

Educating For and Through Nature: A Merleau-Pontian Approach

Ruyu Hung

Published online: 26 October 2007
© Springer Science+Business Media B.V. 2007

Abstract This paper aims to explore the relationship between humans and nature and the implied intimacy, so-call ‘ecophilia,’ in light of the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty. It is revealed from the Merleau-Pontian view of body and nature that there may be a more harmonious relationship between humankind and nature than the commonly assumed, and an alternative understanding of education may thus arise. Following an introduction, this paper falls into three parts: an exploration of the meaning of nature, the corporeality of the body as central to our encounter with nature and the educational implications. The introduction argues that central to one’s understanding of nature is one’s understanding of oneself and the world. To some extent, our current environmental problems are related to a negative understanding of nature. The meaning of nature and our relationship with it will be elaborated by the exploration of the key significance of body to be found in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy. It will be argued that overall, our understanding of the body may be central to reconnecting humankind and nature. Such a re-conceiving of the part played by the body in our relationship with nature may re-orient education towards a love of nature: ecophilia.

Keywords Ecophilia · Education · Merleau-Ponty · Nature

Introduction

With our increasing awareness of various kinds of on-going environmental degradations, more and more philosophers are turning their attention to environmental issues and making efforts to trace their origins back to fundamental cultural inadequacies (White 1974). A conclusion accepted by many of these philosophers is that the environmental crisis originates from the modern worldview in Western culture, the so-called “Culture of Denial”

R. Hung (✉)
National Chiayi University, 85 Wenlong Village, Mingshong, Chiayi 621, Taiwan
e-mails: hungryu@mail.ncyu.edu.tw; hungryu@yahoo.com.tw

R. Hung
University of Bath, Bath, UK

(Bowers 1997). The culture of denial or the modern worldview that is practiced in many forms such as the consumer life-style, the tendency of compliance with modern science and technology, and so forth, is “having such a devastating impact on the life-sustaining characteristics of ecosystems” (Bowers 1997, p. 37). It might be seen as including a cluster of ideologies hazardous to ecological health, including consumerism, technocentrism, rationalism, and dualism. A basic belief underpinning these ideologies is the so-called anthropocentrism or homocentrism or human-centrism,¹ which could be defined as “the belief there is a clear and morally relevant dividing line between humankind and the rest of nature, that humankind is the only principal source of value or meaning in the world” (Eckersley 1992, p. 51). Such anthropocentrism is recognized by some scholars as one of the factors contributing to the anti-ecological paradigm of thought threatening the ecosystem (Plumwood 1990). Although it is claimed that the root of anthropocentrism can be traced back to the Old Testament where man is described as being given dominion over nature (White 1974), its influence can be seen in the formation of the theories and the practices of modern education, hence it continues to impact on younger generations. Therefore, only when “the culture of modernism is fundamentally altered, which in part means altering what students learn” (Bowers 1997, p. 18), is it likely we shall stop passing on the beliefs and practices harmful to the environment.

It has been argued that among what students have learned, the concept of ‘nature’ is one of the most relevant to the understanding of environment and environmental problems (Bonnett 2004). The understanding of nature underlies humankind’s self-knowledge and conception of non-human beings. “Nature” orientates not only the way people think and act toward themselves, but also their attitude toward the world. Expressed in a different way, one’s understanding of “nature” initiates “a certain vision of reality” (Bonnett 2004, p. 119). The significance of the concept “nature” is thus highlighted from the preceding brief discussion. But what is “nature” indeed? Or what is the sense of “nature” and how is it conceived? Moreover, what view of nature is taught in educational institutions and how is it imparted?

We may begin by noting that many aspects of a typical educational environment are not “natural.” For example, the setting of many schools is almost entirely artificial: reinforced-concrete buildings, brick enclosures, and playgrounds paved with rubber mats or concrete floors. It could be hard to find even a small piece of grassland on the campus in some schools. The presence of weeds, fallen leaves, and insects is rarely celebrated by many educators. The “natural” living things permitted might be potted plants and pets. As for the non-visual aspects of schools, usually such space is filled with “wholly human sounds (radios, TV, sometimes even our own voices)” (Weston 2002, p. 40). When pupils are learning about nature or natural beings such as birds or insects, the reality of their twittering and chirpings or their looks is frequently conveyed by means of artificial and technological devices. What is the sense of nature being imparted to pupils by such means? What has been suggested to pupils, through the educational setting described above, is very likely a “nature” whose defining characteristics are tameness, domestication and passivity rather than a “nature” of activity, dynamics, and potency.

There is a tendency in modern culture to regard nature as the totality of non-human beings, submissive, and subordinate. The progress of history is interpreted as the dynamics

¹ Among these terms, the most commonly used one is ‘Anthropocentrism’. While the term ‘Homocentrism’ can be referred to *Radical Ecology* by C. Merchant, ‘human-centrism’ referred to “Path beyond human-centeredness: lessons from liberation struggles” by V. Plumwood, in A. Weston (ed.) *An invitation to environmental philosophy*, pp. 69–106

of humankind's separation from nature and mastery over it. "What men want to learn from Nature is how to use it in order wholly to dominate it and other men" (Horkheimer and Adorno 1972, p. 4). "Nature" is something different and alienated from humankind, it is the "other" to be ruled and tamed by humans. From this perspective, "human" and "nature" seem to be two separate entities incompatible and mutually exclusive. This view produces the human/nature divide or dualism and two separate realms: the human and the natural. Implicit in this view is a belief of human uniqueness, i.e., rationality. Rationality is frequently regarded as the main tool and distinguishing feature for humankind to separate themselves from and achieve mastery over the nonhumans. As Glacken (1974, p. 22) states, "The assumption of rationality, that Western civilization was at the apex of civilizations in the march of progress, implied that mastery was rational mastery, that masters of nature were rational masters." The history of modern Western civilization, on its way toward Enlightenment, is a paean of conquest and mastery over nature. In the name of Enlightenment human rationality not only penetrates and idealizes nature with forms and axioms, thereby turning it into "mere objectivity," but also empties the meanings subjectively perceived in nature and humans' lifeworld (Horkheimer and Adorno 1972, p. 9).

The concern about this derogatory sense of nature is echoed in many approaches to environmental education² and some of them prompt much debate. First, the understanding of the concept of nature to environmental education is still framed by modern thinking (Stables 2001), which means the human/nature divide could continue its impact. Second, even if the approaches of environmental education are adopted with caution against the modern presuppositions, there could be one problem that remains. When environmental education is regarded as one of many learning subjects, distinct from social study, mathematics, and other subjects, the presupposition of a human/nature divide might still underlie the other subjects or disciplines. As David Orr (1992, p. 90) reminds us, "all education is environmental education." The point here is that all education has implications for environmental education, explicitly or implicitly. For example, it is potentially self-defeating in one class to teach against the stereotype that nature is inferior to humanity and in another class to teach about benefits of the development of land. Our request here is not to invent a set worldview, totalizing, and all-encompassing, as the ultimate educational standard, but to ask for a thinking experiment to sketch a lifeworld where the human/nature divide or dualism is no longer simply assumed and the sense of environmental education as a single discrete discipline or subject comes up for re-appraisal. The key of the thinking experiment is the reconceiving of the sense of "nature" and its relationship with humankind. This reconceiving of the meaning of nature entails how humankind understands itself and the world, and how humans connect with the world including the other people and other beings. The most important point is the sense of the reciprocity between

² For instance, an influential and typical definition of environmental education was formulated in an IUCU/UNESCO "International Working Meeting on Environmental Education in the School Curriculum" held in 1970. The definition is described as follows: "Environmental education is the process of recognizing values and clarifying concepts in order to develop skills and attitudes necessary to understand and appreciate the inter-relatedness among man, his culture, and his biophysical surroundings." *International Working Meeting on Environmental Education in the School Curriculum*, Final Report, (Switzerland: IUCU, September 1970). Take another later example. The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, having met at Rio de Janeiro from 3 to 14 June 1992, reaffirmed the Declaration of the United Nations Conference on the Human, Environment. The first principle of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development proclaims that: "Human beings are at the center of concerns for sustainable development. They are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature." *Report of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment*, Stockholm, (United Nations publication, Sales No. E. 73. II.A.14 and corrigendum, 5–16 June 1972), chap. I.

humans and nature. To that end, I shall employ a term converted boldly from E. O. Wilson's (1984) "biophilia": "ecophilia."

Sense of Nature

How is nature understood? There are many ways in which the term "nature" can be interpreted, including "world," "environment" or "wilderness." The term world can be understood from the geographical or cultural aspect. It is often used to refer to the Earth as a whole including all its countries and peoples; sometimes to describe the societies, institutions and the state, or scene of human existence; sometimes to refer to places, events, and ways of life; and sometimes to human affairs. As for the term "environment," it is often taken to refer to surroundings or habitat, composed of circumstances, people, things, and events. But most of the time, especially for environmentalists, it is regarded as the natural world of land, sea, air, plants, and animals. The second sense of environment is closely related to the term wilderness. "Wilderness" is often used to define the area where plants and animals grow in an uncontrolled manner. Wilderness is an area free from human cultivation or intervention. The senses of these terms are related to that of nature but not equivalent. For example, natural law or law of nature, whether in the realm of science or philosophy, indicates an objective norm or a set of objective norms that holds universally. But "natural law" cannot be substituted for "world law" or "environmental law" or "wild law." Moreover, the term "nature" cannot be replaced with "world" or "environment" or "wilderness" when used to discuss "human nature." Overall, what is interestingly noteworthy is that these concepts, with meanings overlapping but discrepant, reveal diverse approaches to perceiving nature. The sense of nature is inextricable from the way of making sense of it, our conceiving and perceiving of it.

Michael Bonnett (2003, 2004) has provided a thorough discussion of the concept of nature and elaborated four senses of it and this may provide a good starting point to consider the meaning of "nature." The four senses are as follows. First, nature can be thought of as the greater scheme of things, some kind of "natural order." This could be understood from scientific or economic or religious perspectives. Second, nature is non-human, "essentially independent of human purposes and culture" (Bonnett 2003, pp. 579–592, 2004, p. 120). Third, nature is the essence taken to be inherent or innate in human beings or things. The Romantics, like Rousseau, interpreted attunement with such a natural essence as the goal of self-fulfillment. However, other philosophers, such as existentialists, oppose the idea that there is some pre-determined human essence. Finally, "nature" can mean what is healthy, normal, innately right or good. The last sense, related to the above, is often contrasted with what are taken to be artificial and corrupting social conventions. Bonnett (2003, p. 591, 2004, p. 122) suggests from the above a unifying idea of nature: "nature conceived as the 'self-arising'."

Nature thus conceived as the "self-arising" is most explicit in the wilderness sense of nature, but it is just as powerful in the other senses. The force of referring to something as the *natural* order is to convey that it is not simply a human artifact... As the natural order, it ever precedes us and lies beyond us. To refer to what is inherent or innate has the same connotation, and the point of describing something properly as natural in the sense of arbiter of rightness is to express an intuition that its authority is not up for question because it is rooted in some independently pre-ordained realm... (Bonnett 2003, p. 591)

According to Bonnett, this understanding of nature as self-arising suggests some underlying characteristics of nature, including its otherness, continuity and integrity, epistemological mystery, ultimate inescapability, unrepeatability, and intrinsic value. In other words, nature is not experienced as a human invention but rather as something always beyond the human will. But how can humans perceive something beyond their will? How is it possible for humans to learn something “other”? This interrogation brings us to Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy.

Merleau-Ponty has discussed the primordial meaning of “nature.” He points out that the word “nature” in Greek comes from the verb *φύω*-, which infers the vegetative; in Latin, the word comes from *nascor*, which means “to be born,” “to live.” From the above, a brief and temporary conclusion can be drawn:

Nature is what has a meaning, without this meaning being posited by thought: it is the autoproduction of a meaning. Nature is thus different from a simple thing. It has an interior, is determined from within; hence the opposition of “natural” to “accidental.” Yet nature is different from man: it is not instituted by him and is opposed to custom, to discourse. (Merleau-Ponty 2003, p. 3)

This seems on one level to take nature as something outside the human, something opposite to the human, but paradoxically there is some part in the human being that is nature. The Merleau-Pontian idea of nature therefore suggests a promising perspective from which to rethink “nature,” “human,” and “nature/human.”

Corporeality as the Encounter of Human with Nature

There is some part in human self-arising not determined by the mind. This incorporates physical development, sentiments, sensations, and more fundamentally, birth and death. No one can fully control or manipulate one’s growing, sensing, and aging. Medicine or gene technology may affect the pace of growth, the time of birth or death, but it will not change the life passage occurrences such as birth, adolescence, senescence, and demise. The reality of life reveals the natural part within humans. There is a potential danger within this view, however, it seems to suggest a dangerous neodualism which reseparates the nature in human from the human body by reifying the nature in human, so that the nature in human becomes an invisible master to conduct the body, just like a pilot in the body-vehicle. This neodualism either goes back to the traditional Cartesian dualism or turns into materialism. Either way leading to the human/nature divide and its metamorphosis, the mind/body dualism, resets its trap.

However, this trap could be avoided if Merleau-Pontian views of nature and body can be appropriately grasped and the human/nature divide or the mind/body dualism can be rejected. The Merleau-Pontian perspective of nature reveals the indivisibility of human and nature, the inseparableness of mind and body. In his classic *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty explores actual experience and reveals the primordial relationship of body-subject and the world. This discussion about the pathologies of phantom limb and anosognosia of the brain-damaged patients discloses the reality often overlooked, that the body makes the world, and vice versa.

In so far as I have a body through which I act in the world, space, and time are not, for me, a collection of adjacent points nor are they a limitless number of relations synthesized by my consciousness, and into which, it draws my body. I am not in

space and time, nor do I conceive space and time: I belong to them, my body combines with them and includes them. (Merleau-Ponty 1962, p. 140)

The body does not passively receive the stimuli from the world, but actively absorbs and adapts them. Take an instance presented in *Phenomenology of Perception*. A patient named Schneider lost some particular body capacities due to the brain injury and showed some morbid motility such as psychic blindness and amnesia concerning names of colors (Merleau-Ponty 1962, pp. 103–110, 175–176). The psychic blindness made him

unable to perform ‘abstract’ movement with his eyes shut...such as moving arms and legs to order, or bending and straightening a finger. Nor can he describe the position of his body or even his head, or the passive movements of his limbs. Finally, when his head, arm, or leg is touched, he cannot identify the point on his body; he cannot distinguish two points of contact on his skin even as much as three inches apart; and he cannot recognize the size or shape of objects placed against his body. (Merleau-Ponty 1962, p. 103)

Merleau-Ponty ascribes the disabilities to the deficiency of performing abstract movements “which are not relevant to the actual situation” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, p. 103). The performing of the abstract movement such as signifying something with a symbol or the movements mentioned above needs a more fundamental background including the “intentional arc” and the “body image,” both pre-constructed through the motility of the body. First of all, the “intentional arc” means not only “the unity of the senses, of intelligence, of sensibility and motility” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, p. 136), but also the life of consciousness subtending “cognitive life, the life of desire or perceptual life” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, p. 136). In addition, the “body image” intertwined with the experience of the body as well as the experience of the body in the world is as a “system of present positions...and as an open system of an infinite number of equivalent positions directed to other ends” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, p. 141). The body therefore could be sensed as a reservoir accumulating the experiences unceasingly. As for the case of Schneider, although he lost the ability to perform the abstract movements, meaning some rifts in his body image and the intentional arc, amazingly, the remaining ability to perform actual movements that were situated in the concrete world, not in the mind, compensated for the loss. When he was asked to perform the abstract movement such as locating the point touched on his skin, he would set his whole body in motion, narrowed down the region and finally posited the location (Merleau-Ponty 1962, p. 107). The process of the positing is, to Merleau-Ponty, the vital beckoning of the body to itself and to the world. The thorough discussion of the pathological reduction in *Phenomenology of Perception* will go beyond the scope of this paper, so the account of the case is halted. The point worth attention here is what Merleau-Ponty reminds us: the individual may profitably be thought of, not as a self-closed corpse, but as a body, an open field, experiencing the world and adapting oneself ceaselessly; no matter the body is normal or deficient, one always keeps sensing, creating, and living as a complete being. “Our bodily experience of movement is not a particular case of knowledge; it provides us with a way of access to the world and the objects with a ‘praktognosia,’ which has to be recognized as original and perhaps as primary” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, p. 140). Thus, he says:

I am my body, at least wholly to the extent that I possess experience, and yet at the same time my body is as it were a ‘natural’ subject, a provisional sketch of my total being. (Merleau-Ponty 1962, p. 198)

The world is not what I think, but what I live through. (pp. xvi–xvii)

However, the above does not mean that the world is a mere product of the body-subject, or it is a result of idealism. “What is given is not the thing on its own, but the experience of the thing, or something transcendent standing in the wake of one’s subjectivity...” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, p. 325). One’s world, full of other objects, is a world of meanings posited by oneself through the interaction between the body and the world. The meaning of the world and the objects cannot be exhausted for, as “the horizon of all horizons, the style of all possible styles” (p. 330), the world is the unity of fundamental abundance and possibilities.

Up to this moment, one doubt might arise from the previous discussions about the terms “nature” and “world” and thus needs more clarification. First of all, as mentioned earlier, the concepts “nature” and “world” may have overlapping but not equivalent meanings. It is common to understand “world” as some field consisting of both artificial and the natural worlds. By contrast, the concept “nature” is often understood as the natural environment or natural world and nothing more. In that case, the concept “world” can include the concept “nature,” but not contrariwise. When Merleau-Ponty often uses the discussion of the “world” to imply “nature,” he seems to commit a fallacy of undistributed middle. Actually, this fallacy is due to the misunderstanding of Merleau-Pontian conceptions of nature and world. In his view, nature denotes something “primordial,” some kind of encountering “in which the subject, spirit, history, and the whole of philosophy are involved” (Merleau-Ponty 1970, p. 64). The Merleau-Pontian nature includes not only the common sense of natural world, but also humanly world. Thus, “[w]hether in the case of individual event of birth, or the birth of institutions and societies, the originary relation between man and being...occurs in each man capable of perception” (Merleau-Ponty 1970, pp. 64–65). It is the scope of “nature” that is capable to include that of “world,” not the scope of world to contain that of nature. Therefore, the exploration of the relationship between the body and its world is sufficient to reveal the relationship between the body and nature.

The Merleau-Pontian approach to the body, the world and the relationship between them inspires us to envisage a deeply metaphysical significance of nature. It can be principally found that, from the Merleau-Pontian perspective, there are “nature-s” in and around the body. The body is the pivot to entwine internal and external nature (i.e., the individual body and the surroundings). Three significant points of the sense of nature can come to light before us by this entwinement. First, the sense of nature is understood as lively corporeality rather than an inert material; the corporeality of the body is embodied in, in the term of Merleau-Ponty, the flesh as well that of the Nature in the earth. Second, the traditional separation of body and nature only exists on the intellectual aspect; they are the various facets of “one” when viewed on the ontological or existential plane. Finally, an interrelated dynamics is involved between the body and its world. The condition or the situation of body does not interdict the dynamic process between it and its world. For example, even though the body is somewhat disabled, it still lives its life, lives its world.

Overall, what is revealed from the previous discussion is a fecund sense of “nature.” On the one hand, as a realm external to humans, Nature is the primordially engaging in the bodies of human beings and the others, inhabiting the encountering of the interaction between all bodies. On the other hand, as an internal realm, nature is the body as the core to anchor its own world by hinging the traces, or stimuli, out of the surroundings, to make sense of them through the process of interpretation and appropriation, to constitute a world for itself and at the same time constitute itself within Nature. That is why Nature is what “we have arisen, in which our beginnings have posited little by little until the very moment of tying themselves to an existence which they continue to sustain and aliment” (Merleau-Ponty 1970, p. 64). To live the body is therefore to live in nature and through it and this is the reciprocity between the body and nature.

Educating for Love of Nature: Ecophilia

It can be revealed from what has been said that, if one is one's body, and one's body shares the corporeality of Nature, there might be the inner- and inter-relationships between one's body and nature. When one exists, one lives in the web of relationships, but the web is not something outside him/her. As Merleau-Ponty ends in his book: "Man is but a network of relationships, and these alone matter to him" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, p. 465). This implies, not only humans, but also nonhuman animals. As long as one is living, one fastens one's world through a perceiving body. Take another example proposed by Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. 77). Even an insect, a so-called lower animal, being able to substitute one sound leg for another cut-off one in the performance of an act, shows the responsive interrelationships between the body and its world. Therefore, "what is found behind the phenomenon of substitution is the impulse of being-in-the-world... When we say that an animal *exists*, that it *has* a world, or that it *belongs* to a world... It presents only a practical significance; it asks for only bodily recognition; it is experienced as an 'open' situation, and 'requires' the animal's movements, just as the first notes of a melody require a certain kind of resolution..." (Merleau-Ponty 1962, p. 78). The proto-way an insect experiences and engages the surroundings through its own body may be fundamentally no different—if simpler—from the way any human does. In more general terms, all the living bodies are involved in nature and participate with each other. Here is revealed the profound pregnancy of ecological thought and the implications of considerable pedagogical significance.

First of all, the Merleau-Pontian view suggests that curricula and the settings of learning may include not only the conventionally accepted idealities—abstract, general, ordered, systematized, and everlasting—but also one's own authentic experiences (the *Erlebnis*) and facts, brute, raw and changeable. It may reveal one more possibility to envisage education: education of the naïve, which takes the trivia including the pieces and details of ordinary life as part of educating: the scent of a new grass, a glimpse of the star deep in the night.

Second, central to this view are the notions of interrelatedness and reciprocity intertwined between humans and non-humans. Every part of the world may affect each other and change the whole. One is what one has experienced and what one is experiencing. At the same, one has been and is being experienced by the others. This is what Merleau-Ponty defines, in Husserl's term, the *Ineinander*: "the inherence of the self-in-the-world or of the world-in-the-self" (Merleau-Ponty 1970, p. 108). Thus, we could find ourselves dwelling in the world and in the others and discover the world or the other beings in ourselves. This holistic understanding might provide us a new horizon to rethink the meaning and *telos* of education.

For a long time education has been taken as a means to make people become more civilized out of the original state of innocence. Many philosophers take rationality as the ideal of education. Immanuel Kant, for example, points out that the human has contrasting features: instinct and rationality. The human needs "a master who will break his self-will and force him to obey a universally valid will... Where is he to find this master?... The supreme guarantor should be just in himself and still be a man" (Kant 1983a, pp. 33–34). In addition, "Enlightenment is the emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's own understanding... The motto of Enlightenment is therefore: *Sapere aude!* Have courage to use your own understanding" (Kant 1983b, p. 41, 1997). From this can be seen the significance of improvement of the inborn rationality and control of the natural desires. There is more about the importance to develop human rationality: "Man can only become man by education... The uncultivated man is crude, the

undisciplined is unruly” (Kant 1900, pp. 6–7). Thus, the aim of education is the means to bring humans out of the natural state of obscurity. Human/nature dualism is implicit in the Kantian rationalist approach to education that is inclined to restrain human instinct and keep education distant and indifferent to nature. By contrast, the Merleau-Pontian view challenges the accepted dualism and prompts different ways of conceiving of nature and the relationship between human and nature. We may thus treat nature with more concern, attentiveness, and even esteem. The nature esteemed could be understood from two aspects: the internal and the external, or, the interior and the exterior, although the nature internal and the nature external are *One* embodied in different facets. Internal nature refers to the living body, which holds the crux connecting the individual with other bodies and the world, while external nature is the totality of otherness including living beings and non-living beings. The task of education therefore turns into “knowing oneself”—“*In te redi; in interiore homine habitat veritas*,” (Saint Augustine, in Merleau-Ponty 1962, p. xi, footnote 1)—not as a soul or an inner man, but as a body. The *veritas* is not the transcendental truth, but the inner- and inter-relationships between oneself with Nature, between the body and the earth, between the interior and the exterior. This self-understanding brings us to the following point.

Finally, since the body is the locus of converging experiences, the locality of the body influences the process of experiencing and perceiving. It is therefore appropriate for learning to occur in the natural context. The genuine experience of nature can be obtained through one’s interacting with, engaging in the shifting of nature, and embracing nature. However, there may be immoderate dependence on printed or mediated materials for learning related to nature. The nature presented in the processed information is objectified and distanced from children’s living experiences and it can hardly therefore initiate them into an agreeable approach to nature. For example, butterflies, a large group of insects commonly found in Taiwan, are used to symbolize beauty; while, at their first stage of the life circle, larvae or caterpillars are antipathetic to many people. The ambivalence discloses the insincerity of the distanced experience of nature. People learn “about” nature, but not “in” nature, not “through” nature. What is noteworthy here is that we do not mean the experience “in” and “through” nature must take the place of the experience “about” nature. What concerns is the thought that life could be better, more creative, and interesting if humans have more and diverse accesses to encounter with nature. One of the ways to increase the accesses may be to educate in and through nature. According to Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. 203), “Our own body is in the world as the heart is in the organism: it keeps the visible spectacle constantly alive, it breathes life into it and sustains it inwardly, and with it forms a system.” One’s body lives a world of meaning for itself by perception. Such a view reflects the following remarks:

While I perceive, and even without having any knowledge of the organic conditions of my perception, I am aware of drawing together somewhat absent-minded and dispersed “consciousness”: sight, hearing and touch, with their fields, which are anterior, and remain alien, to my personal life. The natural object is the track left by the general existence. (Merleau-Ponty 1962, p. 347)

These words inspire us to reconceive the practice of education: when educating could take place in nature and through nature, it is possible to educate “for” nature. Let all the organs of sensation greet nature: to see, to sniff, to hear, and to touch. Let us use every part of the body to caress and be caressed by nature. Let us be in the midst of earth, air and water and infiltrate the whole body with them. If the bodily communing with nature could be provided as one of the learning pathways besides the traditional view of studying about nature,

the young could have more chances to obtain the genuine experiences “through” nature, and so arouse in themselves the spontaneous feelings for nature. The term “ecophilia” used here refers to the innate intimacy of the body with nature. “Ecophilia” is converted from the term “biophilia” of E. O. Wilson. Biophilia is defined admirably by E. O. Wilson as “the innate tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes” (1984, p. 1) and “the innate affiliation of human beings to other living organisms” (Wilson 1996, p. 165). The intention of the transformation of the word from biophilia into ecophilia aims to stress that not only living beings but also non-living beings are parts of human life, that they are “given to me along with the parts of my body...in a living connection comparable, or rather identical, with that existing between the parts of my body itself” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, p. 205). Viewed in this light, the perceiving body could be understood as the anchor for mooring the interior and the exterior to live a life and a world. The sensation, perception and motility of a body are the starting point to sense the inborn affinity for nature, while they are often suppressed in the traditional teaching setting because the body has always been regarded as inferior to the mind from the traditional view. One of the goals of education commonly recognized is to teach students to develop the rationality to govern the flesh. Seldom has an aim of education been heard to encourage students to follow the natural inclinations and let their feelings guide the actions. The point here is not to defend the opposition between body and mind or the mastery of body over mind, but the opposition that has been taken for granted and accepted for a long time might be questioned and the body that has been belittled could retrieve its status in education.

To know one’s own body and its change and potentiality may be the first step in learning in and through nature, viz one part of knowledge of oneself. It is a challenge to the traditional education because the body has been taken as a taboo in the schools. In Taiwan, there are many official do’s and don’ts in the schools used to surveil or discipline or control the body in its entirety, such as the uniforms or the regulation on the hairstyle of secondary school students. The hair regulation was officially proclaimed and implemented in 1969, and was abolished in 1987 by the Ministry of Education (MOE). The peculiarity is that the educators continued to curb the hairstyle of students until a petition was finally sent to the MOE in 2005. Then the MOE restated that no hair regulation was implemented in any schools (Yang 2005). This reveals the belief of control of the body deep-seated in the education.

The second step to educate in and through nature may involve changing the setting, the material, the curriculum, and the physical environment. Education may then be more than an indoor activity. William Morton Wheeler compared the naturalist with the professional biologist to explain the difference between the authentic learning of outdoor experience and the abstract studying of indoor experimentation (Quote from D. W. Orr 1992, p. 87). The latter way of learning promotes not only the specialization of science but also the “oversimplification and the tendency to undue isolation of the organisms...from their natural environment” (Wilson 1992, p. 87). Unfortunately it may be the most common way of learning in schools. School children sit indoors all day—for classes or exams or even rests. Sadly, in Taiwan many children keep staying indoors even when they are after school or on holidays because they have extension classes of the cram school to take. What is to be regretted is the loss of the precious time of life to nourish the inborn ecophilia for other living beings and the world. If, as D. W. Orr states, “Real learning is participatory and experiential, not just didactic” (Wilson 1992, p. 91), then it is reasonable to increase the opportunities of children to experience and engage in nature so as to incite the sensitivity of ecophilia and broaden its purview. Here the opportunities concern the way education occurs and its content including the real educating experience in nature, the image of nature in the textbooks throughout all subjects, and the way people talk about and act

toward nature. Educating in and through nature therefore could not be taken as one single subject or discipline. It could be an approach to reflect and reshape the way of life and a series of experiences aimed at understanding and loving oneself as well as the world.

Conclusion

Educating for nature, overall, may imply the orientation of human beings to live and learn in nature, through nature and for nature as well as in, through and for one's body. David Abram (1996), drawing in Merleau-Ponty, states:

Humans are tuned for relationship. The eyes, the skin, the tongue, and the nostrils—all are gates where our body receives the nourishment of otherness. This landscape of shadowed voices, these feathered bodies and antlers and tumbling streams—these breathing shapes are our family, the beings with whom we are engaged, with whom we struggle and suffer and celebrate. (Abram 1996, p. ix)

Our body is the achievement of evolution as are other beings. It is not a vehicle of mind. It incorporates the mind itself. Once our body retrieves esteem in education, the interconnection between human beings and other beings might be truly valued. Then the way people live, not just how they talk, could be genuinely changed. Ecophilia is therefore possible to be educated through the interrelation and intimacy of lived body and Nature.

The Merleau-Pontian approach reveals a potential realm to re-conceive bodily experience through nature and its educational significance. However, there may be unsatisfactoriness worth more exploration and clarification in the future as Merleau-Ponty's philosophy and its implication in education and environmentalism or ecological thinking have been more and more active recently (Abram 1995, 1996; Brown and Toadvine 2003; Evernden 1985; O'Loughlin 1995). The unsatisfactoriness may convey the following points. First of all, Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is often described as philosophy of ambiguity, which not only highlights the abundant possibilities of understanding his thought but also unmasks the vulnerability of grasping his idea in general due to the lack of definable system and the shifting of focus. This is in tune with the following point: Merleau-Ponty (1988) in his later works uses the expressions of "a-philosophy" and "non-philosophy" to demonstrate a new orientation of his philosophy: negative philosophy—the sort of philosophy "has access of the absolute, not as 'beyond'..." According to Silverman (1988), the later Merleau-Pontian thought is directed to a fundamental ontology through a rereading of Heidegger. The non-philosophizing of philosophy seems to suggest that Merleau-Ponty attempts to search for an absolute Reality or Being at the risk of contradicting with the idea of body-subject-as-lived-experience. Some other debates may be found in the feminist criticism (Sullivan 1997, 2000, 2002). For example, a feminist philosopher Sullivan (1997) claims that the Merleau-Pontian body is an anonymous body "that has no particularity—such as that provided by gender, sexuality, class, race, age, culture, nationality, individual experiences and upbringing..." While the other philosophers, such as Stoller (2000), retort that the critique consists in the confusion of neutrality with anonymity. The unsatisfactory points listed above may not convey the indefiniteness in Merleau-Ponty's thought but reveal the significance to make more in-depth exploration. After all, it is shown that Merleau-Pontian views of nature and body-subject are potential to develop alternative perspectives of educational philosophy; however, more deliberate exploration could avail to construct a coherent and feasible Merleau-Pontian educational philosophy.

Acknowledgments Special thanks to Professor Michael Bonnett and Professor Andrew Stables for their critical, helpful, and brilliant advice. This revised version has benefited from the comments of the reviewers.

References

- Abram, D. (1995). Merleau-ponty and the voice of the earth. In M. Oelsclaeger (ed.), *Postmodern environmental ethics* (pp. 57–78). Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Abram, D. (1996). *The spell of the sensuous*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Bonnett, M. (2003). Retrieving nature, education for a post-humanist age. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 37(4), Special issue.
- Bonnett, M. (2004). Lost in space? Education and the concept of nature. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 23, 117–130.
- Bowers, C. A. (1997). *The culture of denial: Why the environmental movement needs a strategy for reforming universities and public schools*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Brown, C. S., & Toadvine, T. (Eds.) (2003). *Eco-phenomenology: Back to the earth itself*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Eckersley, R. (1992). *Environmentalism and political theory*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Evernden, N. (1985). *The natural alien*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Glacken, C. J. (1974). Man against nature: An outmoded concept. In R. T. Roelofs, J. N. Crowley, & D. L. Hardesty (Eds.), *Environment and society: A book of readings on environmental policy, attitudes, and values* (pp. 17–28). New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.
- Horkheimer, M., & Adorno, T. (1972). *Dialectic of enlightenment*. New York: Seabury.
- Kant, I. (1900). *On education*. Boston: D.C. Heath & Co., Publishers. Available online at: <http://www.oll.libertyfund.org/Home3/Book.php?recordID=0235> (accessed 14 March 2007).
- Kant, I. (1983a). Ideas for a universal history with a cosmopolitan intent. In *Perpetual peace and other essays* (pp. 29–40). Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.
- Kant, I. (1983b). An answer to the question: What is enlightenment? In *Perpetual peace and other essays* (pp. 41–48). Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.
- Kant, I. (1997). *What is enlightenment?* Available online at: <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/kant-whatis.html> (accessed 14 March 2007).
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962). *Phenomenology of perception*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1970). *Themes from the lectures at the Collège de France 1952–1960*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1988). Philosophy and non-philosophy since Hegel. In *Philosophy and nonphilosophy since Merleau-Ponty* (pp. 9–83). Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (2003). *Nature: Course notes from the College de France*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Orr, D. W. (1992). *Ecological literacy*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- O’Loughlin, M. (1995). Intelligent bodies and ecological subjectivities: Merleau-Ponty’s corrective to postmodernism’s “subjects” of education. *Philosophy of Education Yearbook 1995*. Available online at: http://www.ed.uiuc.edu/EPS/PES-Yearbook/95_docs/o'loughlin.html (accessed 14 June 2007).
- Plumwood, V. (1990). Path beyond human-centeredness: Lessons from liberation struggles. In A. Weston (Ed.), *An invitation to environmental philosophy* (pp. 69–106). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Silverman, H. J. (1988). *Philosophy and non-philosophy since Merleau-Ponty*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Stables, A. (2001). Who drew the sky? Conflicting assumptions in environmental education, *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 33(2), 245–256.
- Stoller, S. (2000). Reflections on feminist Merleau-Ponty skepticism, *Hypatia*, 15(1), 175–182.
- Sullivan, S. (1997). Domination and dialogue in Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology of perception. *Hypatia*, 12(1), 1–19. Available online at: <http://www.iupjournals.org/hypatia/hyp12-1.html> (accessed 24 June 2007).
- Sullivan, S. (2000). Feminism and phenomenology: A reply to Silvia Stoller. *Hypatia*, 15(1), 183–188.
- Sullivan, S. (2002). Pragmatist feminism as ecological ontology: Reflections on living across and through skins. *Hypatia*, 17(4), 201–217.
- Weston, A. (2002). What if teaching went wild? In *Philosophy of education*, pp. 40–52.

- White, L. (1974). The historical roots of our ecologic Crisis. In R. T. Roelofs, J. N. Crowley, & D. L. Hardesty (Eds.), *Environment and society: A book of readings on environmental policy, attitudes, and values* (pp. 6–16). New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.
- Wilson, E. O. (1984). *Biophilia*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Wilson, E. O. (1996). *In search of nature*. Washington D.C.: Island Press.
- Yang, G.-T. (2005). The complete deregulation on hairstyle in Taiwan. *Newsletter for Research on Applied Ethics*, 35, 39–46 (in Chinese). Available online at: <http://www.ncu.edu.tw/~phi/NRAE/newsletter/no35/35-6%20.pdf> (accessed 15 March 2007).