

Article

Taking Natural History Seriously: Whitehead and Merleau-Ponty's Ontological Approach

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Abstract: This paper investigates Alfred North Whitehead and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's attempts to develop a historical, dynamic ontology (a "process ontology", according to the former, and an "ontology of the flesh" for the latter). The claim of the paper is that their originality lies in the methods adopted to reach such ontologies, which show strong similarities. Both authors based their research on nature, conceived of as "the leaf of Being", and on perceptual experience, understood not as a chaos of bare, punctual, sense data, but as the complex, original source of meaning that constitutes the primary field of philosophical investigation—the only source from which one can gain new understanding of both *nature* and *logos* (things, happenings, values, subjectivity, laws, etc.). After some introductory remarks on the connections between Whitehead and Merleau-Ponty, the paper is divided into three parts. The first part clarifies why and how, according to the philosophers, ontology should start from a new scrutiny of nature. The second part specifies what this new conception of nature, based on perceptual experience, is. The third part focuses on how their ontologies must be construed as historic, insofar as behaviors, actions, and practices lie at the core of their concept of being.

Keywords: Whitehead; Merleau-Ponty; experience; nature; ontology; history; process; flesh; practice



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1. Introduction

From a traditional, classical metaphysical perspective based on an essentialist type of thinking, the hypothesis of a historical ontology is usually viewed as inconceivable, or at least misplaced, since being is conceived of as an immutable substance (as it is, for instance, according to Parmenides), or as a set of ideas, entities, or structures that do not undergo the changing of time and the mutations of existence. Moving on to contemporary thought, dialectic trends of thought have been widespread, at least from Hegel onwards. Nonetheless, it is possible to detect two, intertwined, major ambiguities in such dialectic-oriented philosophies: first, that dialectics is still based on a predialectic ontology and—consequently—that besides the emphasis on the historical aspect of ontology, history is ultimately conceived of as being the development of an idea; it is always subordinated or dependent upon it. The present paper aims to show how Alfred North Whitehead and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's philosophies pave the way for an alternative, dynamic, and processual ontology. The claim of this paper is that their originality does not, however, primarily lie in the results achieved (which differ from one another), but in the method adopted by the authors to reach their ontologies. Both Whitehead and Merleau-Ponty, indeed, based their research, on the one hand, on nature, conceived of as "the leaf of Being," and on the other hand, on perceptual experience, understood not as a chaos of bare, punctual, sense data, but as the complex, original source of meaning that constitutes the primary field of philosophical investigation—the only source from which one can gain a new understanding of *nature* and *logos* (things, happenings, values, subjectivity, laws, etc.).

From both a theoretical and a historical perspective, the relationship between Whitehead and phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty in particular, has been widely introduced and discussed (among others, see [1–11]). From a methodological perspective, by exploring their

thoughts together, the present paper does not aim to reassess to what extent Whitehead is or can be considered a phenomenologist, or Merleau-Ponty a process thinker, nor to imply that they develop just *one* kind of philosophy. Differences in content, intellectual references, and methods are indisputable facts. Nonetheless, with regard to the relationships between nature and ontology via *experience*, they share a common attitude and some relevant tenets. So, to this extent, by thinking *with* Whitehead and Merleau-Ponty more than *of* them—to recall Stengers’s important book [12]—this paper’s goal is to re-examine the theoretical power of their philosophical proposals, rather than to jump into the (at least potentially) complicated debate over pragmatism, phenomenology, and process studies scholarship.

Even so, it is essential to recall that the association between the two authors is not merely the fruit of subsequent scholarly research but is rather historically rooted. Whitehead’s early reflection is indeed taken under major consideration in Merleau-Ponty’s lectures at the *Collège de France* in 1956–1957 [13]. For this reason, and because of the crucial transitional moment that Merleau-Ponty’s classes on “nature” at the *Collège de France* represent—between his classical masterpiece *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) and the development of his late ontological thought (partially articulated in the posthumous work *The Visible and the Invisible*, 1964)—these classes have a central place in these analyses. Of the three courses, the first was entitled “Le Concept de Nature” (1956–1957), and was divided into two parts (“Study of the Variations of the Concept of Nature” and on “Modern Science and Nature”); the second focused on “Animality, the Human Body and the Passage to Culture” (1957–1958), and the third was called “Nature and Logos: the Human Body” (1959–1960). Whitehead’s concept of nature is examined in depth in the last lecture of the second part of the first course [13] (pp. 113–123)¹. Interestingly, such analysis of Whitehead’s idea of nature does not follow that of other relevant philosophers, such as Aristotle, the Stoics, Descartes, Kant, Brunschvicg, Schelling, Bergson, and Husserl (examined in the first part of the course), but is taken into account in the second part of the course, dedicated to “Modern Science and Nature”. Merleau-Ponty, after considering classical physics (Laplace) and modern physics (quantum mechanics), analyzes Whitehead’s philosophy, probably because the latter’s concept of nature stems from a comparison with both classical and modern physics, and stands out for its radicalism and “modernity”, compared with the other philosophical views.

Before delving into the details of Whitehead and Merleau-Ponty’s ideas of nature, some remarks offered by Merleau-Ponty on the tasks of philosophical inquiry help to clarify his leading interest in undertaking a study of *nature*. As he observes in an excerpt from *The Visible and Invisible*:

In a sense the whole of philosophy, as Husserl says, consists in restoring a power to signify, a birth of meaning, or a wild meaning, an expression of experience by experience, which in particular clarifies the special domain of language. And in a sense, as Valéry said, language is everything, since it is the voice of no one, since it is the very voice of the things, the waves, and the forests. [14] (p. 155)

Accordingly, one could infer that, by focusing on the concept of nature, Merleau-Ponty aims at restoring its power to signify, making the “wild meaning” of nature re-emerge. In this regard, in the introductory pages of *Nature*, the author, after recalling the Greek and Latin etymologies, clarifies—as a first approximation—what he means by nature. He states:

In Greek, the word “nature” comes from the verb φύω-, which alludes to the vegetative; the Latin word comes from nascor, “to be born”, “to live”; it is drawn from the first, more fundamental meaning. There is nature wherever there is a life that has meaning, but where, however, there is not thought; hence the kinship with the vegetative. Nature is what has a meaning, without this meaning being posited by thought: it is the autoproduction of a meaning. [13] (p. 4, emphasis added)

Nature turns out to be appealing for Merleau-Ponty insofar as it represents “the autoproduction of a meaning”. This definition is particularly relevant in assessing both authors’ commitment to the problem of nature. Indeed, in comparison with our Anthropocene era,

where ecological studies are widespread and new attention is drawn to nature (at different levels, from politics to philosophy), Merleau-Ponty, as well as Whitehead, can be seen as pioneering thinkers, and they both provide deep and relevant insights. All the same, the particularity of their investigations does not primarily lie in addressing nature as a specific issue, urgent and unavoidable per se, but specifically in considering nature as *the key problem for philosophical thinking*. To understand better why they came to support such a robust thesis, it is useful to take into account one of the most characteristic phenomena of nature: life. Overall, life can be defined by Merleau-Ponty's words cited above: life is the "autoproduction of a meaning". In more detail, as Whitehead states in *Nature and Life*:

The status of life in nature (. . .) is the modern problem of philosophy and of science. Indeed it is the central meeting point of all the strains of systematic thought, humanistic, naturalistic, philosophic. The very meaning of life is in doubt. When we understand it, we shall also understand its status in the world. But its essence and its status are alike baffling. [15] (p. 148)

Merleau-Ponty, for his part, is even more explicit in presenting his viewpoint, re-assessing the profound connection between nature and ontology by clarifying that his interest is mainly ontological. In fact, he points out that he is not revisiting nature to find "a super-science, a secret science (. . .) that would discover a reality beneath the appearances, reinterpreting the images of science and its models, which for it are auxiliaries, or (. . .) discovering that "matter" is really spirit or similar to a mind" [13] (p. 204). He specifies that:

[We do not seek a] philosophy of Nature as referring to a separate power of being, in which we would envelop the rest, or that at least we would posit separately, against the philosophy of Spirit or of History or of consciousness.—The theme of Nature is not a numerically distinct theme.—There is a unique theme of philosophy: the nexus, the vinculum "Nature"—"Man"—"God". [13] (p. 204)

In other words, according to the author, nature constitutes a feasible path to follow to gain a new understanding of what he calls "the unique theme of philosophy".

2. "The Leaf of Being"², or: How Ontology Should Start from (Experienced) Nature

In the opening paragraphs of Merleau-Ponty's *Nature*, the author provocatively warns about the efficacy of investigating concepts, such as that of nature. As he notes:

*Can we validly study the notion of nature? Are we not then subject to Valéry's critique when he says that philosophy is only the habit of reflecting on words while supposing that each word has one meaning which is illusory since every word has known shifts in meaning? We would be bound to the history of mistaken meanings. But are these changes fortuitous? Wouldn't there be something that had always been intended, if not expressed, by those who use words? Must we not recognize a life in language, which would be neither fortuitous nor a logical, immanent development? For this reason Lachelier, in a note in *Vocabulaire philosophique*, is against the use of precise words: "The words of a language are not tokens and are themselves a φύσις".* [13] (p. 3)

Accordingly, by following the evolution of the concept of nature, Merleau-Ponty does not aim to find an absolute definition, as if "nature" was—inasmuch it is a word or a concept—a label that can be perfectly referred or applied to a determined set of things or facts. Rather, he pays attention to the variations in the concept of nature to become aware of the historical significance of *our* general concepts of nature, and, thereby, to be in the position to bring to the surface the "primordial, nonlexical meaning" of nature [13] (p. 3). Words are not tokens but "living things", as Peirce would say³, which grow and change, every time opening vague horizons of meaning and allowing for new possibilities of action. Even so, these concepts of nature are not meant to be mere covers of a supposed originary experience, but constitute an unavoidable aspect of our relationship with nature, the latter being essentially constituted by the interweaving of language, history, and perception. As Merleau-Ponty summarizes in one of his class *resumés*:

We can neither conceive of primordial being engendering itself, which would make it infinite, nor think of it being engendered by another, which would reduce it to the condition of a product and a dead result. As Schelling has remarked, there is in nature something which makes it such that it would impose itself upon God himself as an independent condition of his operation. Such is our problem. [16] (p. 66)

Therefore, according to the philosopher, by becoming aware of the historical import of our concept of nature, we are empowered to detect in contemporary research what he calls “the symptoms of a new conception of nature” [16] (p. 66). The gist of his method, which brings him to the survey of both classical and modern science, and then to the direct examination of Whitehead’s thought, is that if nature “is an all-encompassing something we cannot think starting from concepts”, or deductions [13] (p. 87), language cannot be assumed as an absolute level from which to grasp any meaning⁴. As he continues, “we must rather think it [the concept of nature] starting from experience, and in particular, experience in its most regulated form—that is, science” [13] (p. 87). For Merleau-Ponty, indeed, science counts as a specific kind of experience, the most regulated type, so that—as he specifies—“we do not ask science for a new, ready-made conception of Nature, but we find in it what [we need] to eliminate false conceptions of Nature” [13] (p. 87). The reason why it is essential to start from experience (including scientific experience) is that, for the author, nature represents “the primordial—that is, the nonconstructed, the noninstituted” [13] (p. 4), but not in the sense of a bare, total *object* untouched by thought, as in the sense of Kantian *noumenon*, for instance. As he further specifies, nature is “an object that is not an object at all; it is not really set out in front of us. It is our soil [*Boden*—not what is in front of us, facing us, but rather, that which carries us” [13] (p. 4). From another perspective, nature should be seen as an origin that is not detachable from us, which is always productive and ever-functioning. In Merleau-Ponty’s words, “An originary productivity that continues [to operate] beneath the artificial creations of man. It both partakes of the most ancient, and is something always new” [13] (p. 125). To this extent, science, especially modern science (e.g., quantum mechanics), has already overcome, for instance, the old Cartesian view of nature as something external and opposed, such as a known object opposed to a subject-knower, although it is not interested in *understanding* the phenomena per se⁵.

So, on the one hand, both Whitehead and Merleau-Ponty’s speculative thoughts pivot around experience and nature. More precisely, this conceptual couple—nature and experience—must be seen as *hendiadys*, since “experience and nature” stand more precisely for “the experience of nature”. On the other hand, another salient common characteristic is that the experience of nature is the level of investigation on which they both base, and incardinate, a new ontological enterprise. In other words, Whitehead and Merleau-Ponty’s ontologies move not from a specific, pre-established *concept* of nature, nor can be deduced from it, but represent similar and close attempts to refound ontology on the *experience* of nature. For Whitehead’s part, the connections between his analysis of experienced nature and his ontology can be easily inferred from a chronological study of his major works—from his philosophy of panphysics, such as *The Concept of Nature* (1920) to *Science and the Modern World* (1925) and *Process and Reality* (1929)—in which he offers a more complex and exhaustive analysis of the universe (subjectivity included) that commonly falls under the label of *process ontology*. For Merleau-Ponty, the connection between nature and ontology cannot only be de facto reconstructed from analysis of his writings but is explicitly examined in his classes on nature. Indeed, nature is indicated by the author as *the* privileged angle from which to reach a new ontology. As mentioned above, the French philosopher declares in the introduction of the course of 1959–1960 that the only perennial theme of philosophy is “the Nature-Man-God nexus”. In light of this triadic nexus, nature is seen as a “leaf or layer of total Being” [13] (p. 204), that is, it is conceived of “as part of this complex which reveals all of it” [13] (p. 205). From this perspective, Merleau-Ponty’s goal (as well as that of Whitehead) is not merely to reach *an ontology of nature*, but rather to come from the experience of nature to “a true *explicitation* of Being” [13] (p. 206). The

ontology of nature is not only a possible way toward ontology but represents “the way toward ontology”—“the way that we prefer”. As Merleau-Ponty states,

because the evolution of the concept of Nature is a more convincing propaedeutic, [since it] more clearly shows the necessity of the ontological mutation. We will show how the concept of Nature is always the expression of an ontology—and its privileged expression. [13] (p. 204)

One famous example of such a connection is represented by Descartes’s philosophy. His view of nature (as *res extensa*), which reduces “the facticity of nature to its bare existence” [16] (p. 67), does not stand only for an ontology of nature, but leads to general ontology, with relevant implications for the roles and conceptions of man and divinity. For this reason, Merleau-Ponty insists on calling nature “an ontological leaf—the thin leaf of nature-essence” [13] (p. 212), and he developed his last years’ research on this issue, before his sudden death in 1961. As he remarks in the first sketch of the third course, alluding to his later unfinished work, *The Visible and the Invisible*:

We passed between causal-realist thinking and philosophical idealism, because we found in brute, savage, vertical, present Being a dimension that is not that of representation and not that of the In-itself. (. . .) We will have to disengage better this idea of Being, i.e., of what makes these beings (Nature, humans) be—and be “in one another”, i.e., makes them be together on the side of what is not nothing; and we will have to specify in particular the relation of the positive and the negative in them, of the visible and the nonvisible. [13] (p. 212)

The ontological commitment is what fascinated Merleau-Ponty about Whitehead, such that the former said of the latter that “he makes us understand the ontological value of perception” [13] (p. 117).

3. “Nature Is Full-Blooded”⁶, or: Whitehead and Merleau-Ponty’s Characterization of Nature

After clarifying that both philosophers think of nature as a privileged angle of access to being, so that “an ontology which leaves nature in silence shuts itself in the incorporeal and for this very reason gives a fantastic image of man, spirit and history” [16] (p. 62), this section briefly touches upon the main outcomes of their investigations on experienced nature. Obviously, there are many facets and much related scholarly research⁷ of Whitehead and Merleau-Ponty’s inquiries on nature. The current section does not presume to be exhaustive, but intends to provide a general, satisfactory description of their original study of the *experience of nature*. The idea underlying such a rough summary is that, if the examination of nature is the privileged path for reaching a new ontology, it is only by dealing with these results that one can understand what this new ontology should look like. The main tenets of their characterization of nature can be summarized as follows: (a) the coimplication and the primacy of perception; (b) the anti-Cartesian view of nature, in accordance with contemporary science; (c) the consequent criticism of the concept of substance, matter (and space and time); (d) “Not a still life:” nature as colorful and meaningful...; and (e) the organic structure of experience and nature.

(a) Starting from the primacy of perceptual experience, this topic is undoubtedly one of Merleau-Ponty’s most characteristic, even before his speculation on nature. So, it is sufficient to say that, according to him, perceptual experience corresponds to both the experience of nature and the lived-body experience. In the case of Whitehead, the matter is more controversial, especially if one takes into consideration the speculative scheme displayed in *Process and Reality*. Nonetheless, even without delving into the connection between his speculative scheme and experience, it is unquestionable that the primacy of perception is also his methodological attitude when investigating nature (cf. especially *The Concept of Nature*). In general, it is worth noting that neither of them means by perceptual experience either a level of pure passivity or of pure activity. The former is, for instance, the case with the mechanistic account of perception, which views perception as the passive

effect of a detached stimulus, prior to us, whereas the latter might be regarded as a constructivist approach to perception, which sees perception as the result of the action of the perceiver on both sensory information gained and other information previously stored. On the contrary, for both, perceptual experience reveals itself as the peculiar entwinement between activity and passivity, between us and the world, from which emerges the importance of the body as the dynamic *locus* of this peculiar entanglement. The body is indeed the place of the emergence of a *chiasmatic structure*, to adopt one of Merleau-Ponty's most notorious pieces of jargon, that always implies reversibility between, for instance, seeing and being seen, or touching and being touched. As de Saint Aubert has underlined, Merleau-Ponty, in an unfinished work, describes his late thought as an "ontology of birth and of co-birth [ontologie de la naissance et de la co-naissance]" [17] (p. 210). Here, by *co-naissance*, the author refers to Paul Claudel's neologism, coined in *Art Poétique*, that joins together what in French is *naissance* (birth) and *connaissance* (knowledge). As de Saint Aubert states:

co-naissance expresses "a radical conception of the life of perception as experience [épreuve] of being, in the double passive-active sense of the verb 'to experience' [éprouver] (to feel and to put to the test, to perceive and interrogate)". [17] (p. 238)

Similarly, though without the considerable analyses carried out in, for instance, Merleau-Ponty's masterpiece, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Whitehead regards the body as the "living organ of experience", its "focal region", and defines it as "the act of self-origination including the whole nature" [18] (p. 225). From this "absolute" level of perception, the authors promote a new characterization of nature that is described, overall, by the following points, and that Merleau-Ponty often provides in manifest continuity with the results formerly achieved by Whitehead.

(b) The anti-Cartesian view of nature, in accordance with contemporary science. In a nutshell, according to both authors, nature cannot be split into rigid dualisms, especially of an ontological type (see [19] p. 6). A typical example of such dualism is that of Descartes, who conceives of nature as an object (*Gegenstand*), characterized by extension (*res extensa*) that, in its turn, stands against a subject, made up of another kind of substance (*res cogitans*), and represented as an external spectator. This Cartesian view is particularly relevant to compare and criticize because it is still at work in "common sense", as Merleau-Ponty remarks. Common sense, in fact, remains grounded in Cartesianism, as well as the conceptions of classical physics (for instance of Newton or Laplace). On the contrary, both philosophers look favorably at contemporary physics, especially quantum theories and relativity, which no longer support such a perspective. There is no absolute mind in front of a natural entity that one can fully understand on the basis of the sum of universal laws. As Merleau-Ponty summarizes in *The Visible and the Invisible*:

But today, when the very rigor of its description obliges physics to recognize as ultimate physical beings in full right relations between the observer and the observed, determinations that have meaning only for a certain situation of the observer, it is the ontology of the kosmotheoros [contemplator of the world] and of the Great Object correlative to it that figures as a prescientific preconception. [14] (p. 15)

(c) Criticism of the concept of substance and matter (and space and time). The previous, modern idea of nature, according to Whitehead, is based on two crucial misunderstandings (or postulates of thought), the first being rooted in a logical assumption, and the second in an epistemological one. The first is the understanding of nature in terms of *substance*—an understanding based on the Greek, Aristotelian, logic of subject/predicate; the second postulate is the conception of *matter* (as well as space and time) as being *simple-located*, that is, the idea that they are akin to mere punctual entities. In both cases, one faces what Whitehead calls the *fallacy of misplaced concreteness*, that is, the peculiar inversion of the abstract with the concrete. In the latter case, as Merleau-Ponty summarizes, "According to Whitehead, it is not possible to think of punctual spatiotemporal existences, nor to compose the world from such insights. These punctual existences are only the result of a work of

thought, of a work of division.” [13] (p. 114). This fallacy—called by Whitehead the *fallacy of simple location*, which in his view has dominated the materialistic and mechanistic view of nature—is also responsible for rendering unintelligible important facts of existence, such as induction, memory, personal identity, and causation (see [20] p. 44).

As for substance, Whitehead claims that Aristotle emphasized the meaning of “substance” as “the ultimate substratum which is no longer predicated of anything else” [21] (p. 18), and that, later, this assumption led to a “tendency to postulate a substratum for whatever is disclosed in sense-awareness, namely, to look below what we are aware of for the substance in the sense of the concrete thing” [21] (p. 18). According to this view, we now tend to construe nature as a sort of unchangeable, immutable foundation for all the mutable facts and attributes we actually perceive in experience. From this perspective, one would have, on the one hand, a neutral individual thing out of reach (nature as substance) and, on the other hand, a multiplicity of experiences (such as feelings or qualities), merely accidental in comparison to the substance-nature that has been postulated below them. In the specific case of nature, it is easy to see how the problem for Whitehead lies in the fact that we begin with analyzing the perceptual experience of nature, but we ultimately, without even realizing it, end up affirming that nature is something beyond, or before, our perceptive experience itself.

(d) “Not a still life:” nature as colorful, meaningful, etc. One of the consequences of the (above-illustrated) fallacy of misplaced concreteness is the reduction of nature to bare matter, simply located in a punctual moment of time and space, whereas all the qualities (the so-called secondary qualities) that we experience in perceptions and sensations are ultimately the product of our mind. However, as the quote used as the paragraph title suggests, according to Whitehead, “nature is full-blooded” [15] (p. 144); it is not a dead schema of reasoning. Explicitly referring to the classical debate in modern philosophy between primary and secondary qualities, Whitehead states:

Thus nature gets credit which should in truth be reserved for ourselves; the rose for its scent; the nightingale for his song; and the sun for his radiance. The poets are entirely mistaken. They should address their lyrics to themselves, and should turn them into odes of self-congratulation on the excellency of the human mind. Nature is a dull affair, soundless, scentless, colourless; merely the hurrying of material, endlessly, meaninglessly. [20] (p. 56)

Again, this new (regained) meaningful, colorful, soundful, scented character of nature is reassessed for both Whitehead and Merleau-Ponty on the basis of perceptual experience. Indeed, for both, it is essential not to reduce perception to the mere apprehension of sense data. In this regard, Whitehead remarks:

Our bodily experience is the basis of existence. How is it to be characterized? In the first place, it is not primarily an experience of sense data, in the clear and distinct sense of that term. (. . .) our feeling of bodily unity is a primary experience. It is an experience so habitual and so completely a matter of course that we rarely mention it. No one ever says, Here am I, and I have brought my body with me. In what does this intimacy of relationship consist? The body is the basis of our emotional and purposive experience. [15] (p. 114)

As Whitehead puts it, our experience is always bodily situated; it is thoroughly *emotional* and *purposive*. To state it more generally, it is always a matter of interest (or “concern”, see [18] p. 176). Indeed, the experience (of nature) is characterized by “the basic fact” that is “the rise of an affective tone originating from things whose relevance is given” [18] (p. 176). Therefore, as much as the experience of nature cannot be reduced to simple-located, bare matter, every moment of our experience of it is connoted by an affective tone and an intrinsic value of importance.

(e) The organic structure of experience and nature. The last point to remark on, no less importantly, is the *organic structure* of experience and nature, which is conceived as being opposed to the mechanistic view based on the simple location of matter [20] (p. 193)⁸. Overall, Merleau-Ponty already hints at this organic structure when he says at the

beginning of his courses that “nature is the *autoproduction of a meaning*” [13] (p. 4). Nature is an ongoing *process*—to adopt Whitehead’s terminology (see also [13] p. 120)—an “operative presence” (cf. [21] p. 73, also quoted by Merleau-Ponty [13] p. 121) that structures itself and autoproduces its meaning. As Merleau-Ponty summarizes, by *organism*, Whitehead, first and foremost, underlines that “Nature is a species of activity which is exercised without being comparable to the activity of a consciousness or of a mind. If we cannot stop it, it is not because it is made of instants, but because it is an activity, because it becomes” [13] (p. 118). For this reason, Whitehead explicitly calls his “philosophy of organism” an alternative philosophy to materialism, implying a whole new understanding of temporality and of relations. Indeed, the organism unfolds the structure of experience, both at the level of temporality and at the level of the interactions between the environment and organisms. In this way, as Merleau-Ponty notices, by the notions of organism and process, Whitehead introduces into nature “the emergence of a history” [16] (p. 87), which is not to be understood as linear or consequential, but is continuously defined and redefined on the basis of the relationship that every single organism has with the others (both organisms, and the environment). As Whitehead emphasizes, his philosophy of organism is “mainly devoted to the task of making clear the notion of ‘being present in another entity” [19] (p. 50).

Regarding the organic structure of experience, in both Whitehead and Merleau-Ponty’s works, the debt to Bergson is easy to reconstruct, though Whitehead never refers to him explicitly in defining his thought as “the philosophy of organism”. On the contrary, as Merleau-Ponty openly affirms in his classes on *Nature*, it is Bergson who introduced, with the concepts of *organism* and *duration*, “the idea of a natural history”, to the extent to which he:

defines the living by history: the living organism is “a unique series of acts constituting the true history.” (. . .) By describing the organism, Bergson leaves behind substantialist thinking, which saw in the end an immutable form, both at the origin and at the end of development. He defines the organism and life as types of temporality and thereby places them outside of every comparison with a physical system. The physical system is its past (Laplace). The organism, and the whole universe defined as natural system, is defined, on the contrary, by the fact that the present is not identical with the past. We can say of the physical system that it is re-created at each moment, that it is always new, or that it is uncreated and is identical to its past. [13] (p. 59, emphasis added)

According to Merleau-Ponty, life, and living beings, can never be reduced to physical substances, but rather imply the abandonment of any substantialist or essentialist thoughts based on the idea of an immutable form. The difference between present organisms and their past paves the way for the concept of duration. As the author continues:

On the other hand, the organism is never identical with its past, nor is it ever separated from it: it continues. Duration becomes the principle of the internal unity of it. “Wherever anything lives, there is, open somewhere, a register in which time is being inscribed.” (Creative Evolution, p. 16) And this register is neither a consciousness interior to the organism, nor our consciousness, nor our notation of time. What Bergson thereby designates is an institution, a Stiftung, as Husserl would say, an inaugural act that embraces a becoming without being exterior to this becoming. This intuition of life as history brings out the value of several passages in Creative Evolution (. . .). [13] (p. 59, emphasis added)

Accordingly, the organic structure of experienced nature introduces the concept of “institution”, which becomes vital for understanding Whitehead and Merleau-Ponty’s idea of nature, not as a super-object that stands against us, nor a mythical origin, but as an activity, a process, and a history in the making, not pre-established or ordered toward a definite *telos*. Life, and living beings, show precisely this aspect of nature: the unfolding of a dynamic *history* that is unintelligible from a mechanistic perspective, as well as from an idealist, or vitalist one⁹.

4. “Like a Pure Wake That Is Related to No Boat”¹⁰: From Nature to an Ontology of Practices

From at least Darwin onwards, the topic of “the history of nature” and evolution has been discussed widely by both philosophers and scientists, questioning deeply previous ideas such as Laplace’s deterministic view of nature, or even Linnaeus’s taxonomy, which presupposes that nature is made up of immutable and fixed species. It is beyond the scope of this paper to follow the evolution of physical and biological research step-by-step and see how Whitehead and Merleau-Ponty (fruitfully) engage with it. Nonetheless, it is relevant to specify their originality in relation to “natural history” and try to characterize it.

In the first part of the paper, it has been shown how the driving interest in approaching nature, especially for Merleau-Ponty, is to reach a new ontology via nature. In the second part, more details related to their view of nature have been elaborated. However, two pivotal questions still remain: what account of “natural history” do they support? And what are the consequences for ontology? This conclusory part of the paper aims to answer these questions by discussing and comparing the analysis carried out so far.

Regarding the first question, it can be inferred from the previous paragraph that by “natural history”, neither Whitehead nor Merleau-Ponty claims a history for nature understood as a unique, linear progress, or a set of teleological developments. There is obviously a continuity in the natural universe and in its evolution, but radical novelties continuously happen here and there as local happenings, and that allows us to speak—generally—of a genuine novelty in nature¹¹. In Whitehead’s words, there is a *concrecence* (from the Latin “cum” plus “cresco”, to grow together), but also a transition. However, in accordance with his epochal theory of time¹², and as one of his most famous excerpts says, “there is a becoming of continuity, but no continuity of becoming” [19] (p. 35). That is, there is a priority of discontinuity and novelty of continuity. As he says, “The fundamental concepts are activity and process” [15] (p. 140). From another perspective, Whitehead states: “The historic character of the universe belongs to the essence of every actual occasion” [15] (p. 123), but this is not to say that there is an oriented development that can be traced separately from the events that actually happen at this level of nature (as history). There is a process, a historical route, that life, as well as nature, displays, that is not subordinated to anything. It is a continuity that brings about novelty and implies unprecedented happenings. It is like an artist’s drawing: she can have an idea of the work she wants to obtain, but—at least in the case of pieces of genuine art—what happens, and the results obtained, exceed the expectations beyond that which can be calculated in advance.

Accordingly, the issue at stake here is this: taking natural history seriously, how can this discontinuity be described? How does one account for the interruptions and novelty that characterize nature? For Merleau-Ponty, Whitehead’s answer is not satisfactory in this regard. As Merleau-Ponty writes: “But what then is this Nature, positively? To that, Whitehead does not bring a decisive clarification” [13] (p. 120). In my view, and before moving on to an analysis of Merleau-Ponty’s standpoint, it can be stated that, according to Whitehead’s *processual* thought, nature is always historic in the sense that it is always *open* and *in the making*—a history of novelties more than a monumental history, to adopt a paradoxical phrase. To this extent, with Whitehead, one can speak properly of a *historical depth of nature* because of his insistence on *activity* and *practices*. Although Whitehead does not adopt the latter (*practices*) as a piece of philosophical terminology¹³, I think that the emphasis on *practice* can be useful for thinking of natural history not as subordinated to a pre-established end, nor as the development of an idea¹⁴. For Whitehead, natural history is an adventure. It might even be regarded as an adventure of ideas, on condition that the latter is not understood as their unfolding. As Whitehead remarks in *Dialogues*:

That is what I have been saying all my life, and I have said little else. Ideas won’t keep. Something must be done about them. The idea must constantly be seen in some new aspect. Some element of novelty must be brought into it freshly from time

to time; and when that stops, it dies. The meaning of life is adventure. [22] (p. 250, emphasis added)

From another perspective, as he underlines in *Process and reality*, every entity (that is, every *actual* entity) is a “self-creating creature” [19] (p. 85) that, through its own subjective form of feeling the data, transforms the universe, actualizing unprecedented possibilities and adding a new element to it. Whether this hypothesis is *decisively* clear or not in “positively” describing nature can then be questioned, but—to fully understand Merleau-Ponty’s objection and his consequent point of view—it is first necessary to take it into account together with Bergson’s positivism and Sartre’s negative view of Being¹⁵.

Merleau-Ponty, especially in his second course on nature, dedicates many pages to discussing the theses of embryologists, biologists, psychologists, and zoologists, such as Driesch, Von Uexüll, Goldstein, Gesell, Coghill, Hardouin, Ruyer, Portman, Lorentz, and others. Among the multiple, remarkable reflections obtained through this comparison, one is particularly interesting for understanding his view of natural history and is related to the study of animal mimicry. To introduce this with Merleau-Ponty’s words: “We must criticize the assimilation of the notion of life to the notion of the pursuit of utility, or of an intentional purpose. The form of the animal is not the manifestation of a finality, but rather of an existential value of manifestation, of presentation” [13] (p. 188). In other words, once one scrutinizes the world of biological and zoological studies, life shows many aspects and behaviors that seem useless, that are not subsumed to some end. In this sense, Merleau-Ponty adopts the metaphor of “a pure wake that is related to no boat” [13] (p. 176). Life—and especially animal life—unveils the autostructuring of a path, a *history in the making*, where the level of practice and behavior is prior, more important, and more effective than that of a supposed, ideal *telos*. Besides avoiding the reduction of life to utility, this exuberance of nature also emphasizes the historical dimension of nature, to the extent to which it underlines that life is never reducible to mere *actuality*. Both in relation to the environment and its future self, the organism is always imbalanced. There exists a disproportion between the postures, behaviors, and practices of an organism—between its living being generally considered—and its environment. The organism is never perfectly adjusted to the present environment; it shows an excess that, according to Merleau-Ponty, leads to acknowledging that there is a dimension of “negative” possibility present in the organism—“negative” because it is not a possibility of anything in particular. The author explains:

We must avoid two errors: placing the phenomena of a positive principle (idea, essence, entelechy) behind us, and not seeing the whole of the regulative principle. We must place in the organism a principle that is either negative or based on absence. We can say of the animal that each moment of its history is empty of what will follow, an emptiness which will be filled later. Each present moment is supported by a future larger than any future. To consider the organism in a given minute, we observe that there is the future in every present, because its present is in a state of imbalance. [13] (p. 155)¹⁶

Within the organism, there is an “invention of the possible” that is not subject to any end, but always implies a further specification through which the living unit is exclusively formed. We are faced with a process of transformation that does not follow a fixed end nor is comparable to mechanical development, intelligible in advance. As the author says: “It is not a positive being, but an interrogative being which defines life” [13] (p. 156). It is the imminence of what is to come that characterizes the structure of an organism and allows us to grasp it in its totality, which does not dwell beyond space–time limits but extends over them. In the organism, there is a dynamic unity between present, past, and future, that cannot be enclosed in an isolated point but is grasped in its unfolding (see also [18] pp. 191–200). For this reason, the understanding of its meaning is linked to the *imminence* of its future manifestation; it is not already given or in full disclosure in the present moment. It is practices, postures, and behaviors—and the creative gestures connected to them—that inaugurate new meanings and new paths. The reason why all dualisms, as well as all those

“monist” explanations that rely on *one* principle (such as mechanisms and idealism, or vitalism), fail in front of life is that they do not know how to manage the “interrogative being” of nature and life—understood as that original imbalance, that negative possibility, that practices and behaviors continuously reveal. The reason I emphasize the role of such possibilities and practices is that it seems to me that these characteristics connote in a specific manner (without denying the differences) both Whitehead and Merleau-Ponty’s ideas of nature as historic.

Finally, it must be taken into consideration that such a perspective on natural history has relevant consequences for ontology. As is well known, on the one hand, Whitehead speaks of a *process*, and his ontology is known as a “process ontology”. On the other hand, transposing the results of his phenomenology of perception onto an ontological level, Merleau-Ponty draws an ontology of the “flesh”, with all the ambiguity intentionally implied by the idea of flesh. Those ontologies are, without doubt, and for the reasons explained in the second and third parts of the paper, both ontologies of experience and of process (that is, ontologies of an antisubstantialist kind); from another perspective, they are ontologies of perception and of (experienced) nature. Those definitions still sound too vague, however, because they do not clearly convey their ideas of perception and nature. In this regard, my suggestion is to add “ontology of practices and possibility” to the previous definitions, because—as has been shown in the last part of this paper—this is what most characterizes the historicity of nature (and of life), as the authors describe it. For this reason, and to conclude, I suggest that the fascinating path of Whitehead and Merleau-Ponty into nature as the leaf of being can be conceived as being an attempt to relocate practices, activity, and pure possibility at the core of being, since being has long been reduced, also following specific ontologies of nature, to a mere static idea.

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Notes

- ¹ Merleau-Ponty, in his classes, focused especially on Whitehead’s *The Concept of Nature* (1920) [21], but also took into account *Science and the Modern World* (1925) [20] and Whitehead’s essay “Nature and life”, which was first published in 1934, and then included in *Modes of Thought* (1938) [15].
- ² See [13] (p. 204). To conceive of nature as “the leaf of being” means that the authors cannot see nature as being apart from its ontological import. To this extent, “being” corresponds here to the level of general ontology, and the emphasis on it underlines how every discovery in the field of natural sciences (as well as of human sciences) is not a mere accidental result or contingency, but makes ontologists realize how they should think of being, in general.
- ³ Peirce writes: “Every symbol is a living thing, in a very strict sense that is no mere figure of speech. The body of the symbol changes slowly, but its meaning inevitably grows, incorporates new elements and throws off old ones” [23] (p. 264, 1903).
- ⁴ In this regard, both Whitehead and Merleau-Ponty share a similar critique of the philosophers’ exaggerated trust in language. It is expressed, for instance, by Whitehead’s famous fallacy of the perfect dictionary: “The fallacy of the perfect dictionary divides philosophers into two schools, namely, the “Critical School”, which repudiates speculative philosophy, and the “Speculative School” which includes it. The critical school confines itself to verbal analysis within the limits of the dictionary. The speculative school appeals to direct insight, and endeavours to indicate its meanings by further appeal to situations which promote such specific insights. It then enlarges the dictionary. The divergence between the schools is the quarrel between safety and adventure” [15] (p. 173). For his part, Merleau-Ponty, speaking of a risk often run by the philosopher, says: “Too quickly trusting language, [s]he would be the victim of the illusion of an unconditional treasure of absolute wisdom contained in language, and that we would possess only by practicing it. Hence the false etymologies of Heidegger, his gnosis. The absolute in language is not an immediate absolute. If language must be the soul of the Absolute, it must be absolute in the relative” [13] (p. 87).
- ⁵ Merleau-Ponty further comments on this point: “This is what is both exciting and exasperating in the scientist: he looks for a way to grasp the phenomenon, but he doesn’t seek to understand it. (. . .) The concern of the philosopher is to see; that of the scientist is to find a foothold. His thinking is directed by the concern not of seeing, but of intervening” [13] (p. 86).
- ⁶ See [15] (p. 144).
- ⁷ About Whitehead’s concept of nature, see [24–26]; on Merleau-Ponty’s one, see [27–33].
- ⁸ Whitehead’s insistence on the concept of organism is widely acknowledged. On the contrary, the fact that the organic structure of experience can also be well-fitting to Merleau-Ponty’s thought may be questioned. In this regard, it is helpful to specify that

this point has been overall motivated by the fact that, in his lectures, Merleau-Ponty endorses Whitehead's concept of organism and shares with the latter the gist of his discourse. Furthermore, there are at least two reasons why the organic structure of experience can also be claimed to be characteristic of Merleau-Ponty's thought. The first is that, in these courses on nature, Merleau-Ponty adopts "organism" quite extensively, not only following Whitehead's reflection but also those of other biologists and thinkers, such as Von Uexküll or the neuropsychologist, Kurt Goldstein (see, for instance, his masterpiece of 1934, *Der Aufbau des Organismus*). Secondly, at least from *The Structure of Behaviour* (1942), Merleau-Ponty refers to those scientists because *vital behavior* and, accordingly, the interaction between organism and environment, represents for him the privileged angle from which to reach a new understanding of both mental and physiological levels. To this extent, although Merleau-Ponty's vocabulary pivots around behavior and (more generally) experience, it is indisputable the central position that organism has in his reflections upon nature and ontology. This hypothesis seems to find an eloquent "ex-post proof", if one then considers the relevance of Merleau-Ponty's influence on the systematic-theoretical-biological hypotheses advanced by Maturana and Varela, who put the organism as "autopoiesis" at the very heart of their proposal.

9 Overall, both authors emphasize and share the organic structure of experience illustrated above. Nonetheless, a significant difference stands out when one analyzes their standpoints in detail. On the one hand, institution (from Husserl's *Stiftung*) constitutes the key concept of Merleau-Ponty's discourse, especially in understanding history (and natural history). In this regard, it is worthwhile to mention that Merleau-Ponty dedicated the courses at the Collège de France in 1954–1955 to institution and passivity. On the other hand, Whitehead construes his view of history around the categories of "concrecence" and "transition", which, according to him, properly describes the nonlinear temporality that is characteristic of that "all-embracing fact which is the advancing history of the one Universe" [18] (p. 150).

10 [13] (p. 176).

11 As Whitehead remarks, this implies that historical facts can be "rationalized", although without the presumption of absoluteness. History is contingent, and so are the rational interpretations that can be offered of it: "The evolution of history can be rationalized by the consideration of the determination of successors by antecedents. But, on the other hand, the evolution of history is incapable of rationalization because it exhibits a selected flux of participating forms. No reason, internal to history, can be assigned why that flux of forms, rather than another flux, should have been illustrated. It is true that any flux must exhibit the character of internal determination. (. . .) But every instance of internal determination assumes that flux up to that point. There is no reason why there could be no alternative flux exhibiting that principle of internal determination" [19] (pp. 46–47).

12 See [34]. On Whitehead and novelty, see [35].

13 However, one of the few scattered passages where Whitehead mentions "practice or practices" is related to the issue under discussion here. He states in *Adventures of Ideas*: "Civilization did not start with a social contract determining modes of behaviour. Its earliest effort was the slow introduction of ideas of modes of behaviour and of inrushes of emotion which dominated their lives. Undoubtedly ideas modified practice. But in the main practice precedes thought; and thought is mainly concerned with the justification or the modification of a pre-existing situation" [18] (p. 110).

14 In this regard, a worthy objection has been raised by Hans Jonas, who writes: "Whitehead, in this respect like Hegel, has written in his metaphysics a story of intrinsically secured success: all becoming is self-realization, each event is in itself complete (or would not be actual), each perishing is a seal on the fact of completion achieved. 'Death, where is thy sting?'" [36] (p. 96).

15 Cf. [13] (p. 70): "There is no place for a conception of Nature or for a conception of history in this philosophy. In Bergson, the official position of positivism also ruins the idea of Nature. We can elaborate a valid concept of Nature only if we find something at the jointure of Being and Nothingness. Despite what Bergson says, there is a kinship between the concepts of Nature and radical contingency. In order to elaborate this concept, we have to leave positivism or negativism, which maintains a separation between the objective and the subjective, and which thus makes impossible the subjective-objective that Nature will always be."

16 Merleau-Ponty then offers this helpful example: "Such for example is the prepubescent period in psychoanalysis. The rupture of equilibrium appears as an operant non-being, which impedes the organism from staying in the anterior phase. It is only a question of an absence, but an absence of what? That's what is difficult to know. There is no solution in the strict sense. The passage to puberty is never perfect. There is a lack which is not a lack of this or that" [13] (p. 155). To analyze Merleau-Ponty's idea of history more in depth, see also [37,38].

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