to be clear, is precisely its strength. Typically, philosophical text seek to define complex concepts or give clear and distinct answers to well defined questions. In this work, Despret does neither. In fact, she actively resist this classical understanding of what philosophy is, opting to philosophize by other means—namely, by formulating more questions rather than giving clear-cut answers. And she is candid about this from start. In the "How To Use This Book" page at the beginning of the text, she proclaims that her goal is to reframe the questions that currently frame the field of animals studies and that, therefore, readers should *wander* through her book without expecting it to tell them where to start, where to pause, or where to finish—or even, for that matter, what to think. It is likely, she says, that different readers will walk away from the book with radically different ideas of what it all means because there is no 'right' or 'wrong' way to

read it, “[no] prescribed meaning or key to the reading” (xvii). Like a wanderer in a foreign land, each reader must chart his or her own path through the text. This is why Despret encourages readers to break from the habit of reading a book ‘in order’ from start to finish and instead take her abecedary “from the middle” (176) just as one might a book of poetry, aphorisms, or nursery rhymes. All twenty-six entries, she says, co-constitute one another. They all give their “own light in the context in which [they are] welcomed” and “respond from their own contexts of enunciation and according to the fortuitous ways they are connected.”

The link to poetry, aphorisms, and nursery rhymes (which is ours, not Despret’s) is important since it highlights the pedagogical force of the work. By definition, for instance, nursery rhymes are practice exercises commonly used to teach children positive values, often with fun and colorful stories involving anthropomorphized animals. They prime children to see the world in specific ways and encourage them to enter into meaningful relations with those around them. This, we hold, is the function of *What Would Animals Say If We Asked the Right Questions?*—to cultivate in the readers certain habits of seeing the world and relating the many creatures who inhabit it. It is no coincidence that abecedaries (from the Latin word for “primer”) have historically been used to—teach pupils—typically children—important lessons about ethics, life, and the ways of the world. The abecedary, one might say, is a form that in-forms (delivers information to the reader) but also re-forms (affects the reader’s very character). Our sense is that Despret’s choice of this unexpected form is itself philosophically meaningful and focalizes one of her chief goals, which is to habituate the intended reader to *questioning the questions we are in the habit of posing to animals*.

But who is the intended reader? Who is a book like this for? While *What Would Animals Say if We Asked the Right Questions* is accessible to the layperson (someone without expert knowledge in animal studies) and has a lot to teach the expert (especially those who identify as professional philosophers and scientists), Despret’s intended reader is the person who falls right in between the layperson and the expert, which is to say, the *specialist-in-training*. Her intended audience, in other words, is the next generation of scientists and philosophers interested in animals, which is to say, those young scholars who are no longer laypeople but who are not yet experts. In many ways, she seems to be talking to those who will be asking questions about animals in the near future and whose ideas about animality are not yet written in stone. Her choice to write a book in a form that is usually geared toward pupils would seem to support this view.

Unfortunately, Despret does not spend much time reflecting on the form of her book. But the subject does come up once in “V for Versions,” where she argues that we cannot assume that the emotions of animals *must* mirror those of humans in every aspect in order to matter ethically. Chimpanzees and humans don’t mourn, for instance, in the exact same ways, but what matters is that we both mourn and what this tells us about the depths of our emotional lives. In this context, she mentions that she chose the abecedary form to express her ideas because this form, by virtue of its nonlinearity, instills in the reader a fundamental respect for difference.

Each entry gives us a snapshot of a scene or situation in which we can see animals as engaged with the world, as what Tom Regan calls “subjects of a life.” But in these scenes and situations, we are also made to reckon with the distance that cannot but separate us from them and with the limits this distance imposes on human thought. Still, the process of moving through these snapshots allows us to appreciate the diversity of life forms that exist on Planet Earth and the plurality of ways in which those life forms can project themselves onto their milieu. Reading Despret’s vignettes of animality, therefore, gives us a sense of the many ‘versions’ of existence for which there is room in this world. But why bombard readers with snapshots of difference? To

make them “stammer in their reading” because when one stammers, one pauses, and when one pauses, one becomes actively receptive to the world in a new way. So, what would animals say if we asked the right questions? We may never know for sure even if we pause; but we for sure will never know if we don’t.

Because of its form and structure, it is not easy to say what *What Would Animals Say if We Asked the Right Questions?* is ultimately about since it is not about any one thing. It is about many versions of many things. Even so, we identify four themes that recur throughout the book and shed light on the more general intervention Despret wants to make in the relevant literature.

The first theme is ‘animals as meaning-makers.’ In direct opposition to the behaviorist image of animals as empty input-output systems, Despret pictures animals as producers of meaning, as builders of worlds. Some entries hint at the meaning-making power of animals by documenting some of their most impressive cognitive and affective capacities, such as the ability to make art (“A for Artists” and “O for Oeuvres”), think mathematically (“T for Tying Knots”), and recognize themselves in a mirror (“M for Magpies”). Others focus less on these capacities and more on the general ways in which animals enter into relationships of care, trust, and recognition with those around them, often in total disregard of species boundaries. Everywhere we look, Despret claims (and here the influence of Donna Haraway’s understanding of ethics as “response-ability” in *When Species Meet* [2008] is hard to miss), animals enter into normative relationships of call-and-response with others. They attune themselves, to others and respond meaningfully their behaviors, needs, desires, and intentions. One of Despret’s virtues as a philosopher is her ability to show us just how prevalent these moments of world-building are. They occur in the wild (“C is for Corporeal”), at non-industrial farms (“W for Work”), and even in the entertainment industry (“E is for Exhibitionists”). In the entries that highlight these moments, Despret mobilizes empirical research to combat timeworn assumptions about who animals are while elegantly re-interprets the philosophical meaning of said research. More than once, she interprets scientific findings in ways that diverge from the norm. In “M for Magpies,” to choose only one example, she interprets the fact that some animals recognize their image in a mirror not as evidence of a species-typical capacity (as is commonly done by animal studies experts), but rather as proof that *some* animals can rise above their condition and radically transform themselves under the right circumstances, especially when we manage to ask them questions that *they* (the animals, that is) find genuinely interesting.

A second theme that runs throughout the book is “the politics of the laboratory.” While Despret does not call for the abolition of laboratory research involving animals, she challenges the orthodox view of the laboratory as a mirror of nature. For her, the laboratory is first and foremost an artifice, a Foucauldian *dispositif* that produces the very phenomena that is subsequently, and crudely, characterizes as “natural” and “biological.” In this regard, one of overriding objectives of the work as a whole seems to be the de-naturalization of scientific knowledge. We find a good example of this in “H is for Hierarchies,” where Despret suggests that the rigid hierarchies that scientists so frequently “see” among social animals may not be products of nature as much as side-effects of the scientific gaze itself. Hierarchical social structures, she says, are almost exclusively observed in laboratory-controlled conditions where humans have put animals in situations of scarcity, privation, and competition. Under these conditions, it is no shock that animals start violating one another and entering into relationships of dominance because, as Despret puts it, “the researchers have encouraged the animals to draw [these relationships] out” (55). The politics of the laboratory also take center stage in “N is for Necessity” (which deals with how gendered language can impact scientific perception and

epistemology) and “L is for Laboratory” (which deals with the politics of ‘anthropomorphic panic’ in the animal sciences and the ways researchers monopolize epistemic authority about animals by deliberately de-valuing the knowledge of farmers and breeders).

One of the most powerful examples of the political nature of scientific knowledge is Despret’s analysis of gendered perception in primatological research. For decades, primatologists have wondered, “What happens when a male gorilla is replaced by another in a gorilla community?” The current, widely accepted answer is that new male commits infanticide and then “appropriates the harem,” which is the group of females to whom the previous alpha male had exclusive access. By killing the infants, the newcomer “promotes the return of the female’s estrus; and he can thus impregnate and propagate his genes.” Despret points out that in using “harem” to describe the social structure that male and female gorillas co-create, researchers bring in a host of gendered assumptions for which there is no empirical base and that end up impacting how primatologists think about gorilla behavior. The term “harem” makes it sound as if a dominant male gorilla selects a number of female partners who are themselves relatively passive. But no observation bears this assumption of female passivity. It is only the use of the term “harem” that shapes scientific perception in such a way that primatologists *see* a male dominating a group of females. The choice of language “engages in a certain type of storytelling” that depicts the male as appropriating or taking possession of the group of females.

Yet, theories inspired by Darwin’s theory of sexual selection maintain the exact opposite, that the females select the males since, biologically, only one male is needed for reproduction. Beginning from this assumption, one can turn the framework around and characterize the female gorillas as taking possession of a male gorilla for the sake of reproduction. Moreover, it is possible to interpret the infanticidal act not as a result of a natural process of harem-appropriation on the part of a dominant male, but as the result of a breakdown in social structure. It is noteworthy, in this context, that we observe infanticide mostly under unnatural conditions. It happens when a male gorilla is literally kidnapped by humans and replaced with a stranger—a stranger without ties or connections to the group, a stranger without a shared history. The death of infants, in the end, could be caused by the stressful conditions created by the human researchers rather than by a species-specific reproductive strategy anchored in the myth of male dominance (108, 110, 112).

A third theme is “the link between science and values,” which Despret approaches from two different angles. The first of these angles puts Despret in conversation with contemporary debates in animal ethics as it entails reflection on the conditions under which it may be ethical to use animals in scientific research. While at no point does Despret develop a full-fledged theory of research ethics, her view seems to be that the use of animals as models is justified if and only if the principal aim of research is to benefit the animals themselves. The second angle puts Despret in conversation with social theory. More than once, she tackles the connection between science and values by expressing concerns about how scientific research into animal behavior is used to justify or condemn culturally coded *human* behaviors. People across the political spectrum often use animal behavior to defend their cultural values. Conservatives will point to ‘monogamous animals’ to stage a weird biological defense of traditional marriage. Meanwhile, liberals will hold up ‘gay animals’ as proof that homosexuality is natural and should be socially accepted. Here, Despret views conservatives and liberals as making a common mistake: assume that ‘findings about what animals do or don’t do can tell us what *we* should or shouldn’t do. Moreover, appeals to nature as a court of socio-political appeals are always based on bad science. If we look closely at the animals that presumably justify traditional marriage (e.g. prairie voles)

or homosexuality (e.g. penguins), we find that the former are not “monogamous” in any meaningful sense and that the latter are not “homosexual” in any meaningful sense either. To view them as such, one needs to do a lot of active misreading of the scientific record and willingly ignore the many ways in which the behaviors of such animals escape the limits of the human categories we try to force upon them (“monogamous,” “homosexual”). Animals, Despret concludes, cannot be “models of morality” (61). If anything, the only moral lesson animals teach us is the one Despret herself discusses in “V is for Versions”: that nature has created an almost endless number of life-forms that can each take up an almost endless number of modes of being and existing in the world (136).

The fourth and final theme that frames *What Would Animals Say if We Asked the Right Questions?* is ‘curiosity.’ Despret coaxes us all to cultivate an ethos of curiosity in relation to animals. But this is not the curiosity of *the master* who feels entitled to demands answers (“Who are you, and why are you not like me?”), but rather that of *the wanderer* who welcomes new encounters with fellow travelers and wonders how it is that their paths happened to converge (“How did we end here, and who are we to one another right here, right now?”). This spirit of curiosity moves Despret to look deep into the lives of animals, zooming in on that indescribable abyss that connects and separates us from them at one and the same time. When she writes about elephant trauma or chimpanzee mourning, for example, she pulls us into a space where we begin to wonder in a different way who animals might be. In the case of the elephant painters from Northern Thailand, she counters the argument that “there is no elephantine invention, no creativity, just slavish copying,” by recalling her personal experience of watching the elephants paint “soberly, precisely, and decidedly, and yet also hanging, at certain moments, suspended, in a few seconds of hesitation—offering a subtle blend of affirmation and reservation,” offering an intention and creativity to their acts that we would have easily given in awe when watching a human painter (3-4). When confronted with this description, one cannot but wonder who these elephants are.

Another moment of curiosity appears is “U for Umwelt.” A loan from German, the term *Umwelt* refers to the environment as lived and constituted by the organism. It first entered animal studies through Jakob von Uexküll’s work on “the ‘concrete or lived’ milieu of the animal” (161). Despret notes that she expected this concept to encourage experts to be “tactful and curious” in relation to animals and ask questions like “In what world must *this stranger* live so as to present such ways of being? What affects him or her? What precautions does the situation require?” (162). But she then confesses that she was disappointed by how the term was actually taken up in the animals sciences, where the concept of the *Umwelt* has become synonymous with basic reflex reactions and the sensorimotor system. Still, the concept might still retain the power to incite curiosity among animal experts if only they are willing to consider that the *Umwelt* of the animal is not just a biological and physiological phenomenon, but a social, cultural, historical, and political one as well. Only a broadened concept of the *Umwelt* would illuminate rather than obscure the world that painter elephants in Thailand constitute for themselves.

*What Would Animals Say If We Asked The Right Questions?* offers a refreshingly new approach to core questions in animal studies. And even if the reader is often left wanting more from some of the entries, the text as a whole makes up for it with its engaging and accessible approach to human and animal worlds. Many scholars interested in animals, from natural scientists to humanists, now recognize that we need to invent new concepts *to think about animals* and *to think about how to think about animals*. We, for one, follow Despret in thinking that the best way to begin this arduous labor is to adopt the ethos of the wanderer rather than the

master and to stop asking animals exhausted questions without considering—at least, not in good faith—whether those questions mean anything to the animals, let alone whether they spark *their* (the animals’, that is) curiosity. If Despret is right about the force of this type of curiosity, we (we, animal studies scholars) have our work cut out for us because to wander is to constantly be on the move, to always be ready for new adventures, and to be willing to ask new and difficult questions not just of those one crosses along the way but also of oneself.

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**David Morris, *Merleau-Ponty’s Developmental Ontology*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2018. 312 pp. (PB) \$34.95, ISBN: 978-0810137929. (HB) 99.95, ISBN: 978-0810137936**

David Morris’ *Merleau-Ponty’s Developmental Ontology* is more of an in-depth, creative seminar on Merleau-Ponty’s oeuvre than it is a mere monograph, as Morris patiently leads the reader through a number of texts and contemporary debates on Merleau-Ponty, laying the groundwork for his own creative “developmental ontology.”

Morris’ central claim is that by working through “sense” as endogenous to being, and articulating a subsequent “phenomenology of nature,” we arrive at an ontological ground where the fundamental term is not idea or substance, but “development” (3). As Morris notes, the presiding question of his book, coming out of *The Visible and the Invisible*, is: “How are we to understand ‘the being of meaning and the place of meaning within Being?’” (7) Morris’ answer, by way of Merleau-Ponty (though the title of the book may be misleading in this regard, as we will see later on) is: development (8).

After reading the introduction alone, the reader will be aware that Morris has a penchant for coining his own terms and providing his own narrow definitions of concepts. This rapid introduction of one term after another might have been cumbersome or overwhelming, but Morris is always careful to group each new addition with a clear definition, their place within Merleau-Ponty’s broader work, along with what is at stake in contemporary scholarship on the topic and how it figures into the coming pages. This makes for a thorough and energetic introduction, leaving the reader feeling ready to dive in.

Laying out sense and the questions it poses to ontology is Morris’ task in his elucidating first chapter. How can we understand meaning as existing prior to our conscious reflections rather than resulting from them? Meaning unfolds within its own self-generated context rather than being imposed by concepts or transcendent laws. This is a “brute” or “wild” being which generates sense in its own way, on its own terms, and has done so before philosophy or science began to take notice (4, 36). Further, the norms and standards of sense must be endogenous to being and not imposed upon from without or above (39). As Morris writes, “[i]n a nutshell, *sense* is Merleau-Ponty’s concept of meaning as manifest within being itself, versus meaning as an ideal or nominalist imposition on being” (3-4).

Morris’ second chapter focuses in on how sense is articulated in the early *Structure of Behavior*, as Merleau-Ponty attempts to grapple with “meaning manifest within sensible beings” (9). The *Structure of Behavior* finds that the organic world always already has an intrinsic

orientation which is not imposed upon it by the outside, and uncovering this orientation without deterministic reduction—this *sense*—is Merleau-Ponty’s first achievement in the narrative Morris lays out.

Following these various guiding threads introduced in the preceding discussion, Chapter 3 tracks how this notion of sense is carried into the realm of our perceptual worlds in the *Phenomenology of Perception*. Here, a second discovery about sense is made, with radical ontological consequences: perception, language, ideas, cognition, etc. are “manifest in such a way as to point to their rootedness in a pre-philosophical sense...” (9). We cannot anchor sense in the subject as “a pure a priori of constituting consciousness, or an associative psychological or neurological mechanism.” As Morris argues, already from his discussions of the phenomenal field, Merleau-Ponty notes how subjectivity itself and all of its attendant baggage from Modern thought must “depend on, arise from, or be oriented by a deeper, prior sense,” rather than being its cause (9, 99). We misconstrue sense if we reflect on it from outside (or “above”) and from within subjectivity, for this rich sense is not a result of subjectivity but is one of its necessary conditions (4, 101).

Chapter Four signals a decided shift in the text, when we move into “wilder” territory, which is less caught up with explicating primary sources. Rather, it ventures out on its own to the speculative and the ontological, attempting to fill out regions of Merleau-Ponty’s working notes in dialogue with contemporary scientific studies. The new reader of Merleau-Ponty will find fewer buoys floating about here than in the first half of the text, while the reader familiar with Merleau-Ponty will perk up at this juncture as the ideas get noticeably more complex and stray from the canon in exciting directions. Here, Morris complicates the implications that this complex sense has for phenomenological reflection—the very same consideration which brought Merleau-Ponty to his own later and more ontological writings. This is where we find Morris laying out his own “phenomenology of nature” in earnest, which he calls “a deepening of phenomenological method demanded by the problem of sense” (4). The problem of sense means that we cannot reflect from within our own subjectivity but must let “nature lead the way in reflection,” remaining passive (4, 120-1). This methodological point regarding a passivity-in-reflection is at the heart of Morris’ notion of a phenomenology of nature, and he traces this throughout Merleau-Ponty’s own methodological considerations (especially in the later writings, notably the lectures on *Passivity* themselves) (10, 121).

Further, this methodological consideration brings Morris to confront what it means for the phenomenological enterprise to admit that *nothing* escapes the endogenous sense of being—not even reflection itself. All philosophy, including phenomenology, is “revealed as an operation of being itself” and is therefore “contingent on the moving history of being” (5, 245). This is what brings Merleau-Ponty’s later writings to questions of “interrogation” and “indirect ontology,” as he tarries with the implications that reflection has on being, and being has on the possibilities of reflection. Morris indicates this difficulty in the introduction: “... if you are going to give an account of what sense is, and your philosophical activity and reflection is itself a phenomenon of sense, then your reflective procedure has to grasp itself as arising within and comporting with sense as a phenomenon broader than something merely in you” (10, 56). The upshot for us, the readers of Morris, is that this dutiful consideration of the process of reflection makes for writing which is clear, systematic, and modest in its admitting of its limits.

Morris’ final three chapters come together to deliver his ontology of “development.” Development is the movement of the self-engendering sense of things. This movement is not reducible to the thing’s being as idea, substance, causal chain, or already determinate factors.

Rather, development is that through which “being engenders determinate, interrelated differences, together with their differential context, thereby enabling sense within being”; this difference is Merleau-Ponty’s “*ecart*,” which Morris translates as “disparity,” and is the negative-in-being which gives being’s latitude to unfold sense (4, 13, 37). This movement can be seen as echoing Merleau-Ponty’s notion of “institution” or philosophies of “becoming,” but Morris prefers “development” since it emphasizes the deep and intimate connection between the movement and its self-generated, concrete context (16, 203). As Morris writes, “*ontological disparity* is at the heart of sense: sense entails norms that are more than given differences. Yet if there is to be sense *in* things themselves, these norms must nonetheless appear and operate right within given differences” (48), Morris’ project is, ultimately, to think through this disparity—this negativity—on its own terms (given the methodological considerations of a phenomenology of nature), as well as the spatiotemporal dimensions of the sense which generates within being on its own terms. Chapter Five tackles this “negative-in-being” in terms of place (which is ontologically prior to “space”), and Chapter Six does so with regard to temporality (prior to “time”). The movement of development, which is radically contingent, is what “leaves latitude in being for being to be oriented, to have a sense, to institute differences that make a difference, that matter” (8; 23; 155-7; 243-6). Being must generate its own context all the way down “along the way” of its own development—otherwise, sense would be “severed from being,” found in some world of impositional principles, ideas, laws, or essences. (13-14) Chapter Seven, which is a monumental work in its own right, finally lays out this developmental ontology, expertly drawing together the book’s numerous threads—from sense to phenomenology of nature—into a culminating picture of a new ontology. This ontological picture is one where the whole of Being is not reduced to static substance or a purely chaotic “becoming,” but is instead grounded, ultimately, in the aforementioned self-engendering movement of sense within a concrete context. There are many building blocks that must fall into place in this chapter for development to be at the ground of Being; one such discussion is that of “templacement,” which Morris lays out in conversation with physicist Lee Smolin. Morris argues that prior to both space and time—and even place and temporality—is the fundamental ontological movement of templacement. Templacement is “the genesis of being as a field in which movement can be manifest as a trajectory in a clear time and clear place. But ... this sort of genesis cannot take place in something already given” (243-4). Developmental ontology is broken down in various such ways in Chapter Seven, as Morris finally arrives at the system we have been moving toward all along. Rather than merely trying to account for sense or describe its endogenous features, Morris carefully tracks what must hold ontologically in order for development to occur as such

Even with this seemingly academic agenda, Morris’ style is dynamic, welcoming, and pedagogical. Indeed, his introduction signals this in its casually playful, yet helpful, section headings which suggest that we are embarking on a philosophical journey with Morris at the lead: “tracing” the themes, “unpacking” a concept, “tracking” the chapters, the “map and territory” of his textual analysis, and his “scholarly compass and excursions.” He elaborates that he has been “digging, excavating, sifting, and tracking in the rich fields of Merleau-Ponty’s textual remains and scholarship thereon,” and what he has to offer us is a map (6). Throughout this philosophical adventure, Morris artfully leads the reader through his map by drawing together careful and close readings of many of Merleau-Ponty’s texts (published and unpublished, books and lectures), while simultaneously challenging and complementing scientific studies on “teleosemantics, biosemiotics, zoosemiotics, dynamic systems theory, and other efforts to root meaning in nature” (34). The form of his engagement with these scientific

fields takes up the gauntlet of autocritique from Merleau-Ponty, which Morris defines as a taking up of “scientific results so as to draw out their implicit ontology,” as he “confronts this ontology within the phenomena, so as to challenge it and yield ontological clues” (11). Indeed, Morris motivates this dialogue with contemporary science by showing that science is now turning back to biological development, having recognized in recent years that genetics does not hold the master key to understanding life; Morris writes, “development must be studied as a process in its own right...the time is ripe to draw philosophical insights from these scientific advances” (17).

Despite a plethora of citations from all walks of academic life, the text remains tight in its narrative and argumentation. Morris’ text is seminar-like, regularly shifting gears from textual analysis to analysis of contemporary biology to discussion of how a given thought fits into contemporary scholarship. The interweaving of many voices might have felt cluttered in less adept hands, but Morris orchestrates this chorus with a clear head and a spirit of collaboration. Although the philosophical ideas under consideration are dense and difficult, Morris expertly guides the reader by means of helpful parentheticals and descriptive section headings, anticipating questions that will arise, offering examples as soon as you are hungry for one, and providing meaningful context for both the advanced and budding phenomenologist. Further, the endnotes alone are a text in their own right, as Morris helpfully dives into—in dizzying detail—numerous rich tangents which would have muddied the waters of a tight argument, but which remain nonetheless engaging for interested readers.

Within the second chapter and into the third, Morris structures his argument by linking up “conceptual issues that animate” different works by Merleau-Ponty (58); though this does offer a helpful “map” in drawing together early, middle, and late works of Merleau-Ponty in a new light (retelling a now-stale narrative with a fresh tack), at times this can feel like a distraction from the ontological considerations at hand. The overall voice and goal can be confused in these moments: is this a work of traditional scholarship on Merleau-Ponty or a creative ontology which is utilizing the thought of Merleau-Ponty to be carried forward? I believe that these need not be mutually exclusive and can indeed build on one another, but in some moments, such as when he first introduces this schema (58), he sacrifices the pace of his creative project to tread back over all-too-familiar distinctions. Perhaps this is a necessary feature of a text which successfully attempts to open itself up to readers of many differing levels of competency within the scholarship, and we should encounter these moments as a generous consideration of those less-versed in the dense thought-world of Merleau-Ponty (plus, we can all benefit from considering even the most worked-over thoughts under a new guise; even if we have walked along the same path every day, a new friend can point out something we have never seen before). Indeed, I have worked with many concepts from Merleau-Ponty of which I had implicitly assumed I had a working knowledge, but Morris’ distinctions have shed new light on the phenomenal field (132), the temporality of evolution (71), the institution of time (189), and determinate perceptions (210).

Further, Morris’ “hermeneutic policy” of reading the texts themselves is a refreshing rereading of familiar territory, as Morris does not take Merleau-Ponty’s own self-assessment at face value (such as his later work’s disavowal of his earlier work) but instead tries to work through each text on its own terms, with a healthy and self-reflective relationship to Merleau-Ponty, remaining true to the thinker while carrying his work forward. Morris does not claim ownership of the system he develops, but he admits that it is not found within Merleau-Ponty either, as he carefully states that his work is the “ontological complement to the deepest questions posed by Merleau-Ponty’s work” (23-24) and that he has learned his very style of

thinking from Merleau-Ponty (25). Although I appreciate the drive to be simultaneously creative and rigorous in one's scholarship, it does leave me wondering: what here is Merleau-Ponty and what is Morris? Morris himself notes at the start of this work that he intends to tackle problems at the heart of Merleau-Ponty and think in his style. I believe he remains true to this promise—but I nevertheless find myself uncertain how to cite or situate developmental ontology. Often Morris is clear about Merleau-Ponty's own claims, but some passages remain ambiguous regarding the distinction between the extrapolation and advancement of Merleau-Ponty's ideas and mere summary. Though this may read as a criticism, this ambiguity is inevitable when creatively thinking along with Merleau-Ponty—a thinker who self-avowedly resisted dogmatism, as he was more interested in making clearings for thought.

In addition, despite Morris' clarifying style and compelling ontology, I do find myself wanting more description and explanation of how this applies within the human realm of perceptual experience. Though this is not the primary topic under consideration, the text at times can feel removed from the world and my own first-person experience—a fact which may be multiplied for new readers of Merleau-Ponty. Particularly, I am hoping to understand in a deeper way how *sense* is manifest for me, and what is at stake in this deeper notion of sense for me and my world. Though this is alluded to in various places, a more explicit discussion of how this ontology of sense is realized within my phenomenal world, and how the non-phenomenal contrasts, would be welcome additions.

On a similar note, Morris frankly admits that it is his own interest in biology which motivates a focus on development as such, and his choice of examples and scientific engagement: “I find biological development to be one of the most extraordinary phenomena manifest in nature: an intense source of wonder, complexity, and scientific challenges” (16). I appreciate Morris owning his personal investment in his framing of the ontological considerations, but I found that the presence of biological development was notably unbalanced, given the lack of discussions of art and expression—a domain typically thematized in discussions of Merleau-Ponty's later work. Although Morris notes in the introduction that he will not tackle expression *per se* since he casts “sense” as ontologically prior, I found myself hoping to see him at least situate “development” in terms of Merleau-Ponty's later aesthetic thinking. Indeed, I found “Eye and Mind”—a later essay often seen as a bridging piece for Merleau-Ponty, where “flesh” occurs for the first time—to be strikingly absent from Morris' discussion. Indeed, since “sense” and “meaning” are on the table, it would seem that engaging how it is that the aesthetic is ontologically revelatory for Merleau-Ponty would be a helpful addition—which harkens back to my prior hope for a contextualization of this rich, ontological sense within concrete perceptual experience.

Despite these unrequited hopes, Morris' thorough work represents some of the very best in contemporary scholarship in Merleau-Ponty. His lucid and pedagogical style is at once light and humorous with personal asides, while also being philosophically rich, rigorous, and engaging. Not only will any reader—from the newcomer to the well-seasoned scholar—gain fresh insight into Merleau-Ponty, but they will also witness the unfolding of a new ontology from a boldly original, well-spoken thinker. In his own refreshing sort of way, I doubt he would ever admit as much.

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