Philosophical-Anthropological Considerations for an Existential-Humanistic Ecopsychology

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In this article, the question of human nature is confronted from what may be called an existential-humanistic ecopsychological perspective. From this perspective, human nature is interpreted to be a synthetic, bipolar human–animal boundary form. The global character of this living form is noted to be a dynamic, oscillating hermeneutical-dialectical interplay between humanitas and animalitas. This appropriation of the human–animal boundary idea provides a wide-open, welcoming space for diverse conceptualizations of human life. At the same time, it maintains that human beings and nonhuman animals are indubitably embedded in a natural world within which we are active coparticipants in the development of experiential perspectives on our own bodies, those of others, and the natural environment at large.

The act of transcendence, in the fullest sense of the term, is characterized by the fact that it is oriented; in phenomenological terms, we can say that it entails intentionality. But while it is an exigence and an appeal, it is not a claim; for every claim is autocentric; and the transcendent is no doubt definable in terms of the negation of all autocentrism. It may be conceded that this is a completely negative property; but it is a property which is only conceivable in terms of a participation in a reality which overflows and envelopes me, without my being able to view it in any way as external to what I am. (Marcel, 1964, p. 144)

From an Earth-centered, ecopsychological perspective, humanistic psychology is guilty of anthropocentrism and speciesism (Shapiro, 2003). To the degree that one may grant an element of truth to this accusation, one must simultaneously acknowledge that psychology, as a whole, has traditionally been an anthropocentric discipline. Of course, one might object that since its inception, psychology has demonstrated a notable commitment to becoming a natural science. Be that as it may, it is nonetheless true that it has endeavored to be a natural science of human behavior and mental process, especially those of the human individual. When it branches out beyond this focus (i.e., the individual human being), it gives rise to specialized areas of study such as social psychology and comparative psychology. In this light, humanistic psychology has been an ongoing effort to offer the discipline at large a broadened, more complete, and more radical understanding of its subject matter. The third force movement has offered psychology a wealth of data concerning neglected dimensions of the psyche and of person–world relations in

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general (e.g., phenomenological accounts of meaning-making, the lived body, values, health and optimal functioning, I–Thou relatedness, self-transcendence, peak experiences, and so forth).

Its criticisms aside, ecopsychology has theoretical roots in the third force movement (Greenway, 1999). Moreover, in spite of its accusation of humanistic speciesism, ecopsychology has often proven itself to be an ally of the humanistic movement. One need only refer to the American Psychological Association’s Division 32 journal, The Humanistic Psychologist, to see demonstrations of this camaraderie. To cite one example, the entirety of Volume 26 was dedicated to the ongoing dialogue between humanistic psychology and ecopsychology. Moreover, the entire second issue of the Journal of Humanistic Psychology’s Volume 41 was dedicated to this same topic. In many respects, ecopsychology is an attempt to progress through the theoretical developments brought about by the third force, especially when it comes to advocating for a more self-transcendent or world-focused point of view. In this, it has much in common with the transpersonal movement, another friend and occasional adversary of humanistic psychology. Both ecopsychology and transpersonal psychology have found a voice within humanistic circles for a good reason. Namely, nonduality rests at the core of both movements (Davis, 1998). Their refusal to accept the separation of person and world was brought to the mainstream of psychology by the humanistic movement, from Carl Rogers’s (1951) insistence that there is no hard and fast line separating organism and environment; to Rollo May’s (2007) existential-psychological interpretations of intentionality, care, and love; to Viktor Frankl’s (1978) and Abraham Maslow’s (1971/1993) respective descriptions of self-transcendence.

As the second postulate of humanistic psychology notes, human beings have their existence in a uniquely human context, as well as in a cosmic ecology. Humanistic psychology has long maintained theoretical common ground with ecopsychology, especially in its existential forms via an emphasis on human embeddedness within the natural world. The existential and Daseinsanalytic currents within the third force have brought Jakob Johann von Uexküll’s concept of an Umwelt into psychology vis-à-vis its adoption by Martin Heidegger. As Rollo May (1958) noted, the Umwelt signifies the surrounding world, the environmental milieu, or the natural world in terms of its objective pole. Its subjective pole is associated with the contingencies of biological existence, including “instincts” and drives (which is not at all to imply that the body is in any way merely incidental to existence).

The Umwelt played an important role in the works of both Ludwig Binswanger and Medard Boss. As Binswanger (1958) explained it, von Uexküll distinguished a perception world or world of subjective perspective (a Merkwelt) and an action world of the animal. He (von Uexküll) combined the perception world and the action world under the name Umwelt to indicate a circular interaction that would serve as the ground upon which to approach and illuminate the experiential viewpoint of organisms. Given the immense variations in biological makeup and environment found in nature, the Umwelt concept implies that there may be as many worlds as there are organisms. For Binswanger, this was a foundation for approaching the lived world of the patient in psychotherapy. The reader will find interesting parallels to these ideas in the developmental works of Ashley Montagu (1970), who emphasized the inherent individuality of living organisms, and Eleanor Gibson (Gibson & Pick, 2000), who introduced the developmental world to the concept of perceptual affordances. Medard Boss used the concept of the Umwelt to explicate a form of ontological guilt called “separation guilt,” by which he means guilt connected to the feeling of having alienated ourselves from nature in our immensely positivistic, technological world (May, 1958, pp. 54–55).
Regrettably, despite the fact that humanistic psychology and ecological psychology do share some theoretical common ground, there remains a relative shortage of humanistic literature on nonhuman animals and our relations to them. Although there have been notable exceptions to this trend (e.g., Churchill, 2007), the trend remains a general truism, nonetheless. More importantly, from an ecological viewpoint, humanistic psychology as a whole has tended to endorse a categorical separation of human beings from the rest of the animal kingdom. In Shapiro’s (2003) words, humanism, in general, is “a pervasive way of life that subtly but radically provides a social construction of ‘animal’ wherein that class is categorically segregated from the class human’” (p. 80). In Shapiro’s view, the reasons for this speciesism are twofold. First, humanism has too often granted human beings exclusive rights to the concept of reason. Second, certain currents of humanistic psychology within the United States developed a notion of selfhood that is “too internal, too dissociated from the world” (p. 78). However, these are not the only ways third force psychologists have endorsed a separatist position with regard to human beings and the rest of the animal kingdom. Human beings have been granted more or less exclusive rights to world-openness, for example (May, 1958; Schachtel, 1959).

According to Bannon (2009), the speciesist thought that has gained a foothold within the ranks of the third force has notable roots in the existential philosophical-anthropology of Martin Heidegger (1947/1977). Specifically, Heidegger held that animals are separated from our ek-sistent essence by an abyss. The actual passage that mentions this abyss in Heidegger’s works is most interesting:

> Of all the beings that are, presumably the most difficult to think about are living creatures, because on the one hand they are in a certain way most closely related to us, and on the other are at the same time separated from our ek-sistent essence by an abyss. (Heidegger, 1947/1977, p. 206)

It is striking to see Heidegger, a master of thought and arguably the most important and consistent philosopher of his time, indicate that nonhuman living beings are the most difficult creatures to think about. Perhaps more important, for the purposes of this article, when Heidegger’s description of Dasein is expressed as Being-in-the-world-with-others-alongside-things, it is equally striking that there is no direct reference to other (nonhuman) living things. This adds some credence to the notion of a trace speciesism emanating from Heidegger, though I do not think that a final judgment on his philosophical system cannot be made from these facts alone. For now, it is sufficient to note that there are legitimate reasons for the concerns regarding humanistic psychology expressed by ecopsychologists. All in all, the primary conceptual bone of contention appears to be the clear-cut separation of the human existent from “brute animals,” to use an old-style turn of phrase.

With this said, the specifically ecological challenge we face as humanistic psychologists of whatever persuasion is to confront the question of human nature in a way that does justice to humanitas and the proud history of third force psychology while appreciating the subtlety, complexity, and ambiguity of being a living creature among many other living creatures. Can we think about human nature in such a way as to conscientiously acknowledge decades of humanistic insights into the characteristically human way of being while, at the same time, finding a way to avoid unjustifiably alienating ourselves from the many species of animal with which we share the planet, who were here before us (some of whom with which we share a genetic linkage), and who also have a right to thrive on Earth? This article is an attempt to address this question.
Accordingly, its focus is relatively narrow in comparison to other eco-humanistic analyses (e.g., Anthony & Soule, 1998; Conn, 1998; Kuhn, 2001).

Because so much of the humanistic tradition in psychology is immersed in existential thought, I use the combined term existential-humanistic for the duration of what follows. This is especially fitting given the central role that various currents of existential thought play herein. I begin by presenting an explicitly ecopsychological redirection of the existential-humanistic trajectory with regard to the issue of human nature as proposed by Shapiro (2003) in his formidable Humanistic Psychologist article on animal experience. Shapiro singled out Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty as thinkers who can pave the way for a more eco-sensitive existential-humanistic view of human nature. To that end, I consider the ways in which these two thinkers can radicalize and ecologize our understanding of human beings. I then reconsider the classical manner of characterizing human nature as that of a “rational animal” for its ecological merits before concluding. Several important humanistic contributions to the development of an existential-humanistic ecopsychology are highlighted at the close of the article.

A CONTEMPORARY EXISTENTIAL-HUMANISTIC TURN: HUMAN NATURE AS A BOUNDARY FORM

We live in a day and age when it is becoming increasingly understood that many constituents of human nature are not exclusive to human living. Stated differently, many of the characteristics that have been heralded by humanistic psychologists as uniquely human (e.g., language, recursion, social organization, etc.) are now seen as somehow or other observable in the lives of certain nonhuman animals. Thus, black-and-white categorical thinking is of limited value in dealing with questions pertaining to the essence of human living. “Animation exists on a subtle and graded continuum, as a matter of course” (DeRobertis, 2012, p. 50). Fortunately, there are humanistic authors who have actively advocated for the development of ways of conceptualizing human existence that are nonseparatist. For example, Shapiro (2003; following Shepard, 1978) has suggested that we look upon our nature as a kind of human–animal boundary form. In Shapiro’s words:

Following Shepard (1978), I take the position that human being is, to use his structuralist term, a “boundary form.” “We live in a lifelong tension between our humanity and our animality” (p. 90). Traditional humanism denies this tension and this ambiguity by devising an overdrawn and unequivocally separatist distinction between human and animal. The present position, then, is a corrective to the categorical overcorrection at the base of traditional humanistic thought and clarifies the impetus and eventual failure of that and other attempts at such dichotomies. We are human and animal, and have clothed ourselves literally and ideologically to hide that fact. (p. 91)

The idea that human nature is a synthetic (i.e., nondualistic), bipolar boundary form holds promise for the development of a nonseparatist, existential-humanistic ecopsychology. It is an idea that I am inclined to go along with inasmuch as it represents a polemic against the notion of a pure human life form, discrete, self-enclosed, as a kind of windowless anthropological monad.

According to Shapiro (2003), the human boundary form is coconstituted by three intertwined regions or “domains,” each of which found our ability to empathize with nonhuman animals (p. 90). These domains, thus, represent the nucleus of an inherent (lived) connection to the
animal kingdom. The fundamental domain (i.e., the one that is the “precondition” for the other two) is a prelinguistic, prereflective, embodied attunement to oneself, others, and the environment (Shapiro, 2003, p. 90). Stated differently, it is the embodied establishment of existential space or the space of actional possibilities. According to Shapiro, for both humans and non-human animals, the immediate experience of the environment is a possible lived space with respect to which each of us is a center of action. Speaking of the nonhuman animal in particular, he noted:

On a bodily, implicit level, he [sic] opposes himself to things (has them, precisely, as objects); he takes up a position and establishes a place—his home or den or playing room or territory. Our primary access to the experience of an animal is through our empathic apperception of his or her lived body and its correlative lived world. We share with them a bodily intelligence, a bodily sense of the world. (p. 91)

The second and third domains of the boundary consist of culture and a common environment in the sense of a shared natural world. With regard to culture, Shapiro noted, “in a limited and complicated sense, we do share a culture with animals” (p. 86). Interestingly, Shapiro’s observations were limited to the ways in which we humans do our part to determine the cultural meaning of being and animal. In this connection, he noted:

The animal is not out there beyond our culture in a nature that is somehow simply what is there. He is a product of our social and emotional needs, fears, and desires. We know him only through certain institutions (family, research laboratory, factory farm, managed game preserve, “wilderness” area), literature (fairy tales, bestiaries, nursery rhymes, natural history, sportsmen magazines, dog-training manuals), and language. (Shapiro, 2003, p. 73)

One may (and should) go beyond these remarks to include the ways in which animals can be said to create their own cultures apart from human inventiveness (e.g., De Waal, 2001; Merleau-Ponty, 1968/2003).

With regard to our common environment, Shapiro (2003) similarly asserted, “Also in a limited and complicated sense we share a natural world with animals” (p. 88). For Shapiro, this domain equates to something “roughly between nature as our immediate ecological and biological setting and a socially constructed nature, nature as currently defined in our culture” (p. 88). Shapiro went on, “While both we and animals have a socially constructed body, we also both have a natural body” (p. 89). Further,

We also live in and share the same natural order—the short days of the long Maine winter, the claustrophobic irritation of black fly season, the exhilaration of a long trek in the woods and the relaxed flop down together fatigue that follows it. Sensitivity to these rhythms and to these vital capacities, rather than to the rhythm of the chainsaw’s cutting or even the fuel’s burning, is a more directly participatory and a less constructed way of being in nature. (p. 89)

In essence, Shapiro’s view of a human–animal boundary form appears to be the fruit of an existential-phenomenological appropriation of the Umwelt, in both its subjective and objective dimensions, embedded with the notion of culture. In effect, to move within the boundary further toward its human pole means to progressively unlimit embodied meaning-making and
culture-making potentials. It means to unlock the cocreative possibilities of the organism in question. To move from the boundary in the direction of the progressively less open, less cognitively differentiated animal would mean to place greater limits on creative, embodied, meaning-making in-the-world. This is how I interpret Shapiro’s repeated use of the phrase “in a limited and complicated sense” while maintaining a distinction (not a separation) between human beings and non-human animals (e.g., Shapiro’s, 2003, pp. 86–88).

According to Shapiro (2003), if humanistic psychology is to grow in the direction of a more eco-friendly viewpoint, one that is mindful of the human–animal boundary form, it needs to exploit the potentials inherent to the existential-phenomenological philosophical-anthropology that originated in the European branch of the third force. In particular, Shapiro endorsed Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty in this regard. While critiquing humanistic psychology for being anthropocentric, Shapiro specifically identified an alternative path for humanism by way of “Heidegger’s description of dasein [sic] as an open responsiveness and attunement that lets be (1962) and Merleau-Ponty’s notion of inhabitation (1962)” (p. 79). Shapiro then went on, “In fact, Levin’s recent attempt (1985) to ‘flesh out’ Heidegger’s interpretation of dasein by, in effect, explicating its concrete bodily pole offers a refinement of humanistic psychology” (p. 79). In what follows, I will be following Shapiro’s lead, however I suggest a more prominent role for Heidegger in the establishment of an existential-humanistic ecopsychology. Before proceeding to Heidegger’s role, however, Merleau-Ponty’s contributions must first be sketched out in relation to Heidegger.

EXISTENTIAL-PHENOMENOLOGY: MERLEAU-PONTY, INTERANIMALITY, AND HUMAN–ANIMAL INEINANDER

The philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty gives one a deeper understanding of the human–animal boundary form with respect to what Shapiro considered its most fundamental domain: embodiment. In a penetrating paper on the topic of animality, Bannon (2009) noted that Merleau-Ponty (1964, 1968/2003) developed a view of human nature that follows Heidegger in quite a number of respects (e.g., the importation of von Uexküll’s Umwelt, the assertion that the human body is not a brute animal body possessing reason, and emphases on the important roles of history and language in the human order). However, there are important ways that Merleau-Ponty departed from Heidegger that allowed him to circumvent a strict adherence to Heidegger’s ontological abyss. For Heidegger, human beings exercise the power of logos. They use language within a temporal horizon to think about the meaning of Being from Being itself, rather than from a merely subjective viewpoint (Heidegger, 1947/1977). This acts as a basis for a historically unfolding process of world-formation. Unlike humans, animals cannot exercise the power of logos to engage in world-formation. They cannot, therefore, perceive objects in their objectivity, but only from what Schachtel (1959) would call an autocentric perspective. Their object relations are utterly colored by the drive for organismic need satisfaction. Accordingly, they are shut in upon themselves such that the “full” perception of objects as objects remains forever impossible. For Merleau-Ponty, however, human beings do not have an exclusive hold on the logos in spite of the fact that humans are creatures of the symbolic order par excellence.

The existence of what we call higher animals gives Merleau-Ponty pause for thought about things that did not impress Heidegger. Merleau-Ponty follows von Uexküll in noting that there
are animals with differing levels of intelligence, leaving open the question of each animal’s relative openness to its environment. Merleau-Ponty recognized what von Uexküll called a *Wirkwelt*, a work-world or world of temporally unfolding achievements in the life of the animal. Merleau-Ponty saw in the animal’s having both a *Wirkwelt* and the previously mentioned *Merkwelt* the potential for a surplus of signification in time, transcending the exclusivity of mere need satisfaction. This temporally significant surplus implicates both objects and the animal’s own body. Objects are not exclusively constituted on the basis of need satisfaction. More important, the animal’s body is understood to be an unfolding form of expressive comportment, a kind of physical symbolism in time, and thus a manner of employing language. As Buytendijk (1974) expressed it, the animal body is a “‘knowing body’” that is a *way of being*, “‘ensouled by its world and ensouling it’” (p. 21). This line of thinking begets the question:

To what extent does there already exist in the highest animals a non-species-typical (law-governed), and therefore relatively-free meaning-giving behavior implying a limited, creative activity as “‘moments’” (islands) of humanness? (Buytendijk, 1974, p. 21)

Here, the category called *human* becomes but one form of historical bodying forth among others rather than an utterly separate realm of being. The notion of a body-subject can be applied to both humans and animals, even if in somewhat different manners (Buytendijk, 1974). Thus, Merleau-Ponty proposed an embodied philosophy of interanimality and human–animal *Einenander* or intertwining (Toadvine, 2009), which provides a philosophical viewpoint upon which to approach the aforementioned notion of a human–animal boundary form. Human and nonhuman animals exist by way of a reciprocal expressive insertion into each other’s historically coconstituted lives, a transactional corporeal resonance occurring in time, as it were. This interpenetration makes it possible for human beings to readily “‘feel-into’” (*Einfühlung*) and relate to diverse species of animal. Merleau-Ponty’s recognition of a primitive historically embedded *logos* at the level of an expressive, knowing body identifies the origination of a meaning-infused world-building process. Thus, Bannon (2009) notes that, for Merleau-Ponty, the difference between human beings and animals is a “‘divergence’” rather than the abrupt “‘abyssal rupture’” that one finds in Heidegger (p. 22). This divergence actualizes in the form of both transcendence (Giorgi, 1992; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962) and the realization of culture (Bannon, 2009; Merleau-Ponty, 1968/2003).

**EXISTENTIAL HERMENEUTICS: A HEIDEGGERIAN LEGACY**

Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of embodied being is of obvious value to the aims of this article. At the same time, Heidegger’s work makes many fine contributions that have yet to be discussed. Heidegger’s work has more to contribute toward the *dissolution* of speciesism that is customarily acknowledged. Heidegger’s work houses a conceptually pluralistic view of human beings that clears a still wider space for appreciating the human–animal boundary form. To see how, consideration must be given to his critique of classical notions of human nature.

Heidegger’s thoughts on human nature emerge from a critique of the classical definition of human beings, which eventually came to be translated as *rational animal*. These critiques are present in a number of works, most notably *Being and Time* (Heidegger, 1927/1962) and his
Letter on Humanism (Heidegger, 1947/1977). In Being and Time, (1927/1962) Heidegger noted that the classical definition of human existence was expressed with the words *zoon logon echon*. For Heidegger, however, *zoon logon echon* ought to be translated as the *living being with the power of language, talk, or discourse*. This represents a twofold change in translation from the classical view. First, emphasis is shifted from *animal* to *living being*. Second, *logos* is no longer translated with the Latin *ratio*. Logos is translated as Greek for language.

In Being and Time, Heidegger (1927/1962) is clear that his reading of *zoon logon echon* is not merely a change in translation, but also a change in interpretation. According to Heidegger (1927/1962), the primary difficulty with the classical definition of human essence is that it tends to cast human beings as something “present-at-hand” (p. 48). The classical definition lends itself to objectification. However, Heidegger wants to move away from a static, essentialist interpretation of human nature and shift toward something more dynamic and existential. The human being is a *living* being, a *languaging* being. Emphasis is placed on the active *be*-*ing* of this entity called *human*. This represents a move away from *whatness* to both the who and the how of human being-in-the-world.

Heidegger also has another motive for reinterpreting *zoon logon echon*. His arguments, as they are unfolded in his Letter on Humanism (Heidegger, 1947/1977), state that the classical definition of human beings as rational animals subsumes *humanitas* under the category of *animalitas*. As such, the essence of human existence is never fully disclosed. He notes that this is a systemic problem that keeps repeating throughout history, and one that only his fundamental ontology can remedy. For Heidegger, the human body is “something essentially other than an animal organism” (1947/1977, p. 204). He readily acknowledges that you can point out commonalities between human bodies and animal bodies from a strictly biological viewpoint, but he calls this *biologism*, as it overlooks the body in its totality as a meaningful *Gestalt*. Merleau-Ponty (1942/1963) followed Heidegger in this regard when he noted, “Man is not a rational animal. The appearance of reason and mind does not leave intact a sphere of self-enclosed instincts in man” (p. 181). However, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty diverge with respect to their attempts to move beyond the classical definition of human beings as rational animals in two major respects.

First, as was shown earlier, Heidegger’s restoration of *humanitas* creates an ontological rupture that separates human beings and animals by an abyss. Thus, Merleau-Ponty offered a potential workaround for reinterpreting this abyss as a divergence. Second, Merleau-Ponty reads Heidegger’s critique of “rational animal” from an exclusively Cartesian standpoint, whereas Heidegger implicitly acknowledges that this concept has had different meanings outside the philosophy of Descartes. Thus, Merleau-Ponty (1942/1963) asserted in no uncertain terms, “Man is not a rational animal” (p. 181), whereas Heidegger noted as early as Being and Time (1927/1962), “The...interpreting...of man in the sense of *animal rationale*, ’something living which has reason,’ is not indeed ‘false’” (p. 208).

Heidegger has repeated this claim over and over again. It figures prominently in his Letter on Humanism (1947/1977), though this is rarely acknowledged for some inexplicable reason. The concept of rational animal is not false for Heidegger. It is true that he did reject the Cartesian, bifurcated conceptualization of human beings as half animal, half rationality. However, Heidegger was conscientiously cognizant of the fact *animal rationale* is a concept that long predates Descartes and can be thought of without the Cartesian ensemble of metaphysical baggage. In St. Thomas Aquinas, for example, the notion of *animal rationale* does not denote a bifurcated nature, but is rather a composite term, a hylomorphic amalgam of body and form working as
Thus, Heidegger maintained, “‘Humanistic interpretations of man as animal rationale, as ‘person,’ as spiritual-ensouled-bodily being, are not declared false and thrust aside’” (p. 210). Heidegger does not object to the animal rationale concept as much as he maintains that it does not plunge into the heart of the human way of being phenomenologically, nor does it “realize the proper dignity of man” (Heidegger, 1947/1977, p. 210).

Having provided an existential-phenomenological alternative to the notion of animal rationale, what are we to make of Heidegger’s refusal to refute this classical definition? The answer to this question lies in hermeneutics. Heidegger’s philosophy marks the beginning of the hermeneutic turn within the post-Husserlian phenomenological tradition (Ihde, 1971). This was part and parcel of Heidegger’s particular emphasis on logos in human living, as language is not something that human beings possess in the strict sense. Language is, for Heidegger, first and foremost the house of Being. Because language extends far beyond the expression of one’s own embodied perspective it is the opening for different levels of discourse, a dialogal interplay of perspectives. Thus, Heidegger would not have found Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of human–animal Ineinander to be false either, but rather a legitimate view from a more finite vantage point than his own. Merleau-Ponty’s view is merely, as Ricoeur (2007) noted, more “completely identified” with human insertion into a field of finite, embodied perception and action (p. 210). Indeed, Heidegger demonstrated a clear awareness of the viability of such a perspective even while arguing against it:

> Because plants and animals are lodged in their respective environments but are never placed freely in the lighting of Being which alone is “world,” they lack language. But in being denied language they are not thereby suspended worldlessly in their environment. Still, in this word “environment” converges all that is puzzling about living creatures. In its essence language is not the utterance of an organism; nor is it the expression of a living thing. Nor can it ever be thought in an essentially correct way in terms of its symbolic character, perhaps not even in terms of the character of signification. Language is the lighting-concealing advent of Being itself. (Heidegger, 1947/1977, p. 206)

In light of these analyses, Shapiro and Merleau-Ponty are seen as dwelling at the gray area of the human–animal boundary, the region of primitive human emergence that is simultaneously an area of convergence that makes drawing clear-cut distinctions between humans and nonhuman animals imprudent, if not unviable. An existential-hermeneutic approach, in contrast, seeks to span the ontological thresholds of human nature, as it were. This is a contextualizing effort in the interest of appreciating the full breadth of our nature as living beings on Earth. Such a movement toward the supporting context of the existential body-subject allows one to avoid an existential monism, which would create unnecessary stalemates between diverse approaches to the problem of human nature (Ricoeur, 2007). Here, the synthetic, bipolar human–animal boundary form is conceived as a dynamic, oscillating hermeneutical-dialectical interplay between humanitas and animalitas. This is a kind of hermeneutic arc, to co-opt phraseology inherent to the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur (2007). When conceptualized from this perspective, the human–animal boundary form is prepared for manifold interpretations ranging from the most materialistically reductionistic naturalism to the most thorough-going idealism. Instead of being completely absorbed into a monism, be it materialistic, idealistic, or existential, human nature becomes a dialogally open issue capable of sustaining diverse interpretations that range from those focusing on molecular, cellular, and vegetative functioning to those focusing on the farther
reaches of human nature. To be sure, this sort of approach holds much productive promise given
the range of diverse perspectives within ecopsychology, some of which defend traditional
naturalism quite vehemently (e.g., Hoelterhoff, 2010). Moreover, an explicitly hermeneutic
application of existential-phenomenology to the issues presented here is commensurate with
Shapiro’s (2003) conclusions concerning an optimal approach to understanding the human–
animal relation. In his words:

In conclusion, I am calling for a phenomenologically based ethology, the touchstone of which would
be our sense of the experience of an individual animal. The method begins with a dual hermeneutic
detour: an interpretative reading both the text of our social construction of the species and of the
category of animal in which the culture has placed our subject (a pet dog, a laboratory rat, a
factory-farm chicken), and of the text of traditional natural scientific findings potentially applicable
to an understanding of that individual animal. (Shapiro, 2003, p. 92)

ANIMALITAS REVISITED: RECONSIDERING THE CLASSICAL
APPROACH TO HUMAN NATURE

As was shown, the realization of culture is noted by both Shapiro and Merleau-Ponty to be a
central and exemplary achievement of the human–animal boundary form. To be clear, humans
do not have exclusive rights to culture. That claim would defeat the purpose of proposing a
human–animal boundary form to overcome separatist speciesism. Rather, it is the unfolding
realization of culture by the transcendent use of symbols that marks the (nonruptured) diver-
gence of the human life form from the nonhuman for these authors. This viewpoint, to my mind,
finds validation (perhaps ironically) in the classical definition of human beings, which has
played an important role in the development of the thinking presented in this article.

As noted, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty both highlighted the problematic nature of looking
upon human beings as rational animals. It was also noted, however, that the notion of a rational
animal does not have to be conceptualized from a Cartesian, bifurcated viewpoint, which was
related to the fact that Heidegger did not reject this definition (animal rationale) outright. If these
facts are to be taken seriously, and the classical definition of human nature is not merely thrust
aside, then it also needs to be pointed out that the Aristotelian and Thomistic philosophies that
nurtured this definition never claimed rational animal to be a stand-alone concept. Although it
has gone largely unrecognized, Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas also considered human beings
to be social and political animals (DeRobertis, 2011; Kenny, 1993). For Aristotle and St. Thomas,
three terms were necessary for an adequate understanding of human nature (i.e., discursive or
rational, social, and political) and, I submit, constitute a valid basis upon which to justify this
emphasis on culture in the human constituent of the human–animal boundary form. In effect,
when the social and political nature of human beings is given adequate recognition, culture
emerges as a markedly comprehensive way of referring to human nature. Culture represents
the realization of our dialogal proclivities, the concrete fulfillment of logos, which is a way
of thinking that is not without precedent in the existential tradition (e.g., Murray, 2001; von
Eckartsberg, 1989).

Interestingly, interpreting the holistic, Aristotelian–Thomistic definition of human beings as
indicative of a human–animal boundary form makes the many offshoots of the Aristotelian–
Thomistic perspective appear more relevant to an existential-humanistic ecopsychology than
ever before. To be sure, I am not the only author to have sensed this inherent compatibility. For example, Strasser (1957) and Sokolowski (2008) have both defended the notion of rational animal on phenomenological grounds. Strasser (1977) has also phenomenologically defended the notions metaphysical animal and religious animal. From the perspective of existential psychology, Rollo May has dubbed the human being the ethical animal (1953) and, more generally, the valuing animal (1979). From a more process-oriented hermeneutical perspective, Gregory M. Nixon (2011) recently asserted, “All of us are the speaking animals of the planet we call Earth” (p. 898). Within the field of evolutionary biology, Hatemi and McDermott (2011) are defending the notion that human beings are political animals by nature. Social psychologist Elliot Aronson (2011) has long defended the notion that human beings are social animals. The Aristotelian-Thomistic philosopher Mortimer J. Adler, much in line with the Heideggerian tradition, has argued that the human is the historical animal (Adler, 1993). Finally, to come full circle, within the world of mainstream psychology, Roy F. Baumeister (2005) has asserted that human beings are best understood as cultural animals.

Returning to Heidegger’s critique of animal rationale, this upsurge of hybrid boundary descriptors (even if understood without Cartesian presuppositions) still harbors the possibility of overlooking the fact that human essence lies in its existence. To employ any number of these composite terms in a manner that casts human beings as something present-at-hand would always keep us one step removed from the temporal unfolding of embodied life. Thus, the key to being able to best embrace the synthetic interconnectivity of animalitas and humanitas lies in guarding against the potential for objectification when employing these boundary descriptors. To guard against an unwitting objectification, perhaps an existential-humanistic ecopsychology might utilize a modified form of Heideggerian terminology to discuss life at the boundary, such as being-in-the-world-with-other-animals-alongside-things-in-responsible-relation-to-the-living-ecosystem.

**FINAL REMARKS**

In his article, *Toward an Ecological Humanistic Psychology*, Kuhn (2001) sought to demonstrate that:

The basic premises of humanistic psychology—personal choice as growth and responsibility, actualizing one’s potentialities, the role of authentic relationships, and the concept of peak experiences as self-actualization—are all reflected in the concept of an expansive ecological self. (p. 21)

This article pursued a slightly different approach to establishing a productive rapprochement between humanistic psychology and ecopsychology. Here I have attempted to utilize Shapiro’s (2003) notion of a human–animal boundary form, buttressed by the existential-phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty and the existential hermeneutics of Heidegger, to directly confront the philosophical-anthropological question of human nature in a way that does justice to humanitas without alienating animalitas.

To be sure, what is presented here does not exhaust the potentials of an existential-humanistic ecopsychology. This article has remained focused on the issue of human nature. Obviously, much more is needed to develop an existential-humanistic ecopsychology, as Kuhn (2001)
and many others (e.g., Pilisuk, 2001; Yunt, 2001) have demonstrated. Suffice it to say that there have always been many important nonanthropocentric elements within the mainstream of humanistic psychology worth mentioning. For example, Abraham Maslow’s (1971/1993) research on peak experiences brought about an enhanced awareness of the power of nature to facilitate moments of intense fulfillment. Maslow described peak experiences as especially joyful moments, involving wonder, awe, and the dissolution of ego boundaries. They usually come on suddenly and can be inspired by the overwhelming beauty of nature (Wuthnow, 1978).

Carl Rogers, in his A Way of Being (1980), cited studies of dolphin consciousness in order to discuss the need to move beyond reductionistic, mechanical models of the mind. He further noted that a global life-affirming attitude was characteristic of the fully functioning, self-actualizing person. Similarly, the existential-humanistic psychoanalyst Erich Fromm (1964) introduced the psychological world to the concept of biophilia as a characteristic trait of the self-realizing personality. Biophilia is a primary quality of productive character and refers to a passionate love of life and all that is alive. This concept has since gone on to be central to the Earth-centered worldview in psychology.

Additionally, one cannot underestimate the value of Heidegger’s later thought for framing the work of an existential-humanistic ecopsychology. Here I am referring to Heidegger’s fourfold. To detail the potential inherent to Heidegger’s fourfold for an existential-humanistic ecopsychology goes far beyond the scope of the current article. However, it is worth noting that Clark Moustakas (1985) sensed the importance of the later Heidegger to humanistic psychology from the time of its founding by asserting:

Humanistic psychology has always implied “authentic relationship to myself, to other human beings, to nature and the universe, and, as Heidegger phrases it, to “divinities present and absent” (Heidegger, 1971, p. x) a view consistent with Progoff’s “humanistic not in the more recent sense of being agnostic or anti-religious, but in the affirmative sense of directing attention to all that pertains to the life of man” (Progoff, 1970, p. 125). (pp. 5–6)

At any rate, Wendell Kisner (2008) has already done an admirable job of outlining the importance of the later Heidegger to an Earth-friendly perspective in his 2008 article, The Fourfold Revisited: Heideggerian Ecological Practice and the Ontology of Things.

From what has been covered in this article, an existential-humanistic viewpoint emerges that maintains a deep kinship between human beings, nonhuman animals, and the entirety of the living ecosystem. Both human beings and nonhuman animals are embedded in a natural world within which we are active coparticipants in the development of experiential perspectives on own bodies, those of others, and the natural environment at large. From an existential-humanistic ecopsychological perspective, human nature has the character of a synthetic, bipolar human–animal boundary form, which is illuminated by Merleau-Ponty’s notion of human–animal Ineinander. As an alternative to seeing human beings and nonhuman animals as separated by an untraversable (Heideggerian) abyss, their relation can be viewed as a kind of lived, felt (embodied) rapprochement. Heidegger’s existential-hermeneutic approach, in turn, rescues human nature from an existential monism that closes the door to manifold perspectives on human insertion in our cosmosically nested ecology. From this broadened perspective, human nature is understood to be a dynamic, oscillating hermeneutical-dialectical interplay between humanitas and animalitas. Although decidedly ecopsychological in nature, this conceptualization is patently existential and mirrors
Kierkegaard’s (1849/1954) observation, “Man is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity” (p. 146). Moreover, the hermeneutic appropriation of the human–animal boundary form provides a welcoming space for any number of the more classically worded human–animal composite descriptions of our boundary form (e.g., metaphysical animal, ethical animal, cultural animal, etc.). To guard against essentialist objectification, however, such descriptors ought to be interpreted with an understanding that the essence human being-in-the-world lies within existence (Heidegger, 1927/1962, 1947/1977).

On a broader level, an existential-humanistic ecopsychology sees the whole living ecosystem as part of what defines us as diverse species and as individuals, so much so that alienation from it can cause distress and, in the case of human beings, ontological guilt. Human being-in-the-world is understood as inextricably intertwined with the lives of other animals and calls for a responsible relation to our shared ecosystem. Moreover, optimal functioning is defined, in part, by a characterological love of all living things. In this sense, an existential-humanistic ecopsychology is characterized less by a being-towards-death and more by a being-towards-life.

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