I. Introduction: Ecological Intentionality as a Philosophical Problem

Contemporary ecological crises are often seen as failures of knowledge, policy, or technology. Although each of these areas is important, such views often overlook the deeper issue of how the natural world is initially revealed to human consciousness. A lack of information (and imagination) about ecosystems and poor ethical regulation do not solely cause ecological destruction. It also results from deeply ingrained habits of perception that render the more-than-human world passive, interchangeable, or merely a tool. This paper argues that ecological intentionality, defined as the way consciousness discloses a meaningful, relational, and worthy world, must be examined through phenomenology and metaphysics, not just ethics.

Phenomenology provides a methodological entry point into this issue by focusing on how meaning develops through lived experience. However, phenomenology alone risks staying descriptive if it doesn't also examine the ontological status of what is encountered. Conversely, metaphysics risks becoming too abstract if it doesn't stay connected to lived experience. Ecological intentionality requires combining both approaches. The world must be shown to appear as meaningful through perception, and it also must be demonstrated to have an intrinsic depth that goes beyond and resists being reduced to subjective construction.

This paper suggests that such a synthesis arises through a careful dialogue between Maurice Merleau-Ponty's account of perception and Edith Stein's metaphysics of finite being and empathy. Merleau-Ponty provides a rigorous phenomenological analysis of perception as an open, embodied interaction with the world. Edith Stein offers

a realist metaphysical framework that affirms the inherent depth, essence, and relational integrity of finite beings. When examined together, these two thinkers reveal ecological intentionality as both a form of perceptual openness and a metaphysical stance of recognition. What follows is an attempt to think slowly with these texts rather than to resolve their tensions prematurely.

Before directly addressing Merleau-Ponty and Stein, however, it is essential to place both thinkers within the Husserlian framework they inherit and modify. Husserl's analyses of intentionality, horizonality, and intersubjectivity offer the conceptual foundation for understanding ecological intentionality as a philosophical issue.

II. Husserlian Foundations: Intentionality, Horizon, and the Limits of Transcendental Phenomenology

Edmund Husserl's phenomenology begins from the claim that consciousness is always intentional. Consciousness is never an empty container or a self-enclosed interiority. It is always consciousness *of* something. This directedness toward an object, whether real, imagined, remembered, or anticipated, constitutes the basic structure of experience.[1] Intentionality is not an added feature of consciousness but its defining characteristic.

In *Ideas I*, Husserl emphasizes that intentional acts do not simply record external objects. Instead, they shape meaning through organized acts of perception, judgment, imagination, and valuation. Importantly, Husserl insists that intentionality does not mean that consciousness creates objects. Rather, it explains how objects are presented as

[1] Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy: First Book*, trans. F. Kersten (Springer, 1983), 83–86.

meaningful within experience. Phenomenological reduction does not deny the existence of the world; it brackets metaphysical assumptions to clarify how the world is disclosed as intelligible.[2]

A crucial component of this disclosure is horizonality. No object is ever given exhaustively. A horizon of implicit references, anticipations, and possibilities surrounds every perception. A perceived object appears against a background that includes its unseen sides, its relations to other objects, and its placement within a broader world. Husserl writes that "every experience has its horizon of actual and possible experiences".[3] This horizonal structure ensures that experience is inherently open, incomplete, and oriented beyond itself.

Horizonality has profound implications for ecological thought. It means that the world is never presented as a closed set of discrete entities. Instead, beings appear within relational fields that exceed immediate perception. Forests, rivers, animals, and landscapes are not isolated objects but nodes within expansive horizons of meaning. Ecological intentionality, at its most basic level, depends on this horizonal openness. Without it, the world would collapse into a series of isolated data points.

Husserl's later work on intersubjectivity further complicates the picture. In *Cartesian Meditations*, Husserl confronts the problem of how other subjects are given within experience. The other is not directly accessible in the same way as one's own consciousness, yet the other is not a mere inference or projection. Husserl argues that the

[2] Husserl, *Ideas I*, 61–64.
[3] Husserl, *Ideas I,* 82.

experience of the other arises through analogical apperception grounded in bodily expression and behavior.[4] The presence of another subject is co-constituted within the life world through shared structures of perception and action.

This account of intersubjectivity is foundational for Stein's early work on empathy and later metaphysical development. It also raises questions that Husserl himself does not fully resolve. If the other is constituted within transcendental consciousness, what safeguards the other's genuine alterity? Does transcendental phenomenology risk collapsing the world into a correlate of subjectivity?

These questions mark the limits of Husserl's project for ecological thought. While Husserl provides indispensable tools for analyzing intentionality and horizonality, his transcendental orientation left the ontological status of non-human beings unresolved. Nature appears as meaningful within experience, but the question of whether this meaning corresponds to an intrinsic depth of being remains open. This unresolved tension sets the stage for Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological reorientation and Stein's metaphysical realism.

Merleau-Ponty radicalizes Husserl's insights by refusing to locate intentionality solely within transcendental consciousness. Stein responds by insisting that being itself must ground the meaningfulness disclosed in experience. Ecological intentionality emerges precisely at this intersection.

---

[4] Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. Dorion Cairns (Springer, 1977), 109–112.

III. Merleau-Ponty: Perception as Lived Openness to the World

Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology begins from dissatisfaction with the dominant philosophical accounts of perception inherited from empiricism and intellectualism. Empiricism treats perception as the passive reception of sensory data, while intellectualism interprets perception as the result of conceptual judgment imposed upon sensations. Both positions, Merleau-Ponty argues, distort the phenomenon they seek to explain by severing perception from lived experience. Against both views, he insists that perception is neither the accumulation of sensations nor the construction of representations, but a primordial way of being oriented toward the world. Perception is how the world first becomes present as meaningful.

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty argues that philosophy must return to "the things themselves," not by reducing experience to pure consciousness, but by attending to the lived body as the site where meaning emerges. The body is not a material object among others, nor is it a detached subject that surveys the world. It is the condition of possibility for perception itself. As Merleau-Ponty famously states, "The body is our general medium for having a world."[5] This claim fundamentally reorients phenomenology. Intentionality is no longer confined to acts of consciousness but is enacted through posture, movement, habit, and orientation.

Perception, on this account, is active rather than receptive. To perceive is not to register an already completed world but to participate in its disclosure. Objects appear within fields of relevance structured by bodily capacities and projects. A path invites

[5] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (Routledge, 2012), 147.

walking, a slope demands a balance adjustment, and a sound calls for attention. These invitations are not imposed by cognition but arise from the reciprocal relation between the body and its environment. For Merleau-Ponty, the world is not neutral matter awaiting interpretation. It is expressive. It solicits engagement.

This expressivity is inseparable from the horizonal structure of perception. Like Husserl, Merleau-Ponty insists that no object is ever given exhaustively. Every perception unfolds against a background of implicit possibilities. Yet Merleau-Ponty radicalizes this insight by showing that horizons are not merely cognitive anticipations. They are bodily and situational. A perceived object is oriented within a spatial, temporal, and practical field that includes what can be reached, avoided, grasped, or traversed. Perception is therefore inseparable from action.

Merleau-Ponty illustrates this point through his analysis of spatiality. Space is not an abstract container in which objects are placed. It is lived space, articulated through bodily orientation. Up and down, near and far, accessible and inaccessible are not neutral coordinates but dimensions of lived experience. A landscape appears differently to one who walks through it than to one who surveys it from above. The meaning of space is inseparable from the body that inhabits it.[6] This has direct implications for ecological intentionality. The natural world is not encountered as an assemblage of objects occupying geometrical space but as a lived environment that shapes and is shaped by bodily presence.

[6] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 281–289.

Merleau-Ponty's critique of objectivism is particularly important here. Objectivism assumes that the world can be fully described from a detached standpoint, independent of any perceiver. While such descriptions may be useful for scientific purposes, Merleau-Ponty argues that they abstract from the primary way the world is given. Scientific objectification presupposes a prior perceptual world that it cannot itself account for. The danger arises when this abstraction is mistaken for reality as a whole. In ecological contexts, this mistake often leads to treating nature as a collection of resources rather than a living environment.

Against this tendency, Merleau-Ponty insists that perception reveals the world as already meaningful. Meaning is not added to a neutral substrate. It is encountered. This does not imply subjectivism. Rather, it means that meaning arises through the encounter between the perceiver and the world. The world has a structure that supports and sustains this encounter. It is precisely this claim that Stein will later ground metaphysically.

Merleau-Ponty's account of perception also emphasizes temporal depth. Perception is never confined to the present instant. Sedimented habits and past experiences shape it. The body remembers how to move, how to respond, how to orient itself. This bodily memory is not representational but practical. It is conveyed through posture and gesture rather than through explicit recollection.[7] Perception, therefore, unfolds within a temporal horizon that binds past, present, and future. This temporal thickness further resists any attempt to reduce perception to momentary data.

[7] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 143–146.

The implications for ecological intentionality are significant. When humans encounter the natural world, they do so through sedimented practices shaped by culture, history, and habit. A forest may appear as a place of dwelling, a site of extraction, or a sacred space, depending on how perception has been trained. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology shows that these differences are not merely interpretive overlays but rather ways in which the world itself comes into view through embodied engagement. Ecological intentionality, therefore, involves not only ethical decision-making but the reformation of perceptual habits.

Merleau-Ponty's later and incomplete (but still valuable) work, particularly *The Visible and the Invisible*, deepens this account without abandoning its phenomenological commitments. While this text is often associated with his ontology of flesh, it also contains important reflections on nature and perception that remain relevant without invoking metaphysical claims beyond the scope of this paper. In his working notes, Merleau-Ponty describes nature as that which "is not constructed, not instituted, but which gives itself."[8] This formulation underscores continuity with his earlier work. Nature is not a conceptual artifact but something that presents itself through perception.

What is crucial here is that Merleau-Ponty does not reduce nature to subjective appearance. The world gives itself. Perception receives what is offered, even as it actively participates in disclosure. This reciprocal structure preserves both openness and

[8] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Northwestern University Press, 1968), 206.

resistance. The world exceeds what is perceived. It cannot be exhausted by any single perspective. This excess is not a failure of perception but a sign of the world's depth.

Yet, Merleau-Ponty remains cautious about metaphysical claims. He resists grounding the depth of the world in a fully articulated ontology of being. His emphasis remains on description rather than metaphysical explanation. This restraint is methodologically deliberate. However, it leaves unanswered the question of why the world possesses the depth and resistance that perception encounters. Is this depth merely phenomenal, or does it correspond to an intrinsic structure of being?

This question marks the point at which Edith Stein's metaphysics becomes indispensable. Merleau-Ponty shows how the world appears as meaningful, expressive, and inexhaustible through perception. Stein will argue that this appearance corresponds to a real ontological depth grounded in finite being itself. Ecological intentionality requires both accounts. Without Merleau-Ponty, perception risks becoming abstract or representational. Without Stein, the depth disclosed in perception risks being reduced to appearance alone.

IV. Edith Stein: Finite Being, Analogy, and Ontological Depth

Edith Stein's *Finite and Eternal Being* represents a decisive expansion of phenomenology beyond its transcendental beginnings. While Stein remains deeply indebted to Husserl's method, she insists that phenomenological description must ultimately give way to metaphysical inquiry if it is to account for the reality encountered in experience. Consciousness does not merely constitute meaning. It encounters being. For Stein, this claim is not a rejection of phenomenology but its fulfillment.

Phenomenology discloses how beings appear, while metaphysics asks what it means for them to be.

Stein's central concern in *Finite and Eternal Being* is the structure of finite existence. Finite beings are characterized by contingency, limitation, and dependence. They do not possess existence by necessity. Their being is received rather than self-grounding. Yet this finitude does not imply insignificance or lack of intelligibility. On the contrary, Stein argues that finite beings possess an intrinsic essence that gives them determinate meaning and form. Each being is what it is, and this "*whatness*" is not reducible to how it appears to a subject.

At the heart of Stein's metaphysics is the doctrine of analogical being. *Being* is not Being in the fullest sense only in God, who is pure act and whose essence is identical with existence. Finite beings participate in being without exhausting it. Their existence is real but derivative. Stein emphasizes that this participation is analogical rather than univocal. Finite beings are genuinely like the eternal source of being, yet they are not identical to it. The analogy preserves both similarity and difference.[9]

This analogical structure has decisive implications for ecological thought. It means that every finite being possesses an objective depth grounded in its participation in being itself. Creatures are not merely aggregates of properties nor mere appearances within consciousness. They are ontologically structured realities whose existence and essence demand recognition. This depth is not conferred by human perception, though it

[9] Edith Stein, *Finite and Eternal Being: An Attempt at an Ascent to the Meaning of Being*, trans. Kurt F. Reinhardt (ICS Publications, 2002), 63–66.

may be disclosed through it. The being of a creature exceeds its usefulness, its visibility, and its conceptualization.

Stein is careful to distinguish essence from existence without separating them. Essence answers the question of what a being is, while existence answers the question of that it is. In finite beings, essence does not guarantee existence. A being's essence is realizable in multiple ways or not at all. Existence is received as a gift. This distinction allows Stein to articulate a metaphysics in which beings are both intelligible and contingent.[10] They are meaningful without being necessary.

Crucially, Stein argues that this metaphysical structure is not inferred abstractly but disclosed through experience. Phenomenology reveals essences by attending to what appears, while metaphysics situates those essences within an account of being. Stein's method, therefore, remains continuous with phenomenology even as it surpasses its methodological limits. She writes that phenomenology provides access to being "from within," while metaphysics seeks to articulate its ultimate ground.[11]

This move directly addresses a limitation in Merleau-Ponty's account. As seen in Part II, Merleau-Ponty describes how perception encounters depth, excess, and resistance in the world. Yet he refrains from grounding this depth ontologically. Stein provides this grounding precisely. The inexhaustibility encountered in perception corresponds to the metaphysical structure of finite being. Beings are inexhaustible because they participate in being without exhausting it.

---

[10] Stein, *Finite and Eternal Being*, 98–105.
[11] Stein, F*inite and Eternal Being*, 72–77.

Stein's account of finite being is also fundamentally relational. No finite being exists in isolation. Each is situated within a network of relations that shape its existence. These relations are not accidental additions but essential dimensions of what a being is. A tree is not merely an isolated object but exists in relation to soil, light, water, and other beings. Stein's metaphysics thus supports an ontology of interdependence without collapsing individual beings into a monistic whole. Each being retains its integrity even as it participates in a broader order of existence.[12]

This insistence on integrity is crucial. Stein rejects any account of being that dissolves individuality into relational flux. While beings are relational, they are not reducible to relations. Each possesses its own center of existence. This balance between relationality and integrity provides an important corrective to ecological frameworks that emphasize interconnectedness at the expense of particularity. Ecological intentionality, on Stein's account, must honor both.

Stein's metaphysical realism also resists reducing nature to human meaning. Because finite beings possess objective essence and existence, they are not dependent on human consciousness for their reality. Human perception may disclose their meaning, but it does not create it. This claim directly challenges instrumental views of nature that treat the non-human world as a projection of human values or needs. Stein insists that beings command recognition by virtue of what they are, not by virtue of what they provide.

At the same time, Stein avoids crude objectivism. Being is not encountered as a brute fact detached from experience. It is disclosed through intentional acts that allow

---

[12] Stein, *Finite and Eternal Being*, 38–40.

beings to appear as what they are. Stein's metaphysics, therefore, requires a mode of access that respects both the reality of beings and the conditions under which they are known. This mode of access is empathy.

Although empathy is developed in detail in *On the Problem of Empathy*, its metaphysical significance is already implicit in *Finite and Eternal Being*. Stein understands empathy not merely as a psychological phenomenon but as a way of encountering the interiority and integrity of another being. Empathy allows one to apprehend another as a center of existence rather than as an object among objects.[13] While Stein's primary focus is interpersonal, the structure of empathy she describes prepares the way for a broader account of how humans may encounter the more-than-human world as possessing its own depth and integrity.

This prepares the synthesis of Stein's thoughts with Merleau-Ponty. Merleau-Ponty shows how perception opens onto a world that exceeds representation. Stein explains why that world possesses an intrinsic depth that resists reduction. Merleau-Ponty's horizons find their metaphysical correlate in Stein's analogical being. Ecological intentionality, when grounded in Stein's metaphysics, becomes more than an attentional stance. It becomes a recognition of real ontological depth.

V. Empathy and Ecological Intentionality: Stein Beyond the Interpersonal

Edith Stein's *On the Problem of Empathy* is often read narrowly as a contribution to the phenomenology of intersubjectivity. While this reading is not incorrect, it risks

[13] Stein, *Finite and Eternal Being*, 112–118.

overlooking the deeper ontological implications of Stein's analysis. For Stein, empathy is not *merely* a psychological mechanism for understanding other persons. It is a fundamental mode of access to the other's being. As such, empathy provides a crucial bridge between phenomenology and metaphysics and is indispensable for articulating ecological intentionality.

Stein begins her analysis by rejecting prevailing theories of empathy that reduce it to imitation, inference, or emotional contagion. Against these accounts, she argues that empathy is a *sui generis* intentional act with its own structure and givenness. Empathy is neither a direct perception nor a representational construction. Rather, it is an experience in which the foreign experience of another is given as foreign.[14] The other's joy, pain, or fear is not experienced as one's own, yet it is genuinely present within consciousness.

This structure is crucial. Empathy preserves alterity. The other is not absorbed into the self, nor is the self-projected outward. Instead, the other is encountered as a center of experience distinct from one's own. Stein insists that this distinction is not an obstacle to knowledge but its very condition. Only because the other is given as other can empathy be an authentic form of access rather than a distortion.[15]

Stein further clarifies this structure by distinguishing between primordial and non-primordial experience. Primordial experiences are those directly lived by the subject. Non-primordial experiences are those given through empathy. Empathetic experience is non-primordial but still genuine. It is not a mere sign or indication. It is a presentation of

[14] Edith Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, trans. Waltraut Stein (ICS Publications, 1989), 10–12.
[15] Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, 14–16.

the other's experience in its own right.[16] This distinction allows Stein to avoid both solipsism and naïve realism. Consciousness is neither sealed off from others nor capable of direct fusion with them.

Although Stein's analysis focuses primarily on human persons, the ontological implications of empathy extend beyond interpersonal relations. What empathy discloses is not simply the mental states of another but the presence of another center of existence. The empathized subject is apprehended as a living being with its own orientation toward the world. This apprehension is grounded in expressive phenomena such as movement, posture, and behavior, but it is not reducible to them. Expression points beyond itself to an interiority that is not directly given but nonetheless real.[17]

This point is decisive for ecological intentionality. When humans encounter non-human beings, they often do so through expressive phenomena. Animals move, respond, and act in ways that suggest orientation, interest, and concern. Even plants and landscapes exhibit patterns of growth, resistance, and response that exceed mechanical description. Stein's account of empathy provides a philosophical framework for understanding how such encounters may disclose real centers of being without collapsing them into anthropomorphic projections.

Stein explicitly connects empathy to the constitution of the real world. In her analysis of intersubjectivity, she argues that the objective world is constituted not by a single subject but through intersubjective experience. The reality of the world depends on

[16] Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, 7–9.
[17] Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, 51–54.

the recognition that others also experience it. Empathy, therefore, plays a constitutive role in establishing the world as more than a private appearance.[18] This claim has far-reaching implications. If the world's objectivity depends on intersubjective access, then modes of access that recognize other centers of experience are essential for preserving the reality of the world itself.

This insight allows empathy to function as an ontological bridge. Empathy is not merely a way of knowing others. It is a way of acknowledging the independence and integrity of beings. Stein emphasizes that empathy corrects the tendency to reduce others to objects of perception or use. Through empathy, one encounters the other as a subject, even when that subjectivity is not directly accessible in the same way as one's own.[19]

At this point, the convergence with Merleau-Ponty becomes clear. Merleau-Ponty shows that perception is already a form of engagement with expressive structures in the world. The world is not mute. It addresses the perceiver through gestures, resistances, and invitations. Stein provides the conceptual resources to interpret this address as more than mere appearance. Empathy allows the perceiver to recognize expressive phenomena as pointing toward real centers of being.

Importantly, Stein does not claim that empathy grants exhaustive knowledge of the other. Empathetic access is always partial. The other retains its opacity. This limitation is not a failure but a condition of respect. The other's interiority is never fully

[18] Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, 65.
[19] Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, 116–118.

transparent. Ecological intentionality, grounded in empathy, therefore resists the impulse to mastery. It fosters a posture of attentiveness rather than domination.

Stein's later metaphysical work clarifies why this posture is appropriate. Because finite beings participate in being analogically, they possess an intrinsic depth that cannot be fully grasped. Empathy becomes the appropriate mode of access to such beings precisely because it respects their finitude and integrity. One does not stand over against beings as a detached observer but encounters them as participants in a shared order of existence.

This account allows ecological intentionality to be articulated as a disciplined philosophical stance. Ecological intentionality is not sentimental identification with nature. It is not the projection of human emotions onto non-human entities. It is an intentional openness grounded in the recognition that beings possess their own centers of existence and meaning. Empathy, understood phenomenologically and metaphysically, makes such recognition possible.

In this way, Stein extends phenomenology beyond its original anthropocentric focus without abandoning rigor. Empathy provides the means by which perception can remain open to otherness while acknowledging ontological depth. Ecological intentionality emerges at precisely this intersection. It is a way of being oriented toward the world that combines perceptual openness with metaphysical respect.

VI. Ecological Intentionality as Phenomenological and Metaphysical Synthesis

The preceding sections have shown that neither phenomenology nor metaphysics alone is sufficient to ground ecological intentionality. Merleau-Ponty provides a rigorous account of how the world is disclosed through lived perception, emphasizing openness, horizonality, and expressive engagement. Stein offers a metaphysical framework that affirms the intrinsic depth, essence, and relational integrity of finite beings. Ecological intentionality emerges precisely at the point where these two accounts are brought into sustained dialogue. It is neither reducible to perceptual attentiveness nor to ontological assertion. It is the structured relation between how beings appear and what they are.

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology establishes that perception is not a detached observation of neutral objects. The perceiver is always already involved in the world through bodily orientation, habit, and responsiveness. The world announces itself through perceptual fields that exceed any fixed representation. This openness is not a deficiency of perception but its defining strength. The perceived world is always more than what is immediately given. Yet Merleau-Ponty resists grounding this excess in metaphysical claims about being itself. He remains committed to description rather than ontological explanation.

Stein's metaphysics answers the question Merleau-Ponty (and Husserl) leaves open. The excess encountered in perception corresponds to the ontological structure of finite being. Beings are inexhaustible because they participate in being without exhausting it. Their depth is not merely phenomenal but real. Stein's doctrine of analogical being affirms that finite creatures possess intrinsic meaning and integrity

independent of human perception. Perception does not confer value upon beings but discloses value that is already there.

Ecological intentionality emerges when these two insights are held together. Ecological intentionality is a structured mode of consciousness in which embodied perception, empathetic recognition, and analogical metaphysics converge to disclose the more-than-human world as intrinsically meaningful and worthy of regard, and in Stein's notion of empathy. Ecological intentionality is therefore both receptive and responsive. It involves being addressed by the world and answering that address through recognition rather than domination.

This synthesis also clarifies the role of empathy. In Merleau-Ponty's account, perception is already an engagement with expressive phenomena. The world is encountered as animated, resistant, and meaningful. Stein's account of empathy explains how such expressivity can be understood to point toward real centers of being rather than mere appearances. Empathy becomes the intentional act through which perceptual openness is transformed into ontological acknowledgment. Through empathy, the perceiver apprehends the other not merely as an object within a field but as a being with its own integrity and orientation.

Importantly, ecological intentionality does not require attributing human consciousness to non-human beings. Stein's account of empathy does not rest on sameness of experience but on analogical access. The other is apprehended as other. This preserves difference while allowing genuine participation. Ecological intentionality thus

avoids both anthropomorphism and reductionism. It neither collapses non-human beings into human categories nor reduces them to inert matter.

The synthesis of Merleau-Ponty and Stein also clarifies why ecological intentionality is not merely ethical in nature. Ethical frameworks often presuppose a prior recognition of value. Ecological intentionality denotes the structure of perception and acknowledgment that enables such recognition. Before one can decide how to act toward the natural world, one must already perceive it as meaningful and worthy of regard. Ecological intentionality operates at this more fundamental level. It shapes the field within which ethical deliberation takes place.

This has methodological implications for a phenomenology of nature. A phenomenology of nature informed by Merleau-Ponty alone risks remaining descriptive without ontological grounding. A metaphysics of nature informed by Stein alone risks abstraction without phenomenological accountability. Ecological intentionality requires a method that remains faithful to lived experience while refusing to collapse being into appearance. It requires phenomenological attentiveness disciplined by metaphysical realism.

Within this framework, nature is encountered neither as a collection of objects nor as a projection of human meaning. It is encountered as a community of finite beings participating in a shared order of existence. Each being appears within perceptual horizons, yet each also exceeds those horizons by virtue of its participation in being. Ecological intentionality is the posture that holds these truths together.

This posture also entails restraint. Because beings possess intrinsic depth that exceeds perception, they resist total comprehension and mastery. Ecological intentionality, therefore, fosters humility rather than control. It acknowledges that the world is not fully available to human projects. This humility is not a limitation but a condition for a genuine relationship. To encounter beings as beings is to allow them to remain other.

At this point, ecological intentionality can be named as a philosophical achievement rather than a metaphor. It is a structured form of intentionality characterized by perceptual openness, empathetic recognition, and metaphysical acknowledgment of finite being. It arises from the convergence of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and Stein's metaphysics and cannot be reduced to either alone.

If ecological intentionality names a fundamental posture of perception and recognition, then it also has implications for spiritual ecology and for phenomenology of nature as a method. These implications must be drawn carefully, without departing from the philosophical foundations established here. The final section will therefore situate ecological intentionality within a broader vision of spiritual ecology, while remaining grounded in phenomenological and metaphysical rigor.

VII. Ecological Intentionality, Spiritual Ecology, and Phenomenology of Nature as Method

The concept of ecological intentionality articulated in this paper does more than describe a particular way of perceiving the natural world. It names a foundational posture toward reality that reshapes how nature is encountered, interpreted, and engaged. By holding

together Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception and Edith Stein's metaphysics of finite being and empathy, ecological intentionality emerges as a disciplined form of openness grounded in ontological recognition. This final section draws out the broader implications of that posture, first for spiritual ecology and then for phenomenology of nature as a methodological orientation.

Spiritual ecology is often approached as a field concerned with values, meaning, or ethical motivation in relation to environmental concern. While these dimensions are important, they presuppose a more basic condition: that the world is already encountered as meaningful, worthy of regard, and resistant to reduction. Ecological intentionality clarifies how such an encounter is possible in the first place. Before one can speak of reverence, care, or responsibility, one must already perceive the world as more than a neutral backdrop for human activity. Ecological intentionality names the structure of consciousness that makes such perception possible.

Within this framework, spiritual ecology is not grounded in sentimentality or projection. It does not require the attribution of human interiority to non-human beings, nor does it depend on metaphoric extensions of religious language. Instead, it arises from a disciplined attentiveness to how beings appear and what they are. Merleau-Ponty shows that the world is encountered as expressive and meaningful through perception. Stein shows that this expressivity corresponds to an intrinsic depth grounded in finite being. Spiritual ecology, understood through ecological intentionality, becomes a response to the reality of beings rather than an imposition upon them.

This response is characterized by reverence, but not reverence understood as withdrawal or idealization. It is reverence grounded in recognition. To encounter a being as possessing intrinsic depth is to acknowledge that it is not exhaustible by human purposes or conceptual schemes. Such acknowledgment fosters restraint. It resists the impulse to mastery that has so often shaped modern relations to the natural world. Spiritual ecology, on this account, is inseparable from humility. It arises from the recognition that beings exceed human grasp.

Ecological intentionality also reshapes the meaning of participation. Participation is not fusion or identification. It is a form of engagement that preserves difference. Stein's account of empathy clarifies this point. Empathy allows one to encounter another as a center of being without collapsing that center into one's own experience. When extended analogically, empathy becomes a way of remaining open to the more-than-human world without erasing its otherness. Spiritual ecology thus becomes a practice of attentive participation rather than control.

This understanding of participation aligns closely with Merleau-Ponty's account of perception as lived openness. The perceiver is not a detached observer but a participant in the world's unfolding. Yet this participation is not totalizing. The world resists complete disclosure. Ecological intentionality preserves this tension. It affirms participation without denying transcendence. Beings are encountered as present and yet always more than what is given.

These insights also have methodological consequences. Phenomenology of nature, if it is to avoid reductionism, must be grounded in ecological intentionality. A

purely descriptive phenomenology of nature risks treating nature as a field of appearances without ontological weight. A metaphysical account of nature that neglects phenomenology risks abstraction detached from lived experience. Ecological intentionality holds these together by insisting that phenomenological description and metaphysical realism are mutually corrective.

As a method, phenomenology of nature begins with attentiveness to how the natural world is given in experience. It attends to perception, embodiment, horizonality, and expressivity. Yet it does not stop there. It asks what these modes of givenness disclose about the being of what is encountered. Stein's metaphysics ensures that phenomenology does not collapse being into appearance. The world encountered through perception is not merely a correlate of consciousness. It is a world of finite beings participating in being itself.

Phenomenology of nature, understood in this way, becomes a practice rather than a technique. It requires cultivating perceptual openness and suspending instrumental habits of attention. It also requires metaphysical seriousness. One must be willing to affirm that beings possess intrinsic meaning independent of human use. Ecological intentionality provides the philosophical grounding for such a practice.

This grounding opens naturally into the broader trajectory of an *Ecology of the Cross*. While a full articulation of that framework lies beyond the scope of this paper, its contours are already visible. Ecological intentionality reveals a world marked by finitude, vulnerability, and interdependence. Beings exist through participation rather than self-sufficiency. Their existence is received rather than possessed. This metaphysical structure

resonates with a theological vision in which relationality, limitation, and self-giving are not failures but fundamental features of reality.

Within such a vision, ecological suffering cannot be dismissed as accidental or irrelevant. The vulnerability of the natural world becomes a site of disclosure rather than mere loss. Ecological intentionality prepares consciousness to encounter this vulnerability without denial or domination. It fosters attentiveness to fragility as meaningful rather than disposable. In this way, ecological intentionality opens the possibility for a theological interpretation of nature grounded in phenomenological and metaphysical rigor rather than sentiment or projection.

The contribution of this paper, then, is not to offer a comprehensive ecological ethic or a theological system. It is to clarify the philosophical conditions under which such projects can proceed responsibly. By synthesizing Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception and Edith Stein's metaphysics of finite being and empathy, ecological intentionality is articulated as a foundational posture toward the more-than-human world. It is a posture marked by openness, recognition, participation, and restraint.

In a time of ecological crisis, such a posture is not optional. It shapes how the world is encountered before decisions are made, before policies are enacted, and before ethics are formulated. Ecological intentionality names the depth at which ecological transformation must occur. It calls for a reformation of perception grounded in an acknowledgment of being. Phenomenology of nature, informed by this synthesis, becomes not only a philosophical method but a way of inhabiting the world with attentiveness and care.

Bibliography

Husserl, Edmund. *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*. Translated by Dorion Cairns. Dordrecht: Springer, 1977.

Husserl, Edmund. *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy: First Book*. Translated by F. Kersten. Dordrecht: Springer, 1983.

Husserl, Edmund. *The Essential Husserl: Basic Writings in Transcendental Phenomenology*. Edited by Donn Welton. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Translated by Donald A. Landes. London: Routledge, 2012.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *The Visible and the Invisible*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968.

Stein, Edith. *Finite and Eternal Being: An Attempt at an Ascent to the Meaning of Being*. Translated by Kurt F. Reinhardt. Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 2002.

Stein, Edith. *On the Problem of Empathy*. Translated by Waltraut Stein. Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1989.