

Review of Louise Westling, *The Logos of the Living World: Merleau-Ponty, Animals, and Language*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2014.

Reviewed by Peta Tait

University of Wollongong

In *The Logos of the Living World: Merleau-Ponty, Animals, and Language*, Louise Westling thoughtfully draws on the ideas of Maurice Merleau-Ponty to offer an accessible but complex theoretical approach to thinking about shared environments with other species. As she explores Merleau-Ponty's ideas of 'The Visible', 'Nature' and 'Logos' (36), Westling reiterates how a major obstacle to human recognition of other species originates in the way that humans only accord language, and therefore the capacity for meaning, to humans. This language-derived position was supported in philosophy and possibly also literature, and Westling argues that it is disproven by recent zoological studies that find other species engaged in embodied meaningful communication about their environments. The human-centric way in which our species traditionally assumes superiority through language has also been undermined by recent neuroscience that finds matching language centres in the brains of related species – leaving aside what animals undergo in laboratories for this outcome. Although she is actually pointing out that Merleau-Ponty's unfinished work set precedents for this challenge, her approach is also compatible with the recent effort of biosemiotics to unify science and cultural analysis.

The value of *The Logos of the Living World* can be found in its exploration of a range of literary texts – from Gilgamesh to Eudora Welty's writing and Martel's *Life of Pi* – in relation to phenomenology, and in its contribution to the fields of animal and environment studies. This is a topical analysis connected to major concerns in the twenty-first century and it lends itself to a range of academic contexts and regenerative disciplinary fields in the humanities. Clearly this book will appeal to academic teachers as well as researchers and I recommend chapter 2 on

‘Animal Life’ for its discursive, self-contained summary of key ideas. Chapter 1 follows shifts in Western philosophy as these unfold in the ideas of Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, and despite claims that remnants of humanistic subjectivity remain in Merleau-Ponty’s thinking, Westling points out that in the unfinished *The Visible and the Invisible* and in fragmentary ‘Nature’ lectures, he draws on the science of his day and moves towards the rejection of human separateness. Merleau-Ponty’s premise that ‘we are given our experiences through our flesh’ can be both practical and theoretical because it rejects objectification of the environment that we inhabit, a process which is masked by language (25). It points out that perception implicates bodily engagement with the surroundings.

As someone who has always found philosophical inspiration in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological ideas of the lived experience of bodies and because these offered convincing ways of interpreting engagement with bodies in performance including animal performers, I am very pleased to read this well-conceived analysis from a scholar also working with Merleau-Ponty’s ideas over two decades and confirming their increasing centrality. Westling is in dialogue with Ted Toadvine, who interprets Merleau-Ponty on nature, and she incorporates diverse thinkers on the environment from Lovelock to the philosopher, Val Plumwood. But it is Westling’s demonstration of how Merleau-Ponty’s ideas also offer a way forward for the study of species, and one beyond the dominant anthropomorphism or behaviourism but in keeping with current science, which seems most relevant.

Chapter three confronts the issue of how language has been used to justify the separation and elevation of humans above other animals. While language and its meanings are logically part of evolutionary development, Westling points out that Merleau-Ponty argues that language emerges physically from and through the body. She explains that it is the living body in the world that makes language – although, logically, bodily differences between species are as important as the shared capacity for exchange. Even literature arises in relation to embodied perceptual engagement in the world. The book offers ways to portray and reflect on the possibilities for interspecies communication and to spread the expectation of embodied meaning from and within the environment. The full extent of interspecies communication has remained a trade secret of the animal trainer until recently. The extensive exposure accorded Martel’s *Life of Pi* dispels misconceptions that the zoo conditions acceptance of animals in captivity as it

potentially contributes to the rejection of human exceptionalism. Westling considers *Life of Pi* to be ‘an apocalyptic allegory of cross-species communication and uneasy co-operation for survival on a vastly diminished planet’ (126). Merleau-Ponty understood that humans live within a ‘network of animal languages’ and that it is vital to recognise these patterns (128).

There are potent political points that this book aligns with about how all creatures are interrelated through the environments which they bodily inhabit, and that human society has failed to understand this in its representation of nature. Instead, humans have been limited by language which can make us blind to the numerous forms of embodied communication between other species, and it is now urgent that this complexity be widely understood.