Empathy, Intercorporeality, and the Call to Compassion

*It is man's sympathy with all creatures that first makes him truly a man.*

—Albert Schweitzer

Introduction

In this tour de force of both intellectual and passionate effort, Ralph Acampora offers up the most intriguing and challenging exploration of the ontology of animal life and of our relations to animals—as well as a discussion of the ethical imperatives that issue forth from this experience—that this reviewer has ever seen. The author builds his thesis upon an inventory of every imaginable way of conceptualizing animal life and human-animal relations, reviewing all the subtleties and shadings of existing ontological and ethical discussions. What this requires on the part of the reader is an empathic aptitude as well as an intellectual background to appreciate the finely tuned distinctions articulated by the author. Acampora’s narrative does not stop at the level of ontology but utilizes his insights into animal being to chart the course for an articulation of ethical principles that would guide our comportment toward animals.

In this brilliant and illuminating work, Acampora is not so much presenting a fully worked out animal ethics as he is laying the foundation for the development of one. Instead of seeking a cognitive or rational commonality with animals (which would be doomed from the start), he posits a commonality at the level of the lived body. The most difficult challenge in writing this review has been trying to find an adequate way of framing this work. Normally I would draw upon my usual phenomenological points of reference (namely, Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty) as the mountain peaks from which I might glance down to put into perspective whatever it is I am reading. Here, however, I find myself humbled by the task of trying to place Acampora’s work into such a framework, since what he has accomplished amounts to the sketching of a new frame of reference altogether. Indeed, he quickly dispenses with the contributions of Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty—along with a long list of other contributors to his own intellectual journey—as he points out the subtle differences in each of their positions and at the same time articulates their limitations.

Following Heidegger’s lead, Acampora feels at ease inventing new expressions to try to communicate the intricate nuances of his own readings of ontology and ethical life. To wit: *convivial worldhood, residential hermeneutics, municipal ontology, parkscape phenomenology,*
transpecific intersomaticity, somaesthetic sensibility, transhuman morality, relational axiology, feral translucitation, post-structural semiology, female dividuality, ecosophic axiology, somatological ethos, bodiment and symphysis. Indeed, one comes away with a new vocabulary that evokes intertextual references to a wide range of source material, while creating intellectual syntheses in an effort to do linguistic justice to the targeted themes of this book.

“Where is this going?” I would ask myself, while making my way through the labyrinth of ideas gathered together in this book. Perhaps this had something to do with the fact that I was only able to read the book a little at a time, due to the challenge of absorbing the intricacies of the discussion, which for this reviewer precluded a “once through” reading. By the time I finally reached the last chapter (which offers its own recapitulation of the first five), I realized I could never have found the words to achieve what Acampora had just accomplished, which was to paraphrase nicely the entire flow of his book-long “argument.” Indeed, the last chapter is perhaps the best imaginable summary of the content of this book, insofar as it offers a kind of retrospective glance at the terrain traversed, from a perspective that enables the reader to hold at arm’s length the ideas with which one had earlier struggled, seeing how they all fall into place in setting the stage for a foray into ethical considerations of our shared life with animals on this planet. The reader might even be advised to begin the book with chapter 6, insofar as it might help the various pathways taken in the first chapters to fall into clearer relief as a kind of preparation for reading the book.

Phenomenology and the Lived Body

To begin to appreciate what Acampora has accomplished here, one needs first to understand the basics of a phenomenology of human experience. Even there, one must proceed with caution because, at the very least, there seem to be few “professional phenomenologists” who are truly adept at grounding their intellectual grasp of phenomenology in clear descriptions of their own experience of the lived body—and it is the lived body that serves as the starting point for Acampora’s own reflections. The formulations of both Husserl (1948/1973, 1910/2005) and Heidegger (1983/1995) can sound so abstruse to the uninitiated that it takes a more concrete thinker like Merleau-Ponty (1964/1968) to bring their ideas back to the “home base” of one’s own lived bodily resonances with the world of experience (see Churchill, 2008). People like Alphonso Lingis (1994, 2000), Elizabeth Behnke (1999), and David Abram (1996) are able to use the phenomenological philosophers as a starting point for their own encounters within the lifeworld. Now I must include Acampora among this small and elite group. Think of it: not only to grasp and be capable of articulately capturing the essence of the ideas of phenomenologists, ethicists, and philosophical zoologists, but then to be capable of moving forward from this starting point into new territory!

For the readers of this review uninitiated into phenomenology, a brief digression is in order here. Genuine phenomenology is itself a practice—never just an intellectual pursuit—by which one discovers and celebrates one’s own immersion in a flux of experience that is the true source of all that we come to know and believe regarding the world. It consists in the realization that it is precisely one’s own presence to the world that is the illuminating source and matrix of all that we come to understand about life. It draws us back to the