Merleau-Ponty has been a rich resource for those working in ecophenomenology, and he is the guiding figure for Robert Booth in this timely and important work. There are many strengths of this book, and one is the breadth of its engagement with current strands in environmental philosophy and adjacent fields including ecofeminism, new materialism, speculative realism and object-oriented ontology. Another strength is the depth of Booth’s analyses of recent scholarship, through which he highlights ways in which his proposal resonates with insights made by others as well as providing incisive critiques at points of divergence. A further strength is that the book is well organised into six chapters, and presents the core argument with clarity, providing cogent summaries at each stage.

Dating back to Husserl, a core motivation of phenomenology has been its critique of naturalism, and Booth carries forward this critique, showing how dualistic assumptions inherent in naturalism, such as the separation of subject and object, obscure the significance of embodied practice to theory and license violent, instrumental modes of relating to objects which are at the roots of the current environmental crisis (p. 32). What is needed to address this crisis, Booth argues, is a shift away from naturalism to a more self-reflective ecophenomenological approach which appropriately recognises the links between theoretical assumptions and praxis.

As an alternative to naturalism, Booth proposes an ecophenomenology guided by ‘radical reflection’, a concept drawn from Merleau-Ponty (p. 56). Among early phenomenologists, Merleau-Ponty stands out for placing special emphasis on the inter-relatedness of ‘operant intentionality’, related to embodied practice, and ‘act intentionality’, related to thought (p. 51). By virtue of the inseparability of embodied habitual practice from meaning formation, the inter-relationship between operant and act intentionality entails the impossibility of a complete reduction to transcendental subjectivity. The incompleteness of the transcendental reduction, in turn, calls for ongoing, radical reflection in place of the objectifying thought characteristic of naturalism. Booth identifies two strands involved in radical reflection: 1) a critical strand which entails ongoing self-critique (the ‘unrest’ referred to in the subtitle), and 2) a strand of openness to alterity. Combining the two strands, Booth argues, radical reflection contributes to aligning theory and practice in ways that reduce violent, anthropocentric modes of practice which have led to the current environmental crisis.
In Chapter 2, Booth identifies ways in which insights from ecofeminists, in particular Val Plumwood, support the methodology of radical reflection. From Plumwood, Booth draws insights into the hegemonic political motivations of subject/object dualism in connection with Plumwood’s discussions of economic rationality, ‘backlogging’, ‘hyperseparation’, ‘incorporation’ and related ideas (pp. 66–71). At the same time, Booth argues, Plumwood is not radical enough in her critique of subject/object dualism insofar as she remains committed to ‘progressive naturalism’. It may be that Booth’s critique here is a bit harsh in view of Plumwood’s care in distinguishing her view from standard forms of naturalism, but naturalism in any form, Booth contends, is incompatible with radical reflection and the kind of openness to nonhuman alterity it entails.

Booth develops the central argument for radical reflection in Chapter 3, ‘Seeing Better’. There he argues that the method of radical reflection can facilitate ‘a view-from-everywhere’, a way of perceiving that is more receptive to other perspectives (both human and nonhuman) and the meanings they offer. In developing the argument, Booth draws on the political theorist and new materialist Jane Bennett’s discussions of ‘thing power’ and quasi-agency (pp. 99–103), which Bennett develops in relation to meanings associated with inorganic materials including a Coke bottle and a pile of rubbish. Booth further notes in Chapter 3 that the recent rise in discussions of the Anthropocene may be counter-productive to efforts to reduce anthropocentrism insofar as those discussions re-affirm the privilege of human agency (p. 107).

The following chapter responds to the charge that Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology cannot escape the ‘correlationist circle’ which would imply idealism and preclude genuine access to other perspectives. This objection has been raised against Merleau-Ponty by speculative realists and those working in object-oriented ontology, a strand of speculative realism (p. 151). In his reply to this challenge, Booth acknowledges that ‘something like correlationism’ (p. 158) is unavoidable, but he turns the critique around, showing how the speculative realist’s must either rely on neo-Cartesian dualistic assumptions in order to describe ‘properties in themselves’ attributable to wholly separate objects or simply affirm a flattened form of objectivity without meaningful content (p. 148). Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology is better able to engage meaningfully with alterity, Booth argues, on the basis of its recognition of non-discursive grounds of experience (discussed in Chapter 5) that are linked with embodiment and accessible through radical reflection (p. 156).

In the final chapter, challenging Ted Toadvine and others working on Merleau-Ponty and ecophenomenology, Booth argues that the (unfinished) ontology of the flesh developed in Merleau-Ponty’s later work does not make a significant advance beyond his earlier work on radical reflection. A major problem with Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of the flesh, Booth argues, is that it fails to provide sufficient criteria for adjudicating between expressions of the...
flesh that are universally true and those which are not. Radical reflection, by contrast, provides a basis for evaluating claims, he argues, through the processes of ongoing self-reflection and openness.

Booth’s defence of Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology is a profound and original contribution to the field. He makes a compelling case for the complicity of naturalism in the current environmental crisis and for radical reflection as a salve for reducing violence and environmental degradation. I highly recommend this work to scholars and readers interested in ecophenomenology and related fields. The text would be an excellent and timely edition to upper level undergraduate and graduate courses on ecophenomenology, environmental ethics and related subjects.

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