

**Ecological Intentionality, Creaturely Form,
and The Ecology of the Cross**

A Cruciform Phenomenology of Creaturely Relation

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I. Introduction

The question this paper explores is whether ecological intentionality can be developed as a cruciform phenomenology of creaturely relations. Before asking how human beings should act toward the more-than-human world, I examine what kind of world becomes visible when creaturely life is understood as internally formed, dynamically unfolding, and relationally given. What does it take for a perceiver to see that world truthfully? Ecological ethics, environmental policy, and conservation science all assume a perceiver. But the perceiver they assume isn't a neutral observer. They don't stand outside the web of relations they're trying to protect or conserve, and their perception has already been formed, well or badly, before any principle reaches them. Ethics, in the realm of reflective articulation, manifests itself later. What comes first is a perceptual field already molded by habit, embodiment, desire, and relation, and that field can be trained, deformed, disciplined, and transformed. This paper aims to take that idea seriously as a philosophical claim. Therefore, it is phenomenological, metaphysical, and ultimately prescriptive. However, that order of emphasis is about how it's expressed rather than claiming that ethical authority is created by perception. The contribution of this paper, if there is one, lies in describing the structure of an ecological encounter and the formation of the perceiver it requires, rather than in prescribing a specific course of action.

The paper's framework is *The Ecology of the Cross*, honoring Edith Stein's last, unfinished work, *The Science of the Cross*. This describes ecological perception, where engaging with creaturely life, when pursued deeply, follows a pattern Edith Stein developed as a transformation of sight, desire, and self-possession. In this process, the desire for mastery is emptied, allowing the creature to be received as a given rather than grasped. The phrase suggests that the Carmelite concept of purgation reflects a truth about perception in general and ecological

perception specifically: perhaps there is what Stein describes as a zero point before one can see any creature clearly.

The instrument supporting *The Ecology of the Cross* is *ecological intentionality*, used relationally here. One pole involves vital directedness, where a living being tends toward and within a world through its powers to maintain and develop its form. The other pole is perceptual intentionality, where that directed life can become accessible to another embodied perceiver without becoming fundamental to that perceiver or exhausted by the perceiver's horizon. Ecological intentionality highlights the encounter between these poles as it unfolds across intersecting environments, when an embodied perceiver perceives another living being as directed within its own world, while both are situated in ecological fields beyond either horizon. The ecological significance of this term lies in the organism-milieu-perceiver relationship. Ecological intentionality itself remains ethically ambiguous, as it can be partial, possessive, deformed, or increasingly receptive. At a basic level, this relationship exists whenever the directed activity of another living being enters perception through its world-relation, even if that perception is partial or distorted.

The adequacy of ecological intentionality increases as the creature's own directedness becomes perceptible without being exhausted by the perceiver's categories of use. I use "truthful" here to denote that increasing adequacy, a reception answerable to what is given while leaving room for the creature's excess beyond the perceiver's use. *The Ecology of the Cross* offers a specifically theological account of how such reception can be transformed through the reordering of appetites for mastery and possession. Vital directedness, perceptual intentionality,

ecological intentionality, and cruciform perception, therefore, mark four related moments within the framework's duration, each with a distinct role in the argument.¹

Two partially intersecting genealogies are important to note at the outset. The technical genealogy of intentionality runs from the scholastic vocabulary of *intentio* through Brentano and Husserl into later phenomenology. Alongside it is the older Aristotelian genealogy of vital directedness, in which perceiving, desiring, nutritive life, and the powers of soul belong to a wider economy of ensouled activity. Ecological intentionality is my constructive crossing of these genealogies. Their technical differences remain decisive throughout. The continuities concern recurring questions about directedness, givenness, and world-relation, and the divergences concern where directedness is located, how it operates, how widely it extends, and what relation it bears to ethical claim.²

The last divergence requires distinguishing among kinds of priorities. Stein describes a phenomenological priority through empathy (*Einfühlung*) and discloses another center of experience as genuinely given and non-primordial, with an interiority exceeding anything an "I" could possess.³ Merleau-Ponty provides a perceptual field with a genetic and operative priority, as embodied intentionality runs beneath deliberate acts, and ethical reflection arises within the reciprocities the body inhabits before it judges.⁴ Levinas later grants alterity normative priority,

¹ The vital-directedness claim has an Aristotelian pedigree and a contemporary test case in the phenomenology of plant life; see Michael Marder, "Plant Intentionality and the Phenomenological Framework of Plant Intelligence," *Plant Signaling & Behavior* 7, no. 11 (2012): 1365–1372. The cruciform claim is developed in the paper's final section, where the Carmelite analysis of the purgation of the appetites addresses the transformation of desire that phenomenological description, on its own terms, doesn't supply.

² Aristotle, *De Anima* II.5 and II.12, in *De Anima*, trans. C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2017); the Brentanian and Husserlian stages of the lineage are treated in section II as background to the contemporary discussion in Dan Zahavi, "Empathy and Other-Directed Intentionality," *Topoi* 33 (2014): 129–142.

³ Edith Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, trans. Waltraut Stein, 3rd rev. ed. (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1989), §§2–4.

⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (London: Routledge, 2012), preface, on operative intentionality (*fungierende Intentionalität*) as prior to act-intentionality.

with the face that contests the sufficiency of intentional constitution, since the other's claim can't derive its authority from my having first successfully gathered the other into a theme.⁵

Ecological intentionality receives all three priorities at different levels. A creaturely life must be phenomenologically given, and that givenness arises within an embodied field older than reflection. What is given exceeds every intention that would make it mine. The final portion of this paper will argue that the Carmelite night addresses a further problem left open by all three of these priorities, namely the appetitive habits by which perception repeatedly turns givenness into possession.

Likewise, this argument proceeds in three movements. The first gives ecological intentionality an explicit account with the historical continuities and divergences just described, and the positioning among three different kinds of phenomenological and ethical priority. The second addresses the account metaphysically. A phenomenology of living givenness that can't say what a living being is will perhaps drift, so this paper develops the vocabulary of potency and act, δύναμις (dynamis) and ἐνέργεια (energeia), toward an understanding of the living being as form-in-act, ἐντελέχεια (entelecheia), and then extends that understanding through the temporality of life and the self-presence of organic form, testing it against the philosophy of difference on one side and against non-neuronal life on the other.⁶ The third movement completes the framework theologically, reading Stein's last work alongside the Carmelite

⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969). Levinas isn't among the examination texts; he enters at Prof. Bagby's suggestion, and his role in the paper is confined to marking this third leaning and the discipline it imposes.

⁶ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* V.12 and IX, in *Metaphysics*, trans. C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2016), with the priority of actuality argued at *Θ*.8, 1049b4–1050b6; *De Anima* II.1, 412a27–28. The dynamic reading of this vocabulary follows John Robert Bagby, "Aristotle's Theory of Dynamics: Examining the Ancient Greek Roots of Process Philosophy" (PhD diss., Boston College, 2021); its extension through duration and organic form draws principally on Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer (New York: Zone Books, 1991), and Raymond Ruyer, *Neofinalism*, trans. Alyosha Edlebi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

sources and St. John, as it interprets his notion of purgation of possessive perception that ceases to be a metaphor borrowed from mysticism and becomes a description of what truthful creaturely encounter demands.⁷ Philosophy, which on one account I find congenial, is the creation of concepts, and a created concept has components, a history, and a consistency it either achieves or fails to achieve.⁸ Ecological intentionality is the concept this paper seeks to create.

II. Intentionality: Historical Continuity and Divergence

The technical vocabulary of intentionality is medieval, and its modern phenomenological career perhaps begins best with Brentano. The problem of directedness that ecological intentionality draws upon is far older. In the second book of *De Anima*, Aristotle notes that sense perception is defined as the capacity to receive the sensible forms of things without their matter (ἡ μὲν αἴσθησις ἐστὶ τὸ δεκτικὸν τῶν αἰσθητῶν εἰδῶν ἄνευ τῆς ὕλης), the way wax takes the imprint of a signet ring without taking its gold.⁹ Perceiving, then, is a communion in form, εἶδος (eidos): the perceived thing comes to be in the perceiver according to the perceiver's way of being, and perception is an actualization in which perceiver and perceived are, for the duration of the act, one in ἐνέργεια (energeia).¹⁰ This formulation belongs to a psychology that is a philosophy of life. The ψυχή (psychē) whose powers Aristotle is analyzing is the principle of living things as such, and its most basic power, the nutritive, τὸ θρεπτικόν (threptikon), belongs to plants. The

⁷ Stein, *The Science of the Cross*, read with Olli-Pekka Vainio, "Dark Light: The Mystical Theology of St. Edith Stein," *Journal of Analytic Theology* 4 (2016).

⁸ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pt. 1.

⁹ Aristotle, *De Anima* II.12, 424a17–24, in *De Anima*, trans. C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2017). The wax and signet comparison is Aristotle's own, 424a19–21.

¹⁰ For the identity of perceiver and perceived in act, *De Anima* III.2, 425b26–27; for the two senses of potentiality and the actualization at stake in perceiving, II.5, 417a21–b16, where the transition from first to second actuality is distinguished from ordinary alteration. The relevance of this distinction to the metaphysics of creaturely form is developed later in section IV.

perceptual and intellectual powers are elaborations within a single continuum of vital directedness, and there's no distinction where "mind" begins and "mere life" veers out of the discussion.¹¹ Second, the account is realist about givenness. What comes to be in the soul is the form of the thing itself, so the structure of perceiving is a structure of world-involvement rather than a private episode from which a world must be inferred.

The scholastics, in turn, inherited this line of thought and incorporated it into a theological framework that we still use. *Intentio*, from *intendere*, to stretch toward. This term, used by Arabic Aristotelians, came to refer to the mode of being a thing enjoys in the soul that apprehends it: *esse intentionale*, intentional being, distinguished from the natural being, *esse naturale*, or the same thing enjoyed in the world.¹² The doctrine is easy to caricature as a theory of mental copies, but its point is in the opposite direction. Intentional being points to the known itself as present in the knower according to the knower's mode, without inserting a substitute between knower and known. Scholastic thinkers' development of the term preserves a realist account of intentional presence within a psychology of the living soul. Its technical work, however, concerns apprehension and the mode of the known in the knower; the nutritive and vegetative powers remain part of the broader Aristotelian "psychology" without thereby becoming instances of intentionality in this strictly technical sense.

Brentano's modern revival gives the technical genealogy a new function (with some historical irony since Brentano was also a scholar of Aristotle). Brentano's *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint* reintroduced "the intentional (or mental) inexistence of an object" as the

¹¹ *De Anima* II.2, 413a20–b10, on life as the mark of the ensouled and the nutritive power as its most widely shared form; II.4, 415a23–b7, on τὸ θρεπτικόν as the first and most common power of soul, in virtue of which life belongs to all living things, plants included.

¹² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 78, a. 3; q. 84, aa. 1–2. For the formula that 'the thing known is in the knower according to the mode of the knower,' see ST I, q. 14, a. 1, ad 3.

positive criterion distinguishing mental from physical phenomena, crediting the scholastics for the terms while adding an element that scholastics didn't employ.¹³ For Brentano, intentionality is demarcated by the fact that every mental phenomenon exhibits directedness toward an object, whereas no physical phenomenon does. The gain in precision and the whole phenomenological movement can be argued to have descended from this insight. Once intentionality becomes the mark of the mental, the broader Aristotelian continuum of vital orientation (the plant turned toward light, the animal's appetite stretched toward its object, the perceiver's communion in form) falls outside the technical category at the point where consciousness, on the modern understanding, begins. The vegetative soul becomes vegetable matter, in a sense. This is a restriction within modern technical genealogy rather than the narrowing of an unchanged ancient doctrine, and ecological intentionality will have to cross that boundary constructively, as developed later.

Husserl's transformation of Brentano's criterion is more complicated still. Husserl de-psychologized intentionality by making it no longer a property that mental episodes happen to have. Instead, intentionality becomes the correlational structure of givenness itself, analyzable on both sides with the noesis, the intending act with its sense-bestowing character, and the noema, the object as intended.¹⁴ This is a critical point this paper establishes: ecological intentionality depends on givenness having structure, and that structure can be described rigorously rather than asserted, which is what makes a phenomenology of creaturely givenness a possible project at

¹³ Franz Brentano, *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint* (1874), bk. 2, ch. 1, cited as background. Brentano's own extensive work on Aristotle's psychology makes the shift in technical function more striking: the historian of the ψυχή became the author of a criterion that confined intentionality to the mental while leaving the broader Aristotelian field of vital powers outside that category.

¹⁴ Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, bk. 1, §§84–96, cited as background to the examination texts. The correlational *a priori* as phenomenology's abiding theme is Husserl's own retrospective judgment in the *Crisis*, §46.

all.¹⁵ There's a degree of restriction that remains and will be examined further; however, the correlation is anchored in transcendental subjectivity, and intentionality is analyzed through constituting consciousness rather than through the wider Aristotelian field of vital powers. Yet Husserl's own later analysis presses against the act-model from within with the studies of passive synthesis, of a directedness that operates beneath deliberate acts and before any thesis, opening a door that his successors and students walked through in their own phenomenological studies and insights.¹⁶ Contemporary discussions have kept that door open, such as Zahavi's account of empathy as other-directed intentionality (a *sui generis* form of givenness in which another's experience is itself presented, without inference and without my living it primordially), shows that the concept retains, even now, the resources to honor an interiority that isn't mine.¹⁷

The history of this development of thought, compressed this way, discloses two genealogies and several points of contact. The technical genealogy of intentionality moves through scholastic intentional being, Brentano's criterion of the mental, and Husserl's intentional correlation. A broader Aristotelian genealogy concerns ensouled powers ordered toward act, including the nutritive and appetitive orientations of living beings. Maurice Merleau-Ponty serves as a hinge between them because operative intentionality reopens directedness beneath reflective acts while preserving the phenomenological demand for describable givenness.

¹⁵ This is the methodological sense in which the present paper remains Husserlian even where its sympathies are Aristotelian: the constructive crossing toward creaturely life is proposed through describable structures of givenness, answerable to the things themselves, and never as a speculative attribution.

¹⁶ On operative intentionality (*fungierende Intentionalität*) and its uptake, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (London: Routledge, 2012), preface. The term is Husserl's; the radicalization is Merleau-Ponty's, and section III returns to it.

¹⁷ Dan Zahavi, "Empathy and Other-Directed Intentionality," *Topoi* 33 (2014): 129–142. Zahavi's defense of the Steinian position against simulationist and inferentialist accounts of social cognition matters here because it establishes, on contemporary terms, that givenness of foreign experience is neither projection nor theory; the extension of that givenness beyond the human is this paper's wager, and it is made with Edith Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, trans. Waltraut Stein, 3rd rev. ed. (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1989), in hand.

Ecological intentionality can also walk through the proposed Aristotelian door while carrying the Husserlian discipline as a constructive crossing of these histories. Its first pole is vital directedness with the root system and the reaching tendril, no less than the judging mind, belonging to fields of living orientation, though those forms of orientation do not all count as intentionality in the same technical phenomenological sense. Here, I use “creaturely” at this stage in a deliberately minimal sense, to name finite living beings. “Toward and within its world” implies vital directedness as inhabitation, an orientation within a milieu the living being helps enact and to which it remains answerable. Likewise, I use milieu to refer to the concrete relational surroundings through which a living being sustains its activity. Umwelt signifies the selectively meaningful world articulated by a creature’s powers within that context. An ecological field names the larger set of relations in which organism and perceiver are both implicated and which exceeds either creature’s Umwelt. This term overlaps without becoming interchangeable. The image of a beam projected at objects is far too thin for that relation. “Given to a perceiver” preserves the phenomenological point that the directed life of another must be able to show itself with a describable structure while remaining non-primordial and excessive to the perceiver’s horizon. This second pole can be considered perceptual intentionality. Ecological intentionality, therefore, names the relation between the poles as it occurs through intersecting milieus. The other is given through its world-relation, and the perceiver arrives from within another situated embodiment. “Ecology” enters the concept at this field level of interactions. A cruciform qualification adds a further question that phenomenological description can’t answer by itself, namely, what must happen to the perceiver’s habits of desire if such givenness is to remain receptive rather than possessive?¹⁸

¹⁸ Edith Stein, *The Science of the Cross*, trans. Josephine Koepfel, The Collected Works of Edith Stein, vol. 6 (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 2002), taken up in section IX with John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount*

III. Three Priorities: Stein, Merleau-Ponty, Levinas on Intentionality and Ethics

The question of whether perception or ethics comes “first” is much too blunt, because Stein, Merleau-Ponty, and Levinas don’t mean the same thing by priority. Stein gives disclosure a phenomenological priority with her insight that another can be encountered as this suffering, joyful, or striving other because foreign experience is genuinely, if non-primordially, given. Likewise, Merleau-Ponty gives the perceptual field a genetic priority with embodied commerce between others and with the world, which precedes reflective judgment and supplies the field from which judgment arises. Levinas gives alterity a normative priority that the other’s claim exceeds my intending and carries an authority irreducible to what appears within my horizon. The argument of this section is that ecological intentionality needs all three distinctions.

Perception *may* precede ethics in the order of phenomenological articulation without becoming the source of ethical authority. It is worth remembering that the word ethics itself carries an ecological memory. ἦθος (ēthos) was associated with the haunt or the accustomed dwelling place. Homer uses the plural for the haunts of horses.¹⁹ Ethics begins, etymologically, in habitat. Whatever priority ethics possesses, ethical life is lived by embodied beings already inhabiting worlds with others.

In Stein’s *On the Problem of Empathy*, empathy (*Einfühlung*) is analyzed as an experience *sui generis*, non-primordial in its givenness. This is evidenced by her ongoing argument that since “I” don’t live the other’s experience from within, yet am directed at an

Carmel and *The Dark Night*, in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, rev. ed. (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1991).

¹⁹ The Homeric usage at *Iliad* 6.511 (ἦθεα ἵππων, the haunts of horses). Later development from haunt to habituation to character through ἦθος and Aristotle’s derivation of ἠθικὴ at *Nicomachean Ethics* II.1, 1103a17–18, where an ethics takes its root from habitat.

experience that is primordial for the other.²⁰ Stein distinguishes the gradations through which this givenness unfolds from the other's experience, which emerges before me, then I follow it into a fulfilling explication, and it stands over against me as an objectified whole. Her analysis establishes that the other is given as another center of orientation of its own around which a world arranges itself.²¹ The givenness is anchored in the living body, the *Leib*, which is not for Stein a merely physical thing. Leib is the field in which another's sensing, feeling, and striving are perceived, while *Körper* names the body considered as a physical thing.²² The structure opens toward more-than-human living bodies because empathic fulfillment varies with bodily type. That opening still leaves unanswered how far empathy, in Stein's strict sense, extends across different forms of life or material. Stein leaves the human boundary less restricted than later theories or thinkers often make it, while vegetal empathy remains unestablished in her work. Section VIII will return to that limit rather than attempt to smuggle plants through a door the analysis hasn't yet opened.²³

The importance here is the *kind* of priority Stein establishes. Disclosure has a phenomenological priority in that "I" can respond to this other's joy or distress because it is given to me as the other's through a non-primordial disclosure that differs from both inference

²⁰ Edith Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, trans. Waltraut Stein, 3rd rev. ed. (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1989), §2, where empathy is distinguished from outer perception, from primordial experience, and from memory and expectation, its nearest non-primordial kin.

²¹ Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, §3, on the grades of accomplishment; §5 on the other as a center of orientation. The spatial figure of the zero point matters for what follows: a center of orientation is what a physical thing lacks and what any living thing, on the paper's argument, possesses.

²² Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, §5, on the constitution of the living body (Leib) as sensing, oriented, and expressive, against the physical body (Körper) as a thing among things.

²³ Stein's own analysis lets empathic fulfillment vary with the type of the living body, and she doesn't halt the analysis at the human type; see *On the Problem of Empathy*, §5. Section VIII returns to the question of extension with Michael Marder, while distinguishing empathy proper from thinner modes of creaturely givenness; see Michael Marder, "Plant Intentionality and the Phenomenological Framework of Plant Intelligence," *Plant Signaling & Behavior* 7, no. 11 (2012): 1365–1372.

and first-person experience. The ethical authority of the other still exceeds the success of my constitution. More recently, Zahavi defends the Steinian account against inferential and simulationist theories because foreign experience can be directly given without being collapsed into mine, while Svenaeus follows the structure across sensual and emotional dimensions. Wharne shows how that mode can guide ethical research and practice with living subjects. The common lesson is narrower and stronger than “perception creates ethics.” Instead, ethical response requires a disclosure that leaves the other unpossessed.²⁴

Maurice Merleau-Ponty leans in a related direction to Stein, but the relation is genetic rather than sequential. This is important for an ecological account of the empathy question. Whereas Stein analyzes empathy as an act with grades of fulfillment, Merleau-Ponty examines what is beneath acts altogether. Operative intentionality, *fungierende Intentionalität*, runs below deliberate taking of a stand: the body is engaged with its world, geared into it, before judgment is able to be rendered. This pre-personal interchange is where meaning first forms.²⁵ Other people are encountered first in intercorporeality: in the way my hand understands the offered hand, in the shared world that our behaviors jointly articulate before either of us thematizes it.²⁶ On this account, the conditions of ethical reflection are already folded into perception’s reciprocities, woven into a field “I” never survey from outside because “I” belong to it. Merleau-Ponty, therefore, gives ecological intentionality a kind of genetic and operative priority of its own, with

²⁴ Dan Zahavi, “Empathy and Other-Directed Intentionality,” *Topoi* 33 (2014): 129–142; Fredrik Svenaeus, “Edith Stein’s Phenomenology of Sensual and Emotional Empathy,” *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 17 (2018): 741–760; Simon Wharne, “Empathy in Phenomenological Research: Employing Edith Stein’s Account of Empathy as a Practical and Ethical Guide,” *Methods in Psychology* 5 (2021).

²⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (London: Routledge, 2012), preface, on operative intentionality as the ground of act-intentionality; pt. 1 on the body as the vehicle of being-in-the-world and on habit as the body’s acquisition of a world.

²⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, pt. 2, ch. 4, on others and the human world; the analyses of expression and gesture in pt. 1, ch. 6, prepare the account by showing meaning inhabiting behavior before any interpretive act.

the perceptual formation that ethical reflection presupposes reaching down into habit, posture, skill, and the body's acquired world. That is why this paper can later speak of perception as trainable or convertible, and ask whether those acquired orientations can also be purged.²⁷

Emmanuel Levinas shifts the argument from sequence to a different sort of priority. For Levinas, intentionality is implicated in totality and to intend an object is liable to become comprehension, a gathering of alterity into the same, a reduction of the other to a theme within my world. Ethics therefore has normative priority over the constituting freedom of the subject.²⁸ The face of the other, *le visage*, is what resists exhaustion by this operation. The face exceeds the status of another *noema*, securely placed within my horizon. It speaks, contests my spontaneity, and addresses me with a claim (the immemorial 'you shall not kill,' for example) whose authority precedes my successful comprehension.²⁹ Following, if ethical regard is grounded too neatly in the structure of givenness, then the other remains hostage to the adequacy of my perception. The accusation here is where ecological intentionality is most exposed. What happens when creaturely life is made a describable structure of givenness? Does phenomenological description honor another living center, or does it turn alterity into one more inventory of contents? Levinas forces the framework to answer that question without assuming that better perception is already innocent.

²⁷ The trainability of perception is already a Merleau-Pontian theme in the analyses of habit acquisition, *Phenomenology of Perception*, pt. 1, ch. 3; its convertibility, in the strong sense this paper intends, is the burden of section IX.

²⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), sec. 1, on the same and the other and on the reduction of alterity as the tradition's constitutive gesture. Levinas isn't among the examination texts; as noted in the introduction, he enters at Prof. Bagby's suggestion as a positioning interlocutor, and the reading offered here is confined to that office.

²⁹ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, sec. 3, on the face as expression exceeding the plastic image, and on the ethical resistance of what can't be comprehended.

The first step in confronting that question is to distinguish between phenomenological articulation and normative authority. Some mode of phenomenal encounter is required if the other is to be encountered as this other at all. The ethical significance Levinas describes as the face exceeds whatever thematic content that encounter yields, and its authority cannot be reduced to the success of my comprehension. This distinction allows ecological intentionality to retain Stein's account of non-primordial givenness while accepting Levinas's insistence that alterity is never constituted without remainder.³⁰

The second issue is ecological reach. Levinas himself hesitated when pressed about the face of animals; his cases of the snake and Bobby the dog while in a Nazi work camp show how difficult it is to make the face, developed in an explicitly human ethical experience, bear the full weight of the more-than-human relation.³¹ That hesitation marks a problem of extension of concepts such as *Einfühlung* to the more-than-human. Stein offers a more graded account of how living bodies can be given, one that preserves differences between a dog and a friend across distinct modes of empathic fulfillment. *The better formulation is that creaturely givenness varies by mode and fulfillment.* At the vegetal limit, as section VIII will argue, ecological intentionality extends farther than empathy proper while retaining Stein's discipline of non-primordially.³²

The resulting position differentiates what "first" can mean. In short, Stein supplies

phenomenological priority, Merleau-Ponty genetic and operative priority, and Levinas normative

³⁰ The objection has a phenomenological exploration independent of this paper; it's substantially Zahavi's point when he insists that other-directed intentionality is a form of givenness rather than a failure of it ("Empathy and Other-Directed Intentionality," 129–142): the alternative to empathic givenness is ignorance rather than reverence.

³¹ Emmanuel Levinas, "The Name of a Dog, or Natural Rights," in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Seán Hand (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 151–153; the hesitation over the snake is recorded in the interview published as "The Paradox of Morality," in *The Provocation of Levinas*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and David Wood (London: Routledge, 1988).

³² Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, §5. The gradation is a strength of her account, but it should not be made to do more than Stein's analysis lays out: variation by bodily type opens the question of nonhuman givenness without by itself establishing vegetal empathy.

priority. Ecological intentionality holds these together by insisting that the creature be genuinely given and genuinely other: given, and other; perceived, and also never possessed. Levinas remains an internal limit on adequating intention, however. The Carmelite night of St. John later takes up a different question, one that Levinas leaves open by appropriating what happens to the appetites by which a perceiver who knows better nevertheless keeps turning another's givenness into availability.³³

IV. From Empathy to Creaturely Being: Stein's Metaphysics with Aristotle

The preceding section established a differentiated ordering: another center of life can be phenomenologically given without reducing its ethical authority to that givenness. The being of such a center, however, remains to be accounted for. A phenomenology of living givenness that fails to address metaphysical questions risks treating “life,” “interiority,” and “center of orientation” as honorific descriptions whose ontological status is left undecided. Stein herself recognized the pressure in her letters and writings. Her development from *On the Problem of Empathy* to *Potency and Act* and *Finite and Eternal Being* in two decades shows a discernible path of realization. That development reflects the pressure of phenomenological description toward the question of the *being* of what had been described.³⁴ Whether the result should be

³³ Edith Stein, *The Science of the Cross*, trans. Josephine Koeppel, The Collected Works of Edith Stein, vol. 6 (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 2002); John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, bk. 1, on the purgation of the appetites, in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, rev. ed. (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1991). Section IX treats the two resources as complementary rather than competitive: Levinas marks the ethical excess of the other, while the Carmelite night addresses the perceiver's appetitive habits of possession.

³⁴ The itinerary is documented in the works themselves: Edith Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, trans. Waltraut Stein, 3rd rev. ed. (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1989); *Potency and Act: Studies toward a Philosophy of Being*, trans. Walter Redmond, The Collected Works of Edith Stein, vol. 11 (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 2009); *Finite and Eternal Being: An Attempt at an Ascent to the Meaning of Being*, trans. Kurt F. Reinhardt, The Collected Works of Edith Stein, vol. 9 (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 2002). *Finite and Eternal Being's* own preface presents the book as a reworking of the earlier habilitation study, which allows reading the two as one sustained engagement.

called a phenomenological metaphysics is a question addressed by others, and this paper will return to it with Borden Sharkey's formulation of the problem and Lebech's guidance.³⁵ The order of exposition, though, follows Stein's here: Aristotelian vocabulary first, since it's the vocabulary she inherited via Thomas Aquinas, and then her rethinking of it from phenomenological ground.

Aristotle's vocabulary begins in *Metaphysics* V.12, where Aristotle distinguishes the senses of δύναμις (dynamis): a source of change in another thing or in the same thing *qua* other, a capacity for being acted upon, and the derivative senses that cluster around these. The discussion is resumed and refined in the opening chapters of book IX.³⁶ Two features of the analysis are relevant to the present argument. First, δύναμις is relational and directional from the start, as a power is a power for something, specified by the actuality it's a power for, so that even at the level of definition, potency doesn't stand on its own. Second, Aristotle doesn't define ἐνέργεια (energeia) in a strict sense, offering an induction through analogies instead. As the one building is to the one able to build, as the one awake is to the one asleep, as the one seeing is to the one with sight closed, and remarking that we shouldn't demand a definition of everything.³⁷ The denial of a strict definition is a principled act in itself. Actuality is what shows itself in the contrast, as it's the term by which the other term is understood, and this asymmetry becomes more explicit in IX.8, where actuality is argued to be prior to potency in account, in time in the

³⁵ Sarah Borden Sharkey, "Is Edith Stein's *Finite and Eternal Being* a Kind of 'Phenomenological Metaphysics'?", *Symposium* 25, no. 2 (2021): 48–66; Mette Lebech, "Beginning to Read Stein's *Finite and Eternal Being*."

³⁶ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* V.12, 1019a15–1020a6, in *Metaphysics*, trans. C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2016); the resumption is *Metaphysics* IX.1–5, 1045b27–1048a24.

³⁷ *Metaphysics* IX.6, 1048a35–b9, for the analogical induction and the remark that we mustn't seek a strict definition of everything.

relevant sense, and above all in being, οὐσία (ousia): πρότερον ἐνέργεια δυνάμεώς ἐστιν.³⁸ The priority *in* being is an important component to consider in this argument. A potency is real as directed toward its actuality; matter is potentially an animal because it can attain the form of one, and things are more truly beings the more they are at work as what they are. When *De Anima* then defines the soul as the first actuality of a natural organic body (ψυχή ἐστιν ἐντελέχεια ἡ πρώτη σώματος φυσικοῦ ὀργανικοῦ), the definition is supplied with this entire structure: the living thing is a body's being-at-work as alive, and the distinction between first and second actuality, between possessed capacity and exercised activity, between the knower asleep and the knower contemplating, gives the analysis of life its two levels.³⁹

This depends, though, on how this apparatus is read, and this paper adopts one developed by John Bagby in his study of Aristotle's theory of dynamics and his published account of Aristotelian intensity. On that reading, δύνάμις names tendency, effort, and directedness within the thing, with its specification by ἐνέργεια understood dynamically instead of as a bare logical possibility awaiting external activation.⁴⁰

An inert account of potency would reduce the Aristotelian vocabulary to a static architecture with limited use for describing living, unfolding, striving creatures. The dynamic reading, by contrast, gives the Aristotelian genealogy of vital directedness a metaphysical

³⁸ *Metaphysics* IX.8, 1049b4–1050b6. The three priorities are argued in sequence: in account (λόγος), since the power is defined through its actuality; in time, since an actual member of the kind precedes the potential one that becomes actual; in substance (οὐσία), through the argument from form and end: the τέλος (telos) is the actuality for whose sake the potency exists.

³⁹ Aristotle, *De Anima* II.1, 412a19–b6, in *De Anima*, trans. C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2017), with the first/second actuality distinction illustrated at 412a22–27 by knowledge possessed and knowledge exercised. Section II's discussion of *De Anima* II.5 (417a21–b16) has already put this distinction to work on the side of perception.

⁴⁰ John Robert Bagby, "Aristotle's Theory of Dynamics: Examining the Ancient Greek Roots of Process Philosophy" (PhD diss., Boston College, 2021); John Robert Bagby, "Aristotle on Intensity," *Epoché: A Journal for the History of Philosophy* 28, no. 2 (2024): 243–271. The latter develops the dynamic reading through inceptive intensity, intrinsic or intransitive causality, and living wholes irreducible to the sum of their parts.

grammar. The plant's capacity to orient growth toward light can be described as a living power whose exercise belongs to the ongoing actualization of its form. Tropism, εἶδος (eidos), and ἐνέργεια (energeia) remain distinct terms within that description. The point is that the activity belongs intrinsically to the living being whose powers are expressed in it. On this reading, the ensouled being is dynamically at work through the powers by which it maintains and unfolds its life.

I use "form-in-act" as a constructive term for this living unity. The phrase gathers several Aristotelian distinctions while leaving them distinct: εἶδος names form, ἐντελέχεια (entelecheia) names actuality in the definition of soul, and ἐνέργεια names being-at-work or activity. "Form-in-act" therefore names a living form as intrinsically operative, possessing powers whose exercise maintains and unfolds the being as the kind of living whole it is. It is this paper's integrative term, not an additional Aristotelian technical expression.

Stein enters this inheritance twice, and the two entries frame her originality in adopting the grammar and vocabulary provided. *Potency and Act*, the habilitation study of 1931 that later found its truer form in *Finite and Eternal Being*, takes up the scholastic pair on phenomenological ground: rather than beginning from the analysis of change in natural bodies, Stein begins from the being "I" can't doubt because "I" live it, the being of the ego itself, and asks what act and potency mean there.⁴¹ What she finds is a peculiar and philosophically productive poverty. The ego's being is actual only point-wise, as it's alive in the present and only in the present; its past no longer, its future not yet, so that lived being shows itself as a continual receiving, held between being and non-being, actual without possessing the ground of its own

⁴¹ Stein, *Potency and Act*, pt. 1, where the investigation opens from the certainty of one's own being and the modes of actuality and potentiality discoverable within it, before broadening to the being of the world.

actuality.⁴² This datum, phenomenological through and through, is what motivates the metaphysical ascent of *Finite and Eternal Being*. There the analysis of act and potency reopens the medieval question of the meaning of being, and Stein's mature formulations organize it as a threefold distinction of essential being, actual being, and mental being (*wesenhaftes Sein, wirkliches Sein, gedankliches Sein*), and a definition of finite being as the being that doesn't possess its being but needs time to unfold what it is, essence and existence coming apart in the finite case because the finite thing receives its actuality rather than being it.⁴³

Importantly, it's here that Stein departs from Husserl. For Husserl, essence is the correlate of eidetic intuition, and the question of its own act of being can be bracketed with the rest of the natural attitude; for Stein, the question can't be bracketed, because the essence of a finite thing is itself something that requires being, and the analysis of what it means to be doesn't terminate in consciousness.⁴⁴ Her answer runs through participation: finite being doesn't possess the ground of its own actuality but receives the act by which it is. That claim concerns the ontology of finite existence. It stands in a structural relation to the Aristotelian account of living activity developed above without making the act of being identical with a creature's particular ἐνέργεια. Following all the way, Stein's analysis opens onto the difference between the being that unfolds in time and the being that possesses itself eternally.⁴⁵

⁴² Stein, *Potency and Act*, pt. 1; the analysis recurs, sharpened, in *Finite and Eternal Being*, chap. 2, where the temporality of the ego's being (actual in the now, its contents rising out of and sinking back into potency) becomes the experiential ground for the whole doctrine of finite being.

⁴³ *Finite and Eternal Being*, chap. 3, for the threefold distinction of essential, actual, and mental being; the characterization of finite being as unable to possess its being all at once, needing time for the unfolding of its essence, is developed across chaps. 2–3 and governs the book's subsequent ascent.

⁴⁴ The contrast is drawn within *Finite and Eternal Being* itself, whose engagement with Husserl's eidetics runs alongside its engagement with Aquinas; on the methodological significance of Stein's refusal to leave the being of essence bracketed, see Borden Sharkey, "Phenomenological Metaphysics?," 48–66. Husserl's position is cited as background from *Ideas I*, §§3–4, on essence as the correlate of eidetic seeing.

⁴⁵ *Finite and Eternal Being*, chaps. 2–3, with the doctrine of participation developed in the book's later ascent; the Thomistic provenance of the esse/essentia distinction is acknowledged by Stein throughout, though her route to it, as

Borden Sharkey's insight of a question provides a worthwhile framework of interpretation here. Is *Finite and Eternal Being* a phenomenological metaphysics? The reading defended here answers yes, provisionally and in a specific sense: the metaphysics isn't imported to adorn the phenomenology of Stein or the approach, and it isn't logically entailed by phenomenological description, either. It's motivated by and remains answerable to phenomenological evidence (the point-wise actuality of lived being, the givenness of another center of orientation, and the graded fulfillment of empathy) while making an ontological proposal about what sort of beings could appear in these ways.⁴⁶ Lebech's advice for beginning readers of the work points the same way: the book asks to be read from the fact of one's own being outward, which is to say it asks to be read in the order this paper has followed, empathy and self-givenness first, with the meaning of being second.⁴⁷ What the order provides is, therefore, a constructive interpretation rather than a deduction. On the metaphysical reading defended in this paper, the living other disclosed in empathy can be understood as form-in-act: a δύνάμις-structured, temporally unfolding being whose finite existence is received and whose activities belong intrinsically to the living form.

Three consequences are allowed for what follows if this is taken as a direction of inquiry. The account of finite being as needing time to unfold its essence opens directly onto Henri Bergson's analysis of duration, and the account of form maintaining itself in act onto Ruyer's

argued here, remains phenomenological. See also Lebech, "Beginning to Read," on participation as the book's architectonic idea.

⁴⁶ Borden Sharkey, "Phenomenological Metaphysics?," 48–66. The formulation defended in the text is closest to the article's own suggestion that Stein's method extends phenomenological evidence beyond the limits Husserl set for it without abandoning the evidential standard itself.

⁴⁷ Lebech, "Beginning to Read Stein's *Finite and Eternal Being*."

self-surveying form. A being that receives itself may also learn to receive another without possession... a possibility whose theological sense the *Science of the Cross* will later develop.⁴⁸

V. Duration, Form, and Self-Presence: Bergson and Ruyer

The conclusion so far is that the creature encountered in empathy is form-in-act: a δύναμις-structured being that needs time to unfold its essence, whose finite existence is received, and whose living activity remains its own. Two parts of that conclusion remain underdeveloped, and they're the areas where the Aristotelian and scholastic apparatus, whatever its other strengths, runs the thinnest for consideration. The first is temporal: to say that finite being needs time for the unfolding of its essence is to invoke an account of time adequate to living unfolding. Neither Aristotle's physics of motion nor Stein's phenomenology of the ego's point-wise present supplies an adequate account on its own. The second concerns the mode of form's self-possession: to say that a living form maintains itself in act is to claim that the form is somehow present to itself in its activity, and the claim needs a defense that doesn't install a homunculus to do the possessing.

Bergson reached duration through the problems of memory and perception; Ruyer reached the self-surveying form through embryology and the critique of mechanism. These are two modern itineraries, starting from different problems, that converge on accounts of enacted living unity. However, this convergence remains suggestive rather than demonstrative, and it leaves open whether the underlying metaphysics are compatible.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Edith Stein, *The Science of the Cross*, trans. Josephine Koeppel, The Collected Works of Edith Stein, vol. 6 (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 2002), anticipated here only as the term of the argument; the development belongs to section IX.

⁴⁹ Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer (New York: Zone Books, 1991); Henri Bergson, *Freedom: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1904–1905*, ed. Nils F. Schott and Alexandre Lefebvre, trans. Leonard Lawlor (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024); Raymond Ruyer, *Neofinalism*, trans. Alyosha Edlebi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016). The convergence claim concerns distinct

Matter and Memory makes two important contributions to this framework. The first contribution concerns perception. On Bergson's analysis, conscious perception works by subtraction from the field of images. Among the totality of images acting and reacting on one another, a living body is a center of indetermination: because its response to what acts on it isn't dictated, the surrounding images are, so to speak, filtered through its possible action, and what we call perception is the aspect of things that answers to the powers of the perceiver.⁵⁰ This insight gives the perceptual side of vital world-relation a dynamic articulation. If perception measures possible action, what *appears* is inseparable from a living body's powers of response and possible action. Bergson therefore strengthens the organism-perceiver side of the framework without himself extending it into nutritive and vegetal life, which Aristotle and Marder will later address in this paper.⁵¹ The second contribution concerns time. Bergson's analysis of memory distinguishes the habit-memory enacted in the body from the pure memory in which the past survives integrally, and his figure of the cone renders the relation: the whole of a duration contracted, at varying degrees of tension, into a present that acts.⁵² The consequence is that a creature's actuality is "thick." The living present contracts the organism's whole past into action. Form, accordingly, is a history being lived. Bergson gives a temporal thickness to Stein's claim that finite being unfolds through time, while also placing pressure on a reading of essence as a

evidential routes arriving at accounts of enacted living unity; it makes no claim of direct influence, though neither philosopher was innocent of Aristotle.

⁵⁰ Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, ch. 1, on the aggregate of images, the living body as a center of action, and pure perception as the selection of images relative to possible action; the figure of perception as subtraction rather than addition governs the chapter's argument against both realism and idealism.

⁵¹ Edith Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, trans. Waltraut Stein, 3rd rev. ed. (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1989), §5; see section III above on the graded fulfillment of empathic givenness across the types of the living body.

⁵² Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, chs. 2–3, for the two memories and the survival of the past; the cone and the planes of contraction appear in ch. 3's account of the movement between pure memory and action.

complete blueprint that is fixed in advance. The ἐντελέχεια (entelecheia) of section IV thus acquires a temporal depth that the scholastic vocabulary does not itself analyze.

The Freedom Lectures extend the analysis from perception and memory to action. This is important, because the framework's account of creaturely directedness would otherwise remain receptive only. Freedom, for Bergson, identifies the degree to which an act expresses the whole of a personality, emerging from the entire duration of the self rather than from a detached present or an automatic mechanism. Acts are more or less free as they gather more or less of the self that performs them.⁵³ Read alongside the dynamic interpretation of δύναμις (dynamis) adopted in section IV, it can be said that potency, as tendency, and duration, as the past pressing into act, converge in refusing an atomized present detached from what the living being has been.⁵⁴

Al-Saji's study of the prepersonal notes that the past that orients a body's perception is a past that was never present as such, an ontological weight of acquired orientation operating beneath the level of acts. It exceeds the series of retained presents accessible to recollection... which is to say that Bergsonian duration, followed into the body, arrives at the operative intentionality Merleau-Ponty found beneath the act-intentionality of the tradition.⁵⁵

⁵³ Bergson, *Freedom*. The doctrine is continuous with the account of the free act in *Time and Free Will*, cited as background where needed; the lectures' advantage for this paper is their explicit treatment of degrees of freedom across the range of living action.

⁵⁴ John Robert Bagby, "Aristotle's Theory of Dynamics: Examining the Ancient Greek Roots of Process Philosophy" (PhD diss., Boston College, 2021). The kinship noted in the text is argued rather than asserted in Bagby's own work on the Aristotelian resonances of Bergsonian intensity; see also Bagby, "Aristotle on Intensity," *Epoché: A Journal for the History of Philosophy* 28, no. 2 (2024): 243–271. For the purposes of this paper the comparison functions as a convergence between section IV's reading of δύναμις and Bergsonian evidence, and nothing in the argument depends on a genealogical claim.

⁵⁵ Alia Al-Saji, "A Past Which Has Never Been Present: Bergsonian Dimensions in Merleau-Ponty's Theory of the Prepersonal," *Research in Phenomenology* 38, no. 1 (2008): 41–71. The essay's title formula is put to systematic use here: a never-present past is what an acquired bodily orientation is, and section VI takes up the Merleau-Pontian side of the connection.

The convergence should remain incomplete. Aristotle's account, as read here, keeps actuality, form, and τέλος (telos) central to the intelligibility of living activity. Bergson resists treating becoming as the execution of an already completed form or end and gives novelty a stronger metaphysical role. Their common ground lies in a living present irreducible to externally related instants and in activity belonging to an internally differentiated whole. However, their accounts of how that whole is determined remain genuinely different. The comparison therefore proceeds by structural resonance rather than reconciliation.

Raymond Ruyer addresses the second dimension, and *Neofinalism* poses its problem with a unique directness by asking what is a form, if it's neither an aggregate assembled from outside nor a shape observed from outside? His answer is the doctrine of absolute survey, *survol absolu*. A true form (an embryo organizing itself, a melody holding itself together across its unfolding, a consciousness present to its own field) possesses itself whole, without a supplementary dimension and without an external observer to do the surveying; its unity is enacted in itself without the standpoint of an external surveyor, and this self-survey is what distinguishes formation from mere functioning, the developing organism from the machine that runs step by step.⁵⁶ The equipotentiality of early development of an embryo, in which parts stand ready to become what the whole requires, resists any account on which the organism is an assemblage of externally related pieces, and demands a form present to itself instead across its own extension.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Ruyer, *Neofinalism*, in the opening chapters' analysis of absolute survey, where the visual field's self-possession without a supplementary eye supplies the first model, and the account is extended from consciousness to all true forms; the contrast between formation and step-by-step functioning structures the book's critique of mechanism throughout.

⁵⁷ Ruyer, *Neofinalism*, in the chapters on embryogenesis and equipotentiality; the argument is that regulative development, parts becoming what the whole requires, is evidence of a domain of survey and can't be reconstructed from externally related elements.

The constructive reading I seek from this is that the *survol* offers a striking modern structural analog to the Aristotelian vocabulary of ἐνέργεια, the priority of an enacted whole over externally assembled parts, unity accomplished rather than observed. Ruyer doesn't necessarily speak Aristotle's language, and this claim isn't one of textual similarity. Its value is comparative: the Aristotelian-Steinian account of form-in-act can bring Ruyer's biological examples into dialogue with its own account of living unity without annexing his system.⁵⁸ The appropriation is deliberately partial. I use *survol* here to refer to the trans-spatial self-unity of a living form across its activity. Ruyer's larger account of themes, ideality, and finality remains outside the present argument, however. Smith's study of absolute forms establishes that Ruyer's forms are genuinely metaphysical unities rather than heuristic fictions; the account of organic consciousness in the recent organism-oriented literature shows the doctrine operating at the level this paper requires, the level of organismic life as such rather than of human awareness; and Bogue's examination of Ruyer beside Leibniz and Deleuze locates the point of resistance that appears again in section VII: a finality that is, without acting as an efficient force among forces, can't be absorbed without remainder into a philosophy of pure immanent difference.⁵⁹

This provides a provisional account of creaturely form. To Bergson, form is a history being lived, a duration contracted into act, and creaturely perception is the vital selectivity of a center of indetermination. Ruyer provides a more structural analog for self-presence: living unity is enacted from within rather than supplied by an external surveyor. Together they support a

⁵⁸ The reading is interpretive rather than textual: Ruyer's own vocabulary is of survey, theme, and trans-spatial form rather than of act. Its warrant is structural: self-presence in activity, priority of the whole over assembled parts, unity enacted rather than observed. Its purpose is to bring Ruyer's biological examples into comparative dialogue with the Aristotelian and Steinian argument of section IV without annexing his system.

⁵⁹ Daniel W. Smith, "Raymond Ruyer and the Metaphysics of Absolute Forms," *Parrhesia* 27 (2017): 116–128; Audronė Žukauskaitė, "Raymond Ruyer: Organic Consciousness," in *Organism-Oriented Ontology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 38–56; Ronald Bogue, "The Force That Is but Does Not Act: Ruyer, Leibniz and Deleuze," *Deleuze Studies* 11, no. 4 (2017): 518–537.

formulation that the framework will test for the rest of the paper: creaturely form is an achieved, temporally “thick” activity whose unity arises through living enactment, with no static shape imposed from outside. Such activity can, in principle, become perceptually given to another living being.⁶⁰ The phenomenological home of these doctrines, the field in which durational, self-surveying life is actually perceived, requires description, and section VI turns to Merleau-Ponty’s *Nature* lectures to provide it. And both Bergson and Ruyer, each in his own idiom, don’t allow the concept of novelty room for ambiguity. Whether that refusal can be sustained against the strongest philosophy of difference is a question section VII will face.⁶¹

VI. Nature, Organism, and Ecophenomenology

The last two sections built a metaphysics of creaturely form as temporally “thick” and internally enacted, then placed finite creaturely existence within Stein’s metaphysics of received being. What that metaphysics still lacks is a phenomenological setting, a description of the field in which durational, self-possessing life is actually perceived, by perceivers who are themselves alive and embedded in the same field. Merleau-Ponty returns here on the side of what’s perceived; the *Nature* courses he delivered at the Collège de France in the late 1950s are a phenomenological attempt to describe nature and the organism from within the phenomenological attitude, and they were composed in explicit dialogue with the biological evidence that shaped Ruyer’s generation as well.⁶²

⁶⁰ Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, §5, with section III above. The claim in the text is deliberately limited: the *survol* serves as a metaphysical analogue that can illuminate the kind of living unity Stein’s phenomenology encounters without being identified with her own account.

⁶¹ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), chs. 1, 2, and 5, taken up in section VII with Bogue, “The Force That Is but Does Not Act,” and Petr Prášek, “Ecology, Eco-Phenomenology, and the Immanent Ethics of Nature,” *Meta: Research in Hermeneutics, Phenomenology, and Practical Philosophy* 15, no. 2 (2023): 342–366.

⁶² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Nature: Course Notes from the Collège de France*, comp. Dominique Séglaard, trans. Robert Vallier (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2003); the examination list assigns Course 1, pts. 1–2,

The first course approaches nature historically, working through the concept's lineage from Descartes and Kant through Schelling to Bergson and Husserl. The survey does philosophical work by showing that "nature" reaches us already interpreted, and that the modern interpretations share a decision (nature as pure exteriority, *partes extra partes*, the correlate of a surveying thought), whose cost the rest of the lectures tallies.⁶³ Against that decision, Merleau-Ponty describes nature as the primordial, an autoproduction of sense that carries its own articulation before and beneath our constructions and exceeds both the product of consciousness and the status of a mere object.⁶⁴ Merleau-Ponty seems to take from *Matter and Memory* the refusal of a perception assembled inside a subject, while resisting the temptation to dissolve the perceiver into a universal flux, and the resulting position (perception always someone's, yet of a nature that exceeds every perceiver). It's the second course, though, that converges most directly with the previous argument of section V. There, Merleau-Ponty turns to animality, and the organism he describes, drawing on the embryology of his sources and above all on Uexküll's studies of the *Umwelt*, is an enacted totality: a behavior with a style, an unfolding that its parts serve, a creature whose relation to its milieu is a theme it develops rather than a set of reactions it undergoes. Uexküll's own figure, which Merleau-Ponty takes up, is the melody that sings itself.⁶⁵ The melody was also Ruyer's figure for the true form, and Merleau-Ponty was working

and Course 2. The compiled and posthumous character of the notes counsels interpretive modesty throughout: the lectures are read here for their arguments and figures, without claims about a final Merleau-Pontian system.

⁶³ Merleau-Ponty, *Nature*, Course 1, pt. 1, on the Cartesian and Kantian conceptions; pt. 2 carries the history through Schelling, Bergson, and Husserl. The characterization of the modern concept as exteriority without interiority frames the whole first course.

⁶⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Nature*, Course 1, in the introductory sketches, where nature is approached as the primordial and the non-constructed; the formulations are programmatic, and their systematic weight in this paper is carried by the second course's account of the organism rather than by the sketches alone.

⁶⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Nature*, Course 2, in the chapters on animality, behavior, and the *Umwelt*, where Uexküll's investigations supply the guiding evidence and the melody figure renders the organism's unfolding as themed rather than mechanical.

within a biological conversation that overlapped with Ruyer's sources and problems. Their recurrence to the same figures therefore functions as cross-confirmation within a shared biological field rather than as independent discovery. What matters for this paper is the way phenomenological description and a metaphysics of form press on the same problem of organismic unity from neighboring directions.⁶⁶

The study of what has come to be considered ecophenomenology also makes important contributions here. Phenomenology is suited to ecological questions, on the account of Brown and Toadvine, because ecological crisis reaches into the concept of nature itself as well as into the world, and phenomenology interrogates the experiential ground beneath the naturalistic concept: the earth as experienced, valued, and inhabited before it's objectified, measured, and managed.⁶⁷ The framework of this paper belongs to that program and makes a specific contribution to it. Most ecophenomenology remains, methodologically, on the side of description; the argument of sections IV and V has tried to supply what description alone withholds, a metaphysical account of the creatures described, and the wager here is that its own ecophenomenological account gains explanatory depth when its descriptions of nature are placed in conversation with an ontology of creaturely form-in-act.⁶⁸

The field also contains a dispute the framework has to adjudicate, because both parties claim the Merleau-Pontian inheritance. Abram's reading takes the account of perception toward

⁶⁶ Raymond Ruyer, *Neofinalism*, trans. Alyosha Edlebi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), with section V above. The two convergences differ in kind and jointly strengthen the case: section V argued that distinct philosophical routes converge on enacted living unity; this section adds that neighboring disciplines within a shared biological conversation reach related figures for the same phenomena.

⁶⁷ Charles S. Brown and Ted Toadvine, introduction to *Eco-Phenomenology: Back to the Earth Itself*, ed. Charles S. Brown and Ted Toadvine (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), xi–xxi.

⁶⁸ The methodological claim isn't a criticism of the field so much as a division of labor; Petr Prášek, "Ecology, Eco-Phenomenology, and the Immanent Ethics of Nature," *Meta: Research in Hermeneutics, Phenomenology, and Practical Philosophy* 15, no. 2 (2023): 342–366, surveys the field's constructive options and is taken up in section VII, where its Deleuzian alternative becomes a rival.

participation: perception as reciprocity with an animate earth, the sensing body as continuous with the sensuous world it inhabits, reflection as a late and derivative posture that the ecological writer's task is largely to undo.⁶⁹ Toadvine's response grants the description power and rejects the conclusion. Sympathetic immersion in the sensuous can powerfully disclose ecological relation, yet phenomenology still requires reflection. The flesh, in Merleau-Ponty's own later usage, names a relation that includes divergence, the *écart* between the sensing and the sensed, rather than a fusion that reflection fails.⁷⁰ The paper aligns more with Toadvine on the methodological point. Stein's account of empathy, on which the framework's theory of creaturely givenness was built, is an account of non-primordial givenness: the other's life is genuinely given and never lived from within, and the distance isn't a defect of empathy but its structure.⁷¹ An ecophenomenology of fusion would lose what section III argued must be kept with the creature's excess over my own grasp. A Levinasian insistence on excess warns against reducing alterity to phenomenal content; an ecophenomenology of fusion risks the opposite error of absorbing the other into my sensibility. The Steinian structure holds the cornerstone that this framework needs, as given, and other perceived and never possessed.

Toadvine's essay "Ecophenomenology after the End of Nature" addresses a more difficult question in this context. If "nature" as a stable referent has dissolved, if there's no longer, after the Anthropocene diagnosis, a pristine domain outside human alteration for

⁶⁹ David Abram, "Merleau-Ponty and the Voice of the Earth."

⁷⁰ Ted Toadvine, "Limits of the Flesh: The Role of Reflection in David Abram's Ecophenomenology," *Environmental Ethics* 27, no. 2 (2005): 155–170.

⁷¹ Edith Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, trans. Waltraut Stein, 3rd rev. ed. (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1989), §2, with section III above. Stein's account of non-primordial givenness functions here as an external criterion for what this framework needs from the ecophenomenological dispute; it does not settle an exegetical question within Merleau-Ponty on its own terms.

ecophenomenology to be the phenomenology of, then what does the discipline describe?⁷² The framework's answer is that it never needed the pristine referent. What sections II through V have assembled (creaturely directedness, form-in-act, durational unfolding, self-surveying unity, graded empathic givenness) characterizes living beings as such, in managed forests and city easements as much as in "wilderness," and none of it depends on nature as an untouched backdrop. A creature remains a center of orientation even in anthropogenic habitat; the *θρεπτικόν* continues its work in a planted pine. The end of nature, if that's what this is, names the exhaustion of a concept the first course of the Nature lectures already showed to be a construction. Creatures remain, and a framework built on creaturely form passes through that conceptual dissolution intact.⁷³

VII. Difference, Immanence, and the Edge of Normativity: Deleuze and Guattari

A framework should be tested against the strongest position it excludes, and for a framework built on creaturely form that position is likely a philosophy of difference. Deleuze grants the existence of form while making constituted form derivative, an effect of intensive and differential processes that precede organized form. A philosophy beginning from the living form, therefore, begins in the middle and risks mistaking a result for a principle. The first chapter of *Difference and Repetition* makes the case at the level of thought: difference has been thinkable only through identity, opposition, analogy, and resemblance, and each of these subordinations captures difference by referring it to something it isn't, so the task is to think difference in itself,

⁷² Ted Toadvine, "Ecophenomenology after the End of Nature," in *Transforming Politics with Merleau-Ponty: Thinking beyond the State*, ed. Jérôme Melançon (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021), 127–144.

⁷³ Aristotle, *De Anima* II.4, 415a23–b7, with section II above on τὸ θρεπτικόν; the point of the crosslink is that the paper's ground floor was laid in a psychology of life, never in a concept of pristine nature, so the dissolution of the latter leaves the former standing.

freed from the demand that it be difference between two identities.⁷⁴ The doctrine of univocity is emphasized. Being is said in a single sense of everything of which it's said, and what differs are the modes; there's no hierarchy of analogically graded beings, and accordingly no privileged ontology in which the organic form could sit above the intensive processes that produce it.⁷⁵ This is a serious position because it challenges the move sections IV and V previously make in treating form-in-act as the ground of creaturely being.

The second chapter's analysis of passive synthesis supplies a genetic account of organic identity: the living present is a contraction of habits, and the contracting is done beneath any active subject, by what Deleuze calls larval subjects; an organism is a system of contemplations and contractions, made of contracted water, earth, light, and air, so that identity is an effect of repetition rather than the possession of a form.⁷⁶ The chapter's second synthesis is Bergson's pure past, and its third is the eternal return in which the identical is expelled rather than preserved, which means Deleuze has taken the same Bergsonian material used in section V and turned it against a doctrine of enduring form.⁷⁷ The fifth chapter completes the case with the difference of intensity as the sufficient reason of a phenomenon; individuation precedes and

⁷⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), ch. 1, on the fourfold subordination of difference in representation (identity in the concept, opposition of predicates, analogy of judgment, resemblance in perception).

⁷⁵ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, ch. 1, on univocity in Duns Scotus, Spinoza, and Nietzsche. The relevance to this paper is important: the analogical structure of being that Stein inherits and reworks in *Finite and Eternal Being* is what univocity rejects, so the disagreement here reaches the foundations laid in section IV rather than the surface of its results.

⁷⁶ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, ch. 2, on the first passive synthesis, habit, contraction, and the larval subject; the account of the organism as composed of contracted elements makes the point that contemplation and contraction operate below the level of any acting self.

⁷⁷ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, ch. 2, for the second synthesis and its explicit debt to Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer (New York: Zone Books, 1991), chs. 2–3, and for the third synthesis and the eternal return as selective of difference against the identical. Section V above used the same Bergsonian material to establish the temporal thickness of creaturely act; that the material supports both readings is a reason to argue the case rather than assume it.

conditions differentiation, and the extended, qualified, organized world we perceive is intensity in the act of canceling itself, which makes stable form a derivative result of intensive individuation rather than its metaphysical ground.⁷⁸ Prášek shows what an ecological ethics looks like from this perspective as an immanent ethics evaluating encounters by the compositions they make possible and the powers of affecting and being affected they increase, without appeal to any norm standing outside the field of relations.⁷⁹ The position is attractive because it refuses the transcendent criteria that environmental ethics has often struggled to justify.

The framework grants a great deal of this, then identifies the point at which it can't follow, such as individuation not being the imposition of a shape on indifferent matter, and any hylomorphism that treated form as a static template deserving a concern and criticism. The dynamic reading of δύναμις (dynamis) adopted in section IV concedes the substance of that objection in advance, since a potency that's tendency rather than inert capacity is already an account of formation from within.⁸⁰ A Spinozist-Deleuzian grammar of composition has helpful evaluative resources: encounters can increase or diminish powers of affecting and being affected, sustain or decompose relations, and make some compositions possible while undoing others. A clear-cut and an old-growth stand are, therefore, likely ethically distinguishable on Deleuze's terms. The disagreement lies deeper, however. This paper asks whether relation, composition,

⁷⁸ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, ch. 5, on intensive difference as the sufficient reason of the sensible, on individuation as prior to specification and organization, and on the cancellation of intensity in extension as the ground of the illusion that stable qualified forms are basic.

⁷⁹ Petr Prášek, "Ecology, Eco-Phenomenology, and the Immanent Ethics of Nature," *Meta: Research in Hermeneutics, Phenomenology, and Practical Philosophy* 15, no. 2 (2023): 342–366. The essay's importance for this paper is that it makes the Deleuzian alternative concrete at the level of ecological ethics rather than leaving it as a general metaphysical rival.

⁸⁰ John Robert Bagby, "Aristotle's Theory of Dynamics: Examining the Ancient Greek Roots of Process Philosophy" (PhD diss., Boston College, 2021), with section IV above. The dynamic reading shares the substance of Deleuze's objection to static hylomorphism; the disagreement begins over what follows from that concession.

and capacity are sufficient to name the cross-temporal integrity and flourishing of a living form, or whether such evaluation also requires an account of what the being is when its constitutive activities are going well. Extending that evaluative grammar from organisms to ecological communities would require a further argument that this paper doesn't supply in its argument.⁸¹

The Aristotelian response presented here interprets evaluative grammar with a more ontological perspective, while stopping short of deriving a complete norm of flourishing solely from actuality. A potency is understandable through its directed activity, making the characteristic actions of a living form relevant to judgments of success and impairment. Damaging the powers that sustain and develop an organism's life is more than merely reordering relations around an indifferent substrate. Metaphysics IX.8 emphasizes the priority of actuality, which renders those activities ontologically significant; a fuller account of flourishing would require additional biological and ethical reasoning. Thus, the two frameworks differ on how much ontological depth an immanent evaluation needs. Deleuze asks what a body can do and what relations it can create; the present argument additionally asks how those powers are connected to the ongoing activity of a living form. This constitutes a genuine disagreement, and it does not diminish the philosophy of difference.

Bogue's analysis of Ruyer alongside Leibniz and Deleuze places the same tension within the Deleuzian body of work rather than outside it. Ruyer's notion of finality, the force that exists without acting as one force among others, cannot be neatly integrated into a philosophy of immanent difference without residual remainder, and the resistance is most evident where Deleuze and Guattari need it most. At the end of *What Is Philosophy?*, when they confront the

⁸¹ The Spinozist origin of the criterion is what makes this more difficult, since the language of agreeing and decomposing relations presupposes a determinate relation that characterizes a given body; see Prášek, "Ecology, Eco-Phenomenology," 342–366, for the ecological deployment. Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*, pt. 4.

question of how a brain or a concept can be a unity, they directly engage with Ruyer's absolute survey: the brain as a form that surveys itself without external distance, or a self-possession in which nothing observes from outside. I do not interpret the use of Ruyer here as a concession made under pressure; rather, it signifies a productive tension within the project. When Deleuze and Guattari inquire about how a brain, a concept, or a plane maintains coherence as a multiplicity, Ruyer's language of self-survey becomes useful because multiplicity must still remain together without being reduced to identity. This point of contact highlights a phenomenon that the vocabulary of form-in-act also seeks to explain, without claiming to refute difference.

Philosophy, as this paper adopts in its introduction, is the creation of concepts, and a created concept has components, a history, and a level of consistency that it either achieves or fails to achieve. The concept binds its components together as one, and this unity is the philosopher's task rather than a gift from the realm on which the concept is based. Ecological intentionality is the concept this paper introduces, and Deleuze and Guattari have provided an unusually challenging standard for judging it. A concept must attain internal consistency without erasing the differences among its components. Vital directedness, perceptual intentionality, creaturely form, and cruciform transformation must remain connected without being reduced to a single vocabulary. If they do, the achievement is similar to what the paper describes as form, which is not the suppression of difference but its enacted consistency. This analogy does not resolve the metaphysical debate with Deleuze. Instead, it clarifies what kind of form-in-act it is asking to be explained and why the concept itself must pass the same test.⁸²

⁸² See Michael Marder, "Plant Intentionality and the Phenomenological Framework of Plant Intelligence," *Plant Signaling & Behavior* 7, no. 11 (2012): 1365–1372; Michael Marder, "Plant Intelligence and Attention," *Plant Signaling & Behavior* 8, no. 5 (2013), taken up in section VIII. e23902

VIII. The Testing Ground: Plant Intentionality and the Limit of Empathy

The first pole of the working definition argued that directedness belongs to living forms more broadly than it does to conscious minds, and every subsequent section has accepted this claim without testing its lower boundary. Plants serve as the test because they eliminate many features that make intentional vocabulary easy to use without noticing what is being attributed: they lack a nervous system, locomotion in the traditional sense, and expressive behavior that straightforwardly invites the interpersonal structure Stein analyzes as empathy. The question here is therefore twofold. Can vegetal directedness be described without metaphor? And if it can, what remains of ecological intentionality when empathy proper reaches its limit? Failure wouldn't mean that plants lack consciousness, which the framework has never required; it would mean that their orientation could be entirely reinterpreted as external causation, with nothing in the living form tending toward anything.

Michael Marder's argument is phenomenological in method while explicitly drawing on the plant-intelligence and plant-signaling literature. Vegetal life is directed: the root grows toward water, the shoot toward light, the tendril toward what it will climb, and this directedness isn't an event happening to the plant but the very way the plant exists. Since a plant's life is its growth, and its growth is its tending-toward, this directedness is fundamental to its existence. The intentionality claimed here is non-conscious and non-representational; there is no internal theater where the sun appears as an object. Marder suggests that the phenomenological concept can be decoupled from conscious representation and reinterpreted through vegetal directedness. His proposal is thus revisionary and constructive, not claiming that classical phenomenology already viewed tropism as intentionality. This idea connects to the Aristotelian lineage of vital directedness discussed in section II while also engaging with the technical phenomenological

lineage from a different perspective. Marder's notion of vegetal intentionality is most compelling when seen as a modern extension that connects those historical ideas rather than as a simple return to an old phenomenological consensus. The second essay introduces a more complex idea. In Marder's usage, attention refers to the plant's selective response to its environment: differential growth, orientation, and changes in disposition during interactions, all happening without a central point of attention. Here, attention is distributed across a body without a head, illustrating that selectivity, the feature Bergson regarded as fundamental to perception, does not require the architecture typically associated with it.⁸³

Read into the framework, the case does three kinds of work. It gives the Aristotelian ground floor a demanding vegetal test: the nutritive power, τὸ θρεπτικόν (threptikon), was never outside the soul's domain, and vegetal tropisms can be read as exercises of nutritive powers belonging to a living form. The soul as first actuality is expressed through second-actuality activities of nutrition and growth, and the vegetal case tests that dynamic vocabulary at its lower limit without requiring a one-to-one identity between tropism, δύναμις (dynamis), and εἶδος (eidos).⁸⁴ The case is also strongly consonant with Ruyer's emphasis on morphogenetic unity. His evidence for absolute survey was embryological rather than neurological, and vegetal life makes the problem especially vivid because the plant keeps growing its own architecture in response to conditions it cannot move to escape.⁸⁵ The vegetal case also marks the limit of the Steinian extension, and the limit is philosophically useful. Stein's empathy is a mode of foreign-

⁸³ Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer (New York: Zone Books, 1991), ch. 1, with section V above on perception as selection relative to possible action.

⁸⁴ Aristotle, *De Anima* II.4, 415a23–b7, in *De Anima*, trans. C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2017), on the nutritive power as the first and most widely shared power of soul; II.1, 412a19–b6, for the first/second actuality distinction. See sections II and IV above.

⁸⁵ Raymond Ruyer, *Neofinalism*, trans. Alyosha Edlebi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), with section V above on equipotentiality and formation. The observation in the text isn't Ruyer's own emphasis, which falls on animal embryogenesis, and is offered as an extension his argument allows (rather than one he makes).

experiential givenness anchored in the expressive living body. A plant doesn't entitle me, on the evidence assembled here, to claim that its experience is empathically fulfilled. What is given is thinner and differently structured: orientation, tending, selective growth, and the slow style of a life. These are genuinely features of the plant's directed activity without thereby becoming my experience or licensing an inference to a hidden vegetal interiority.⁸⁶ At this boundary, ecological intentionality extends farther than empathy proper. Marder supplies the case for vegetal directedness; Stein supplies the discipline by which another's life isn't converted into my own. The continuity lies in a principle of non-appropriative givenness across different modes of life. Root and friend therefore belong to related modes of encounter without occupying points on one smooth degree-scale.

Bergson made perception the measure of a body's indeterminacy, signifying an action that is not predetermined. Plants, whose responses seem more constrained compared to animals, appear to sit near the limit of that measure. The response depends on the tempo and plasticity of plant growth. Here, "indetermination" should be understood modestly as developmental plasticity: which root branches, where a stem thickens, and whether a season results in flowering or storage can vary as a living organism interacts with its environment. The timing of these changes makes it easy to confuse them with a fixed sequence of external reactions. The key difference lies in organization across time: environmental influences are integrated through powers that belong to a self-maintaining and developing whole. A thermostat reacts to temperature; a living plant differentially uses light, water, damage, and seasonal cues in its ongoing activity to remain and become this organism. Vital directedness refers to that inherent

⁸⁶ Edith Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, trans. Waltraut Stein, 3rd rev. ed. (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1989), §5, with sections III and VI above.

orientation of powers. Organismic normativity concerns success, impairment, and thriving within those activities. Bergson's concept of duration offers a way to perceive this temporal aspect of the difference without claiming plant freedom analogous to human agency. What the framework needs is what Marder's analysis provides: a living form tends to its environment, makes selections within it, and can be recognized as doing so. That alone is likely enough to establish the vital aspect of ecological intentionality without requiring plants to have consciousness (which is certainly debatable) or empathy (also debatable) in the strict Steinian sense. However, the relational claim still requires something that abstraction alone cannot provide: a concrete description showing the difference between directed life, its givenness, and how the perceiver's own categories are involved. A specific example can reveal this connection before exploring how the perceiver transforms.

A Place-Based Test: The Black Walnut

For several seasons, I have kept a place-based journal around the black walnut behind my house in Spartanburg, South Carolina. Its compound leaves typically appear later than those of the oaks, maples, and cedars on the property. They burst forth in a frenetic process within just a few days of spring. By July, the tree is already dropping fruit. In August and September, the afternoon showers and heat arrive as the black walnut makes its last deposits of its green-husked fruit on the ground, making visible in just a few months what the earlier sections have described more abstractly over longer periods: a living form carries a history forward by absorbing light, water, soil, season, and previous growth into current activity. The black walnut isn't only situated in an environment as one object among others. Its crown, trunk, roots, leaves, and fruit are ongoing expressions of a life within a Carolina Piedmont setting. Aristotle and Marder provide the most minimal description of what's visible: a nutritive life that is already directed,

and growth is a tending-toward rather than an externally assembled process. Bergson emphasizes that tending has a temporal depth: the present tree isn't a fleeting moment but a duration in which past seasons persist as the capacities and limits of this one. Ruyer's language of self-formed unity, used cautiously, describes another aspect of the same phenomenon. The black walnut's form isn't given by the observer recognizing it but enacted through the living actions by which the organism keeps becoming this tree.

The phenomenological test starts where these descriptions end. None of them truly captures the walnut's lived experience, and nothing in observation justifies the claim that I know what it's like to be this tree. At that point, Stein becomes relevant again. What is given is the tree's intentional activity as an other: its slow growth, fruiting, persistence, and response to a world it inhabits on its own tempo, unlike mine. The distance isn't a lapse of attention but part of genuine givenness. At the same time, the categories I first use to relate to the tree are rarely neutral. It can come as shade, nuisance, property, biomass, carbon source, landscaping, future lumber, or a fall of fruit. Each description can be practically valid; none is false because it's useful. The ecological danger begins when one of these becomes the sole way I see the tree, when its availability for me replaces the directed life that initially made any use of it possible. Ecological intentionality describes the perceptual relationship where these practical meanings stay relevant without erasing the living world that surpasses them.

The walnut also reveals the problem that a theory of attention alone cannot solve. I might learn to describe its form more precisely, notice its seasonal rhythms, and resist the temptation to anthropomorphize it by imagining an internal life similar to my own, while still primarily viewing the tree through the lens of possession. Better description does not automatically diminish appetite. Therefore, the local case returns us to the fundamental question embedded in

the framework: what must happen to the perceiver when ecological seeing is blocked by the desire to make what is given completely available, even after the creature has been carefully observed? That is the question at the heart of the Ecology of the Cross.

IX. The Ecology of the Cross

The framework now has its two poles and the relationship between them. Living form can be described as directed within a milieu; that directedness can be perceptually given to another embodied perceiver without being exhausted by the perceiver's horizon; and the vegetal case has shown where ecological intentionality extends beyond empathy proper. What remains unresolved is the perceiver's own formation. Phenomenology can suspend theses, redirect attention, and disclose structures of givenness, but none of these accomplishments alone removes the desire to possess what has been disclosed. The *epoché* performs a necessary methodological suspension. The problem before the argument now lies elsewhere, in the distortion of seeing caused by appetite, habit, mastery, and desire. The framework needs an account of transformation, including a dimension that exceeds what the perceiver can control as just another technique. It requires a reordering that addresses both the appetites and the level of explicit theses, with a real cost. The claim of this section is that such a structure has been described with unusual precision in the Carmelite tradition, and that Edith Stein, who brings phenomenological training into sustained contact with that tradition, provides the analysis through which it can enter the framework with its theology clear and its phenomenological relevance capable of proper description.⁸⁷

⁸⁷ Edith Stein, *The Science of the Cross*, trans. Josephine Koeppel, The Collected Works of Edith Stein, vol. 6 (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 2002). Stein's biography makes the double occupancy a matter of record rather than of interpretation (Husserl's assistant at Freiburg, later a Carmelite at Cologne and Echt), and the interpretive restraint this section observes is to argue from her texts rather than from her life.

The *Science of the Cross* is the right text because of what Stein attempts in it. Written for the fourth centenary of John of the Cross's birth and left unfinished, the book analyzes, through a philosopher trained in phenomenological method, what kind of knowledge the cross is. Stein's title supports her thesis. *Kreuzeswissenschaft*, The Science of the Cross, names a type of knowing whose truth only becomes real through experience, so that the transforming effect on the knower is part of how the knowledge is received. For the framework's purposes, this is the key formal claim because it identifies a kind of cognition that previous epistemology had not considered. Section II's history traced the ongoing intentionality of experience and its divergences over where directedness resides. What Stein describes is a further divergence, at the level of perception: a kind of givenness that must be received in a way that changes the receiver and cannot be grasped by a subject whose own constitution remains fixed.

John's early work in Christian ascetical theology explores how appetite, purgation, and union with God hold specific theological meanings that this paper does not attempt to reinterpret. Stein's analysis then demonstrates how this theological framework influences a way of knowing in which the knower is transformed through their experience. *The Ecology of the Cross* expands this structure to ecological perception. I do not attribute this ecological extension to John or Stein. This layered approach allows theological sources to have a real impact while ensuring that the phenomenological and historical claims remain grounded in their own evidence.

John of the Cross offers the analysis Stein interprets, and its structure is important. The first book of *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* argues that disordered appetites cause specific damage. Among the harms John lists is an explicitly epistemic one: appetite darkens and blinds

the soul.⁸⁸ John's point relates to the soul's perception within the path of union, so that disordered appetites darken and blind it. My suggestion is that possessive desire can similarly influence ecological perception, shaping what stands out before any explicit ethical principle is applied and reducing the creature mainly to its availability. John's diagnosis still belongs to sixteenth-century ascetic theology, but its structural resonance provides a clearer way to identify one form of perceptual distortion. The passive nights are central to this discussion, as they signify an unintentional emptying that can't be performed by the one who needs it. John's word for the path is the single term the framework must interpret accurately. On the mountain's outline, along the ascending way, he wrote *nada*, and the concept of nothing is vast enough to encompass the mountain itself.⁸⁹

Ecological misperception also results from conceptual ignorance, cultural shaping, institutional structures, technological influence, and habits of attention. The Carmelite contribution focuses on one persistent aspect: possessive desire that persists despite corrected information and better descriptions. Therefore, appetite has a specific role within the framework. It refers to the tendency to transform what has been revealed into something ultimately available for use, mastery, or possession.

This raises an objection that an Ecology of the Cross must address. The Carmelite *nada* appears to be the least ecological doctrine possible. If creatures are nothing (or no thing) compared to God, and if attachment to them is the disease while detachment is the cure, then the tradition seems more like an instrument for devaluing the created world rather than perceiving it.

⁸⁸ John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, bk. 1, chaps. 6–10, esp. chap. 8, in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, rev. ed. (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1991).

⁸⁹ *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, the sketch of the mount and the accompanying maxims beginning the work. The totality of the negation, extended to the ascent itself, is what prevents the doctrine from being read as an ordinary asceticism of moderation.

This paper appears to have adopted an ascetic theology against its own subject matter. John's own qualification is also important: "All creatures considered in this way are nothing."⁹⁰ The phrase "considered in this way" describes the comparison of finite creatures with the infinite being of God, and the attachment by which the soul tries to make them proportional to divine union. Therefore, John's *nada* targets the creature under the aspect imposed by appetite, either as a means to complete the self, satisfy possessive desire, or lead the soul to God via a route the soul can control. The Creator-creature disproportion makes that use impossible. The emptying falls on the appetite's claim upon the creature and upon God; however, the creature's reality remains. In Stein's integrated presentation of John's spiritual path, the created world also appears differently in the *Spiritual Canticle*: the groves and meadows are clothed in beauty by a glance that passed through them, described with a particularity that the earlier ascent lacked.⁹¹ From an ecological perspective, this contrast enables a return to creaturely particularity after possessive claim has been loosened. The creature that appetite had reduced to use can become visible again under a different aspect. This is the structure the framework has aimed for since section III: the creature's excess over my grasp, honored from within givenness rather than protected by withdrawing the creature from givenness entirely.

That structure allows the paper to settle a debt it incurred in section III. Ecological intentionality arose by distinguishing the types of priority identified by Stein, Merleau-Ponty, and Levinas. Levinas offers a prohibition inherent to the framework: the other is never fully contained within my horizon, and intentional understanding is always vulnerable to becoming

⁹⁰ John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, bk. 1, chap. 4, §3, in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, rev. ed. (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1991).

⁹¹ John of the Cross, *The Spiritual Canticle*, sts. 4–5, esp. the commentary on st. 5, in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, rev. ed. (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1991).

possession. The Carmelite analysis addresses a different but related question. What happens to the perceiver whose appetites continue to turn another's givenness into availability even after hearing the philosophical warning? The face challenges sovereignty; the night describes a transformation of habits and desires through which sovereignty is repeatedly reconstructed. Their radicalities serve different functions. Levinas helps clarify the ethical excess of the other; John and Stein provide an ascetic grammar for the perceiver's dispossession. And the ontological connection is even closer. Within Stein's metaphysics of participation, finite being receives the act by which it exists. The Aristotelian framework remains separate: a living being enacts its own powers through activities that sustain and unfold its form. The constructive proposal joins these spheres structurally without equating the received being with each creaturely ἐνέργεια. In Stein's account, a finite being whose existence is received encounters other finite beings whose existence is also received. Cruciform perception describes a reformation of human reception toward greater adequacy to that creaturely condition. Practices can prepare the perceiver for such a change, while the Carmelite passive night does not allow the decisive reordering to be artificially produced on command. Cruciform perception extends the metaphysics into a theological discipline aimed at the possessive habits through which received beings are treated as if they were available for ownership.⁹²

The language of form is the last thing to develop, and it's where the framework's title of a cross ceases to be a figure.

who, though he was in the form of God,

did not regard equality with God

⁹² Edith Stein, *Finite and Eternal Being: An Attempt at an Ascent to the Meaning of Being*, trans. Kurt F. Reinhardt, The Collected Works of Edith Stein, vol. 9 (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 2002), chaps. 2–3, with section IV above.

as something to be exploited,
 but emptied himself,
 taking the form of a slave,
 being born in human likeness. (Phil. 2:6–7, NRSV)

This section of Philippians, which Stein and the Carmelite tradition (as well as much of Christianity) interpret as the pattern of the cross, offers a Christological framework through self-emptying, ἐκένωσεν (from κενόω, kenoō): the one described as existing ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ takes μορφήν δούλου, the form of a slave. The repeated use of μορφή (morphē) echoes the paper's vocabulary of form, while the first-century hymn belongs to a context distinct from Aristotle's more technical terms. A framework focused on the central category of form-in-act leads, in its Christological dimension, to a pattern where form is revealed through self-giving rather than self-assertion. Stein's explanation of conformity to Christ describes the human counterpart. She depicts the transformation of the person through participation in a pattern of self-emptying love.

The Ecology of the Cross can now be more precisely defined. It describes an ecological perception in which the life of another creature is received by a perceiver whose habits of control are being dispossessed in accordance with a Christological model of self-giving. Cruciformity here signifies the theological shape of a human perceiver's conversion from possession toward reception, while leaving kenosis distinct from the metaphysical definition of form. Two disciplines emerge from that distinction. First, the framework cannot serve as spiritual comfort that reconciles anyone to ecological loss; the night purges the perceiver's appetite for possession and offers no justification for accepting another person's possession. Second, the passive nights should not be seen as achievements, since they are experienced rather than sought. The framework provides a description of a structure and an explanation of why that structure

becomes necessary once attention and description confront the persistence of possessive desire. Vainio's study of Stein's dark light and Jani's account of continuity between her phenomenological and mystical writings support the methodological point on which the entire section depends: this final movement continues the same inquiry at the point where the perceiver becomes central.⁹³

The claim is deliberately modest in scope. Ecological intentionality as a phenomenological relation does not inherently require Christian theology. Cruciform perception is a distinctly Christian theological concept developed here from Stein and John of the Cross. Other ascetic or contemplative traditions may describe transformations of possessiveness that are structurally similar, and this paper leaves that comparison open. The Cross offers a Christological pattern of receiving life, self-giving, and dispossession; phenomenology alone does not prove that pattern or make it universally necessary.

X. Conclusion: What the Framework Establishes and Leaves Open

The paper set out to explore whether ecological intentionality can be developed as a cruciform phenomenology of creaturely relations. Ecological intentionality has emerged as a structured field relation with distinct moments. Vital directedness describes the immanent tendency of living forms within a milieu; perceptual intentionality refers to the givenness of another living orientation to an embodied perceiver; ecological intentionality refers to the encounter between these poles as it unfolds through intersecting milieus that surpass either horizon. Its ecological nature, therefore, belongs to the organism-milieu-perceiver field rather than simply to the

⁹³ Vainio, "Dark Light"; Anna Jani, "Self-Sacrifice and the Sacred: Edith Stein on Phenomenology, Christianity, and Mysticism." *Religions* 16, no. 3 (2025): 336. Jani's argument for continuity between Stein's phenomenological and mystical writings supports reading *The Science of the Cross* as continuous with her philosophical concerns, while the work's theological subject and method remain irreducible to phenomenology.

presence of a nonhuman object. The relation is ethically ambivalent and can be attentive, partial, possessive, or deformed. The cruciform qualification indicates a further theological claim about the perceiver: truthful reception may require the dispossession of appetites that persist despite improved information and attention. The result is an account of the perceptual and metaphysical field in which an environmental ethic would need to form, without fully providing that ethic.

Four results can be outlined as theses. The first is historical: the technical genealogy of intentionality and the Aristotelian genealogy of vital directedness remain distinct even where they intersect. Ecological intentionality constructively bridges them by linking a phenomenological account of givenness to an older metaphysics of immanent living powers. Therefore, the concept restores a vital matrix without claiming that a single doctrine of intentionality extended unchanged from Aristotle to Husserl. The second is methodological, concerning different levels of priority. Stein emphasizes phenomenological priority in disclosure, Merleau-Ponty prioritizes the embodied field as genetic and operative, and Levinas emphasizes alterity as normative. Perception thus comes before ethics in the organization of thought but does not serve as the origin of ethical authority; the encounter with the other occurs without the ethical claim of alterity being fully expressed through what is thematically given. This differentiated hierarchy also clarifies the ecophenomenological debate between immersion and reflection. Stein's non-primordial structure maintains the necessary framework: given and other, perceived but never fully possessed. At the vegetal limit, however, the discussion also highlights where true empathy transitions into a subtler, non-possessive mode of creaturely givenness. The third result is metaphysical: under the constructive interpretation presented here, living beings can be understood as form-in-act, dynamically rich and internally organized, with Ruyer's *survol* serving as a modern structural analogy rather than a strict identity claim. Against Deleuze, the

paper advocates for a more comprehensive view of how powers and relations belong to the ongoing activity and flourishing of a living form, while preserving the normativity of immanent composition as a genuine alternative. The fourth result names the framework itself: Cruciform perception describes the distinctly Christian theological transformation of a human perceiver, whose received life encounters other received lives and whose desires for mastery are gradually altered so that givenness does not necessarily turn into mere availability. This pertains to the human perceiver's conversion, distinct from the metaphysical idea of form and separate from kenosis, and renders ecological intentionality understandable as a phenomenological concept outside the Christian theological framework developed here.⁹⁴

The limits are worth stating with the same care, since a framework's claims are only as good as its account of what it hasn't shown. Most importantly, the paper stops short of establishing vegetal empathy in the strict Steinian sense. At the vegetal limit, ecological intentionality extends beyond empathy proper, where Marder's account of directedness can be combined with Stein's discipline of non-primordially without attributing a plant experience whose phenomenological structure the paper can't fulfill. The framework still owes a larger body of sustained descriptions across different kinds of creaturely encounters. The reading of Ruyer's *survol* as a structural analog to ἐνέργεια remains interpretive. The engagement with Deleuze rested on three chapters and a late text, enough to locate a serious disagreement while leaving Deleuze unsettled. The paper has also not established that forests, watersheds, or ecological communities are organismic forms in the Aristotelian sense. However, any extension from living substances to ecological wholes requires its own argument. More consequentially, the passive

⁹⁴ See section IX above; Edith Stein, *The Science of the Cross*, trans. Josephine Koeppel, The Collected Works of Edith Stein, vol. 6 (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 2002).

nights, by John's own analysis, are undergone, which means the framework can't be converted into a method, curriculum, or practice anyone administers; whatever formation it describes can be prepared for but not produced on command. Nor does the framework, on its own, do the work that structural and political analysis does. A conversion of perception that leaves the arrangements of extraction untouched would reproduce precisely the failure critics of ascetic traditions worry about. The constraint stated in the previous section, that a doctrine of dispossession must never be conscripted by whoever benefits from other people's dispossession, needs an account of those arrangements to be enforceable. The framework clarifies what such an account would address while leaving that structural analysis to other methods.

What the paper establishes for future work can be summarized in three contexts. Philosophically, the form-in-act thesis is now sufficiently supported to serve as a tool for further testing, while remaining open to revision. Phenomenologically, ecological intentionality has been defined more as a relational field involving vital directedness, perceptual intentionality, and the intersecting milieus through which another living being becomes apparent, with empathy playing a central but limited role in that relation. Theologically, the science of the cross has been given a systematic role: it describes the transformation of desire needed when attentive perception becomes entangled with possession. Each level also highlights unresolved issues: the flesh and the chiasm, which this paper approached through the Nature courses without fully engaging with late ontology; the *survol* at its full theological significance; Stein's empathy and *esse* considered together as a single doctrine rather than as two stages of a process; and a theology of the cross read ecologically from sources beyond the Carmelite tradition. The black walnut discussed in section VIII is only a preliminary local test. Beyond it lies the main question of the dissertation: what this framework requires from specific places in the Piedmont and

Lowcountry of the Carolinas, where its concepts will either prove useful both descriptively and ethically or reveal their limitations. The criterion for evaluating this result was established at the outset and aligns with the tradition the paper argued against: a created concept has components, a history, and a coherence it either attains or fails to attain. Whether ecological intentionality unites its components into a whole is the question this analysis poses.

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