Organizing for an ecologically sustainable world: Reclaiming nature as wonder through Merleau-Ponty

Natalia Korchagina

Introduction

Nowadays the newfound corporate penchant for sustainability programs and sustainability reporting is met with increasing disillusionment and critique on the part of the public, environmental groups, and critical management studies community, the realization being that if companies are jumping on the sustainability bandwagon, it is not because of a pang of responsibility for nature but because of a good business case (Banerjee, 2003; Painter-Morland and ten Bos, 2016; Phillips, 2014). Within this economic logic, nature is reduced to a means to organizational ends, be those ends profits (Seebode et al., 2012), industry renewal (Guthey and Whiteman, 2009), or business firm's legitimacy and a license to continue 'business as usual' (Bansal and Clelland, 2004).

The smokescreen of the corporate sustainability discourse, then, cannot eliminate a disturbing sense that we are not only failing to alleviate the sheer extent of our harm to nature, but actively amplifying it: 'complex ecological problems are increasing, not decreasing' (Whiteman et al., 2013: 307). Stirring up our senses are imaginings of the future that are nothing short of apocalyptic:

> According to the Global Footprint Network's calculations, in 2012 the demands we made on the Earth's biocapacity (to absorb waste and regenerate renewable resources) was the equivalent of 1.5 planets...The calculations also suggest that if current population and consumption trends continue, by the 2030s we will need the equivalent of two Earths. (Global Footprint Network website, 2012, quoted in Parker et al., 2014: 14)

And as the unending stream of corporate irresponsibility scandals reminds us, the gap between corporate sustainability rhetoric and practice is getting ever wider. Just as one illustration, one could think of the 2015 Volkswagen emissions-testing scandal in which the company that announced itself as 'the world's most sustainable automaker' (Volkswagen, 2014) was revealed to have underhandedly and unscrupulously manipulated its car emission levels by using so-called 'defeat devices' (Schiermeier, 2015). Among commentators, there is a suspicion that this practice 'may be more widespread' among car manufacturers (*ibid.*).

All this raises complex questions as to the underlying causes of such behaviors and possible ways out of the environmental crisis. Some management scholars opine that what we need is more stringent regulations, policies, quantification and control of business-induced environmental degradation (Whiteman and Hoster, 2015). Others invoke arguments of a utilitarian kind that justify the need to 'save' nature in terms of nature's usefulness to humankind as a pool of resources that ensures human survival and progress. As this second type of argument goes, we should be more careful in managing nature – a precious resource – lest we face 'a state less conducive to human development' (Rockström et al., 2009, quoted in Whiteman et al., 2013: 309).

More critically-minded scholars have expressed doubts that such legalistic and utilitarian approaches and arguments can procure long-lasting sustainable change. For example, environmental philosopher Neil Evernden argues in 'The natural alien: Humankind and environment' (1993) that they will fail (and have failed) us because they do not change our deep-seated ways of thinking about nature and ourselves in relation to it, which in turn shape our practices. In organizational studies, Starkey and Crane (2003) make a similar point: our entrenched cultural assumptions about and representations of nature constrain our ability to transcend the unsustainable paradigm.

If indeed the environmental crisis is a crisis of our philosophical assumptions and beliefs about nature, it demands that we engage in their questioning and revision; that we develop not only behavioral, material and technical alternatives, but also alternative ways of thinking about ourselves and the more-than-human world around us. Indeed, these two enterprises need to be intertwined, for commitment to concrete alternatives will arguably be more enduring and thoroughgoing when it proceeds from a different way of seeing and experiencing the world, rather than from contingent self-interest or legal regulation.

In line with the above, this article is concerned with exploring dominant assumptions about nature that permeate modern-day discourses and how they

constrain our ability to refashion our relationship with nature in more hospitable terms. Enlisting examples, I will suggest that not only corporations but also alternative organizations and movements reproduce problematic assumptions about nature, which makes the latter no different, on a deeper level of a worldview, from their pro-growth corporate adversaries.

As a line of flight, I will then explore the philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty which allows for a radical re-imagining of nature and ourselves in relation to it. And although Merleau-Ponty never developed his project into an environmental ethic and thus offers no explicit normative prescriptions as to how we should behave towards nature, as philosopher Ted Toadvine suggests, Merleau-Ponty's philosophy 'can alter our ethos by shifting our sense of *what is* and how we experience and interpret our relations with things' (2009: 134, emphasis in original).

As such, my proposition here is that Merleau-Ponty's thought can help us organize for an ecologically sustainable future. By offering us a different way of understanding and experiencing nature and our relationship, it can prefigure a 'moral transformation' (Crane, 2000, quoted in Banerjee, 2003: 164; Reason, 2007) in relation to the more-than-human world and stimulate active participation in alternative forms of living and organizing for sustainability.

Unravelling dominant assumptions in modern discourses of nature

How do we come to know nature through modern discourses and what are the implicit assumptions underpinning such knowledge?

Predominantly, these discourses are in the grip of positivist science, which construes nature as a collection of separate entities that are knowable in principle, the assumption which entails another one: that nature can be brought – if only with time and accumulation of scientific knowledge – under human control. The conjunction of these assumptions already signals why many scholars are doubtful that scientific discourses can enable radical change.

For one thing, by creating a 'veneer of objectivity' (Morar et al., 2015: 17), science-based rationality backgrounds and even extinguishes all other forms of responding to nature, such as ethical intuitions and affective engagement. By relying on science to tell us the 'facts' and offer 'solutions', we distance ourselves personally from nature. We let our relationship be mediated by impersonal data, cold and detached. This leads to what Worthy (2008) conceptualized as 'phenomenal dissociation', a profound lack of immediate and sensuous involvement with nature and the consequences of our actions on nature.

A related reason is that reductionist, mechanistic assumptions deny nature any sense of its own, and thus invite and legitimize human control over it. As Evernden puts it:

> Starting with mechanistic assumptions, it [ecological research] can only discover machines. Consequently it will always seem reasonable that we can manipulate the ecomachine. If we can fix engines, we can fix ecosystems. (1993: 21)

We see these assumptions perpetuated for example when organizations announce that nature's 'crises' can be duly 'combatted' with intelligent 'solutions' (Alternatiba, 2016). It is telling that these words come from an alternative organization. The fact that even such organizations and initiatives reproduce, if only unconsciously, the assumptions of human supremacy and power over nature probably explains why the material and behavioral alternatives they offer often do not find purchase with the public. By leaving our underlying view of nature unchallenged, they arguably fail to provide a resonant motivation to commit to these alternatives.

The second type of discourse, often used by alternative organizations and environmental activists, is a normative one where certain 'rights' are extended to nature. This discourse shares some of the underlying assumptions with the previous one. Nature is also constructed here as knowable, this time by analogy with a human being – specifically a modern human being for whom 'rights' are an inalienable value. A vivid example of this discourse adoption is Bolivia whose indigenous president, with the support and involvement of social movements, passed The Law of Mother Earth that stipulates eleven rights for nature, including 'the right to life and to exist; the right to continue vital cycles and processes free from human alteration; the right to pure water and clean air; the right to balance; the right not to be polluted; and the right to not have cellular structure modified or genetically altered' (Vidal, 2011).

Similar criticisms apply to this second discourse. By anthropomorphizing nature and thus rendering it known, the rights discourse equally denies nature its Otherness, its transcendence over human cognitive powers and cultural categories. The extension of rights to nature is further contestable because nature is obviously not a legal subject and cannot invoke its rights in court, so it is unclear how the rights discourse could be implemented in practice.

A further problematic side of this discourse is that, just like the science-based discourse, it frames our relationship with nature in terms of control – this time legal control. What such a framing forecloses is the possibility of ethical responsiveness to nature, which cannot be procured through a set of rules, rights, and laws (Rhodes and Harvey, 2012). And as the undiminishing stream of

environmental scandals suggests, it is questionable that regulations alone can bring about behavioral change, let alone genuine commitment to sustainability.

Finally and significantly, both science-based and rights-based discourses presuppose a deep divide between humans and nature: nowhere is there talk about how we are related to nature. Humans and nature are drawn apart. In both cases, there is no intertwining between us and the natural world. Such divisive assumptions arguably obstruct sustainable change because they disconnect nature from our sense of who we are and our lived experience.

Below I explain how the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty signals possibilities to revise the above problematic assumptions, offering us a different way of understanding what nature 'is' and illuminating how we might arrive at this different understanding. I will further provide some suggestions as to how I see Merleau-Ponty's work inspiring sustainable change at the level of practice and belief.

Exploring alternatives through Merleau-Ponty

It is important to establish that Merleau-Ponty does not describe any ideal of human-nature relationship. On the contrary, he acknowledges that in modern times our thinking of nature remains in the grip of scientific discourses and 'dogmatic common sense' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: xi), which we take as 'the ultimate court of appeal in our knowledge' of nature (*ibid*.: 23).

That said, the philosopher points to what these discourses occlude and what we can turn to as an alternative source of understanding: our corporeal, perceptual experience of nature, 'our immediate relationship with the world' (Barbaras, 2001: 28) that is always there before discursive and analytical thought. Going further still, he contends that we should indeed challenge the priority of science in framing our understanding of nature and instead affirm perceptual experience as a primordial and privileged source of knowledge: 'natural being is...eminently being-perceived' (Merleau-Ponty, 2003, quoted in Barbaras, 2001: 37).

Perceptual experience is important because, Merleau-Ponty claims, how nature appears to us in perception is different from how scientific and other discourses construct it. It is the perceived being of nature that Merleau-Ponty sets out to describe and reclaim as a source of original understanding. This is accomplished primarily in his later work and especially through the concept of 'flesh', which has been widely recognized to hold far-reaching implications for environmentalism (Bannon, 2011) and key aspects of which I detail below.

To begin, Merleau-Ponty clearly challenges the objectivist idea of nature as a collection of material entities that have no inherent sense. 'Nature is ... different from a simple thing', he writes (2003: 3). But it is also 'different from man' (*ibid.*), for it is not a mere discursive construction or mental representation. As such, neither scientific nor rights discourses do justice to the being of nature.

If perceived nature is neither an objective being nor a mere ideality, how are we to describe its being? Merleau-Ponty suggests that perceived nature is its material presentations that are immanently sensible to us: 'Nature is what has a meaning, without this meaning being posited by thought' (*ibid.*). The concept of 'flesh' summarizes this idea. Merleau-Ponty describes flesh as 'the visibility of the invisible' (*ibid.*: 209); 'the unicity of the visible world and, by encroachment, the invisible world' (1968: 233). The perceived is 'fleshy' and at the same time meaningful. The fleshy (visible) and the meaningful (invisible) are not separate but intertwined in the very act of perception, and are thus two conjoined layers of being. For example, the being of 'a jaguar in the rainforests' or 'of a hummingbird' in the Amazon is apprehended only as their carnal manifestations, however they cannot be reduced to carnality (Fóti, 2013: 116). Natural beings are not bundles of physical properties, for they have a unique style of being, a unique affective and expressive value for us, which is not separate from their physical presentations: '[M]eaning [is] inextricably embodied in the configuration of its sensible presentations' (Toadvine, 2009: 57).

It is important to emphasize that for Merleau-Ponty the meaningful, or the 'invisible', dimension of the perceived world is not representational. Perception never gives us 'objective being, substantial, completed' (Dastur, 2000: 29). However, this does not mean that it is somehow pre-representational, or on its way to becoming a representation. Instead, the philosopher introduces a new term to describe this meaning: *expressive*, which denotes sensibility that is not positive knowledge, but affective, elusive, and strictly 'ungraspable' (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 214). Perceived being has a 'unique way of manifesting itself without becoming positivity, without ceasing to be ambiguous and transcendent' (*ibid.*). There is a constitutive absence at the heart of presence, which makes natural being something that forever transcends our powers of knowing it.

It is precisely as non-positive being that nature is a source of emotion and an impulse to creativity. According to Merleau-Ponty, nature has the power to move us to creative expression which should be understood broadly as expressive activity, be that gesturing, speaking, dancing, or even smiling or sighing. From the modest to the highly creative, nature arouses in us impulses to express it: 'Everything comes to pass as if expression arose through the world's striving to be perceived, to be painted, spoken, and thought' (Toadvine, 2004: 279). If these

impulses come from perceived nature, Merleau-Ponty proposes to speak of nature as unfolding its expression through us. This implies that our relationship with nature can be deeply affective, relational, and intimate versus one based on control. As Ted Toadvine elaborates:

> My body's struggle to express would then be nothing other than the world's struggle to express itself through me, as if I were an organ of this single massive body named Nature. Human being might be thought of as nature's engine of self-expression, its own coming-to-consciousness. (2004: 279)

Here we should say that not only the human body is the organ or site of nature's expression: Merleau-Ponty also thinks of animals, who are perceivers like us, as such a site, even proposing to speak of animal culture (Merleau-Ponty, 2003). With this, he challenges the anthropocentric worldview and establishes continuity between humanity and animality that both continue the '"miracle of expression" originating within nature's own depths' (Toadvine, 2009: 54). These ideas are in turn consonant with contemporary work in critical animal studies (e.g., Gruen, 2015) that challenges reductionist understandings of animals (as mere biological organisms whose behavior is mere reflex) and instead proposes that they perceive the world as meaningful and relate to it that way.

That said, we should not interpret Merleau-Ponty as suggesting that our relationship with nature is by default harmonious, passionate, and enchanted. As mentioned earlier, he is well aware that a modern person tends to think that atoms are more real than his/her immediate experience of nature (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). And indeed, the problem might be that we have 'forgotten' how to experience nature, for in our cultures contemplative perception is often looked down upon as a waste of time. Value is placed on 'productive' time, which creates a rush to make, manage, and control (Bakken et al., 2013). So we rush past nature on our way to work – to our offices filled with the artefactual rather than natural – and do not really come into perceptual contact with it.

However, this does not mean that we cannot (re)engage ourselves with nature and experience its expressive, affective, creative being that Merleau-Ponty affirms. To help us in this, we can for example turn to arts. One could think of the impressionists who painted the ephemerality of the perceived, or Cezanne who said: 'Nature is always the same, but nothing about her that we see endures' (Toadvine, 2013: 109). Not only painting, but also other forms of art as well as artists' experiences of the more-than-human world can 'teach' us about how human perception allows us to experience nature. These should be reclaimed as valid sources of understanding in our personal lives, but equally at schools and universities where knowledge of nature remains almost exclusively shaped by the sciences.

But of course, central emphasis should be placed on actually making perceptual contact with nature. As Merleau-Ponty suggests, we will emerge from it more fulfilled as the expressivity of the natural world enables creative, affective and spiritual dimensions of human life. Put differently, Merleau-Ponty's thought might allow us to (re)discover the natural world as a source of wonder, which should not be diminished as a marginal or unimportant experience. In fact, the experiences of self-transcendence and affectivity in encounter with the natural world have been long recognized as important to a fulfilled existence (e.g., Marotto et al., 2007).

Related to this and probably most importantly, Merleau-Ponty's ideas indirectly suggest that our current notions of wellbeing need to be challenged. While in western societies we continue to associate wellbeing with wealth (wellbeing = monetary wealth) (Painter-Morland, 2015), Merleau-Ponty suggests that our wellbeing is intimately tied to the natural world and ability to experience it. So while the reduction of nature to a pool of resources (to its visible aspect) makes possible nature's exploitation and accumulation of monetary wealth, another kind of wealth and wellbeing is lost in this process. What is lost is the ability to perceive nature as a 'miracle of expression' (Toadvine, 2009: 54), as unicity of the visible and the invisible aspects, and with it lost is our expressive, imaginative, and spiritual life.

By acknowledging nature's transcendence and sensitizing us to it, Merleau-Ponty's philosophy can facilitate the emergence of an ethos of dwelling hospitably with the more-than-human world (Bannon, 2011). Such an ethos certainly does not emerge as a set of normative maxims, but as an experience of standing in wonder before the natural world.

In sum, Merleau-Ponty's philosophy emerges as deeply complementary to the project of alternative organizing for sustainability as it provides resources through which we may become critical of the dominant discourses of nature and move towards alternative ways of speaking about, experiencing, and living amidst the natural world. In this way, his thought might enable us to resist the corporate capitalist logic that represents our wellbeing in terms of endless material growth. It might help us realize that in the pursuit of such growth we diminish not only nature's being but also our own being, as we equally become a productive resource that is tightly managed, measured, and controlled by organizations, such that we lose the capacity to experience ourselves otherwise. As such, Merleau-Ponty's philosophy can stimulate us to explore and create alternative forms of organization and sociality that would take seriously the idea that human wellbeing is not separate from the natural world, and a different set of values this implies.

references

Alternatiba (2016) 'About us'. [https://alternatiba.eu/en/alternatiba-community/the-project-alternatiba/]

Bakken, T., R. Holt and M. Zundel (2013) 'Time and play in management practice: An investigation through the philosophies of McTaggart and Heidegger', *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, 29(1): 13-22.

Banerjee, S.B. (2003) 'Who sustains whose development? Sustainable development and the reinvention of nature', *Organization Studies*, 24(1): 143-180.

Bannon, B.E. (2011) 'Flesh and nature: Understanding Merleau-Ponty's relational ontology', *Research in Phenomenology*, 41(3): 327-357.

Barbaras, R. (2001) 'Merleau-ponty and nature', *Research in Phenomenology*, 31(1): 22-38.

Bansal, P. and I. Clelland (2004) 'Talking trash: Legitimacy, impression management, and unsystematic risk in the context of the natural environment', *Academy of Management Journal*, 47(1): 93-103.

Dastur, F. (2000) 'World, flesh, vision', in F. Evans and L. Lawlor (eds.) *Chiasms: Merleau-Ponty's notion of flesh*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Evernden, N. (1993) *The natural alien: Humankind and environment*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Fóti, V. (2013) *Tracing expression in Merleau-Ponty: Aesthetics, philosophy of biology, and ontology*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

Gruen, L. (2015) *Entangled empathy: An alternative ethic for our relationships with animals*. New York: Lantern Books.

Guthey, G.T. and G. Whiteman (2009) 'Social and ecological transitions: Winemaking in California', *Emergence: Complexity and Organization*, 11(3): 37-48.

Marotto, M., J. Roos and B. Victor (2007) 'Collective virtuosity in organizations: A study of peak performance in an orchestra', *Journal of Management Studies*, 44(3): 388-413.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962) *Phenomenology of perception*, trans. C. Smith. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1968) *The visible and the invisible*, trans. A. Lingis. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (2003) *Nature: Course notes from the Collège de France*, trans. R. Vallier. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

Morar, N., T. Toadvine and B.J. Bohannan (2015) 'Biodiversity at twenty-five years: Revolution or red herring?', *Ethics, Policy and Environment*, 18(1): 16-29.

Painter-Morland, M. (2015) 'Philosophical assumptions undermining responsible management education', *Journal of Management Development*, 34(1): 61-75.

Painter-Morland, M. and R. ten Bos (2016) 'Should environmental concern pay off? A Heideggerian perspective', *Organization Studies*, 37(4): 547-564.

Parker, M., G. Cheney, V. Fournier and C. Land (2014) *The Routledge companion to alternative organization*. London: Routledge.

Phillips, M. (2014) 'Re-writing corporate environmentalism: Ecofeminism, corporeality and the language of feeling', *Gender, Work and Organization*, 21(5): 443-458.

Reason, P. (2007) 'Education for ecology: Science, aesthetics, spirit and ceremony', *Management Learning*, 38(1): 27-44.

Rhodes, C. and G. Harvey (2012) 'Agonism and the possibilities of ethics for HRM', *Journal of Business Ethics*, 111(1): 49-59.

Schiermeier, Q. (2015) 'The science behind the Volkswagen emissions scandal', *Nature News*, 24 September.

Seebode, D., S. Jeanrenaud and J. Bessant (2012) 'Managing innovation for sustainability', *R&D Management*, 42(3): 195-206.

Starkey, K. and A. Crane (2003) 'Toward green narrative: Management and the evolutionary epic', *Academy of Management Review*, 28(2): 220-237.

Toadvine, T. (2004) 'Singing the world in a new key: Merleau-Ponty and the ontology of sense', *Janus Head*, 7(2): 273-283.

Toadvine, T. (2009) *Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of nature*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

Toadvine, T. (2013) 'Nature's wandering hands: Painting at the end of the world', *Klesis*, 25: 109-123.

Vidal, J. (2011). 'Bolivia enshrines natural world's rights with equal status for Mother Earth', *The Guardian*, 10 April.

Volkswagen (2014) 'Volkswagen Group sustainability report 2014'. [http://sustainabilityreport2014.volkswagenag.com/sites/default/files/pdf/en/Volkswagen_SustainabilityReport_2014.pdf]

Whiteman, G. and H. Hoster (2015) 'Vehicle emissions: Volkswagen and the road to Paris', *Nature*, 527 (7576): 38.

Whiteman, G., B. Walker and P. Perego (2013) 'Planetary boundaries: Ecological foundations for corporate sustainability', *Journal of Management Studies*, 50(2): 307-336.

Worthy, K. (2008) 'Modern institutions, phenomenal dissociations, and destructiveness toward humans and the environment', *Organization and Environment*, 21(2): 148-170.

the author

Natalia Korchagina is a British Academy Newton International Fellow at Warwick Business School, University of Warwick. Her research interests include organization studies, philosophy, and social movements struggling for social, ecological, and urban justice.
Email: natalia.korchagina@wbs.ac.uk