

Nature and *Physis*: Highlighting the Significance of
Understanding the Ontological Primacy of Nature in Post-
Metaphysical Thought

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Contents

Introduction: Nature does not Exist	2
I. The Natural History of Forgetting	10
II. The Deconstruction of Natural Sovereignty.....	23
III. The Language of Flesh.....	44
Conclusion: Never Nature, Always Questioning.....	60
Works Cited	63

Introduction: Nature does not Exist

This thesis concerns the understanding of *physis* in the work of Martin Heidegger and how this understanding is elaborated and extended by Jacques Derrida and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Heidegger first discusses *physis* in his 1929-30 lecture course, published in English as *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, where he remarks that *physis* is customarily translated as nature, from the Latin *natura*, but properly means the “self-forming prevailing of beings as a whole.”¹ He continues,

Physis as beings as whole is not meant in the modern, late sense of nature, as the conceptual counterpart to history for instance. Rather it is intended more originally than both these concepts, in an originary meaning, which, prior to nature and history, encompasses both.²

Thus, the emergence of what we call “nature” is the history of an error, appearing only out of the mistranslation of *physis* and its meaning within the early Greek milieu. This translation of *physis* as *natura* in Roman philosophy was not an innocent one, nor without considerable consequences. The widespread use of “nature” has led to problematic understandings of what is “natural,” not least since nature is opposed to that which is free, to that which has a history, that which is not merely bodily, and so on. In other words, nature is that which is to be transcended in order to be fully human.

Since its inception as an idea, our understanding of “nature” has always been mediated by culture and language. Timothy Morton, in his book *Ecology without Nature*, asserts, “‘nature’ is an arbitrary rhetorical construct, empty of independent, genuine existence behind or beyond the

¹ Heidegger, Martin, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*. Trans. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker. Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1995: 25.

² Ibid, 26.

texts we create about it.”³ “Nature” does not exist apart from human representation, it is a semantic construct, which conjures up an image or idea of its content. Discourses regarding “nature” and related terms such as “climate” and the “environment” abound, yet the meaning of these terms remains inconsistent and elusive. “*Nature*,” Morton observes, “wavers between the divine and the material. Far from being something ‘natural’ itself, nature hovers over things like a ghost. It slides over the infinite list of things that evoke it.”⁴ “Nature” is so widely deployed and conveys such a diversity of meanings that it becomes almost mythic in its signification and cannot be understood apart from fabulation, since its variable meaning subverts any sense of legitimate validity. Nature, far from being what the human discovers using *aisthesis* or perception, is an invention, and one that grounds all kinds of metaphysical oppositions, such a *physis/nomos*, *psychē/soma*, *physis/ technē*, and so on. From Plato to Kant and beyond, only that being that can be sovereign over nature, even one’s own bodily nature, can be said to be free, to have a moral quality to its actions, and so on.

The most pernicious effect of the thinking of nature, is that this word, “nature,” always announces a separation. As Morton remarks, “just when it brings us into proximity with the nonhuman ‘other,’ nature reestablishes a comfortable distance between ‘us’ and ‘them.’”⁵ The divisions produced out of an understanding of nature are manifold. Nature is opposed to culture, and it is said to describe the non-human, which is always denotes the inferior, the less-than-human. Yet nature remains something in which we are somehow implicated. As Clive Hamilton writes, “we believe we are rational creatures, arisen from nature,” but are nevertheless

³ Morton, Timothy. *Ecology without Nature*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2007, 21-22.

⁴ Ibid. 14.

⁵ Ibid, 19.

“independent of its great unfolding processes.”⁶ The borders around nature, its precise definition or location are always blurred. Nevertheless in light of recent attention to ecological sustainability, there is a movement to return to nature, to reintegrate ourselves within its folds. So what is nature? Morton remarks, “nature always slips out of reach in the very act of grasping it.”⁷ He continues, “at the very moment in which writing seems to be dissolving in the face of the compelling reality it is describing, writing overwhelms what it is depicting and makes it impossible to find anything behind its opaque texture.”⁸ That is, we are confronted with the realization that no such thing as nature exists.

However, we cannot ignore the crisis within that which is called “nature,” namely, the concern regarding the sustainability of life on our planet. The destruction of our ecosystems, including the ongoing devastation of natural resources, constitutes the loss of life of many species and the conversion of the earth into something potentially uninhabitable—both for those we dub too easily the human and for those we don’t. I argue in this thesis that an important step in working towards greater concern and respect for our Earth and its inhabitants is dispensing with our commonplace understandings of nature. As Claire Colebrook puts it,

The humanism and anthropocentrism that have marked Western thought need to give way to a new relation to the environment. This would not be a shift in the value we attribute to the planet and the atmosphere that is our home; it would be a question of valuing the environment *more, or of granting it greater worth, importance or significance.*⁹

In fostering more conscientious and sustainable relations to our environment and non-human life,

⁶ Hamilton, Clive, *Earthmasters*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2013: 195.

⁷ Morton, *EN*, 19.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Colebrook, Claire. *Death of the Posthuman*. Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2014: 52, her emphasis.

we must change our comprehension of what we dub “nature” would be. Ted Toadvine writes, “the proper subject for an ‘environmental’ philosophy turns out to be not the ‘environment’ at all, but rather *physis*, nature, as this concept has been developed in the history of Western philosophy.”¹⁰ For the ancient Greek philosophers, *physis* referred to the unfolding of Being.¹¹ Heidegger returns to this understanding, and explains *physis* as,

The emerging sway, and the enduring over which it thoroughly holds sway. This emerging, abiding sway includes both ‘becoming’ as well as ‘Being’ in the narrower sense of fixed continuity. *Physis* is the event of standing forth, arising from the concealed and thus enabling the concealed to take its stand for the first time.¹²

Given Heidegger’s description of *physis* drawn from the pre-Socratics, *physis* evokes a sense of flourishing, strength, regulation, balance, and freedom. *Physis* expresses what must be returned to the earth and the diversity of the biosphere, which comes from nothing but itself and that humans can neither administer nor control. Morton asserts that in order to become truly ecological, that is, properly attuned towards and concerned for the sustainability of relations among organisms, we must abandon our idea of “nature.”¹³ My claim, presented throughout this thesis, is that taking *physis* as the starting point for the consideration of existence activates the task of overcoming the representation of nature as a concept and begins the possibility of thinking nature outside of an anthropocentric model, which enables the attainment of greater respect for biodiversity. Therefore, rethinking *physis* beyond or behind what came to be called “nature” is indispensable to the task of developing a greater ecological understanding.

¹⁰ Toadvine, Ted. *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 2009: 7.

¹¹ Heidegger, Martin. *Nature, History, State: 1933-1934*. Trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt. London: Bloomsbury, 2013: 24.

¹² Heidegger, Martin. *The Introduction to Metaphysics*. Trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt. New Haven: Yale UP, 2014: 16.

¹³ Morton, *EN*, 1.

The significance of *physis* will be brought in sharper relief through the examination of the work of Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Heidegger first recalled the significance of *physis* in Ancient Greek philosophy. *Physis* is subsequently re-invoked by Derrida in terms of *Walten* (we'll leave it untranslated for now, for reasons to be discussed in that chapter), and explored by Merleau-Ponty with the notion of flesh. In reconsidering nature in terms of *physis* of Being, I will focus on the account of ontological difference, that is, the difference between beings and Being. I argue that *physis* goes beyond or is irreducible to this distinction, since beyond the ontological difference is the becoming of Being. *Physis* permits this difference, but is outside of it, and not defined by it. Rethinking nature along the lines of *physis* must emulate the becoming of *physis* as a non-identical sameness. *Physis* names something outside the distinction between beings and the *as such*, that is, Being. There can never be a total relation to Being "as such," since the *physis* of Being demands ontological mutation. Our thinking of nature must likewise include an intimation of an equality of belonging to a shared becoming that does not eradicate difference. This is undoubtedly a challenge, since it requires us not only to abandon the "naturalness" of our metaphysical tendencies, but also to recognize the general inadequacy of our thought in comprehending what could be considered a complete ontology. *Physis* as emerging sway is characterized by its dynamism and evasiveness. Thus, the task of defining "nature" is impossible, for nature is always to come.

In Chapter 1, I will examine Heidegger's understanding of *physis*, described first in his 1929-30 course, published as *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, as well as his 1935 course, published as *The Introduction to Metaphysics*. I will discuss Heidegger's recognition of the mistranslation of *physis* as *natura* as an event that he perceives as non-arbitrary and that

coincides with the inauguration of the Western metaphysical tradition. For Heidegger, metaphysical thinking has always been “onto-theological.” Metaphysics as onto-theology contains the simultaneous determination of the essence and existence of beings, becoming jointly ontological and theological. In sketching out Heidegger’s interpretation of metaphysics as onto-theology, I will look to his *Identity and Difference*, where this notion is explored at length. I argue that the onto-theological problem of metaphysics is at the root of the threat to the realm of that which we presently call “nature,” since the idea of nature obscures *physis* and a richer understanding of what is. Although Heidegger sketches a precise depiction of the onto-theological constitution of metaphysics, he does not sufficiently develop beyond the many hints provided in the texts noted above an alternative thinking of nature. Therefore, we must locate the path leading beyond traditional considerations of nature elsewhere than Heidegger. I will introduce two figures whom I argue take up the challenges presented by Heidegger: Jacques Derrida and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Both Derrida and Merleau-Ponty are inspired by the challenges to traditional metaphysics put forth by Heidegger, and each develops innovative responses to the problems of overcoming onto-theology and suggest a return to *physis* as a means of deconstructing metaphysics and that which we perceive as natural. The advances made by Derrida and Merleau-Ponty will be the subject of chapters two and three, respectively.

Jacques Derrida is one of Heidegger’s most important followers, and is perhaps most famous for his development of the method of deconstruction. Deconstruction contains a moment of realization that “supposedly complete identities or closed structures, ideas, or systems are always open-ended and can therefore never attain the perfect self-presence on which so much of

metaphysical philosophy is founded.”¹⁴ At the heart of the tasks of deconstruction is Derrida’s notion of *différance*. In Chapter 2, Derrida’s notion of *différance* will be examined in greater detail, highlighting the relation of *différance* to *physis* often missed in the eponymous essay on *différance*, but which will prove crucial, as I demonstrate. Derrida’s interest in *physis* in relation to *différance* is apparent throughout his career, and *physis* is mentioned in many of Derrida’s most notable works, including, as we noted, “Différance” (1968) as well as *Of Grammatology* (1976). However, it is not until the final year of Derrida’s career, the lectures published as the second volume of *The Beast and the Sovereign*, that he makes his most decisive determination with respect to Heideggerian *physis*, and in a manner that is novel to Derrida himself—or at least novel to those who think of Derrida’s works as only taking up “readings” of texts than extending and reorienting Heidegger’s thinking of the ontico-ontological difference – through his “discovery” of *Walten*. In *The Beast and the Sovereign II*, Derrida engages in extensive examination of *Walten*, the oft neglected term that appears throughout Heidegger’s post-turn (*Kehre*) writing in relation to *physis*, enabling him to reinterpret Heidegger’s ontological writings. Just as Derrida asserts *différance* is older than Being itself, *Walten* comes to name the force of *physis* that precedes the ontological difference, as well as the bifurcation of *physis* from that to which it has historically been opposed: *technē*, *nomos*, *thesis*, etc. *Walten* is thus beyond all conception and determination, and *physis* must similarly be thought outside all natural and cultural associations or representations. *Walten* exposes the powerlessness of human agency within the world or presence they occupy, laying bare the arbitrariness of the theological dimension of metaphysics and the forms of sovereignty that human gives to themselves, which for Derrida is always a phantasm. In sum, what Derrida does by describing *Walten* or *physis* in

¹⁴ Burik, Steven, *The End of Philosophy and the Task for Comparative Thinking*, Albany: SUNY, 2009: 54-5.

terms of *différance* (and vice-versa) is open us up to a thinking of deconstruction that is not allergic to quasi-ontological claims—with the “quasi” marking out the enormous weight that a certain of forgetting of *physis* in traditional ontology still leaves on any future ontology.

Chapter 3 will take up the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty in order to challenge further the ontological determinations of traditional metaphysics. Merleau-Ponty is often considered a phenomenologist, however by the end of his career, he had adopted a critical attitude towards phenomenology. Looking at Merleau-Ponty’s unfinished and posthumously published *The Visible and The Invisible*, I will examine Merleau-Ponty’s changing attitude towards his earlier works of phenomenology. Central to this discussion is Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the “chiasm,” which denotes the reversibility of visible and invisible existence united in a single “flesh.” The influence of Heideggerian *physis* is plain in *The Visible and the Invisible*, particularly when one considers the working notes included at the end of this manuscript. Just as he was developing his writing of *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty presented a series of lectures from 1956-60 at the Collège de France, published in English as *Nature*. What emerges from these late writings by Merleau-Ponty is a critique of *logos* as exclusively human and the promotion of a greater biocentrism. Further, unlike Heidegger and Derrida, Merleau-Ponty sees philosophy as a discipline that should not be divorced from the practices of the physical sciences, since only by the incorporation of these traditionally separate disciplines can we engage in ontological inquiry that actually rejoins to the structure of living beings existing together.

I. The Natural History of Forgetting

Martin Heidegger's entire career is characterized by his continual efforts to challenge traditional metaphysics and what it "forgets," most famously the question of the meaning of the Being of beings. In his work turning from 1929 into the thirties, it's clear that this forgetting—including the forgetting that we have even forgotten—is linked to a forgetting of an originary *physis*. Heidegger's critique of the metaphysical tradition, which he understands as initiated by Plato and Aristotle, begins in *Being and Time* (1927). *Being and Time* opens with Heidegger explaining the "necessity for explicitly restating the question of Being," given that Being, the most universal concept, has been exempted by metaphysics from true philosophical inquiry.¹⁵ Metaphysics has "forgotten" to question the meaning of Being as such, and instead focuses only on the being of beings.¹⁶ In *Being and Time*, Heidegger's primary mode of addressing the question of Being is through Dasein, Heidegger's term for the being of human existence. *Being and Time* names Dasein the primary entity to be interrogated in interpreting the meaning of Being. Around 1930, Heidegger experiences what many scholars consider a philosophical "turn" (*die Kehre*) after which he comes to realize "that the event of Being cannot be adequately understood from the limited, individuated perspective of Dasein."¹⁷ *Being and Time* does not sufficiently undermine the metaphysical tradition Heidegger is attempting to overthrow, since Dasein remains closely aligned to the subject-oriented model of understanding found in the work of Kant and Descartes, i.e. "a notion of the human subject grounded in the interior-

¹⁵ Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962: 21.

¹⁶ Ibid, 22.

¹⁷ Magrini, James. "The Work of Art and Truth of Being as 'Historical'." *Philosophy Today*. 54. 4. (2010), 346.

exterior/subject-object dichotomy.”¹⁸ Following the turn, Heidegger’s emphasis shifts from analyzing the Being of Dasein to an attempt to think Being itself.

Coinciding with Heidegger’s philosophical turn, Heidegger begins to describe Being in terms of *physis*. *Physis* is, of course, a Greek term, but Heidegger takes its meaning from specific readings of the pre-Socratic philosophers, those who question “the prevailing of beings as a whole.”¹⁹ In his first explication of *physis*, found in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, Heidegger writes, “*physis* means this whole prevailing that prevails through man himself, a prevailing he does not have power over, but which precisely prevails through and around him.”²⁰ In his lecture course presented at the University of Freiburg in 1935 and published in English as *The Introduction to Metaphysics*, Heidegger defines *physis* as,

the emerging sway, and the enduring over which it thoroughly holds sway. This emerging, abiding sway includes both ‘becoming’ as well as ‘Being’ in the narrower sense of fixed continuity. *Physis* is the event of standing forth, arising from the concealed and thus enabling the concealed to take its stand for the first time.²¹

Through Heidegger’s exploration of the meaning of Being as *physis*, he disengages from the lingering subjectivism that persists in *Being and Time*, which limits the apprehension of Being that an understanding of the Being of Dasein in *Being and Time* was supposed to lead. Central to Heidegger’s writings post-turn, and characteristic of his renewed critique of metaphysics during this period, is his argument that the primordial meaning of *physis* has been lost. *Physis* was translated by the Romans as *natura*, and it is from this that our concept of “nature” is derived, a

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Heidegger, *FCM*, 28.

²⁰ Ibid, 26.

²¹ Heidegger, *IM*, 16.

nature that stands over and against the human, however defined.²² Heidegger emphasizes that this mistranslation is significant, remarking in *The Introduction to Metaphysics*, which also deals with an explication of *physis* at length, that the translation of *physis* into Latin *natura* “was not an arbitrary and innocuous process, but was the first stage in the isolation and alienation of the originary essence of Greek *physis*.”²³ He continues, “this fundamental Greek word for what *is* is usually translated as ‘nature’...But with this Latin translation, the original content of the Greek word *physis* is already thrust aside, the authentic philosophical naming power of the Greek word is destroyed.”²⁴ The obfuscation of the meaning of that which is as *physis* coincides, he argues, with the inauguration of Western metaphysics. The work of Plato and Aristotle marks a decisive shift in the history of philosophy, which Heidegger describes as the “end” of Greek philosophy and the moment “‘idea’ comes to the fore as the definitive and prevailing word for Being (*physis*),”²⁵ exhibited by the advent of ‘nature’ as concept. Heidegger notes an ‘idea’ is formed on the basis of what something appears to be, yet comes to define what it constitutively is, as any reader of Plato knows²⁶ The idea replaces Being in the most fundamental sense. As Heidegger writes, “*idea* names not only the nonsensuous aspect of what is physically visible. Aspect (*idea*) names and also is that which constitutes the essence.”²⁷

For Heidegger, metaphysics is “the systematic articulation of the truth ‘about’ beings as a

²² Heidegger, *NHS*, 24.

²³ Heidegger, *IM*, 15.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 192.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 196.

²⁷ Heidegger, Martin. “The Question Concerning Technology.” In, *Basic Writings*. Trans. David Farrell Krell. New York: HarperCollins, 2008: 325.

whole.”²⁸ Thus, metaphysics begins with the presence of beings already in existence, rather than questioning the “prevailing” of beings, as the pre-Socratics did, which includes an attunement towards becoming. The word ‘metaphysics’ derives from the Greek word for ‘over,’ *meta*, ‘*ta physika*,’ what naturally is.²⁹ Heidegger notes that ‘*ta physika*,’ as what naturally is, constitutes already a narrowing of *physis*, the prevailing of beings as a whole.³⁰ What naturally is, says Heidegger, provides a foothold for questioning about its existence.³¹ So, while metaphysics is a certain kind of questioning about *physis*, its process is always self-referential and historically situated. With the privileging of *idea*, metaphysics eclipses *physis* in terms of what naturally is, which is replaced by the idea. By locating Being within the idea, metaphysics, writes Heidegger, “thinks of the Being of beings both in the ground-giving unity of what is most general, what is indifferently valid everywhere, and also in the unity of the all that accounts for the ground, that is, of the All-Highest.”³² Thus, Heidegger stresses that metaphysics is always *both* ontological *and* theological, and thus should always be described as “onto-theology.”³³ Metaphysics seeks the common ground for all within the idea of the one, which becomes indistinguishable from the theological quest of the highest being. Metaphysics always approaches the ontological question theologically, and thus ontology and theology become entangled as “onto-theology.”³⁴

Onto-theology is explored, among other places, in *Identity and Difference*, where Heidegger writes of the need for a “step back” from the history of philosophy and its

²⁸ Heidegger, Martin. “On the Essence and Concept of *Physis*.” In, *Pathmarks*. Ed. William McNeill. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998: 185.

²⁹ Heidegger, *IM*, 19.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Heidegger, Martin. *Identity and Difference*, Trans. Joan Stambaugh. New York: Harper & Row, 1969: 58.

³³ *Ibid.*, 60.

³⁴ Van der Heiden, Gert. *Ontology after Ontotheology*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 2014: 7.

establishment as onto-theology.³⁵ Stepping back directs us to “the realm which until now has been skipped over, and from which the essence of truth becomes first of all worthy of thought.”³⁶ The privileging of idea, to the detriment of a richer understanding of Being, begins with Plato and Aristotle, who privileged, in the end, *thēoria over praxis*, but continues throughout the historical trajectory of Western metaphysics. In *Identity and Difference*, the modern example Heidegger uses to illustrate how unchanging this has been throughout philosophy is Hegel. For Hegel, Heidegger notes, “only the absolute Idea is Being.”³⁷ Thus, by locating Being within idealism, “the conversation with the earlier history of philosophy,” when Being was first made theoretical, “has the character of *Aufhebung* (elevation).”³⁸ Of the effect of such continuance, Heidegger writes, “elevation leads to the heightening and gathering area of truth posited as absolute, truth in the sense of the completely developed certainty of self-knowing knowledge.”³⁹ Instead, Heidegger suggests a break from this perpetuation of the tradition, enabled through the step back. Heidegger remarks, “since the step back determines the character of our conversation with the history of Western thinking, our thinking in a way leads us away from what has been thought so far in philosophy.”⁴⁰ By moving away from what has hitherto been thought in the history of philosophy, the step back is at the same time a way forward. In the step back, Heidegger writes, “thinking recedes before its matter, Being.”⁴¹

Heidegger perceives that thinking has always left unasked “the *difference* between Being

³⁵ Heidegger, *ID*, 49.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 43.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 49.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

and beings.”⁴² Already in *Being and Time*, Heidegger recounts the forgetting of the ontological difference between Being and beings, as characteristic of traditional metaphysics. However, what Heidegger seeks to accomplish with this stepping back is to do more than merely raising the ‘unthought’ of the ontological difference. “The step back,” he writes, “goes from what is unthought, from the difference as such, into what gives us thought. That is the *oblivion* of the difference.”⁴³ Heidegger describes the oblivion as the “veiling of the difference,” which has “withdrawn itself from the beginning.”⁴⁴ Since Heidegger writes, “the difference belongs to the oblivion,” it is plain that Heidegger believes the oblivion of difference goes beyond the difference itself and towards what grants its possibility. Metaphysics has traditionally forgotten the ontological difference, but what has been truly unthought is the *becoming* of the ontological difference.

Heidegger asserts, “when we deal with the Being of beings and with the beings of Being, we deal in each case with a difference.”⁴⁵ This is because “Being” always refers to the Being of beings, and “beings” to the beings of Being as such.⁴⁶ What is overlooked in this understanding is what puts Being and beings into relation. However, Heidegger notes that we cannot form a representative idea of this difference without being “at once misled into conceiving of difference as a relation which our representing has added to Being and to beings.”⁴⁷ He concludes, “the difference is reduced to a distinction, something made up by our understanding.”⁴⁸ Therefore, the

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 62.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 61.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 62.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

true essence of metaphysics, which has been unthought by metaphysics, cannot be grasped metaphysically. This becoming of ontological difference, what is unthought in metaphysics is that which has been passed over and obscured throughout all history of metaphysics: *physis*. Heidegger describes the ambivalence of *physis*, which accounts for the relation of non-identical sameness held between beings and Being. He writes, “*physis* as that which prevails, means not only *that which itself prevails*, but that which prevails in its prevailing or the *prevailing* of whatever prevails.”⁴⁹ Thus, *physis* describes not only the Being of what prevails, but the particular yet inseparable instances of its becoming, which is to say, the unfolding of *physis* as ontological difference, which is to say, that *physis* is “older” than the ontological difference itself.

Against the background of this originary ambivalent *physis*, as both ontological identity and ontological difference, the metaphysical ontological inquiry has always been approached theologically, since “the Being of beings is represented fundamentally, in the sense of the ground, only as *causa sui*.”⁵⁰ Identifying a common ground of all beings that is also the generative ground of all existence, Being becomes analogous to “the metaphysical concept of God.”⁵¹ Therefore, in metaphysics thus far, says Heidegger, “we have thought of Being in an inappropriate way. We represent Being in a way in which It, Being, never gives itself. It is impossible to represent ‘Being’ as the general characteristic of particular beings.”⁵² The thinking of “nature,” as a concept purporting to describe *physis*, is unintelligible and inhibits the ability to develop our ecological thinking according to the proper essence of *physis*. Thus, undoing the

⁴⁹ Heidegger, *FCM*, 30.

⁵⁰ Heidegger, *ID*, 60.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*, 66.

metaphysics of onto-theology is nowhere more immediately necessary than in our thinking of nature.

The translation of *physis* as *natura* is the historical moment when the representative idea of Being usurps the more complete apprehension of Being that had hitherto been practiced by the pre-Socratic philosophers. Heidegger observes that “‘nature’ has become the fundamental word that designates the essential relation that Western historical humanity has to beings, both to itself and to beings other than itself.”⁵³ Heidegger continues, “therefore generally when we speak of the ‘nature of things,’ we mean *what* things are in their ‘possibility’ and *how* they are, regardless of whether and to what degree they ‘actually’ are.”⁵⁴ ‘Nature’ has become as central to metaphysics as onto-theology, employed to definitively describe the existence and essence of things. Thus, the recovery of the proper understanding of *physis* is of chief importance in order to depart from the understanding of Being as a whole only in terms of a conceptual understanding based on an idea, of nature, which is believed to be always observable. Heidegger expresses the urgency for a renewal of the true sense of *physis*,

At first blush our question about the essence and concept of *physis* might seem to be simply an inquiry, out of curiosity, into the origin of past and present interpretations of “nature.” But if we consider that this fundamental word of Western metaphysics harbours within itself decisions about the truth of being; if we recall that today the truth about beings as a whole has become entirely questionable; moreover, if we suspect that the essence of truth therefore remains thoroughly in dispute; and finally if we know that all this is grounded in the history of the interpretations of the essence of *physis*, then we stand outside the merely historical interests that philosophy might have in the “history of

⁵³ Heidegger, “OECP,” 183.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

the concept.” Then we experience, although from afar, the nearness of future decisions.⁵⁵ Since the beginning of the Western metaphysical tradition coincides with the mistranslation of *physis* as *natura*, it follows that the concept of nature that emerges from this can only be metaphysical, and thus nature will always be contaminated by the onto-theology characteristic of that metaphysics.

However, replacing *physis* with a representation of nature constitutes a devastating narrowing of the prevailing of Being itself to an idea of nature that is prior to any human concepts. This makes thinking *physis* difficult, precisely because Heidegger argues that since it prevails over what is dubbed the human, it defies any representation. Furthermore, the predominant idea of nature is that it is opposed to culture. Nature is the domain of beasts, the nonhuman beings considered less than their human fellows, who inhabit a world and belong to an organized society in addition to being a part from the natural world; we represent the world in terms of this fundamental division. The invention of “nature” is an onto-theological maneuver that established the bifurcation of the human from other beings, the “estrangement” of humans from Being as *physis*, and the installation of a hierarchy based on these dichotomies that solidifies human exceptionalism. The human invents nature in order to give itself sovereignty over it. Heidegger states that onto-theology is “the still *unthought* unity of the essential nature of metaphysics.”⁵⁶ While it remains unthought, the onto-theological constitution of metaphysics is permitted to persist, and as it pertains to nature gives credence to notions of the “natural.” Our understanding of the natural derives its authority from the theology enmeshed in the ontology of metaphysics, which establishes the ground of all beings with divine-like authority.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 185.

⁵⁶ Heidegger, *ID*: 55.

This brings us to major points whenever Heidegger discusses *physis*, namely what he above called the “naming power” of the early Greeks. Heidegger announces in *The Introduction to Metaphysics* that one of his aims is “to win back intact the naming force of language and words.”⁵⁷ He continues, “words and language are not just shells into which things are packed for spoken and written intercourse. In the word, in language, things first come to be and are.”⁵⁸ What are we to make of this claim? Is it merely a vacuous nominalism? We will see that it is not. Heidegger notes, despite the fact ‘language’ derives from ‘*logos*,’ *logos* fundamentally has no immediate relation to language as common sense typically thinks of it.⁵⁹ Taken in the Greek sense, the correct understanding of *logos* refers to the “relation of one thing to another,”⁶⁰ and is “constant gathering, the gatheredness of beings that stands in itself, that is, Being.”⁶¹ Heidegger perceives *physis* and *logos* as fundamentally the same, commenting, “*logos* characterizes Being in a new and yet old respect: that which is in being, which stands straight and prominently in itself, is gathered in itself and from itself, and holds itself in such gathering.”⁶² While Heidegger rejects the concept of nature belonging to metaphysical language of representation, it is important to note the originary connection between *physis* and *logos*. “In the *logos*,” writes Heidegger, “the prevailing of beings becomes revealed, becomes manifest.”⁶³ *Physis* is the prevailing of Being, but only through the *logos* does *physis* emerge out of concealment.⁶⁴ It is important to note that the loss of the understanding of *physis* is accomplished through a

⁵⁷ Heidegger, *IM*, 15.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 138-9.

⁶³ Heidegger, *FCM*, 27.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.

separation of *physis* and *logos* and their originary connection to Being. Hence Heidegger's supposed "linguistic turn" in his later work is not a move away from ontology, but a rethinking of the latter where *logos*, said to be a feature of the human, is not opposed to nature, the fundamental move of metaphysics. In metaphysics, "*logos* as the revealing gathering... becomes the necessity of the essence of historical humanity."⁶⁵ It becomes the task of metaphysics to "to gather and apprehend the Being of beings, to *take over* the knowing setting-to-work of appearance and thus to *govern* unconcealment, to preserve it against concealment and covering-up."⁶⁶ The stepping-forth of *logos* over and against Being makes it presiding over Being and determining the Being of beings. Heidegger observes, "Being as *physis* is covered up and reinterpreted,"⁶⁷ and this constitutes an act of violence against *physis*.⁶⁸ The loss of the proper understanding of Being is not the only casualty of human logocentrism, that is, the placement of the *logos* on this side of the human/nature divide that metaphysics instantiates. In the translation of *physis* as *natura*, what subsequently gets called "nature" also suffers, and remains the construction of a domain that is subservient to the human.

Despite his extensive critique of the representational thinking of nature enmeshed within traditional metaphysics, Heidegger himself remains committed to tenets of anthropocentrism, which a true rejection of onto-theology must undermine. In *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, Heidegger famously marks out the distinction between kinds of beings based on his understanding of their ability to "have" world. Heidegger asserts the well-known tryptic: "1. The

⁶⁵ Heidegger, *IM*, 181.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 186.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 190.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*.

stone (material object) is *worldless*; 2. The animal is *poor in world*; 3. Man is *world-forming*.”⁶⁹ Heidegger defines world as “the totality of beings outside of and other than God.”⁷⁰ This totality refers to Being *as such*, and, for Heidegger, relation to the world is defined in terms of access to the as such of Being. Heidegger states, “because plants and animals are lodged in their respective environments but are never placed freely in the clearing of Being which alone is ‘world,’ they lack language.”⁷¹ Language is “the clearing-concealing advent of Being itself.”⁷² Only humans ek-sist, that is, they “[stand] in the clearing of Being” through their ability to have world.⁷³ Being “speaks” language, and language is “at once the house of Being and the home of human beings.”⁷⁴

The ek-sistence of humans is dependent upon the ontological difference, since the human relation to Being as such presupposes the distinction between Being and beings, to which only Dasein has access. However, my claim is that we must base our thinking of nature not upon the understanding of ontological difference, which contains the ordering of beings based on their supposed relation to the as such, but rather upon *physis*. *Physis* as the becoming of ontological difference is therefore outside the distinction of Being and beings and necessarily surpasses the relation to Being or ek-sistence that Dasein may or may not have exclusively among beings. Thus, a thinking of nature according to *physis* will not reproduce the anthropocentrism that Heidegger maintains throughout his critique of metaphysics.

⁶⁹ Heidegger, *FCM*, 177.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 176.

⁷¹ Heidegger, Martin. “Letter on Humanism.” In, *Basic Writings*. Trans. David Farrell Krell. New York: HarperCollins, 2008: 230.

⁷² *Ibid*.

⁷³ *Ibid*, 228.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 262.

The notion of the divisive impact of a representational understanding of nature will be explored further in Chapter 2, when we examine the work of Jacques Derrida. Jack Reynolds remarks that, for Derrida, “metaphysics is not only the science of presence and of valorizing that which appears, it also involves installing hierarchies and orders of subordination in the various dualisms that it encounters and/or engenders.”⁷⁵ *Physis* will be examined by Derrida in terms of its originary connection to *logos*, as Derrida takes aim specifically at the artificial distinctions based on language appropriation that establish a hierarchical ordering amongst beings. As we will see, the method of deconstruction developed by Derrida is valuable in rethinking our understanding of nature, since Derrida challenges the concept of nature as something we exist over and against. In overcoming the violence of metaphysics, Derrida returns to Heideggerian *physis*, which he will discuss in terms of *Walten*, its originary prevailing.

⁷⁵ Reynolds, Jack. *Merleau-Ponty and Derrida*. Athens: Ohio UP, 2004: 54.

II. The Deconstruction of Natural Sovereignty

Derrida's method of deconstruction is something he develops over the course of his career, however, in this chapter I will focus on the last series of lectures given by Derrida in his lifetime, and specifically the second session of those seminars in order to discuss the explicit connections Derrida makes between his own project of metaphysical deconstruction and that of Martin Heidegger. The title for this series of lectures, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, announces already a binary, a delimitation characteristic of the metaphysics Derrida will challenge. The separation of the beast from the sovereign is suggestive of further distinctions that are familiar in our "natural" world: human and animal, power and powerlessness, nature and culture—all implicit under the heading of *The Beast and the Sovereign*. Throughout *The Beast and the Sovereign II*, Derrida makes frequent references to Heidegger, in particular, the latter's 1929-30 lecture course, published in English as *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, a text Derrida makes central to his own lectures alongside, for the most part, just one other text, *Robinson Crusoe*. However, Derrida also includes important readings of *Identity and Difference*. In *The Beast and the Sovereign* Derrida announces the "discovery" he claims to have recently made within Heidegger's oeuvre. "Late in my life of reading Heidegger," says Derrida, "I have just discovered a word that seems to oblige me to put everything in a new perspective. And that is what happens and ought to be meditated on endlessly."⁷⁶ This word is *Walten*, which Derrida believes has been neglected in Heidegger studies. *Walten* names a force of excessive sovereignty. Derrida describes *Walten* as "dominant, governing power, as self-

⁷⁶ Derrida, Jacques. *The Beast and the Sovereign: Volume II*. Trans. Geoffrey Bennington. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010: 279.

formed sovereignty, as autonomous, autarchic force, commanding and forming itself.”⁷⁷ This chapter will examine the notion of *Walten* as presented by Derrida in *The Beast and the Sovereign II* and Derrida’s interpretation of *Walten* in terms of originary *physis*. Although *Walten* is first mentioned by Derrida in “*Geschlecht IV*” (1989), I will show that at this point it had not yet taken on the significance it would have in *The Beast and the Sovereign II*. The significance of *Walten*, as an excess of sovereignty proper to *physis*, is informed by Derrida’s own writing on the notion of *différance*. What Derrida thus achieves in *The Beast and the Sovereign* is a powerful challenge to onto-theologico-political determinations and is understood by Derrida as “older” than ontological difference. By characterizing *physis* as the *Walten* of hyper-sovereignty, Derrida shakes the metaphysical foundations of any supposed unity of “the human world” at its very core. Derrida uses *Walten* to expose the fundamental contingency of our world and the arbitrariness of the dichotomies we produce, such as the binary between the human and the animal, as existing within it. *Walten* as *physis* “rules” exterior to the possibility of these divisions, which are nothing more than arbitrary determinations produced by the vanity of the human supposing its own sovereignty. Derrida surpasses Heidegger in challenging the supposed marker of human exceptionalism, the existence of the relation to Being *as such*, the ontological difference reinforcing to that which is called “nature.”

Derrida locates *Walten* within his renewed reading of Heidegger as a force of radical sovereignty, a power that undoes every claim to sovereignty, which he had been beforehand overlooked for its importance. Despite its recurrence in Heidegger’s work, attention to *Walten* is often neglected, overshadowed by preoccupations with *physis*, to which it is related. Derrida

⁷⁷ Ibid, 39.

understands that *physis*, Heidegger's word for Being derived from the early Greek philosophers, "is what increases, grows, increases by growing, the growing of blossoming growth."⁷⁸ *Physis* understood as "growth" has resulted in the association of *physis* with "nature." Yet the translation of *physis* that remains closer to the original sense, not as nature or even as growth, is *physis* as the "self-forming prevailing of beings as a whole."⁷⁹ Derrida takes seriously this rejection of *physis* as nature, and aligns himself with the notion of the "prevailing" of *physis*. Prevailing is the typical interpretation of the difficult to translate *Walten*, which appears in the original German in the lectures given its many semantic meanings. Derrida notes that *physis* depends, "as *Walten*, only on itself, which forms itself sovereignly as power, receiving its form and its image, its figure of domination, from itself."⁸⁰ Newly attuned to *Walten*, Derrida writes, "*physis* is the *Walten* of everything."⁸¹ Derrida asserts the significance of this novel interpretation of *physis* as *Walten*, believing that it "answers Heidegger's most explicit concern."⁸² Derrida believes that the proper meaning of Heidegger's notion of *physis* is *Walten*, as sovereign power, rather than *Wachstum*, meaning growth, which is the typical interpretation of *physis*, even by Heidegger in certain passages.⁸³ "*Walten* as *physis*, *physis* as *Walten* is everything; *physis* and *Walten* are synonyms of everything, of everything that is, and that is, then, as originary sovereign power."⁸⁴ It is the power or force of *physis* as *Walten* that Derrida

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Heidegger, *FCM*, 25.

⁸⁰ Derrida, *BS*: 39.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid, 40.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 39.

deems essential, and no longer “nature in the belated and restricted sense of the word, as the object of natural sciences.”⁸⁵

Despite the fact that Derrida is a thinker who is typically associated with the critique of sovereignty, in *The Beast and the Sovereign II*, Derrida, upholds the sovereignty of *Walten*, identifying *Walten* as the “excess” of sovereignty. However, *Walten* is not analogous with the commonplace forms of sovereignty presumed by humans. *Walten*, Derrida asserts, is “foreign or heterogeneous, excessive even, with respect to this ontic and therefore theological or theologico-political sovereignty.”⁸⁶ “Nonetheless,” he continues, “and by that very fact, perhaps constitutes an ontological super-sovereignty, at the source of the ontological difference.”⁸⁷ *Walten* names the unthought of metaphysics that Heidegger in *Identity and Difference* perceived as evading metaphysical thinking. Derrida makes plain in *The Beast and the Sovereign* that he is continuing Heidegger’s critique of metaphysics as onto-theology. Derrida writes, “as soon as metaphysics thinks beings as such in their totality, as a totality and God then becomes the highest being, the most elevated, the supreme foundational being who grounds every thing in reason, then metaphysics becomes a logic as theo-logic or theo-logy.”⁸⁸ However, Derrida remarks that the individual who “believes he is the author, the master and possessor, and the inventor...ignores the fact that he is first of all gripped, seized.”⁸⁹ That which originally grasps him is *Walten*, the “sovereignty so sovereign that it overruns any historical configuration of an onto-theological and

⁸⁵ Ibid, 40.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 208.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 207.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 288.

therefore also theologico-political type.”⁹⁰ Derrida’s assertions about the *Walten* that originally seizes humanity, recalls Heidegger’s affirmations regarding *logos*. Heidegger writes, in *The Introduction to Metaphysics*, “human beings stand before *logos* as those who do not grasp it.”⁹¹ Heidegger continues, “human beings remain those who do not bring [*logos*] together, do not grasp it, do not seize it as a unity.”⁹²

Understanding the nature of *logos* is essential to understanding what Derrida means when he describes *Walten* as an excess of sovereignty. In *The Beast and the Sovereign* Derrida remarks, “Heidegger’s definition of *logos* will always depend tightly on this thinking of *Walten*.”⁹³ Derrida continues, “the *logos* is what, bringing *Walten* to speech...liberates this *Walten* – and this *physis*, this *physis-as-Walten*, from its *Verborgenheit* [dissimulation], its hidden, dissimulated, silenced being.”⁹⁴ This coming to *logos* is already the separation, the differentiating into distinct identities that renders *physis* not as the *Walten* of undecidability, but instead as that which comes to be contrasted with *thesis*, *nomos*, etc. “The fundamental meaning of *physis*,” writes Heidegger in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, “is already ambivalent in itself...*Physis*, that which prevails, means not only *that which itself prevails*, but that which prevails in its prevailing or the *prevailing* of whatever prevails.”⁹⁵ He continues, “that which prevails manifests in its undecidedness.”⁹⁶ The *physis* that comes to be translated as *natura*, and even before this decisive moment when *physis* is concentrated into an idea, is

⁹⁰ Ibid, 279.

⁹¹ Heidegger, *IM*, 142.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Derrida, *BS*, 42.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Heidegger, *FCM*, 30.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

already encompassed by an onto-theology that will come to definitively characterize metaphysics since it has already been demarcated and separated from the creative powers of human production, such as law and custom, but rather Heideggerian *physis*, as opposed to Aristotelian *physis*, includes these.

Logos, like *Walten*, evades human mastery. However, it the human perception of themselves as the possessor of language, as the supposed *zoon logon echon* that elevates them above the animal, the *zoon alogon*, the being that lacks speech. Derrida notes, “in the dominant tradition of how the animal is treated by philosophy and culture in general, the difference between animal and human has always been defined according to the criterion of ‘power’ or ‘faculty’.”⁹⁷ However, it is *Walten* that is “the source, the origin, the condition, the force, the violence or the power that make possible and thus capable, the power to accede to the ontological difference, and therefore to the as such, and therefore, to the *logos*.”⁹⁸ In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida asserts, “all the metaphysical determinations of truth, and even the one beyond metaphysical onto-theology that Heidegger reminds us of, are more or less immediately inseparable from the instance of the *logos*, or of a reason thought within the lineage of the *logos*.”⁹⁹

In *Identity and Difference*, Heidegger states “metaphysics responds to Being as *logos*.”¹⁰⁰ He continues, “metaphysics thinks of beings as such as a whole, it represents beings in respect of what differs in the difference, and without heeding the difference as difference.”¹⁰¹ For

⁹⁷ Derrida, *BS*, 243.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 245.

⁹⁹ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*. Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997: 10.

¹⁰⁰ Heidegger, *ID*, 70.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

Heidegger, the ontological difference “constitutes the ground plan in the structure of the essence of metaphysics.”¹⁰² The metaphysical thinking of difference is what makes metaphysics simultaneously ontology and theology and at once onto-theology. “All metaphysics is at bottom, and from the ground up, what grounds, what gives account of the ground, what is called to account by the ground, and finally what calls the ground to account,” writes Heidegger.¹⁰³ Derrida perceives *Walten* as occupying a vital role within Heidegger’s *Identity and Difference*. Recalling Heidegger’s call for a “step back” from the onto-theology of metaphysics in order to examine its unthought essence, Derrida writes, “it is toward this *Walten* that the step backward directs us.”¹⁰⁴ With regards to the ontological difference, Heidegger asserts in *Identity and Difference* that Being and beings are different only by virtue of the Same.¹⁰⁵ Earlier in *Identity and Difference*, Heidegger explains that sameness is not to be confused with identity. “The same,” he writes, “is not the merely identical. In the merely identical, the difference disappears.”¹⁰⁶ Therefore, as Iain Thomson notes, two things that are said to be the “same” are actually thus required to be different.¹⁰⁷ The proper understanding of the same, writes Heidegger, “implies a relation of ‘with,’ that is, a mediation, a connection, a synthesis.”¹⁰⁸ Derrida understands *Walten* to be “at once, the event, the origin, the power, the force, the source, the movement, the process, the meaning etc. —whatever you like—of the ontological difference, the becoming-ontological-difference of the ontological difference, of the supervening of Being and

¹⁰² Ibid, 70-1.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 58.

¹⁰⁴ Derrida, *BS*, 216.

¹⁰⁵ Heidegger, *ID*, 65.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 45.

¹⁰⁷ Thomson, Iain, *Heidegger on Ontotheology*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2005: 26.

¹⁰⁸ Heidegger, *ID*, 25.

of the arrival of beings.”¹⁰⁹ As Heidegger asserts in *Identity and Difference*, “the onto-theological constitution of metaphysics stems from the prevalence of that difference which keeps Being as the ground, and beings as what is grounded and what gives account, apart from and related to each other.”¹¹⁰ The becoming ontological difference is preceded by the *Walten* of *physis*, which is fundamentally the non-identical “Same.” Being is gathered by the *logos*, apprehended by the human and constructed metaphysically only in terms of difference, while the essence of this relation of separateness remains unthought. Derrida states that the onto-theological constitution of metaphysics proceeds from “the superior power of Difference.”¹¹¹ Thus, it is the insistence upon the difference in ontology that engenders our false conception of Being and our tendency to decree the alterity of otherness, such as in nature.

Derrida’s examination of *Walten* leads him to a renewed understanding of Heideggerian *physis*. The distinction of the proper meaning of *physis* from its subsequent meaning following the translation of *physis* into *natura* is by now familiar. However, this is not the only binary containing *physis* that Derrida sees fit to deconstruct. In *The Beast and the Sovereign II*, Derrida remarks, “the *natura* to which Heidegger says *physis* is not to be reduced, is not the *physis* of the Greeks in general, with all the oppositions *physis/technē*, *physis/nomos*, *physis/thesis* or *physis* versus *kata suntheken* [convention].”¹¹² Derrida suggests that Heidegger’s *physis* surpasses the Greek understanding of *physis*, which places *physis* always in opposition and *physis* is rather beyond all such separation. Derrida continues, “Heidegger continues to give broad credit to this interpretation of *physis*; but what he is determined to distinguish from it, as an erroneous and late

¹⁰⁹ Derrida, *BS*, 256.

¹¹⁰ Heidegger, *ID*, 71.

¹¹¹ Derrida, *BS*, 257.

¹¹² *Ibid*, 222.

coming interpretation, is modern post-Galilean or post-Cartesian *natura*.”¹¹³ The characterization of *physis* that remains in contrast with *technē*, *nomos*, *thesis*, and the like, is one that is still subject to metaphysical demarcations that seek to establish the separation of *physis* from human convention and artifice. In such distinctions, metaphysics seizes upon the difference, and *physis* thus becomes a facsimile of *natura*, the determination of the natural instead of the *Walten* that precedes such separation. Derrida perceives that Heidegger is signaling his desire “to bring his own inflection to the reading of Aristotle, by appropriating, i.e., translating Aristotle’s hidden or occulted intended meaning into his own discourse.”¹¹⁴ Heidegger’s *physis* is not Aristotle’s; it is his own. The essential difference between Heidegger’s *physis* and Aristotle’s is, in Derrida’s interpretation, the added inflection of *Walten*. As Heidegger asserts in *Identity and Difference*, “the origin of the difference can no longer be thought of within the scope of metaphysics.”¹¹⁵ *Physis* as *Walten* evades the becoming metaphysical of *physis* that occurs even before its translation into *natura* when it is already dichotomized. Derrida concedes, the reason he places so much emphasis on the word *Walten* because he understands that it refers “to a sovereignty of last instance, to a superpower that decides everything in the first or the last instance, and in particular when it comes to the *as such*, the difference between Being and beings.”¹¹⁶ *Walten* is the *physis* of Being, the becoming ontological difference that puts it first and last as the excess of sovereignty transcending the ontological and theological.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 223.

¹¹⁵ Heidegger, *ID*, 71.

¹¹⁶ Derrida, *BS*, 279.

Michael Naas points out that Derrida's claim in *The Beast and the Sovereign II* that he has "just discovered" *Walten* is incorrect.¹¹⁷ In "Geschlecht IV" (1989), Derrida makes reference to *Walten*, nevertheless, Naas notes that "it was, it seems, the *detour* of 'The Beast and the Sovereign' that led Derrida back to Heidegger's *Walten*, though also, perhaps, the question of *Walten* in Heidegger that allowed Derrida to think or frame otherwise the question of *The Beast and the Sovereign*."¹¹⁸ Certainly, it is apparent in "Geschlecht IV" that Derrida has not yet realized the full breadth of the implications of *Walten* and has not yet changed Derrida's understanding of originary *physis*. In "Geschlecht IV", Derrida describes that *Walten*, as a ruling force, prevails and "obtains itself by a struggle...as world."¹¹⁹ Derrida in *Geschlecht IV* remarks that *Walten* is in one sense an affirmation of Heraclitean *polemos*, Being as originary strife, and is also, in a Heideggerian sense, "a synonym for *An-Wesen*," meaning presence or unconcealment. Derrida explains, "the *An-* of *An-Wesen*, what makes come to presence this unfolding of a *physis*, remaining however in it itself, is the force or the violence of *Walten*."¹²⁰ *Walten*, as the *physis* of *polemos*, is the origin, the producer and the generator of presence.¹²¹ He continues,

Conflict is *physis* inasmuch as it institutes but also inasmuch as it keeps what it institutes...when conflict stops, when one no longer hears what is unheard in the conflict, the being does not disappear, but is no longer kept, affirmed, maintained, becomes an object, an object available there where the world has ceased to become world.¹²²

¹¹⁷ Naas, Michael. "'World, Finitude, Solitude': Derrida's Final Seminar." *Research in Phenomenology*. (44: 2014). 20.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Derrida, Jacques. "Geschlecht IV." In, *Reading Heidegger*. Ed. John Sallis. Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1993: 207.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid, 208.

This understanding of *physis* is not the one that Derrida will present in *The Beast and the Sovereign II*, where Derrida comes to understand it in terms of *Walten*. In “*Geschlecht IV*,” Derrida affirms that *physis* is the “epiphany of the world.”¹²³ However, in *The Beast and the Sovereign II*, Derrida is adamant that the world is gone, it never is, and thus cannot be the manifestation of *physis*. “The world is gone, I must carry you” are the lines from a poem by Paul Celan that Derrida repeats countless times throughout the lectures. The world is gone so we carry each other, preserving a representation of the world through convention in order to avoid having to bear instead the knowledge of “the irremediable solitude without salvation of the living being.”¹²⁴ Our world is forged from “language and imposes conventional signification on words in order to survive, to persevere in life, to prevail, to have his values prevail.”¹²⁵ However the language of metaphysics is not the truth of Being, which cannot be spoken, but is instead the *Walten* of *physis*, forever evading human mastery.

Derrida’s recognition of the significance of *Walten* is informed not only by reconsideration of Heidegger’s work, but by his own writing, in particular the notion of *différance*. Michael Naas observes that *Walten*, the word that dominated Derrida’s final seminar, can be understood as “the last quasi-synonymous supplement, the last disseminative iteration, the last autoimmune inscription, the last ‘proper name,’ for what Derrida once called... *Différance*.”¹²⁶ In “*Différance*,” Derrida, in explaining the meaning of *différance*, maintains that it is “neither a word nor a concept.”¹²⁷ Nevertheless, he engages in an “approximate semantic

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Derrida, *BS*: 266.

¹²⁵ Ibid, 267-8.

¹²⁶ Naas, “WFS,” 27.

¹²⁷ Derrida, Jacques, “*Différance*.” In, *Margins of Philosophy*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1972: 7.

analysis that will take us to within sight of what is at stake,”¹²⁸ tracing the etymology of “difference” from the Latin “*differre*.”¹²⁹ Derrida notes *differre* is not a literal translation of the Greek *diapherein*, meaning a carrying over, or carrying across.¹³⁰ *Differre* has two derivative meanings: to differ and to defer.¹³¹ The ambivalent nature of *différance* recalls the ambivalence of *physis*, its double meaning described by Heidegger in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*. In *The Beast and the Sovereign II*, Derrida makes explicit reference to *différance*, declaring the “*différance* (with an *a*) of originary *physis*.”¹³² Naas points out that since *Walten*, as we have seen, is identified with *physis*, and *différance* is now also identified with *physis*, then “Derridean *différance* would seem to be identified with, if not actually be another name for, Heideggerian *Walten*. For what is *Walten* but this *différance* of an originary *physis* – before the ontological difference.”¹³³ Naas’s reading of *Walten* as *différance* is consistent with Derrida’s explanation in “*Différance*.” In “*Différance*,” Derrida is reluctant to refer to *différance* as an “origin,” for this term does not seem proper to it since *différance* is the origin of differences.¹³⁴ *Différance* prefigures Derrida’s understanding of *Walten*, and the *archē* of non-identical sameness of Being. Derrida explicitly asserts that *différance* is the “same” in “*Différance*.”¹³⁵ In the same breath, he also makes reference to *physis*, deeming *physis* to be “the unfolding of the same as *différance*.”¹³⁶ Perhaps, just as Derrida finds *Walten* as an undiscovered passkey to

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid, 8.

¹³² Derrida, *BS*: 126.

¹³³ Naas, “WFS”: 18.

¹³⁴ Derrida, “D”: 11.

¹³⁵ Ibid, 20.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

reading Heidegger, we, too, after so many readings of this most-read of Derrida's texts, see *physis* and Derrida's readings of it as crucial to the tasks of deconstruction.

Derrida's indebtedness to Heidegger is apparent throughout "*Différance*." Derrida at one point, while describing how presence can no longer be thought as "the absolutely central form of Being," but only as "determination" or "effect" of *différance*, admits that this maneuver is "radically and purposely the gesture of Heidegger."¹³⁷ Nevertheless, Derrida is unwilling to bring *différance* into complete association with Heidegger, or define *différance* as *physis*, since, not only does *différance* interrogate the determination of Being as being, but also as beingness, and fundamentally, "*différance* is not."¹³⁸ *Différance* "is not a present being, however excellent, unique, principal, or transcendent. It governs nothing, reigns over nothing and nowhere exercises any authority."¹³⁹ *Différance* is "the possibility of conceptuality, of a conceptual process and system in general."¹⁴⁰ It is "the playing movement that 'produces'" and the "non-full, non-simply, structured and differentiating origin of differences."¹⁴¹ *Différance* is properly conceived of in terms of play, which announces the "unity of chance and necessity in calculations without end."¹⁴²

However, at the time of "*Différance*," Derrida, who has not yet made the connection with *Walten*, but seeks something analogous with it in the notion of *différance*. In "*Différance*," Derrida describes the movement of *différance*, relating it to *physis*,

¹³⁷ Ibid, 16-7.

¹³⁸ Ibid, 21.

¹³⁹ Ibid, 22.

¹⁴⁰ Derrida, "D": 11.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid, 7.

The intelligible as differing-deferring the sensible, as the sensible different and deferred; the concept as different and deferred, differing-deferring intuition; culture as nature different and deferred, differing-deferring; all of the others of *physis* – *technē*, *nomos*, *thesis*, society, freedom, history, mind, etc.—as *physis* different and deferred, or as *physis* differing and deferring. *Physis in différance*.¹⁴³

Thus, *différance* is plainly something Derrida sees as related to *physis*, but it appears that *différance* is something that *physis* itself is not. *Physis* is understood only as *in différance*, Derrida resists conflating *physis* with *différance*. Not until Derrida seriously examines *Walten* does he recognize, within *physis*, something that he recognizes as Heidegger's own principle of *différance*, namely *Walten*. Derrida appears to debate in “*Différance*” how closely to align *différance* with Heideggerian *physis*. He concedes, “in a certain aspect of itself, *différance* is certainly but the historical and epochal *unfolding* of Being or of the ontological difference.”¹⁴⁴ However, Derrida explains his trepidation to explain *différance* as or within Being,

Yet are not the thought of the meaning or truth of Being, the determination of *différance* as the ontico-ontological difference, difference thought within the horizon of *Being*, still intrameta-physical effects of *différance*? The unfolding of *différance* is perhaps not solely the truth of Being, or of the epochality of Being.¹⁴⁵

“Perhaps,” he remarks, “we must attempt to think this unheard-of thought, this silent tracing.”¹⁴⁶ Derrida suggests we must begin to think *différance* otherwise than Being, “since Being has never had a ‘meaning,’ has never been thought or said as such, except by dissimulating itself in beings,

¹⁴³ Ibid, 20.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, 22.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

then *différance*, in a certain and very strange way, (is) ‘older’ than the ontological difference or the truth of Being.”¹⁴⁷Derrida explains,

“‘Older’ than Being itself, such a *différance* has no name in our language. But we ‘already know’ that if it is unnamable, it is not provisionally so, not because our language has not yet found or received its name, or because we would have to seek it in another language... it is rather because there is no name for it at all, not even the name of essence or Being, not even that of ‘*différance*,’ which is not a name, which is not a pure nominal unity, and unceasingly dislocates itself in a chain of differing and deferring substitutions.”¹⁴⁸

Thus, the primordial *différance* is neither unity, nor contradiction and is a force beyond all determination as ultimate ambivalence. *Walten* as *différance* functions the same way, as the hyper-sovereignty that exceeds not only our conception, but our very existence as beings in that *Walten* describes the not-yet metaphysical separation of the ontological difference.

Derrida’s approach contrasts with that of Jean-Luc Nancy, who argues, in *The Creation of the World*, that all thinking of nature is essentially metaphysical. For Nancy, knowledge is limited to the world of presence and nature is understood as eternally denatured because it only exists insofar as it is conceived of metaphysically and historically. Following its denaturation, Nancy’s “nature” only reinforces its own non-essentiality and confirms that actuality is limited to those who exert techno-logy: humans.¹⁴⁹ Philosophy is, for Nancy, the technology of truth. Truth emerges only because of denaturation, because of the groundless contingency of the human

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, 26.

¹⁴⁹ Nancy, Jean-Luc. *The Creation of the World, or, Globalization*. Trans. Francois Raffoul and David Pettigrew. Albany: SUNY Press, 2007: 88.

existence and our power to dictate a world of sense through the techno-logy of metaphysics.¹⁵⁰ Nancy writes that *logos* itself is “invented and organized along with other technologies,” revealing that which fabricates truth is a fabrication itself, just another offshoot of the technological humanity.¹⁵¹ *Logos* is “a technology that manages production, no longer of subsistence, nor even of a surplus subsistence, but of meaning itself”,¹⁵² the speaker of truth for humanity is an empty and contingent tool for assigning arbitrary value.

Nancy conceives of nature as non-given and requires that it be constructed in order to exist; any nature that exists at all does so only as denaturation and thus, nature is immediately cast forever in a position of dependence and subordination to its originator as it has no autonomous reality for itself. This attack on nature corresponds with a further distinguishing phenomena of the modern age, which is paradigmatic of anthropocentrism: the rise of individualism. Nancy’s appraisal of the non-existence of nature is an unsustainable position, because the logic that supports the fundamental claim underpinning his argument is unsound. Nature is the product of *physis*, a process ontologically prior to metaphysics and that does not rest solely on human constructs for its becoming. Nancy’s entire account of denaturation rests on the notion of *creatio ex nihilo*. However, creation does not come from nothing; *physis* exists transitionally between groundlessness and existence. While Nancy continues to maintain the “meaningful” world of being singular plural is created out of nothing, knowledge of the world’s being is simply a mirror image of its creator. Nancy’s *creatio ex nihilo* is the production and reproduction of the Anthropocene. Trapped in our metaphysical construction of the world, with

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, 88-9.

¹⁵¹ Ibid, 89.

¹⁵² Ibid.

only empty truths to guide us, the world of the plural singularity has come to be a hall of mirrors, where inundated by the reflection of our image we struggle to maintain our true *ethos*. Heidegger puts it best, acknowledging that “if man is to find his way once again into the nearness of Being he must first learn to exist in the nameless... Before he speaks man must first let himself be claimed again by Being, taking the risk that under this claim he will seldom have much to say”.¹⁵³ Learning to exist in the nameless will require that we see beyond the immediacy of experience and the simplicity of understanding a similarly human perspective. The challenge is not to set upon and reveal, but to stand back from the activity of creation, as passivity is required to reacquaint humanity with the notion of Being-for-itself. Until we learn to see beyond the limits of our theory, humanity will remain blind to the gifts of *physis*, too deaf from the repetition of its own passing of sense.

Derrida, in his last lectures and in his linking of *différance* to *physis* suggests otherwise. For Derrida, as opposed to Nancy, deconstruction need not place the becoming of all meaning in human signification. For Derrida, in fact, it is the opposite that is true. Affirming the hyper-sovereignty of *Walten*, surpassing the ontological difference, Derrida exposes all subsequent metaphysical determination that make up the human world begin to be revealed as arbitrary—and as later than any *Walten* of *physis*. In *The Beast and the Sovereign II*, Derrida writes, “the sense of sovereign and superhuman violence of *Walten*, of the all-powerful reign of *physis* appears the most clearly in Heidegger’s elucidation when he makes clear that humans themselves are dominated, crushed under the law of sovereign violence.”¹⁵⁴ The mastery of *Walten* over human existence is unrivaled. Not only is *Walten* beyond the metaphysical “world,” as one that

¹⁵³ Heidegger, “LH,” 223.

¹⁵⁴ Derrida, *BS*, 41.

is always supported only by those questioners for whom the world is always gone and can never be completely at home, it is also outside of nature. Derrida remarks that *Walten* is a force that bears neither life nor death, it is “between life and death, or beyond the opposition of life and death.”¹⁵⁵ Thus, *Walten* is beyond a “nature” that would be living, growing and falling into decay. Further, *Walten* is identified with *physis*, and Derrida reminds us in “*Geschlecht IV*” that “to determine the originally Greek apprehension of being as *physis*, before all the later concepts tied to ‘nature,’ Heidegger insists on the tension of a double movement.”¹⁵⁶ Once one admits the originary conflict and opposition as a sovereign power, all subsequent differences must be understood only with recourse to this original governing of fundamental undecideability. In characterizing *Walten* as the polemical sovereign standing apart, yet simultaneously encompassing the totality of existence,¹⁵⁷ Derrida again recalls the notion of *différance*. In *Différance*, he writes, “philosophy lives in and on *différance*, thereby blinding itself to the same, which is not the identical. The same, precisely is *différance*... the other different and deferred in the economy of the same.”¹⁵⁸ Given the contradictory nature of *différance*, Derrida remarks that “one could reconsider all the pairs of opposites on which philosophy is constructed.”¹⁵⁹

Although Derrida begins “*Différance*” by announcing that it is “a writing on writing, and also of a writing within writing,”¹⁶⁰ “*Différance*” cannot only be understood as a text on language. It becomes apparent through Derrida’s likening of *différance* to *physis* and *Walten*, that the differing and deferring betraying the possibility of a fixed origin of meaning in semantic

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, 94.

¹⁵⁶ Derrida, “GIV”: 207.

¹⁵⁷ Derrida, *BS*: 41.

¹⁵⁸ Derrida, “D”: 17.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, 3.

language simultaneously reflects Derrida's ontological understanding. Heidegger perceives an originary connection between *physis* and *logos*, which Derrida can be understood as re-invoking with *différance*. *Logos* is the gathering of meaning of a *physis* that is fundamentally undecided, and thus *logos* itself is founded upon instability. All linguistic certitudes and the constructions put forth by metaphysical interpretations fall away in the face of this superior and fluid force. Derrida remarks that although we affirm the existence of the "world" (and likewise "nature"), this "consensual communicative action" does not suffice for the world to be anything other than "the agreement inherited over millennia between living beings...an agreement, then, an always labile, arbitrary, conventional and artificial, historical, non-natural contract, to ensure for oneself the best, and therefore also the longest survival by a system of life insurances."¹⁶¹ Therefore, all worldly distinctions, such as that of the human and the animal, or of nature and culture, have meaning only while they have world. However, the "world is gone," never present and infinitely deferred, never more than "misleading allegation" put forth by those who claim sovereignty. In the history of the world, this has been the humans who have constructed their world to exclude and oppress the "beast." The world is the construction of convention and contingency, and the beings that inhabit it are gripped by *Walten*, without ever being able to grasp it.¹⁶² Derrida notes, "the noun 'world,' as a word void of meaning or the meaning without use of the word 'world' being merely an artificial effect, a cobbled-together verbal and terminological construction, destined to mask our panic... *that there is no world.*"¹⁶³ Equating *Walten* with *physis*, and with *différance*, Derrida develops a strong argument against translating *physis* as nature. However, in doing so, in introducing the concept of *différance* into *Walten-as-physis*, Derrida deconstructs the

¹⁶¹ Derrida, *BS*, 267.

¹⁶² *Ibid*, 288.

¹⁶³ *Ibid*, 256-6.

very idea of the natural. The only necessity is the force of *Walten* in its fundamental undecidability. All that emerges from *physis* as *Walten* can never obtain mastery in presence over the unseen existence of the governing force.

Walten is “the exercise of an archi-original force, of a power, a violence, before any physical, psychic, theological, political determination.”¹⁶⁴ The sovereignty of *Walten* is so excessive that it is “stripped of all the anthropological, theological and political, and thus ontic and onto-theological dimensions of sovereignty.”¹⁶⁵ Through *Walten* Derrida deconstructs all notion of difference, since *Walten* is the originary force before all separation. Derrida alludes to this eventual realization in “*Geschlecht IV*,” remarking, “the word Heidegger privileges to say this originary unity of two contraries is *Walten*.”¹⁶⁶ However, his understanding of the relation between *Walten* had not yet reached its apex. Not until Derrida’s recognition of the ambivalence fundamental to *Walten* had been interpreted on the basis of *différance* is Derrida able to definitively undermine the metaphysics of presence. In “*Geschlecht IV*” Derrida is still beholden to an understanding of *physis* as origin. Derrida’s reading of *physis* as *Walten* in *The Beast and the Sovereign* means that “no more is it a matter here of the state of nature as opposed to the state of society, an opposition that has organized so many discourses for so long.”¹⁶⁷ *Walten* is “the all-powerful reign of *physis*.”¹⁶⁸ But this *physis* that is not only before *natura*, but before all metaphysical ordering, including the conception of *physis* as distinct from *nomos*, *thesis*, and *techne*. These distinctions stem from an awareness of the ontological difference, but the essence

¹⁶⁴ Ibid, 104.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, 279.

¹⁶⁶ Derrida, “GIV”: 207.

¹⁶⁷ Derrida, *BS*, 40.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid, 41.

of this difference, similitude, is the *Walten* of *physis*, and thus supersedes all onto-theological taxonomy. Although *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* takes center stage in *The Beast and the Sovereign II*, *Identity and Difference* is equally important in purview of Derrida's discussion of Heidegger in these lectures. *Walten* answers directly to the question of what is unthought in metaphysics, raised by Heidegger in *Identity and Difference*. In examining *Walten* as *physis* and *Walten* as *différance*, Derrida succeeds in taking a step back from our traditional view of metaphysics and deconstructs the sovereignty of onto-theology. Ascribing instead the sovereignty to *Walten*, Derrida makes redundant all human claims to sovereignty dependent upon *logos* that claim an empty sovereignty in the subordination of non-human existence.

In the next chapter, the metaphysical language that functions onto-theologically to carve its own understanding of essence into existence will be again rebuked for its inability to provide a complete ontological understanding. Maurice Merleau-Ponty will rebuke the notion that there can be a pure and complete understanding of what exists, since all interpretations are only particular perspectives, which themselves belong to the perpetual integration and exchange of beings, sharing a simultaneous relation amongst themselves emerging from their mutual expression of a single Being. Merleau-Ponty's ontology of flesh abolishes the type of ontological understanding that has thus far been described by traditional metaphysics. Instead, he proposes, by way of his doctrine of flesh, a return to *physis* in that our understanding of existence must remain faithful to how Being asserts itself to be.

III. The Language of Flesh

In Chapter 1, we looked at the problematic translation of *physis* as *natura*, from which the concept of nature derives. This was discussed in terms of the problematic tendency of metaphysics to privilege ideas, coincidental with the loss of awareness for Being as a whole. In the present chapter, our examination of the thinking of nature put forth by Maurice Merleau-Ponty is also dependent on an understanding of *physis*, which will be discussed by Merleau-Ponty in terms of “flesh.” The last chapter explored Derrida’s understanding of *physis* as *Walten*, the force of *physis* prevailing beyond all human command. Through his account of *Walten* as exceeding the difference of the *as such*, that is, of beings from Being, Derrida deconstructs the onto-theology of metaphysics. *Walten* names a hyper-sovereignty “older” than ontological difference, answering to Heidegger’s question raised in *Identity and Difference* regarding the “unthought” essence of metaphysics. Derrida’s method of deconstruction and his elucidation of the primacy of *Walten* challenges the human mastery obtained through the appropriation of *logos*. The justification for the dominant position of humans amongst all beings is constructed through metaphysical language, which Derrida exposes as both artificial and arbitrary given the supremacy of *Walten* exceeding all human distinctions within Being. For Heidegger, “what characterizes metaphysical thinking, which seeks out the ground for beings, is the fact that metaphysical thinking, starting from what is present, represents it in its presence and thus exhibits it as grounded by its ground.”¹⁶⁹ Although Merleau-Ponty’s account of flesh does involve the immediacy of perceptual experience, his intention is not to reproduce the metaphysics of presence. Merleau-Ponty writes,

¹⁶⁹ Heidegger, Martin. “The End of Philosophy and the Task for Thinking.” In, *Basic Writings*. Ed. David Farrell Krell. New York: HarperCollins, 2008: 432.

We are interrogating our experience precisely in order to know how it opens us to what is not ourselves. This does not even exclude the possibility that we find in our experience a movement toward what could not in any event be presented to us in the original and whose irremediable absence would thus count among our originating experiences. But, if only in order to see these margins of presence, to discern these references, to put them to the test, or to interrogate them, we do indeed first have to fix our gaze on what is apparently *given* to us.¹⁷⁰

Merleau-Ponty's study of perceptual experience is precisely to reveal what is forever absent, and unrepresentable, thus challenging the ontological presuppositions that have emerged from traditional metaphysics. For Merleau-Ponty, nature is precisely "the primordial – that is, the nonconstructed, the noninstituted."¹⁷¹ Merleau-Ponty's understanding of nature emerges within an ontology that brings together the "visible" and "invisible" of Being, held by the reversibility, or "chiasm," of a single "flesh" existing within one sole Being. The theory of flesh and chiasm discussed in Merleau-Ponty's unfinished and posthumously published manuscript *The Visible and the Invisible*, fortifies Merleau-Ponty's understanding of nature described in the series of lectures given at the Collège de France between 1956-60, published in English as *Nature*, which were presented at the same time as he was developing *The Visible and the Invisible*. These texts will both be explored in this chapter to give an account of Merleau-Ponty's non-metaphysical understanding of nature. Merleau-Ponty's understanding of nature, an expression of his developing theory of flesh, is a return to Heideggerian *physis*, independent of metaphysics and is thus located "outside" ontological difference.

¹⁷⁰ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *The Visible and the Invisible*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1968: 159.

¹⁷¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Nature: Course Notes from the Collège de France*, Trans. R. Vallier. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 2003: 4.

In the working notes included at the end of *The Visible and the Invisible* Merleau-Ponty writes, “The world of perception is at bottom Being in Heidegger’s sense.”¹⁷² The Heideggerian understanding of Being is akin to the Ancient Greek notion of *physis*, as the emerging sway of presencing.¹⁷³ Note that Merleau-Ponty does not assert that *Being itself* is equivalent to *physis*, only the world of perception, which, for Merleau-Ponty, refers to the notion of “flesh.” Flesh is described by Merleau-Ponty as the universal “texture” of the visible, shared by all bodies and the world.¹⁷⁴ Flesh, writes Merleau-Ponty, “is not matter, is not mind, is not substance.”¹⁷⁵ Rather, flesh intersects and transgresses these categorical distinctions. It is a “*general thing*, midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea. A sort of being wherever there is a fragment of being.”¹⁷⁶ This granting of itself, the yielding of flesh from Being and holding presence as a visible realm, reveals that flesh is indistinct from what Heidegger describes as *physis*. Mauro Carbone notes “flesh of the sensible” is that to which all belong and makes “each of our experiences communicable and sharable”¹⁷⁷ and that, “the flesh appears as the condition of possibility of the communication of all experiences.”¹⁷⁸ This interpretation of flesh, as a web of mutual disclosure, is shared by Bryan Bannon, who remarks that flesh is “a relation between bodies, the connection between them that isolates each as a separate body and yet holds all together in one world.”¹⁷⁹ He continues, “flesh is a relationship and not itself a being.”¹⁸⁰ Flesh is ungraspable yet potent as the forceful productivity of association and meaning between beings,

¹⁷² Merleau-Ponty, *VI*, 170.

¹⁷³ Heidegger, *IM*, 96.

¹⁷⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *VI*, 138.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 139.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid*.

¹⁷⁷ Carbone, Mauro. *Flesh of Images*, Trans. Marta Nijhuis. Albany: SUNY, 2016: 9.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid*.

¹⁷⁹ Bannon, Bryan E. “Flesh and Nature.” In, *Research and Phenomenology*. 41. (2011), 345.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 344.

can be understood alongside Derridean *Walten* as another interpretation of Heideggerian *physis*.

In *The Introduction to Metaphysics*, Heidegger asserts that, for the Greeks, “*physis* and *logos* are the same.”¹⁸¹ Since Merleau-Ponty attributes his understanding of the world of perception to Heideggerian Being as *physis*, the world of perception must also be understood, for Merleau-Ponty, in terms of *logos*. Flesh describes the plurality of communicability and is akin to Heidegger’s thinking of the Being of beings in terms of *physis* and *logos*, permitting self-emergence, as the universality of gathering, holding itself in presence as a single flesh. For Merleau-Ponty, this *logos* includes the silent language of perception. Merleau-Ponty writes, “there is a *logos* of the sensible world and a savage mind that animates language – communication in the invisible continues what is instituted by communication in the visible; it is the other ‘side’ of it, just as things teach us that there was always another side conjugated with the visible side, and impossible with it.”¹⁸² *Logos* can be seen, heard, spoken, felt: *logos* pronounces itself silently in each sensible thing.¹⁸³ Merleau-Ponty writes, “Language is a life, is our life, and the life of things.”¹⁸⁴ He also quotes Paul Valéry,

Language is everything, since it is the voice of no one, since it is the very voice of the things, the waves, and the forests. And, what we have to understand is that there is no dialectical reversal from one of these views to the other; we do not have to reassemble them into a synthesis: they are two aspects of the reversibility which is the ultimate truth.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸¹ Heidegger, *IM*, 100.

¹⁸² Merleau-Ponty, *VI*, 227.

¹⁸³ *Ibid*, 208.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 125.

¹⁸⁵ Cited in, Merleau-Ponty, *VI*, 155.

Bannon argues that flesh is best understood in terms of Heideggerian ontological difference.¹⁸⁶ He continues, “Merleau-Ponty does not want to acknowledge any pure difference between the ontic and the ontological, he does find in Heidegger the idea that there is a ‘moving relation between being and a being, a relation that cannot be fixed.’”¹⁸⁷ Thus, Bannon suggests the ontological difference of Heidegger is not eradicated by Merleau-Ponty, but dispersed within the flesh. As Merleau-Ponty himself writes in *The Visible and the Invisible*, there is “no *absolute* difference...between philosophy or the transcendental and the empirical (it is better to say: the ontological and the ontic) – No absolutely pure philosophical word.”¹⁸⁸ There is, for Merleau-Ponty, no absolute separation of beings from Being such that the ontological difference purports to describe. The flesh is, therefore, unconcerned with such a separation, overcoming ontological difference and instead achieving an ontology of non-identical sameness as reversibility. Reversibility is the primary characteristic of flesh: flesh is the visibility of the invisible,¹⁸⁹ these two sides of flesh remain inseparable, insoluble, held together through the structure of the chiasm. With reversibility, Merleau-Ponty also resists turning the flesh into merely another “philosophical word,” since the “language” of flesh includes perception. Merleau-Ponty describes this reversibility to be like “the finger of the glove that is turned inside out.”¹⁹⁰ This remark pronounces the singularity of the flesh as well as revealing the impossibility of ever uniting the two sides upon the same plane: “there is no need of a spectator who would be on each side. It suffices that from one side I see the wrong side of the glove that is applied to the right

¹⁸⁶ Bannon, “FN,” 329.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid, 344.

¹⁸⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *VI*, 266.

¹⁸⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *N*, 209.

¹⁹⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *VI*, 263.

side, that I touch the one *through* the other...the chiasm is that—reversibility.”¹⁹¹ The tactile experience of the sensibility of the flesh demonstrates the primacy of perception in our experience of being, but the doctrine of reversibility, the logic of the chiasm that holds the two realms, of visibility and invisibility or sensibility and sentience, together provides for unity in difference.

The example of the glove also reveals how Merleau-Ponty establishes a *logos* of the sensible. Rajiv Kaushik asserts, “where Heidegger ultimately fails to think through ontological difference in his recovery of a *physis* that is always subject to the primacy of Being, Merleau-Ponty succeeds, for implicit in the philosophy of flesh is in fact a radicalization of *physis*, an understanding of *physis* as presiding over being in its originating.”¹⁹² He continues, “one could stress the connection between flesh and *physis* by showing how the flesh, like *physis*, does not name a different realm than art, language, history etc., but rather a process of co-emergence between all these.”¹⁹³ This remark recalls Derrida’s discussing of *physis* as *Walten*. Derrida also perceives that *physis* exceeds all demarcations of specific domains and disciplines. Bannon remarks, too, that language and history are particular forms of flesh, just as language and temporalization belong to *physis*.¹⁹⁴ For Derrida, *physis* as “older” than ontological difference is the reason for his characterization of *Walten* as hyper-sovereignty. Likewise, flesh describes the relation between all beings in their Being and becoming and, in this sense, *physis* as flesh is again outside and “older” than the ontological difference.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Kaushik, Rajiv. “Physis and Flesh.” In, *Analecta Husserliana*. (2009), 78.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Bannon, “FN,” 346.

Flesh as a relation of all beings is best understood in terms of its chiasmic structure, which describes how beings hold together in constant mutual affectivity. The reversibility of the ontological chiasm again recalls Heideggerian *physis* as the ambivalent prevailing. *Physis* is simultaneously both what prevails and what permits prevailing.¹⁹⁵ The reversibility of flesh illustrates how the various folds of flesh engage in a dialogical exchange. Merleau-Ponty gives the following description of the structure of the chiasm:

[W]hen the silent vision falls into speech, and when the speech in turn opening up a field of the nameable and the sayable, inscribes itself in that field, in its place, according to its truth—in short, when it metamorphoses the structures of the visible world and makes itself a gaze of the mind, *intuitus mentis*—this is always in virtue of the same fundamental phenomenon of reversibility which sustains both the mute perception and the speech.¹⁹⁶

Sensibility traverses the chiasm of visibility and lends itself to ideality, becoming a “less heavy, more transparent body, as though it were to change flesh, abandoning the flesh of the body for that of language.”¹⁹⁷ The world is created by the crossing of the chiasm; the secret meaning self-arising into appearance and world as *physis*, emerging from the *logos* of flesh. The world of sensory experience is created for Merleau-Ponty just as it was for Heidegger, that is by *physis* as the “as the emerging sway of presencing.”¹⁹⁸ The sensible is inherently meaningful for Merleau-Ponty; invisible meaning is latent within the visible.¹⁹⁹ Merleau-Ponty affirms the visible is pregnant with the invisible, which is to say productive, expressive and capable of self-

¹⁹⁵ Heidegger, *FCM*, 31.

¹⁹⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *VI*, 155.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 153.

¹⁹⁸ Heidegger, *IM*, 16.

¹⁹⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *VI*, 215.

originating—precisely what we find in Heidegger’s account of *physis*.²⁰⁰ Thus, perception of the sensible is the intimation of fecundity and meaning. This awareness of Being is, however, non-metaphysical and not an operation performed by a subject. Rather, Being speaks to the entirety of itself. The *logos* of Being is a dialogue across the chiasm and the various folds of flesh.

As Bannon asserts, flesh “is a structure that makes possible affective relations, not an experience of a perceiving subject.”²⁰¹ Therefore, the human experience of flesh does not exhaust the possibility of flesh relations. He continues,

All bodies are their flesh relations, but the specificity of various modes of being in the world is also preserved insofar as different bodies are open to different affective dimensions, are susceptible to different affections, and therefore are capable of different behaviours, some of which are ‘intelligent’ or sentient, others of which are not.²⁰²

Merleau-Ponty announces in the first chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible* that his task is to establish an ontology that destabilizes the categories “subject” and “object.”²⁰³ As he makes clear, perception is not an object, nor is it performed by the activity of a “subject.”²⁰⁴ Merleau-Ponty writes that it is not the subject who perceives, explaining “I do not perceive any more than I speak—perception has me as has language.”²⁰⁵ He continues, “it is not we who perceive, it is the thing that perceives itself. . . it is not we who speak, it is truth that speaks itself at the depths of speech—Becoming-nature of man which is the becoming-man of nature—the world is a *field*,

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Bannon, “FN,” 345.

²⁰² Ibid, 350.

²⁰³ Merleau-Ponty, *VI*, 23.

²⁰⁴ Ibid, 25.

²⁰⁵ Ibid, 190.

and as such is always open.”²⁰⁶ This is a field that is open to *all*, thus endorsing a plurality that does not exist in Heidegger, since only *Dasein* is in ek-stasis. Merleau-Ponty’s “it is not we who perceive” is clearly reminiscent of Heidegger’s remark that “language speaks.”²⁰⁷ It is not I who speak, but Being itself. For Heidegger, Being lends itself to *Dasein* through language as appropriation, bestowing upon it a residence in their uniquely human essence.²⁰⁸ Merleau-Ponty removes the appropriation of language, the ownership of this privileged access to Being, that for Heidegger is unique to *Dasein* in its ek-stasis, standing out alone in the clearing of Being, apart from those who lack language.²⁰⁹ For Heidegger, while “language is the house of Being,”²¹⁰ humans will always be its shepherd,²¹¹ and so the house of Being is one in which only humans truly dwell. But for Merleau-Ponty, the sensible is an articulation of Being and a field where sense and sensation is passed along all of the flesh of the world—and not just human *Dasein*. If nature is a field, remarks Bannon, then “there is no one state of this field that is more ‘natural’ than any other, and therefore, the normative principle that humans ought to allow nature to be in its ‘natural’ state loses its foundation.”²¹²

Despite the intimacy of flesh and nature, these are not analogous. Bannon remarks, “nature neither is constitutive of a being’s essence (i.e. it is not flesh proper) nor is nature a specific means of relating to beings (i.e. it is not, like language or history, a particular form of

²⁰⁶ Ibid, 185.

²⁰⁷ Martin Heidegger, “Language,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, Trans. A. Hofstadter. New York: Harper Collins, 1971: 183.

²⁰⁸ Martin Heidegger, “On the Way to Language,” in *Basic Writings* Ed. D. Krell. New York: Harper Collins, 1993: 416.

²⁰⁹ Heidegger, “Language,” 230.

²¹⁰ Martin Heidegger, “LH,” 236.

²¹¹ Ibid, 234.

²¹² Bannon, “FN,” 353.

flesh).”²¹³ Individual bodies inhabit their own flesh relating to other bodies in terms of a flesh relation. Nature is coincidental with flesh, simultaneous with the enduring productivity of the flesh relations. In the working notes of *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty writes, “‘Nature is at the first day’: it is there today... This does not mean: myth of the original indivision and coincidence as return... It is a question of finding in the present, the flesh of the world (and not in the past) an ‘ever new’ and ‘always the same.’”²¹⁴ The flesh is both always new and yet always the same since it is constant in its binding force between all beings, yet these relations are always changing and are never fixed. As such, the endurance of the mutability of flesh yields a nature of constant flux and productivity. “The sensible, Nature,” writes Merleau-Ponty, “transcend the past present distinction, realize from within a passage from one into the other... existential eternity.”²¹⁵

The fluidity of flesh means that nature is not representable, or graspable. Merleau-Ponty describes, “nature is an enigmatic object, an object that is not an object at all; it is not really set out in front of us. It is our soil [*sol*]—not what is in front of us, facing us, but rather, than which carries us.”²¹⁶ As we are all held amongst the folds of a single flesh, and belonging to a shared nature. This is encapsulated by Merleau-Ponty, who writes, “nature: it is the flesh, the mother.”²¹⁷ However, Merleau-Pontian flesh also does not reproduce an origin in the sense of *causa sui*. Rather, flesh is, like *physis*, fundamentally creation. Merleau-Ponty announces in *The Visible and the Invisible*, “for me it is no longer a question of origins, nor limits, nor of a series

²¹³ Ibid, 351.

²¹⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *VI*, 267.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *N*, 4.

²¹⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *VI*, 267.

of events going to a first cause, but one sole explosion of Being which is forever.”²¹⁸ The productivity of flesh as *physis*, generating an ever-changing nature, includes the expressivity of Being in all its forms. When Merleau-Ponty describes the perceptual world as Being in Heidegger’s sense, he goes on to remark that this perceptual world “is more than all painting, than all speech, than every ‘attitude,’ and which, apprehended by philosophy in its universality, appears as containing everything that will ever be said, and yet leaving us to create it.”²¹⁹

In the *Nature* lectures, Merleau-Ponty, cites Lachelier, writing, “the words of a language are not tokens and are themselves a *physis*.”²²⁰ By rethinking that which we call language, Merleau-Ponty is able to critique our understanding of “nature.” Against the dualism that plagues traditional metaphysics, Merleau-Ponty states, “there are no substantial differences between physical Nature, life, and mind.”²²¹ He begins the first of his series of lecture on nature, asking, “can we validly study the notion of nature?”²²² He continues, “isn’t it quite vain to seek the secret of the word in single meaning, by looking in a single direction?”²²³ Nature cannot be reduced to a concept of human artifice, nor can its essence ever be ascertained merely by grasping the meaning of a concept. “Nature resists,” Merleau-Ponty asserts. “[Nature] cannot be entirely established in front of us... The organism is not a construction. It has an interior that is not in the image of our ‘I think,’ and which we can understand only by bastard representations. Every representation with respect to natural production is false in principle.”²²⁴

²¹⁸ Ibid, 265.

²¹⁹ Ibid, 170.

²²⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *N*, 3.

²²¹ Ibid, 212.

²²² Ibid, 3.

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ Ibid, 83.

The lexical language of our ordinary metaphysics, is one spoken only in the human mind, rather than the one that Being itself speaks. “It is the error of the semantic philosophies to close up language as if it spoke only of itself: language lives only from silence; everything we cast to the others has germinated in this great mute land which we never leave.”²²⁵ This mute land is of course the sensible. The artificiality of purely metaphysical thought demands a dialectical contrary, which Merleau-Ponty understands as perception. The abundant speech, loud in its silence across the flesh, reveals that Being is fundamentally dialectical in nature, and grants itself an opening for dialogue: “Being is the reversion of silence and speech into one another.”²²⁶ Dialectic is, for Merleau-Ponty what puts thought at work and in contact with Being.²²⁷ A “bad” dialectic is what thinks it grasps being in thought, it “does not wish to lose its soul in order to save it,” but “wishes to be dialectical immediately,” to become autonomous and thus cannot avoid becoming metaphysical.²²⁸ In contrast to this is what Merleau-Ponty calls the “hyperdialectic,” a superior dialectic recognizes that Being is “not made up of idealizations or of things said.”²²⁹ The hyperdialectic is dependent on the reversibility of the flesh, involving the language of perception spoken by the voices of silence, since it includes the whole of Being in communication with itself, and “is capable of reaching truth because it envisages without restriction the plurality of the relationships.”²³⁰ Thus, through Merleau-Ponty’s description of the hyperdialectic within Being, he reveals an understanding of the web of expressivity beyond

²²⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *VI*, 126.

²²⁶ *Ibid*, 129.

²²⁷ *Ibid*, 91.

²²⁸ *Ibid*, 94.

²²⁹ *Ibid*.

²³⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *VI*, 91.

human metaphysical meaning. It is this that philosophy must strive for, and for this reason Merleau-Ponty finds it necessary to reexamine our ontological presuppositions.

For Merleau-Ponty, ontological inquiry should mirror the chiasmic structure of the flesh. Merleau-Ponty remarks, “if we are aware of the artificiality of thinking...what remains is to wonder if thinking can live in an exclusively human and artificial universe.”²³¹ In breaking free of the confines of our human representational thinking, Merleau-Ponty believes a proper understanding of nature cannot ignore the natural sciences. He asserts, “nature is an all-encompassing something we cannot think starting from concepts, let alone deductions, but we must rather think it starting from experience, and in particular, experience in its most regulated form—that is, science.”²³² Merleau-Ponty recognizes that this view is problematic, noting that “science still lives in part on a Cartesian myth...its concept of Nature is often only an idol to which the scientist makes sacrifices.”²³³ Such reservations regarding the adoption of the methods of the physical sciences are present not least in Heidegger’s writings. Iain Thomson notes that Heidegger refers to the positive sciences as “ontic sciences,”²³⁴ which pale in contrast with philosophy, the truly ontological “science of being.”²³⁵ However, Merleau-Ponty remarks, “the radical opposition, traced by Heidegger, between ontic science and ontological philosophy is valid only in the case of Cartesian science, which posits nature as an object spread out in front of us, and not in the case of modern science.”²³⁶ Merleau-Ponty suggests that “the philosopher must

²³¹ Merleau-Ponty, *N*, 85.

²³² *Ibid*, 87.

²³³ *Ibid*, 85.

²³⁴ Thomson, *HO*, 108.

²³⁵ *Ibid*.

²³⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *N*, 86.

see behind the back of the physicist what the physicist himself does not see.”²³⁷ The philosopher and the scientist must work together, since, Merleau-Ponty warns, “it is dangerous to leave all freedom to the philosopher. Too quickly trusting language, he would be the victim of the illusion of an unconditional treasure, of absolute wisdom contained in language.”²³⁸ It is for this reason that Merleau-Ponty asserts, “the philosopher should be unafraid to ask for help from the sciences,” since the scientist takes serious the language of perception and not merely of thought.²³⁹

Ontologically speaking, “everything is science and everything is philosophy,”²⁴⁰ since Being speaks both a visible and invisible language. If we are to understand the chiasm and the ontology of flesh that situates human existence alongside other beings then we must amend our manner of thinking, breaking down binary and hierarchical thinking. Instead, we must think laterally, in terms of reversibility that embrace the web of meaning that constitute flesh in constant flux. This flesh, as *physis*, no corresponding idea could ever encompass the complexity of the flesh. Merleau-Ponty offers a critique of subjectivity that surpasses Heidegger’s attempts by recognizing the non-lexical expressivity of the sensible world. While both maintain that our relation to Being occurs in language, for Merleau-Ponty this includes the silent language of perception, and all of Being is in constant communication with itself. Locating *logos* throughout Being, including the expressivity of the sensible, Merleau-Ponty’s ontology surpasses Heidegger’s own, which reserves for the human alone a privileged access to Being, and thus it is only the human that is in dialogue with what Merleau-Ponty means by the sensible, namely the

²³⁷ Ibid, 87.

²³⁸ Ibid.

²³⁹ Ibid, 85.

²⁴⁰ Ibid, 213.

flesh of the world. Merleau-Ponty writes, “there is a *logos* of the sensible world and a savage mind that animates language – communication in the invisible continues what is instituted by the communication in the invisible; it is the other ‘side’ of it.”²⁴¹ Similarly, science and philosophy are other sides of one another, each corresponding to a different kind of expressivity within the whole of Being. Merleau-Ponty affirms, “Nature as a leaf or layer of total Being,” and that we must pursue “the ontology of Nature as the way towards ontology.”²⁴² This is because, for Merleau-Ponty, “Nature is always the expression of an ontology – and its privileged expression.”²⁴³ Therefore, according to Merleau-Ponty, we must focus on nature, which for him means the unanimous expression of Being by a diversity of beings. Engaging with ontology thus cannot be undertaken from a position of privilege within ontology or from a representational perspective, since the singular flesh of Being is fundamentally plural.

Metaphysical inquiry enforces the absolute separation between being and Beings onto-theologically, ignoring their fundamental relation. Heidegger writes in *Identity and Difference*,

The onto-theological constitution of metaphysics stems from the prevalence of that difference which keeps Being as the ground, and beings as what is grounded and what gives account, apart from and related to each other... The difference constitutes the ground plan in the structure of the essence of metaphysics.²⁴⁴

Thus, metaphysics can only conceive of ontology as predicated upon difference as excludes the correlation of beings and Being from its manner of thinking. Flesh overcomes this discordance,

²⁴¹ Ibid, 227.

²⁴² Ibid, 204.

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Heidegger, *ID*, 71-2.

describing a relation whereby beings maintain their distinction from Being, yet are simultaneously held by flesh in a relation of non-separation. Flesh signals a return to the identity between beings and Being corresponding to the unthought of metaphysics. The flesh, always present, yet ever new, as the constant emerging relation of existence to itself, corresponds to the becoming and self-emergence of *physis*. The fluidity of *physis* as the ontology of flesh precludes conceptualization and thus resists the representational interpretations found within our common understanding of “nature.” Flesh carries the model of unity-in-difference beyond the becoming ontological difference of *physis* into the realm of what is considered “nature.” Merleau-Ponty recognizes a multiplicity of beings participating equally in chiasmic flesh, the reversibility of flesh undermining the privilege of the lexical or the sentient and thus overturning the human inclinations to mastery.

Conclusion: Never Nature, Always Questioning

In abandoning concepts and shifting away from the representational thinking that has shaped the trajectory of Western philosophical thought, a chief difficulty in accomplishing the step back from this problematic metaphysics remains tangled in our commonplace use of language. As Heidegger writes in *Identity and Difference*,

Our Western languages are languages of metaphysical thinking, each in its own way. It must remain an open question whether the nature of Western languages is in itself marked with the exclusive brand of metaphysics, and thus marked permanently by onto-theo-logic, or whether these languages offer other possibilities of utterance – and that means at the same time a telling silence.²⁴⁵

This means that knowledge must be predicated upon absence and understanding must become comfortable with the incomprehensible if we are to avoid remain ensnared by the onto-theology that has thus far characterized metaphysics. Heidegger, Derrida, and Merleau-Ponty each recognize the need to step back beyond metaphysics that contains false claims to authority and dominance that have characterized the human way of thinking and relating to what is other. The metaphysical certainties regarding “what naturally is” have been shown in their historical and logocentric contingency, contradictory to the Being of *physis*. My examination of the paths taken by these thinkers, has surveyed their various approaches in order to invite a thinking of nature as pluralistic, non-hierarchical, and underdetermined.

In Chapter 1, I explained the meaning and signification of *physis* as it is presented by Heidegger through recourse to the Ancient Greeks. I discussed the impact of the translation of *physis* as *natura* as launching metaphysics as our primary mode of engaging with existence, that

²⁴⁵ Ibid, 73.

is, with its idea rather than as a whole. For Heidegger, this metaphysical thinking has been, since its inception, invariably been characterized by onto-theology, the interpretation of all of existence within a single idea, becoming elevated to a theological dimension. Onto-theology cannot engage with a thinking of Being outside of its own metaphysics, which means that it always contains an aspect of Being that is “unthought.” For Heidegger, this is not only the difference between beings and Being as such, the totality of existence, but that which holds beings and Being is a relation of simultaneous identity and difference, namely *physis*.

Physis is significant for Derrida, as well, since his recognition of *physis* as *Walten* informs his deconstructive project of challenging the privileged or commonplace considerations that form the basis of our understandings. The discussion of *physis* as *Walten* was the subject of Chapter 2, where it was also described in relation to *différance*, Derrida’s term for the differing and deferring that comprises the instability of meaning at the supposed origin of all semantic language. The undecidability of Derrida attributes to *différance* is akin to the *Walten* of *physis* he sees as the force of Being. This *Walten* is described as “older” than ontological difference and is thus an “excess” of sovereignty that is superior to any human attempts to usurp its dominance and exert their own authority among beings and decide the meaning of Being along metaphysical lines. As we saw in Chapter 3, Merleau-Ponty also affirms the non-identical sameness of beings among Being and returns to a Heideggerian sense of *physis* in his theory of flesh. Flesh is a dialectical interrelation of beings and Being, with the whole of flesh engaging in a single relation that yields something like a “nature.” However, this nature is both subject and object, visible and invisible, spoken and silent by the voices of both language and perception. Thus, the ontology of flesh cannot be described metaphysically, since it is fundamentally unstable, in flux as *physis*,

and resists representation.

What we can learn from Heidegger, Derrida and Merleau-Ponty in terms of our relation to life, and the development of greater sustainability, is the inadequacy of thought that purports to provide an immediate exemplification of existence that is based solely on concepts. What we have seen in the work of all three thinkers, is that any ontology to come that will overcome onto-theology will necessary be one that is constantly in development. Being as *physis* is continually the continual expression of becoming, and no theory will ever be adequate to its mutating manifestation. Timothy Morton asserts, “ecology, if it means anything at all, means being without nature.”²⁴⁶ Ecology will need to think in terms of *physis*, and this thought must, therefore, be similarly fluid, adaptive and receptive, which no concept of nature can ever achieve in its determination to pronounce a fixed referent. Morton states, the “environment is theory – theory not as answer to a question...but as question, and question mark, as in question, questioning-ness.”²⁴⁷ What we think of as the environment and nature is always in question because it cannot be posited. As I have argued throughout this thesis, there is no pure or stable “nature” to which the concept of nature refers. In developing an ecological discourse that is more sensitive to the existing relations among organisms, we should embrace a thinking of *physis*, the prevailing of all being, to develop greater strength, sustainability, and solidarity within the diversity of common existence.

²⁴⁶ Morton, *EN*, 204.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 175.

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