

Recovering the Lost Touch with Nature: An Exploration in Yoga and Phenomenology

Violeena Deka

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati
E-mail: violeena@iitg.ernet.in

Abstract—One of the issues that a philosophical examination of the environmental crisis brings to light is human alienation from nature. Certain influential environmental philosophers like Erazim Kohak and Neil Evernden point towards a growing disconnect between man and nature in their works. Tracing the roots of such alienation philosophers often refer to the Cartesian split of the mind and body whereby everything apart from the thinking mind are to be controlled and manipulated as objects devoid of any purpose of their own. Such a worldview has proved to be environmentally destructive in light of the human induced environmental degradation that we witness around us. Recently, environmental philosophers working in the continental tradition of philosophy in their search for a new philosophy of nature seek to restore the primordial essential relatedness that binds man and nature together. Such works often refer to Merleau Ponty's existential phenomenology which moves beyond phenomenology's preoccupation with consciousness and gives priority to the incarnate subject and its essential relation with the external world. This paper seeks to explore that such an approach can draw much inspiration from the Eastern philosophy of Yoga. Recently when ecophenomenologists are trying to revive the lost touch with nature through Merleau Ponty's concept of the lived body one may find many points of commonality with the yogic practices of meditation which may prove to be mutually illuminating for both the traditions of philosophy. Both Yoga and Existential Phenomenology emphasize our immediate subjective experiences and reveal that our felt alienation is only superficial and that a renewed understanding of our relationship with our body and the external world can help us to overcome the sense of alienation and can also influence to minimize our negative impact upon the environment.

1. INTRODUCTION

We live in an age of wide scale environmental crisis much of which can be attributed to human over-exploitation and manhandling of the natural environment.

World Congress on Interrelationship among Arts, Culture, Humanities, Religion, Education,
Ethics, Philosophy, Spirituality, Science and Society for Holistic Humane Development

ISBN: 978-93-85822-32-2

113

Studies indicate that human impact on nature and climate has been so massive that we have now entered the new geological epoch called the anthropocene, a term coined by the Dutch chemist Paul Crutzen. In this new age humans have assumed the power to alter the course of and make irrevocable changes to nature. As the consequences of this new age stares us in the face, people across the globe have awakened to the challenges that it poses upon human kind.

2. PHILOSOPHERS APPROACH:

Although philosophers have always engaged with question of nature and human-nature relations, yet the environmental challenges that face us in our times received their widespread attention only since the mid 1970s. Since then however philosophers have shown tremendous interest in addressing the problems of nature and human responsibilities towards it. The environmental turn in philosophy launched the new discipline of environmental ethics which have rigorously sought to engage in a dialogue about the human relation to nature through fundamental revision and rethinking.

A common concern of many contemporary environmental philosophers have however been that although environmental philosophy is developing, engaging thinkers in more and more complex debates, yet it appears that much work in environmental philosophy is narrowly located in the area of environmental ethics. Being associated with analytic philosophy, such early environmental philosophy dealt largely with reasoned arguments as to why we should value nature based on different moral norms and principles like utilitarianism, deontological ethics, virtue ethics etc. A deeper reflection suggests that environmental problems are not like technical problems seeking technical solutions but call for a different approach which does not fall into the usual pattern of thinking exclusively in terms of problems and solutions.

As pointed out by (Brown & Toadvine, 2003),

“If philosophy is to make a contribution towards resolving the environmental crisis, it will likely begin with a steady and insightful clarification of our ethical and metaphysical assumptions about ourselves and the world around us. These basic assumptions— about the relation between humans and nature, human nature, the nature of nature, and the nature of the Good—underlie all of our current behavior, both individually and culturally. But the assumptions that have guided our past behavior reveal their limitations as we think about, imagine, and live through the events and consequences of what we call the environmental crisis.”

3. PROBLEM OF ALIENATION

One of the issues that a philosophical examination of the environmental crisis brings to light is human alienation from nature. Certain influential environmental philosophers like Erazim Kohak and Neil Evernden point towards a growing disconnect between man and nature in their works. According to them we seem to have lost touch with nature. Thus, we feel dislocated from our own roots. A sense of hopelessness pervades us. When one probes deeper such alienation appears to emerge from our presupposed notions of self and nature whereby we tend to believe that a superior rational self is in charge of the natural environment which is treated as that other which can be manipulated as per human whims and interests. Such notions of self and other owe much to the modern distinction between the thinking minds and material world of objects initiated by Descartes. Such a distinction led to the dominant worldview in which we have learnt to perceive man as rational conscious selves as opposed to nature as the inert other. It accords a superior place to human as soul possessor of conscious minds and devalues the natural world as inert, lifeless and purposeless. As per this view material reality is a strictly mechanical realm and our subjective experiences add nothing to it. Descartes laid the foundation of the objective sciences which have however overlooked our direct subjective everyday experiences. Our direct experiences are necessarily subjective and the world we experiences is not an inert mechanical object but a living field. As David Abram in (Abram, 1996) wrote, “my life and the world’s life are deeply intertwined”

How do we escape such dualisms that dominate our perspectives on our relationships to others with whom we coexist in the shared world? Sharing similar concerns (Spurling, 1977) claims that our lives are essentially fragmented in this age. These reflect and are reflected by those splits in terms of which we understand ourselves: mind and body, reason and emotion, masculine and feminine, etc. Environmental thinkers argue that unless we overcome such dualistic presuppositions we cannot go far in solving the environmental crisis. Erazim Kohak writes “In our preoccupation with solving environmental problems we stand in danger of losing something crucial - clarity of vision. An adequate approach to environmental problems requires that we develop a different attitude towards nature, a more sympathetic understanding which will help us to see, look, feel and understand the plight of our natural surroundings.

Thus, what we need is a philosophy that helps us to regain our lost touch with nature and motivate us to act ethically towards it.

Again, our alienation from nature not only leads to environmental degradation, but, something in us diminishes too. In an article, “Listening to the Land”, the author

Thad Box shared his experiences of playing with his grandson in his flower garden. As they were busy admiring the colors of a dead butterfly, the grandson wanted his grandpa to make the butterfly fly. When told that the butterfly was dead the little grandson innocently suggested to him to get some batteries so that the butterfly could fly again. In the child's world of electronic toys and computer games, that was indeed a logical solution.(Box, 2006)

Thus, the more we distance from nature the more we lose sense of meaning and value of life. The solution to the problem of alienation is to be carried out at two levels. At the theoretical level we need a clarification of our metaphysical and ethical presuppositions. While at a more immediate and practical level we need to reflect more and pay attention to our natural surroundings.

4. CONTINENTAL TURN IN ENVIRONMENTAL PHILOSOPHY

Recently, environmental philosophers working in the continental tradition of philosophy in their search for a new philosophy of nature seek to restore the primordial essential relatedness that binds man and nature together. According to them our immediate subjective experiences reveal that our felt alienation is only superficial and that a renewed understanding of our relationship with nature will help us retrieve the lost sense of meaning and value. Such philosophers often refer to the philosophy of the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau Ponty

5. MERLEAU PONTY'S EXISTENTIAL PHENOMENOLOGY:

Merleau Ponty's existential phenomenology sought to provide a different way of understanding how human beings inhabit the world. In recent years Merleau-Ponty's philosophy has taken on a new found importance within the field of environmental philosophy. He sought to rearticulate the relationship between subject and object, self and world, among various other dualisms, and his early and middle work did so primarily through an account of the lived and existential body. He argued that the significance of the body, or the body-subject as he sometimes referred to it, is too often underestimated by the philosophical tradition which has a tendency to consider the body simply as an object that a transcendent mind orders to perform varying functions.

In contrast to this view, Merleau Ponty considered the body as the true subject of experience. It is the body which makes experience possible. The living body is the very possibility of contact, not just with others but with oneself- the very possibility of reflection, of thought, of knowledge. This turn of putting the body to the forefront of philosophy is Merleau-Ponty's major achievement. He considers

‘perception’ as the reciprocity or the ongoing interchange between the body and the entities that surround it.

For Ponty, the perceived world is the always presupposed foundation of all rationality, all value and all existence. He writes,

All my knowledge of the world, even my scientific knowledge is gained from... some experience of the world without which the symbols of science would be meaningless. The whole universe of science is built upon the world as directly experienced. (PP: viii)

In place of Cartesianism and scientific objectivism, Merleau-Ponty installs a kind of thinking that reveals the basic continuity between human perception and perceived nature, between the sentient and the sensible. In his work, ‘The Visible and the Invisible’, Merleau-Ponty claims that we must “recommence everything,” and in doing so he creates an ontological concept, “flesh,” which he says is neither thought nor thing, but rather an epistemological and ontological relation, that includes the sentient-sensible and the sensed-sensible (i.e., perceiving being and perceived being) as its two lips or leaves. Flesh, then, is neither subject nor object, but the “formative medium” of the two—a “general manner of being.

In order to demonstrate empirically his notion of flesh Merleau Ponty calls attention to the obvious but easily overlooked fact that my hand is able to touch only because my hand is itself a touchable thing and is entirely a part of the tactile world that it explores. Thus, our sentient bodies are entirely continuous with the vast body of the land. It means to touch is also to feel touched, to see is also to feel oneself seen. (Abram, 1996)

Such ideas can profoundly influence one’s behaviour. If my surroundings are attentive and watchful then I must take care that my actions are mindful and respectful, not only towards other humans but with the rest of nature as well.

Ecophenomenologists argue that our entrenched ways of understanding human subjectivity, scientific objectivity, materiality, and animality cut us off from the actual experience of our environment. The rediscovery of our perceptual, embodied, and intersubjective interactions with our surrounding world opens us to dimensions of nature’s meaning and value that our habitual ways of conceptualizing our environmental problems tend to obscure.

Ponty’s existential phenomenology sought to return the subject or the experiencer to its essential relation with the social world. It leads to an understanding of subjectivity in terms of the body which is the experiencer of the relation between the inside and the outside. In this approach existential phenomenology can draw

inspiration from the eastern philosophy of Yoga which involves practices that involves the mind and the body, the inner and the outer. Many scholarly comparisons have already been made and much thought has been devoted on the correspondence between phenomenological method of reduction and yogic practices of *citta vrtti nirodha*. Although yoga and phenomenology belong to different origins, yet both the traditions are connected by the fundamental similarity of their objectives, to transform the way we live and view the world. This shows the timeless relevance of philosophical problems and how different philosophical systems (ancient and modern) may influence one another in dealing with them. Thus, today when ecophenomenologists are trying to emphasize the importance of the phenomenological attributes of paying close attention and allowing things to reveal themselves, one can find relevance and correspondence between Merleau Ponty's concept of lived body and Yogic practices of asana and *prāṇāyāma*.

6. YOGA:

Yoga is an ancient inter-religious practice which strives for personal spiritual development through meditative practices aimed at uniting mind, body and spirit. Over time there developed different kinds of yoga but they all share an underlying rationale which is rooted in the very meaning of the term yoga. Yoga comes from the Sanskrit verbal root 'yuj' meaning 'to yoke' in the sense of yoking one thing to another. Thus yoga refers to the idea of merging or uniting either self/soul with the universal essence or with God as in the theistic beliefs. However being opposed to dogma and institutionalization yoga is popular in the contemporary world both eastern and western, as it upholds the scope for secular spirituality

Earlier comparisons between yoga and phenomenology were made on their common aspirations of transcendence from the world but comparisons with Merleau Ponty's existential phenomenology emphasizes the somatic incarnate domain of human experiences and how the practice of yoga shares a common ground with existential phenomenology as explicated in yoga philosophy. A careful exploration reveals that both yoga and Merleau Ponty's philosophy delve into the very flesh of the world and emphasize human embodiment. Yoga is not just contemplative but is a very practical approach involving the mind and the body of the individual. Yogic practices also provide a way out of the alienated lifestyles of industrialized civilization by making us aware of our inner bodies and practicing control over the mind and the senses. Even the yogic practice of *prāṇāyāma* (breath control) can be compared with Merleau Ponty's idea of lived body wherein the human body is understood as that which perceives nature which it also inhabits. Both emphasize performing or engaging in an activity that brings

forth the essential relation between inner and outer body. They draw our attention to the very experience of engaging with body. Like yoga existential phenomenology affirms the domain of subjectively lived experiences and seeks to inculcate in us virtues which help us to appreciate different multiple subjective standpoints.

7. CONCLUSION:

Both the philosophical traditions can help us to overcome the sense of alienation that springs from the Cartesian understanding of the transcendental subject leading to the solipsistic self. On the other hand we become more aware of our bodily subjectivity which becomes charged and enlightened and helps us widen our limited perspectives. Thus we become better equipped to perceive deeper and clearer. Our subdued, dormant subjectivity gets enlightened. We realize that when we cut a branch we do not just lose a branch but hamper a chain of events connected with it. We realize that just like the body and mind are not divorced, I and my world are not separate entities. We are essentially embodied and embedded. Thus, both yoga philosophy and existential phenomenology give us an idea of enhanced and enlarged subjectivity whereby a renewed meaningfulness evolves giving us a sense of our belongingness to our real home. Within these approaches the self is in a way released from its bondage in the inner sphere of the psychological world and realizes its bond with the surrounding Earth, the smell of the soil, the comfort of the sky, the sound of the water, and the various subtle ways in which the self participates in a meaningful dialogue with everything around it.

REFERENCES:

- [1] Abram, D. (1988). Merleau Ponty and Voice of the Earth. *Environmental Ethics* , 101-120.
- [2] Abram, D. (1996). *The Spell of the Sensuous*. New York: Vintage.
- [3] Abram, D. (1996). *The Spell of the Sensuous*. USA: Vintage.
- [4] Bannon, B. E. (2011). Flesh and Nature: Understanding Merleau-Ponty's Relational Ontology. *Research in Phenomenology* , 327-357.
- [5] Berleant, A. (1992). Beyond Disinterestedness. *British Journal of Aesthetics* , 187.
- [6] Berleant, A. (1992). *The Aesthetics of Environment*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- [7] Bossche, M. V. (2012). An Aesthetics of Nature:Consequences of Merleau-Ponty's embodied ontology. *Journal of Philosophical Investigations* , 129-137.
- [8] Bourdeau, P. (2004). The man nature relationship and environmental ethics. *Journal of Environmental Radioactivity* , 9-15.
- [9] Box, T. (2006). Listening to the land. *Rangelands* , 49-50.

-
- [10] Brown, C. S. (2003). The Real and the Good: Phenomenology and the Possibility of an Axiological Rationality. In T. Toadvine, & C. S. Brown (Eds.), *Eco-Phenomenology: Back to the Earth Itself* (pp. 3-19). New York: SUNY.
- [11] Brown, C. S., & Toadvine, T. (2003). *Eco-phenomenology Back to the Earth Itself*. New York: SUNY.
- [12] Brown, C. S., & Toadvine, T. (2003). *Eco-Phenomenology: Back to the Earth Itself*. USA: State University of New York Press.
- [13] Bullington, J. (2013). *The Expression of the Psychosomatic Body from a Phenomenological Perspective*. Springer.
- [14] Callicott, J. B., & Frodeman, R. (2009). *Encyclopedia of Environmental Ethics and Philosophy*. USA: Macmillan Reference.
- [15] Carman, T. (2008). *Merleau Ponty*. New York: Routledge.
- [16] Carman, T., & Hansen, M. B. (Eds.). (2005). *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau Ponty*. UK: Cambridge University Press.
- [17] Casey, E. S. (2003). Taking a Glance at the Environment: Preliminary Thoughts on a Promising Topic. In C. S. Brown, & T. Toadvine (Eds.), *Ecophenomenology* (pp. 187-210). New York: SUNY.
- [18] Cataldi, S. L., & Hamrick, W. S. (2007). *Merleau ponty and environmental Philosophy*. Albany: SUNY.
- [19] Clarke, M. (2002). Ontology, Ethics, and "Sentir": Properly Situating Merleau-Ponty. *Environmental Values*, 211-225.
- [20] Compton, J. J. (1988). Phenomenology and the Philosophy of Nature. *Man and Nature*, 65-89.
- [21] Compton, J. J. (1979). Reinventing the Philosophy of Nature. *A Review of Metaphysics: A Philosophical Quaterly*, 3-28.
- [22] Dillon, M. (1988). *Merleau Ponty's Ontology*. USA: Indiana University press.
- [23] Diprose, R., & Reynolds, J. (Eds.). (2008). *Merleau Ponty Key Concepts*. Stocksfield: Acumen.
- [24] Dreyfus, H. L., & Wrathall., M. A. (2006). *A companion to phenomenology and existentialism*. UK: Blackwell Publishing.
- [25] Evernden, N. (1993). *The Natural Alien*. London: University of Toronto Press.
- [26] Foltz, B. v., & Frodeman, R. (2004). *Rethinking Nature*. Indiana University Press.
- [27] Foss, J. E. (2009). *Beyond Environmentalism: A Philosophy of nature*. New Jersey: Wiley.
- [28] Howarth, J. (1995). The Crisis of Ecology: A Phenoemenological Perspective. *Environmental Values*, 17 - 30.
- [29] James, S. (2009). *The Presence of Nature*. UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- [30] Jensen, D. (2004). *Lestening to the Land: Conversations about nature, culture and eros*. USA: Chelsea Green Publishing.

- [31] Klaver, I. J. (2005). Continental Environmental Philosophy. In M. E. Zimmerman, J. B. Callicott, K. J. Warren, I. Klaver, & C. John, *Environmental Philosophy: From animal rights to radical ecology* (pp. 281-295). NJ.
- [32] Kohak, E. (1984). *The Embers and the Stars*. London: University of Chicago Press.
- [33] Langer, M. (2004). Merleau Ponty and Deep Ecology. In L. E. Dermot Moran, *Phenomenology: Critical Concepts in Philosophy, Volume 4* (pp. 118-135). New York: Routledge.
- [34] Langer, M. (2003). Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty. In T. Toadvine, & C. S. Brown, *Eco-Phenomenology: Back to the things themselves* (pp. 73-103). New York: SUNY.
- [35] (2007). An Inquiry into the Intercorporeal Relations Between Humans and the Earth. In K. Liberman, S. L. Cataldi, & W. S. Hamrick (Eds.), *Merleau Ponty and Environmental Philosophy* (pp. 37-51). New York: SUNY.
- [36] Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962, 1988). *Phenomenology of Perception*. New York: Routledge Press.
- [37] Moran, D. (2001). Introduction to Phenomenology. *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* , 109-112.
- [38] Moran, D. (1997). Towards a philosophy of the environment. In J. Feehan, *Educating for Environmental Awareness* (pp. 47-48). Ireland: Walsh Printers.
- [39] Morley, J. (2008). Embodied Consciousness in Tantric Yoga and the phenomenology of Merleau Ponty. *Religion and the Arts* , 44-163.
- [40] Morley, J. (2001). Inspiration and Expiration: Yoga Practice through Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of the Body. *Philosophy East and West* , 73-82.
- [41] Ouderkirk, W. (1998). Mindful of the Earth: a bibliographical essay on environmental philosophy. *Centennial Review* , 353-392.
- [42] Ponty, M. M. (1962). *Phenomenology of perception, translated by Colin Smith*. Great Britain.
- [43] Sarukkai, S. (2002). Inside/Outside: Merleau-Ponty/Yoga. *Philosophy East and West, Vol. 52, No. 4* , 459-478.
- [44] Seamon, D. (2000). A Way of Seeing People and Place: Phenomenology in Environment- Behaviour Research. In S. Wapner, J. Demick, T. Yamamoto, & H. Hinami (Eds.), *Theoretical Perspectives In Environment-Behaviour Research* (pp. 157-78). New York: Plenum.
- [45] Seamon, D. (1984). Emotional experience of the Environment. *American Behavioral Scientist* , 757-770.
- [46] Smith, C. (1962). *Phenomenology of Perception*. Great Britain: Gallimard.
- [47] Sokolowski, R. (2000). *Introduction to Phenomenology*. Cambridge university press.
- [48] Sokolowski, R. (2000). *Introduction to Phenomenology*. UK: Cambridge University Press.
- [49] Sparrow, T. (2011). Ecological necessity. *Thinking nature* , 1-19.

- [50] Spurling, L. (1977). *Phenomenology and the Social World*. New York: Routledge.
- [51] Stone, A. (2005). Introduction: Nature, Environmental Ethics, and Continental Philosophy. *Environmental Values* , 285-294.
- [52] Thomson, I. (2004). Ontology and ethics at the intersection of phenomenology and environmental. *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* , 380-412.
- [53] Toadvine, T. (2005). Limits of the Flesh: The role of reflection in David Abram's Ecophenomenology. *Environmental Ethics* , 155-170.
- [54] Toadvine, T. (2009). *Merleau Ponty's Philosophy of Nature*. North Western University Press.
- [55] Zimmerman, M. (2004). What Can Continental Philosophy Contribute to Environmentalism? In B. Foltz, & R. Frodeman (Eds.), *Nature Revisited: New Essays in Environmental Philosophy*. Indiana University Press,.