EDITORIAL, *Starting from Nature*

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The impetus for this issue first arose at the inaugural conference of the Irish Phenomenological Circle, hosted by University College Dublin in June of 2011. The theme of that conference was the intertwining of the ideas of Nature, History and Freedom in the thought of the French Phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Prior to and for this inaugural meeting, we (the editors) had produced a (unofficial) translation of a short text by Melreau-Ponty, “La Nature, ou le monde du silence” (“Nature or the World of Silence”), which was published in French in 2008. It is from this short text that this special issue draws its title: “Starting From Nature”. In this text Merleau-Ponty writes: “Nature does not interest us for itself as a universal explanatory principle, but rather as an index of what in things resists the operations of free subjectivity and as a concrete entry point into the ontological problem.” If one takes as the starting point of philosophical reflection the operations of subjectivity (Husserl) or freedom (Sartre) then the problem is effaced in advance; Nature is thus treated only under the rubric of a correlate of subjective operations or what is there for freedom to exercise its control over. As Merleau-Ponty writes: “From the perspective of subjectivity or of freedom, all conceivable being is in front me, as what I have to be (in the mode of acceptance or refusal).” But these approaches miss the “primordial being against which all reflection institutes itself” or the very fact that subjectivity is always already an “intervention in the world”. Here the French phenomenologist seems to be telling us that subjectivity emerges in and from nature. The challenge is to find a way to allow subjectivity to think what exceeds its grasp, and to think its own emergence in this originary horizon. Thus a philosophy of the subject (phenomenology) is already a philosophy of nature, and a philosophy of nature that does not try to account for how nature thinks itself (consciousness) has also missed the point of its investigation. As such, philosophy must
‘start from nature’. As Merleau-Ponty writes in the above mentioned short text: “Every positing of a Nature implies a subjectivity and even an historic intersubjectivity. This does not make it such that the sense of natural being is exhausted by its symbolic transcriptions, that there is nothing to think before these transcriptions.”

In the discussions that emerged both at and following the meeting in Dublin, it became clear to us that it would be of great interest to examine not only the theme of starting from nature not only in Melreau-Ponty’s thought but also his predecessors and influences, particularly within the German Idealist tradition. That is what this issue sets out to accomplish. It is obvious that Schelling’s Naturphilosophie looms large here. Merleau-Ponty makes reference to his thought in calling for restoration of the true traits of the “veiled idol” [idol voilée] that is Nature. And while it is precisely Husserl’s philosophy of the subject that Merleau-Ponty sets out to undermine, it is also of course in Husserl’s own unthought or embarrassing unpublished works that Merleau-Ponty locates the resources to do so, if only Husserl would commit to undermining the foundations of his own project (the absolute ground in and of transcendental subjectivity and transcendental sense-bestowal) as Merleau-Ponty knows he wants to! The text of Husserl’s that we present here, Beilage XXIII of the Krisis (in English translation for the first time), is a wonderful example of just what is meant by this. In his discussion of biology in its relation to transcendental phenomenology Husserl seems to oscillate and himself be tempted to actually do what Merleau-Ponty rather over-enthusiastically claims is happening in this text: a reformulation, on the basis of the empathic science of biology, of the transcendental itself, from subjective sense-bestowal to natural sense-formation. Husserl truly travels to the limits of his own phenomenology here, or perhaps to phenomenology per se, but in the end returns to the ground of constituting subjectivity. Schopenhauer’s metaphysics of the will also deeply puts into question the sovereignty of human subjectivity in the face of the complex of forces from which it arises: the natural
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principle of an anonymous, unconscious and irrational life-drive. For Schopenhauer, it is the subordination of intentional subjectivity to natural forces that also shows the kinship of the subject to “material bodies”

Thus the articles presented in this special issue of the JBSP address how precisely we are meant to understand or speak about the concept of ‘nature’ ‘starting from nature’, and indeed whether philosophy can successfully address the self-examination and self-understanding of nature by nature. The contributions in this issue reflect a broad spectrum of philosophical interests when it comes to the issue of starting from nature, from within nature. However, any reader of the articles contained in this issue – which I will introduce below but ultimately let speak for themselves – will see how widely and deeply the problem of nature reaches across all of the major areas in the history of philosophy and remains a compelling problem today. The question of nature, putting nature into question by allowing nature to put itself into question and to make sense of itself, is no longer limited to the discussion of nature as the domain of the not I, i.e. to objective necessity or inhuman nature, but rather an inclusive ontological interpretation of nature in terms of a creative living organism which makes sense of itself and its surroundings as an open field of nature. This issue takes inspiration from Merleau-Ponty’s indefatigable reappraisal of the centrality of nature to philosophy, his attempt to close the gap between native and philosophy, and his continual attempt to find a precedent for this in Husserl’s late writings. It is from Husserl’s own un-thought, from the necessary incompleteness of thinking, that Merleau-Ponty draws the inspiration (and perhaps the courage) to claim that his philosophy hinges on the “Becoming-nature of man which is the becoming-man of nature” (VI, 185)

In How Nature Comes to be Thought. Schelling’s Paradox and the Problem of Location, Iain Hamilton Grant argues that the claim nature is thinkable entails a paradox, insofar as the thinking of nature can only occur within a nature amongst the capacities of which are
thinking. He argues that from this paradox the question of the location of thought entails a negotiation of what is and is not thought in the thought of nature. But the thinking of nature entails precisely the exceeding of location, insofar as the particularity of any solution to “the nature of nature” undercuts the claim of any thought to have as its subject nature itself. Drawing on problems in topology, morphology and on logical solutions for the problem of thinking nature from a location formed within it, Hamilton Grant argues that the problem of the thinking of nature from within it articulates a field theory made true or false by fields themselves.

Rudolf Bernet’s contribution, *Schopenhauer on the Will as Drive of my Libidinal Body and as Natural Force of Material Bodies*, claims that the twofold experience we have of the bodily movement – as an object among other objects and as an organ of our will – gives phenomenological evidence to Schopenhauer’s metaphysical thesis concerning the identity of will and representation. There are, however, Bernet claims, diverse modalities of bodily “movements”. These can be either voluntary or involuntary; they can also lend themselves to an intimate experience in terms of either an inner perception of willful “acts” or sensations of pleasure and pain related to possibly unconscious desires. Formulated in Freudian language, Bernet argues that the unconscious will-drive expresses itself under the double form of representations and affects which belong to a body that is simultaneously governed by the principle of reality and the principle of pleasure. Paying special attention to Schopenhauer’s metaphysical, anthropological and cosmological views, Bernet shows how this pessimistic philosophy of a nihilistic will remains indebted to Leibniz’s optimistic rationalism, and how it anticipates the Freudian conception of a death drive.

In *Flesh Made Paint* Nicolas de Warren examines Merleau-Ponty’s *Eye and Mind* and its delirious portrait of painting. In his contribution, de Warren examines Merleau-Ponty’s principle claim that painting is a fundamental form of thinking by focusing on
three different ways in which this insight becomes articulated in *Eye and Mind*; with reference to Merleau-Ponty’s ontological project in *The Visible and the Invisible*; with reference to the idea that painting is a form of thinking and the relationship between philosophy and art; with reference to the medium specificity of thinking in painting. De Warren further examines the changing relationship between phenomenology and painting in the evolution of Merleau-Ponty’s writings and suggests that *Eye and Mind* poses the question of philosophy to art. In addition, de Warren argues that the phenomenological reduction and theory of essences becomes perfected in modernist painting, and demonstrates this claim through an analysis of Merleau-Ponty’s interpretation of modernist aesthetics and Cézanne’s paintings.

Lastly, we are deeply grateful to all of the contributors to this volume and are honoured to bring together such a fine collection of articles. We are delighted to act as guest editors and would like to thank the editor of the journal, Ullrich Haase, for giving us the opportunity to prepare this issue.

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1 Our English translation of this text remains unpublished.