Phenomenology of death: subjectivity and nature in Husserl's genetic phenomenology

Vecino, M.C.

Chapter 8: Nature

"Autant que par le tourbillon de la conscience absolue, la pensée de Husserl est attirée par l'eccéité de la Nature"

Maurice Merleau-Ponty*, Le philosophe et son ombre*

In this chapter, I consider what Husserl's understanding of subjectivity, as it was displayed in our last section, owes to his —and the phenomenological tradition in general— understanding of Nature. Even while the approach to Nature suffers changes throughout Husserl's work, the idea of the natural world as a disenchanted realm of physical things continues to have an influence on his dealings with constituting subjectivity. A reconsideration of the notion of Nature that reconciles it with constitution would allow us to make sense of limits as "natural" in a new sense of the word, namely one that considers them a part of the primal fact of life.

8.1 Introduction

There might have been a time when there was no consciousness in the world, when mute nature was all there was, and it was there with no one to look at it. This is what science tells us. But that moment in time (if we can indeed refer to something prior to the upsurge of conscious subjectivity as being "in time") can only be named now, can only have meaning once subjectivity has made its appearance. Did it exist before? And if so, in what sense of "exist"? When phenomenology enquires about the meaning of 'being', it brings out its necessary entanglement with subjectivity; and if being is always being for consciousness, then the question about the being of nature prior to conscious thought becomes more difficult. According to Bataille (1986), a group of intellectuals including Merleau-Ponty, discussed this matter on a late night at a Parisian bar, where they famously asked "*Was there a sun before men existed?*". Merleau-Ponty answered

in the negative, as he does in *Phenomenology of Perception*, claiming that there is no world without a being in the world (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 456; Vrahimis 2013, 87)

From the perspective of transcendental phenomenology, being something amounts to being given as something to consciousness. What the world and things are, are 'sense-formations' correlative to transcendental subjectivity. Nature is not the exception; it too draws its meaning from the constituting activity of the subject, that is to say that what nature is can only be unveiled insofar as it is given to consciousness. However, even if every transcendental phenomenologist were to agree on this basic insight, nature would remain a peculiar notion. In the natural attitude we think of ourselves as persons, and the scientific-naturalistic attitude refines and accentuates that understanding. Only when we perform the *epoché* do we realize that we are natural only insofar as we constitute ourselves as such, and therefore we are not primarily, not originally, not *really* natural. As Husserl states in the fifth *Cartesian Meditation*, "*as a component pertaining to my world-apperception, it [the ownness of "*my psyche*"] is something transcendentally secondary"* (Hua 1, 131; Husserl 1960, 100).

The conflict between the natural and the phenomenological attitude is, of course, ubiquitous; but in this case it is even more pressing since the question of the being of nature is inevitably intertwined with the question of our own being as constituting subjects insofar as nature is often presented as the limit of constitution.

I have started this dissertation by considering the tension between the first and the third-personal approaches to consciousness, that in Husserl's work can also be translated as a tension between transcendental subjectivity and her self-objectification as a human being, the two forms of the subject involved in the paradox of subjectivity. Husserl's phenomenology considered as transcendental idealism, even when progressively constricted by the advance of an existential perspective on the subject, remains in the end faithful to the absoluteness of the constituting subject considered as pure consciousness. The path we have taken so far has led to reconsidering these types of statements on the basis of the

ambiguity of the subject as embodied and part of a life-world. We found that in order to explain how time, and accordingly how experience, can take place, we have to place the body already at bottom-most level of constitution. It is because we are at once subject and object in the world, and neither pole can exist independently, that we must understand our way of being as the intertwinement of these two types of self-awareness.

This movement, however, must be met by a different idea of nature. According to Bernhard Waldenfels, the notion of the subject that we have been contesting so far arises in correlation to a specific notion of nature:

> *Indeed the destiny of the modern era is deeply marked by the fact that the mathematization of nature and the enthronement of the ego arose together and reinforce each other. Due to this two-fold process, everything that pertains to our bodily existence is twice overshadowed–by an autonomous subject and by a calculable nature.* (Waldenfels 2007, 70).

In this chapter, I will explore the notion of nature and inquire into a possible understanding of it that is not necessarily opposed to constitution.

Husserl deals with the question of nature on various occasions throughout his work, generally in the context of considering the relationship between nature and spirit, which can be broadly defined as the realm of what is properly human (meaning, values, culture, history) and its consequences for the organization of science. Husserl's main goal throughout his dealings with the subject of nature is to contest the naturalistic notion of an absolute nature that is independent of subjectivity. However, his own depictions of nature share some features with this scientific notion that are detrimental for bridging the gap that opposes nature and constitution, namely the idea of nature as a disenchanted realm of the mere physical. Finding a better notion of nature is perceived both by the tradition in phenomenology and in philosophy of mind as a way to help bridge the explanatory gap insofar as it is the strict opposition between nature and spirit that is at the root of the conflicting perspectives on subjectivity. As John McDowell puts it:

> *If we conceive nature in such a way that delineating something's natural character contrasts with placing something in the space of reasons, we can no longer take in stride the idea that powers to acquire knowledge are part of our natural endowment. Knowing, as a case of occupying a normative status, can no longer be seen as a natural phenomenon. And now it is easy for knowing to seem mysterious. (…).* (McDowell 2009, 258-259).

Interestingly enough, Roman Ingarden points to the conception of the fundamental difference between the spatiality of the physical thing and the intentionality of experience as one of the theoretical *decisions* that leads Husserl to his idealistic position (Ingarden 1975, 29).

In the following, I will explore the treatment of nature present in Husserl's own work. A first approach to it can be characterized as the opposition between the personalistic and the naturalistic realms, in which the former reveals itself to be foundational for the other. In later approaches to the subject, once the life-world has appeared as a key interpretative notion, this seems to change as nature and spirit are seen as abstractions and their fundamental entanglement stressed. However, while this perspective may challenge the privilege of spirit over nature, from a phenomenological perspective it does not yet place subjectivity in the midst of this entanglement, but rather, above it. After reviewing both these positions, I will turn to different attempts from the field of contemporary phenomenology and philosophy of mind to place meaning and intentionality already in nature and try to reconcile phenomenology with science by naturalizing phenomenological inquiry. I will argue that, while it is fruitful to recognize intentional patterns in other forms of life, these approaches neglect to problematize the type of access we have to these findings. The missing piece is a properly phenomenological way of reaching validation for these approaches, and in order to find that, we need to redefine the subject along the lines that we have been exploring, and place it in nature, understood as the meaningful space of our limited existence.

8.2 Naturalistic nature

Because they span the course of many years, some of Husserl's views seem to become reversed at times as he reaches more clarity about his own philosophical approach. A consistent framework however is the need to distinguish phenomenologically between the domains of different sciences, thus getting involved in a debate of his time. The first notion takes nature as the object of natural science, and considers it the product of the spirit's constitution. Although dealing with a scientific notion of nature, Husserl finds its origin in pre-scientific experience (Hua 4, 2; Husserl 1989, 4).

The first type of approach to the topic of nature in Husserl's work can be found mainly in *Ideas II* (Hua 4) and in the *Nature and Spirit* lectures of 1919 (Hua/Mat 4). In this context, nature is first presented as the correlate of a particular attitude, namely the scientific-naturalistic attitude defined in opposition to the personalistic one. As we have seen, these two attitudes focus on two different regions or *strata* of the world, the natural and the spiritual realms. The natural would be the most basic of these levels, the purely physical substratum of "*every possible external concrete individual*" (Hua/Mat 4, 120), consisting of its materiality and its spatio-temporal location and tied to the laws of causality; the realm of "mere things" as opposed to the spiritual world of values and social meanings: "*Nature in a specific sense, the subject of natural science, are the mere things, the things as mere nature, that is the res extensae*" [Natur im spezifischen Sinn, das Thema der Naturwissenschaft, sind die bloßen Dinge, die Dinge als bloße Natur, d.i. die res extensae] (Hua/Mat 4, 121). Described in this way, nature is completely disenchanted and portrays itself as devoid of meaning: "*it is characteristic of these objects [natural objects] that a valuing consciousness, as "constituting" has contributed nothing to their essential composition, that is, to the content of their sense*." (Hua 4, 26; Husserl 1989, 28). This is a characterization of nature that excludes and opposes spirit, and that can be traced back to the Cartesian rationalist ontology: "*Roughly, in Descartes's philosophy material nature is devoid of meaning because what actively organizes nature–God, God's ideas–is external to it."* (Morris 2013, 320). This Cartesian organization is at the basis of the modern scientific view of the world, as Husserl sees it (Hua 6, 74 ff.).

As Ulrich Melle (1996) points out, and as I suggested at the beginning of this thesis, Husserl's concern with scientific naturalism is of an ethical nature, since he considers the mechanistic view of the world that science endorses to be undermining human freedom. As a fragment from *First philosophy* shows:

> *Instead of opening wide for man the gates of genuine freedom and offering its empowering tools, science seemingly transforms man itself in a complex of facts bereft of freedom. Science seemingly subordinates man to a meaningless world-machinery. It explains man in terms of a merely subordinated machine in the world-machinery. Instead of providing man with scientific "directions towards a blessed life*" [. . .] *science turns nature and freedom into an incomprehensible antinomy.* (Hua 8, 230-231)[76]

In spite of being extremely critical of scientific naturalism, Husserl himself seems to share a common perspective with it about what 'nature' is. Not only does *Ideas 2* paint a picture of the subject as being founded upon a lower stratum made of mere materiality[77] that leads Husserl to say that "*the spirit can be grasped as dependent on nature*" (Hua 4, 297; Husserl 1989, 311), but there are several places in which Husserl displays this type of naturalistic perspective. In a manuscript from 1919 related to his course on *Nature and Spirit* he speaks of nature as being "*perceptually given in pure receptivity*" [wahrnemungsmäβig gegeben in reiner Rezeptivität] without the intervention of egoic acts (Hua 25, 329). In a similar vein, we have seen that Husserl talks about the body and soul as a nexus, a middle point or a turning point between the realms of spirit and nature in the 1919 course on spirit and nature, a view that speaks to a strong separation of realms–and therefore, a non-spiritual nature—that could come into contact only *a posteriori*.

It seems the strategy adopted in these texts is not to question the idea of nature as the stratum of mere materiality or sensuously given experience, but to claim that the spiritual cannot be reduced to the natural layer and that, on the contrary, spirit

[76] As translated by Staiti (2014, 253)

[77] This is considered by some Husserl scholars as the negative influence of Edith Stein in the editing of Ideas 2, who would have reversed the order of foundation between nature and spirit by presenting nature as the lower, most fundamental stratum. Although this is not the only text where one can find this kind of statement -which could mean Husserl himself was at times seduced by this idea-, the primacy of spirit over nature was overall predominant and more in line with his thought.

is foundational. According to Andrea Staiti (2014), *Ideas 2* includes descriptions from different perspectives. Once the phenomenological reduction comes into play, and a shift of attitude is performed in the text itself, the idea of a founding nature is put to rest. So even when Husserl might state that the ego has a natural side (Hua 4, 338; Husserl 1989, 349), having performed the *epoché*, consciousness is radically separated from nature because what made the Ego seem connected to it in the natural attitude is now revealed as a constituted meaning.

So while in the natural and in the naturalistic attitude, affection, sensation, and the body are thematized as our own connection to nature, in the phenomenological attitude they prove to be *constituted as* natural, that is to say as not natural in-themselves. So when Husserl speaks of the Ego as natural, he would be echoing a naïve understanding of the subject. On the contrary, the phenomenological attitude reveals that, being a constituted meaning, nature can never be foundational regarding spirit, but rather that it is us, as spiritual beings, that confer upon nature the sense of being 'meaningless' and 'in-itself':

> *For, when, at the beginning, we posited nature straightforwardly, in the way done by every natural scientist and by everyone else sharing the naturalistic attitude, and when we took human beings as realities, ones that have a plus above and beyond their physical Corporeality, then persons turned out to be subordinated natural objects, component parts of nature. On the other hand, when we inquired into the essence of the person, then nature presented itself as something constituted in an intersubjective association of persons, hence presupposing it.* (Hua 4, 210; Husserl 1989, 220)

Nature is peculiar because unlike any other object "*it is our ground, not what is in front of us, but what carries us*" (Merleau-Ponty 1995, 20) an apparent thing-in-itself that the phenomenological reduction unmasks. If nature were described as deprived of meaning, then subjectivity as meaning-constituting would be naturally placed in the realm of spirituality. In the 1925 course on Phenomenological Psychology, Husserl explicitly equates the subjective with the mental (Hua 9, 54; Husserl 1977, 40), and even when he admits inanimate things can hold some spiritual meaning, this is only in a derived manner insofar as they are experienced

as supporting certain predicates given by a subject. The official response of phenomenology to the naturalistic claim that anything can be reduced to nature as the realm of physical causality is that "*In virtue of the essential correlation between the constituting and the constituted, all nature must be relative*" (Hua 4, 179, Husserl 1989, 189). At least in the context of *Ideas 2*, while nature is relative, spirit is not. Spirit is thus equated to subjectivity in general, and held as absolute: "*That is to say, if we could eliminate all spirits from the world, then that is the end of nature. But if we eliminate nature, "true," Objective-intersubjective existence, there always still remains something: the spirit as individual spirit*." (Hua 4, 297; Husserl 1989, 311). As we will see, Husserl will later question the absoluteness of spirit, but not the absoluteness of subjectivity against nature. As late as 1934, he writes:

> *Everything in the world, the world that is ours, is ultimately nature, physical corporeality (…) Nature is, however, constituted nature, my corporal body constituted body; constitution is the permanent transcendental happening in and from my Ego and the Ego of others in it*. (Hua 42, 79-80)[78]

There is a sense in which our experience in the life-world also offers us the source for considering nature in this opposition to subjectivity. There is a practical dimension that has to do with the type of ethical response we adopt towards it. In our dealings with what we perceive as mute nature, we consider ourselves responsible for the meaning we ascribe and consequently the way in which we interact with our own nature and the nature surrounding us. When we speak of the destruction or preservation of nature, we consider the natural world to be something different than ourselves, we place it as an object in front of us, and this is arguably something needed in order to *care* for it: "*Nature is incessantly and necessarily spiritualized and humanized. If we decide to protect Antarctica from human exploitation, this too involves a particular spiritualization and humanization*

[78] Alles in der Welt, die Welt unser aller ist, ist zuunterst Natur, physische Körperlichkeit. (…) Natur ist aber konstituierte Natur, mein körperlicher Leib konstituierter Leib; die Konstitution ⟨ist⟩ das ständige transzendentale Geschehen in meinem Ego und von ihm aus und in ihm die ⟨der⟩ anderen Egos.

of Antarctica. We give it a certain meaning, we apperceive it with a certain value." (Melle 1996, 34).

In a related manner, Steven Crowell (1996) argues that it is when I recognize another as other (and so when an ethical claim takes place) that nature becomes disenchanted and perceived within ourselves as a force dragging us down (Hua 4, 276; Husserl 1989, 289). Taking from Levinas' argument in *Totality and infinity*, Crowell holds that the presence of the other before me is what distances us from the world and thus allows for something like a world to exist in the first place. Before this ethical call, there was a fusion between the subject and her surrounding, and this is where our sense of belonging to nature comes from. Once we are in a spiritual world, nature is what threatens us to go "back" to this absorbed experience, but precisely because it can present itself to us in this or that way, nature is no longer one with us, no longer meaningful or 'mythical', thus resulting in a paradox:

> *Because the personalistic community presupposes the ethical constitution of intersubjectivity, its mythical view of nature already contains the sense of following upon a battle already won; that is, it rests upon an obscure acknowledgement of the 'absolutism of reality' that it conceals and resists*. (Crowell 1996, 105).

Needless to say, in the life-world we also have experiences that could speak for the contrary belief, as we will see further on.

8.3 Spiritual nature

There are many elements in Husserl's work that would support the notion of a spiritualized nature, without it resulting in thinking of a natural intentionality. For instance, he sometimes speaks of nature not as the object of natural science but a pre-scientific, "natural" nature that presents itself to us in our everyday life: *"The nature of everyday life is plainly the normally experienced nature, but the nature of natural science is by no means this, the normal nature, but wants to be the "objectively true" nature." (Hua 9, 128; Husserl 1977, 98).* In the writings gathered

in *Experience and Judgment*, Husserl extensively refers to a notion of a pre-given nature as an "*objective environment*" that is "*always already given to us*" (Husserl 1997, 37) and that includes more than only mere physicality since it is already typified:

> *our pregiven surrounding world is already "pregiven" as multiformed, formed according to its regional categories and typified in conformity with a number of different special genera, kinds, etc.* (Husserl 1997, 38)

Contrary to the idea of the absoluteness of spirit, one can find elements in other writings where Husserl treats both spirit and nature as abstractions that are in fact interdependent. In the *Nature and Spirit* lectures of 1927 he states:

> *We have to learn to see deeper here, that even nature and spirit, though each designates a universal concept, a world-encompassing infinity, have their sense-dependency in relation to each other. Nature is not thinkable without spirit, spirit is not thinkable without nature. What shows here is that what is grasped in universal concepts has along with its constitutive sense an outer, indefinite but not arbitrary horizon of sense. Nature has also spirit-determinations, spirit has also nature-determinations. That means that indeed each scientifically closed-off conceptuality is an abstraction*. (Hua 32, 16)[79]

The need to "see deeper" [*tiefer einsehen*] here does not refer to the overcoming of the natural stance but rather of the scientific stance, so well established that it has become a commonplace for reflection. In the theoretical attitude(s), nature and spirit only show up as opposite realms:

> *In keeping with their respective habits of interpretation, the natural scientist is inclined to regard everything as nature, whereas the investigator in the human sciences is inclined to regard everything as spirit, as a historical construct, and thus both thereby misinterpret whatever cannot be so regarded*. (Husserl 2002, 253)

In the same spirit, he states:

> *The natural and the mental do not confront us clearly and separately so that mere*

[79] As translated by Bruzina (2010, 95)

pointing would suffice: here *is nature, and* here*, as something completely different, is mind [*Geist*]. Rather, what seems at first obviously separated, upon closer consideration turns out to be obscurely intertwined, permeating each other in a manner very difficult to understand (Hua 9, 54; Husserl 1977, 39)*

This interdependency of spirit and nature was also found in the genetic analysis of primal temporalization (chapter 5), where Husserl reached a last level of constitution characterized by an indifferentiation of the primal I and the primal *Hyle*, terms than can be considered as a pure form of spirit and a pure form of nature respectively. Indeed, *Urhyle* was described as the core and matter [*Stoff*] of the proto-impressional sphere (Hua/Mat 8, 110). It is matter before affection, since when the Ego turns towards it, it becomes sensation-hyle (*Empfindungshyle*). But matter before affection is precisely what the naturalistic notion of nature was about, and this material core in the origin of time was the basis for the constitution of nature. However, *Urhyle* is not something given but reconstructed, since once it presents itself to the Ego it becomes already "spiritualized":

"Nature" is the core, matter (Hyle) of the world as experienced–a core that accepts "spiritualization" and already beforehand has it in world consciousness; but the objective nature is not simply constituted on the basis of the unitary hyle, but first the primordial core is constituted, through which the meaning of nature is constituted for me in the first stage (Hua/Mat 8, 111)[80]

Hyle is experienced as transcendent, but it is always transcendent for some Ego, and it cannot stand on its own outside this relationship. Since we can only reach the available content insofar as it is given to us, that is, since content is always content for an Ego, this natural material cannot be taken as proof of something existing outside the reach of subjectivity, that is, as something in-itself. At the same time, the Ego arises by turning to the sensation that draws its attention (Hua/Mat 8, 350). This goes to show that, as it should be kept in mind, it is the

[80] Die „Natur" ist Kern, Materie (Hyle) der Welt als erfahrener – ein Kern, der „Vergeistigung" annimmt und im Weltbewusstsein vorweg schon hat; aber die objektive Natur ist nicht aufgrund der einheitlichen Hyle schlicht konstituiert, sondern erst konstituiert ist der primordiale Kern, durch den für mich der Sinn Natur in erster Stufe sich konstituiert.

correlation of the subjective-objective poles which is fundamental to experience, and not one of the poles. However, as we have seen repeatedly throughout this dissertation, Husserl does not consider this a reason to question the absoluteness of the Ego but rather to conclude that, since the Ego is the only one that can disclose–retrospectively—this fundamental entanglement, it is nevertheless foundational. In the lectures on phenomenological psychology, Husserl wonders if it is possible to perceive the world pre-theoretically (Hua 9 57; Husserl 1977, 41) or even any object at all insofar as we always seem to "put" something of the order of the mental alongside what is given: "*Is even a single thing actually to be designated as perceived, since it is always more than we actually perceive of it*?" (Hua 9 61; Husserl 1977, 45).

What we have arrived at is a notion of a meaningful nature that is nonetheless not meaningful in and of itself. In his most idealistic formulations, nature is for Husserl "*a structure of transcendental history*" [einem Gebilde der transzendentalen Geschichte] (Hua 15, 309), and the "rule of awakening of the monads":

> *Starting from the given monads with their given sensations and perceptions, we have to say: For the human monads, strong nature means certain rules of their actual appearances and those of inactual appearances, which they could have according to their 'psychophysical constitution'. And 'nature before any awakened consciousness' means that for all sleeping monads there are certain rules of connection, which are presented to us by analogous structures and phenomena, and that there is a law that develops the monads up to 'awaken' consciousness*. (Hua 42, 158)[81]

Regarding the gap between nature and constitution, we can say that this notion of a spiritualized or meaningful nature is not enough to bridge it since, as long as nature is constituted by a subject that methodologically holds a priority over it, whether it is disclosed as meaningful or disenchanted does not make a difference,

[81] Von den gegebenen Monaden mit ihrem gegebenen Empfindungs- und Wahrnehmungsbestand ausgehend, müssen wir sagen: Die feste Natur bedeutet für die Menschenmonaden gewisse Regeln ihrer aktuellen Erscheinungen und derjenigen inaktuellen Erscheinungen, die sie nach ihrer „psychophysischen Konstitution" haben könnten. Und „Natur vor allem erwachten Bewusstsein" besagt, dass für alle schlafenden Monaden gewisse Regeln des Zusammenhangs bestehen, die sich uns vorstellig machen durch analogische Gebilde und Erscheinungen, und dass eine Gesetzmäßigkeit besteht, welche die Monaden emporentwickelt ⟨zu⟩ „wachem " Bewusstsein.

because the subject will remain exterior to it in some way. On the contrary, a meaningful in-itself nature is what many attempt to find in order to bridge the gap and/or bring phenomenology and the sciences closer together.

8.4 Naturalization of phenomenology

Traditionally, the difference between nature and spirit has been considered as the difference between humanity and the natural world, where the upsurge of human consciousness breaks the causal chain of the natural order and inaugurates a new type of possible relations. This is what Wilfrid Sellars had in mind when he distinguished between the space of nature and the space of reasons, drawing attention to the particular kind of normativity that governs human action, different than empirical generalizations that make up natural laws. The potential danger with this perspective is, as John McDowell afterwards pointed out, that we risk undermining *empiria* as a valid source of knowledge[82]. So there is a danger–as Husserl pointed out—in considering the world and the subject through the perspective of natural normativity: freedom becomes incomprehensible. But there is also the opposite danger of considering experience in general under the laws of reason, namely, the danger of undermining the objective world as a source of validity.

Facing this problem, a possible response has been to try to conceive nature in a broader way, namely one that has room for meaning and reasons. John McDowell attempts to do this with the notion of a second nature, that will be suited for thinking about the way of being of humans as a nature that is acquired by habit. However, as Michael Thompson points out, McDowell's second nature has no understandable connection to first nature, and this reproduces the problem:

The break with vulgar bald naturalisms does not come or does not simply come with

[82] For a comprehensive view of this debate see Ainbinder & Satne, "Normativity with a human face. Placing intentional norms and intentional agents back in nature" in Marsch, J., McMullin, I. & Burch, M. *Normativity and Meaning: Crowell and the Promise of Phenomenology,* London: Routledge, 2019

> *an expansion of the concept of a nature that would permit recognition of second natures alongside first; it must come with an expansion of the concept of a first nature that would permit it to cover all that is really contained in such a concept as human*. (Thompson 2013, 703)

Expanding the concept of nature to fit intentionality in it is a common strategy of several projects that aim to reconcile phenomenology and natural or cognitive sciences, usually inspired by Merleau-Pontian phenomenology. In an article on this issue, David Morris (2013) proposes that we consider meaning as already existing in nature, in order to close the gap that separates nature and consciousness. He takes as an example the behaviour of receptors in the immune system, which select and respond to pathogens in ways that do not seem to respond to previously demarcated patterns. He understands this behaviour as the exhibition of negation (which he considers a fundamental feature of sense) existing already at the level of lower organisms, in the discerning and determining of these receptors. According to Morris, this shows that "it is not we who determine that life is meaningful, life itself in its very living determines itself that way, and that is an unsurpassable characteristic of life" (Morris 2013, 324).

A similar strategy is adopted in autopoietic enactivism (Varela, Thompson and Rosch, 1991), with the aim of reconciling scientific and phenomenological accounts of life. From the side of biology, autopoietic theory serves to explain the behaviour of organisms as cognitive systems, that is, as systems that relate in a meaningful way with their environment, drawing from Varela and Maturana's autopoiesis theory; while Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology was meant to provide a first-personal account of behaviour as the nexus of consciousness and nature (Kee 2018, 4).

But these attempts might fall short of showing how an access to such a meaningful being in-itself could be accomplished, and this is, in our view, Merleau-Ponty's main problem. How is this nature exhibited if it is not to a subject? On the opposite side of this controversy, this problem is articulated by Steven Crowell (2014) in a discussion surrounding a possible description of life. As it happens with life, if we consider nature to be a common field that we share with other forms of

life (animals, organisms, etc.) we must admit that since it is only through our own experience of life and nature that we can reach any description about it, this description will fail to reach a truly objective status. It is only through a *privative approach* that we can make sense of the being of animals, namely by starting from our own experience and subtracting whatever elements we find to be specifically human. In Husserl, animals are seen in the personalistic attitude as abnormal variants in relation to the normality of the human (Ciocan 2018). Crowell contests our kinship with other animals[83] because he contests our belonging to nature, which is an essential feature of the Merleau-Pontian interpretation. In another article on the topic of nature Crowell states:

> *Merleau-Ponty, for example, tries to close the gap that opens up between the naturalistic and the personalistic attitude in Husserl on the basis of this radical break with nature by interpreting touch's reversibility as the Chiasm which represents the prototype of all subsequent reflection. But if for him the constitution of all meaning, including the meaning of the Other, will be carried out through the resources of a being whose break with nature is accomplished in circular intimacy across the arc of its own Body, how does it for itself ever come to be more than equivocal, apparitional, like the 'things' surrounding it? Does it possess the power to disambiguate the spectacle, in which its 'Others' too participate?* (Crowell 1996, 97-98)

In other words, if the subject is regarded as a thing of nature, what makes it apodictic, and so a reliable source of evidence?

Perhaps it is not, but this does not need to lead directly to the opposite conclusion, namely that nature in itself is an authority regarding the meaning of the world and of ourselves, and that it only takes observation to reveal these meanings. In fact, this view is also highly contested in contemporary science, not just by the work of sociologists and philosophers of science drawing attention to the possible biases of the scientists conducting research, but in the experimental field as well[84].

---

[83] For a detailed view of Crowell's position on this matter see: Crowell, S. (2017) "We have never been animals. Heidegger's Posthumanism." in *Études phénoménologiques–Phenomenological Studies* 1, 217-240.

[84] It can only be pointed out here that a particularly interesting counterpart to these phenomenological findings are the ontological questions raised in the field of quantum physics. The uncertain nature of reality prior to observation and measurement that experiments in quantum

Crowell may be right in suggesting that Merleau-Ponty's description of animal behaviour is not first-personal at all, but as we have seen, the first-personal has proven to be less than ideal to approach the question of embodiment and nature.

Placing meaning and normativity in nature in a way that is independent of the observing subject runs the risk of concealing this subject's perspective. If this is the premise behind the attempt to naturalize phenomenology, we must reject these projects. On the other hand, considering the subject as the only source of meaning runs the risk of reducing nature to a cultural or historical product. It becomes our task to search for a perspective that does not commit either of these excesses.

8.5 Nature as facticity

If we think of Nature as a realm of spatiotemporal objectivities that is independent of the subject, we wouldn't be able to postulate it without going against the transcendental principle. Naturalistic nature would be a thing in-itself if we consider its meaning to be already within it, waiting only to be passively received by us. Nevertheless, this does not lead us to support the opposite idea of a completely spiritual world. If nature is presented to us *as* a thing in-itself in our normal understanding of it, this is an indication that its meaning is never wholly reducible to our constitution of it. Unlike any particular object, nature is a horizon for this constitution, which means our making sense of it occurs within it. When Husserl discusses the encounter with different cultures or alienworlds, he provides a social or intersubjective description of nature, that is nevertheless linked to embodiment. Nature in this sense would be an objective and all-encompassing horizon for all homeworlds, made up of the shared features of embodiment and spatio-temporal location on Earth: "*The world for us receives new, strange people, but still people, realities, animated bodies, persons who live in a special community with each other (…) namely, realities individuated by their physique and their*

mechanics show, could be considered as a type of objective display of the limits of the scientific approach. In the words of Karen Barad: "*Measurement is a meeting of the "natural" and the "social". It is a potent moment in the construction of scientific knowledge –it is an instance where matter and meaning meet in a very literal sense*" (Barad 2007, 67)

spatiotemporal positions (…) (Hua 15, 216)[85]. In *Phenomenology and embodiment*, Joona Taipale presents this notion in connection with empathy. Following Zahavi who in turn follows Merleau-Ponty[86], he claims that embodiment in its two-fold dimension allows for the self to be a part of the objective realm, and through empathy–which has an *a priori* dimension whereby the other is present before being intended as an object—the other is understood as a part of this objective realm as well. Nature, in this sense, would be the horizon of all human experience, while at the same time it is disclosed in human experience. This is what makes us both spiritual and natural beings.

But once again the question could be raised as to what makes this understanding of nature more than simply the constituted sense that we imbue it with.

If we want to consider a new notion of nature that can include the subject, we need to start by thinking of the subject as body, in the perspective we have been exploring. After having looked more closely at the notion of constituting subjectivity in our previous chapters, we must also admit that nothing can be given as purely subjective, in a purely first-personal intuition.

In "The question of the Other" Bernhard Waldenfels states: "*It is not easy to say who gets farther from the truth of the body: Descartes who takes the dualistic part, insisting on a gap between mind and body, or Hegel who takes the monistic part, integrating the body into the totality of spirit.*" (Waldenfels 2007, 71). These two tendencies are suitable to understand the different strands in Husserl's thought about nature: we have either a nature completely alien to spirit or completely dependent on it, and this division is intimately related to Husserl's conception of the subject. How should we understand nature beyond this dichotomy?

In order to bridge the gap between nature and intentionality, not only a

---

[85] Die Welt für uns gewinnt neue, fremde Menschen, aber doch Menschen, Realitäten, beseelte Körper, Personen, die in besonderer Gemeinschaft miteinander leben (…) nämlich Realitäten individuiert durch ihre Physis und deren raumzeitliche Stellen (…)

[86] Zahavi 2001, 160–61. Husserl also writes: "that I . . . can become aware of someone else . . . , presupposes that not all my own modes of consciousness are modes of my self-consciousness" (Hua I, 135; see also Hua XV, 634). Or, as Merleau-Ponty puts it: '*as an embodied subject, I am exposed to the other person*' (Merleau-Ponty 1969, 28/18)"

meaningful nature is needed but so is a natural spirit. This entails accepting that while we are responsible for the meaning we ascribe to nature, for how we disclose it and thus what ethical stand we take regarding it; we ourselves are also a part of what we reveal. This not only means that we are subject to biases of our own, but that in the most intimate experience of ourselves there is also a sense in which we are subject to contingency, alien to ourselves and obscurely aware of our existential dependencies. What we can learn from limit-cases is that this obscurity is not just the way in which we constitute an experience given in our interiority, because in fact at times these experiences are not entirely constitutible. This is what happens in the case of death. As Natalie Depraz states in an article from 1991, the thing that eludes us about life is the mystery of its beginning and ending, and the impossibility of having an access to those limit-events. (Depraz 1991, 464)

Along the same line, Ronald Bruzina states:

> *One of the prime impositional features, nevertheless, in the force of sense not as thought but as found in experience, is that of a beginning and an end, in striking contrast to temporalization 'as such.' Beginning and ending, even if not able to be experienced of oneself, is completely natural to human life as we find it around us, and expect in ourselves as what we can never experience. And we see precisely this contrast, not fully resolved in the texts*. (Bruzina 2010, 119).

Along with the appearance of *Urhyle*, these are facts of our existence that cannot be explained from a first-personal point of view. Husserl's interpretative response is to presuppose the precedence of the spirit, that is, of the transcendental subject *outside* nature:

> *If* ownness-purification of the external world, the animate organism, and the psychophysical whole*, has been effected, I have lost my natural sense as Ego, since every sense-relation to a possible Us or We remains excluded, and have lost likewise all my worldliness, in the natural sense. But in my spiritual ownness, I am nevertheless the identical Ego-pole of my manifold "pure" subjective processes...* (Hua 1, 129; Husserl 1960, 98).

But this perpetuates the opposition between nature and spirit that undercuts

our chance of connecting science with ethics in a positive way.

At the beginning of this dissertation, I have proposed to call limit-cases "natural phenomena." The reason is that, in my view, they exhibit a natural resistance to be absorbed by the space of meaning. This resistance is our first-personal experience of nature. In the phenomenological tradition, the impositional character of our embodied existence has been treated under the title of facticity. Facticity, as the name suggests, encompasses all the facts of our existence, that is, everything deriving from our spatio-temporal being in the world, with embodiment at its centre. Because the structures of facticity describe empirical facts, they do not belong essentially to the constituting subject. The consequences of this approach can be positive insofar as they stress the need to develop a different approach to the human subject than the deterministic or causal approach of modern science to its objects of research. We are more than our historical place, our social environment, our bodies as *Körper*. However, we reach ourselves only through those objective aspects; and most importantly, our existence itself is a primordial *fact*. An important distinction can be drawn here between factuality *within* the world-horizon and the deploying of the world-horizon itself, that we refer to as primal facticity. When Husserl talks about facts in *Ideas 1*, he defines them in opposition to essences (*Eidos*) (Hua 3-1, 9), with the former contingent and the latter necessary. While with any object of experience fact and *eidos* are clearly differentiated, when it comes to our very being in the world, the rules that apply normally to explain the relationship between transcendental and empirical cease to apply:

> *The existence of an Eidos, the existence of eidetic possibilities and the universe of these possibilities is free from the existence or non-existence of any realization of such possibilities, it is independent of all reality, namely the corresponding one. But the Eidos transcendental self is unthinkable without a transcendental self as factual* (Hua 15, 385)[87]

As Anne Montavont points out, facticity in this fundamental sense cannot be

[87] Das Sein eines Eidos, das Sein eidetischer Möglichkeiten und des Universums dieser Möglichkeiten ist frei vom Sein oder Nichtsein irgendeiner Verwirklichung solcher Möglichkeiten, es ist seins unabhängig von aller Wirklichkeit, nämlich entsprechender. Aber das Eidos transzendentales Ich ist undenkbar ohne transzendentales Ich als faktisches.

crossed out by the reduction, because it is what makes it possible in the first place –along with any kind of activity of the constituting subject (Montavont 1999, 198). What we reach by enquiring into these fundamental facts is a "metaphysic of facticity"[88] that deals with the *brutal fact* of there being a world given to a consciousness. Ultimately, it is the fact of the Ego being affected by *Hyle*, the accidental (*Zufällig*) beginning of affection and time (Hua 39, 473) that shows that we cannot do away with nature, at least not without incurring the cost of endorsing a speculative metaphysic of the pure spirit. Ronald Bruzina insists on this point:

> *…that part of the absoluteness of these limits lies in giving human existence and human experience too exaggerated and too pure a "spiritual" character, in an acceptance of the* geistig *that is conceived as so totally "unbodily" that it has virtually no material being to mark it as inhabiting the world in actuality (i.e., phenomenally). There is, in other words, a reductionism that is a spiritualistic as much as there is a reductionism that is naturalistic. (Bruzina 2001, 375).*

In the same sense, Montavont asks: "*How do we think what we* must *think according to Husserl, namely a flowing life closed off to affection, if affection is precisely constitutive of this life*?" (Montavont 1999, 177-8)[89]. This flowing life without time or affection is the idea of the subject we have been contesting so far. Limit-cases, as the points that mark the union or separation of this life and personal life have been a leading thread in the process. In this sense, Klaus Held points out that the living present can only be 'living' insofar as it stretches between birth and death, and these facts structure it in an essential manner (Held 1981, 218). In his study on the living present he explicitly talks about the functioning present as an "absolute fact": "*The* nunc stans *as anonymous, as a 'given' whose way of being given is not known, should be called "fact" in the following.*" (Held 1966, 146)[90]

The peculiarity of the issue is that the only first-personal evidence we can have

---

[88] According to Landgrebe: "*Husserl defines metaphysics as "the doctrine of the fact"* [die Lehre vom Faktum]" (Landgrebe 1982, 39)

[89] Comment penser ce qu'on doit penser selon Husserl, à savoir un vie fluante fermée à toute affection, si l'affection est précisement constitutive de cette vie même?

[90] Das *nunc stans* als solchermaßen anonymes, als eine "Gegebenheit", von der nicht einmal die Gegebenheitsweise bekannt ist soll im folgenden ,,Faktum" heißen.

of this primal facticity lies in the lack of evidence of the experience of limits. Only our insufficient experience of them can provide some form of first personal attestation of our natural character. This is not, of course, accidental, since the factical ground of experience could not be given otherwise without ceasing to be what it is. However, limits do not delineate a realm beyond consciousness where pure nature would continue, that is, they do not point to a primacy of nature over consciousness. Rather, they testify for the insurmountable truth of the correlation, and the claim that there cannot be consciousness without world or world without consciousness.