

An Address from Elsewhere: Vulnerability, Relationality, and Conceptions of Creaturely Embodiment

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The underlying question guiding this chapter is simple enough: What concepts do we use to make sense of the relationality of human and animal life that is also captured in the notion of “creaturely life” used throughout this volume? Of course, this question itself already implies a certain conceptual and ethical a priori shared by many of those working in animal studies or related fields: That human and (at least more complex forms of) animal life are defined by a distinct form of affiliation and kinship—whether it is expressed in evolutionary or other terms—that

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goes beyond the ecological commonplace that everything is connected to everything else. If we accept this principal claim, and to the extent that it informs our own work in academia, a more specific subquestion (one already alluded to in my introductory remarks to this section of the volume) suggests itself: What kinds of ontological and ethical imaginings, of worlding and storying, are sustained, or foreclosed, by the concepts and epistemic frameworks we work with, including those that we have inherited from a predominantly anthropocentric tradition of thought? And, more specifically, how can we de- and reterritorialize concepts that are vital to explain particular aspects of the experience of being human such as “sociality” or “community” in a way that enables us to develop their postanthropocentric potential?¹

My approach to these rather far-reaching questions will of necessity be a very limited one here. In this chapter, I focus on the idea of creaturely embodiment—the existential facticity of being a living body, which human animals share with other living beings—and its importance for thinking relationally about human and animal life. It is surely not an all too extraordinary or controversial claim that embodied being is always and inevitably a being-in-relation and that all forms and modes of relationality are ultimately grounded in, and articulate themselves through, the sphere of creaturely embodiment.² In this sense, we might argue that relational ontology is corporeal ontology and that an ontology of the body is always an ontology of embodied relationality. Indeed, if “all creatures on earth are blessed and cursed with the ability to respond” (Oliver 2010, 270), then the body invariably constitutes both the condition of possibility and the medium of this interrelationality and mutual responsiveness. Thus, grappling with the Derridean “question of the animal” (also) means grappling with the “question of the body,” with its capabilities and limitations as well as the modes of address and responsibility for which it allows. Embodiment is, of course, a highly complex issue in and of itself because the fact that there is no such thing as “the animal” necessarily implies that there is (also) no such thing as “the body” that could serve as a firm ethico-ontological grounding for discussions of animal being and creaturely relationality. However, although the specific forms and possibilities of (inter)corporeality may be highly dependent on the species and even the individuals in question and thus can only inadequately be described with reference to a generic human or nonhuman animal body, thinking in terms of the shared parameters

of creaturely embodiment might nonetheless offer a viable perspective to think about the potentials of forms of sociality and becoming-with across morphological, perceptual, sensorimotor, and experiential difference.

In this chapter, my specific approach to the question of creaturely embodiment and its importance for thinking relationally about humans and other creatures consists of a critical engagement with a concept that has gained quite some currency over the last years and has become an important element of recent postanthropocentric thought: The idea of an existential *vulnerability* that is shared by all living beings. Unlike traditional conceptions of agency—which are anthropocentric in the sense that the only beings they can think of as truly agential are humans and which (consequently) mostly focus on the alleged “non-animal” (rational, linguistic, etc.) aspects of the human experience—vulnerability foregrounds the more inherently postanthropocentric facticities of embodiment. While vulnerability has thus become an important perspective on the meanings and ethical implications of creaturely embodiment, an emphasis on embodiment is, in turn, crucial to any discussion of key terms such as “vulnerability” and “agency” as well as their interrelations given their conceptual inseparability from our particular understandings of corporeality and our existence and experiences as embodied beings (including the transspecific nature of our own thoroughly more-than-human bodies).³ As I want to argue here, however, the trouble with vulnerability—or, more precisely, with the restrictive, negative way we usually tend to think and feel about this phenomenon—is that it adopts a rather limited and limiting perspective on embodiment, intercorporeal relations, and the ways in which living beings relate to their worlds with and through their bodies. Given that the notion of “the creaturely,” as it figures in contemporary (animal) philosophical discourse, arguably shares much, if not most, of its conceptual substance with the notion of vulnerability—the essential point conveyed by thinking in creaturely terms usually being the embodied, finite nature of being a living being—rethinking vulnerability may help us develop more affirmative imaginings of interspecies relations with an emphasis on the intricacies of creaturely ways of being as forms of an embodied being-in-relation.

As will be discussed in more detail later in the text, vulnerability can be interpreted in terms of our *openness* as living bodies to the world and to a multiplicity of human and nonhuman others. Vulnerability, in the words of Judith Butler, denotes an openness to an “address from

elsewhere that we cannot preempt” (2004, 29), and shielding ourselves from such forms of “address” is not only a *de facto* impossibility but would also be diametrically opposed to the very nature of being a living being. This is because the living being, as Jean-Luc Nancy writes, is always already “affected by an outside,” and “it is being affected by an outside that brings anything to life, whether we are talking about a plant or a human animal” (2013, 94). In this chapter, I thus argue that an important part of our postanthropocentric theoretical endeavors should consist in working toward more lively corporeal ontologies that take into account this existential openness of creaturely life—a life that can never thrive, nor even exist, in self-sufficiency, but is always already constitutively beyond and outside itself.

In what follows, I will discuss in some detail two different conceptions of embodiment that are grounded in different presuppositions about and conceptualizations of vulnerability and that have different implications regarding how we think about the relationality between (different forms of) living beings and between living beings and their respective worlds (or environments). I begin with a discussion of an idea of embodiment which, for the purposes of this chapter, I refer to as *embodiment as exposure*. I argue that this somewhat problematic concept is the result of an equally problematic, reductionist understanding of what it means to be vulnerable, which in turn leads to a rather disappointing and impoverished idea of creaturely relationality. In a second step, I then probe into an alternative understanding of embodiment that I believe resonates well with my critique of the dominant conception and reception of vulnerability in terms of embodiment as exposure but which, rather than simply abandoning the concept of vulnerability, allows us to accentuate its radically ambivalent rather than merely negative meaning. This alternative concept of embodiment, which I call *embodiment as world-openness*, will also require an engagement with anthropocentric conceptions of world and organism-world relations. I do this by discussing the concept of “world-openness” as it has been developed in the field of philosophical anthropology and by suggesting an alternative, postanthropocentric interpretation of this concept that emphasizes how embodiment can be understood in terms of an actively shared creaturely with-sphere that is of crucial ontological and ethical relevance in itself rather than merely figuring as a stepping stone for imaginings of anthropological difference.

EMBODIMENT AS EXPOSURE, OR: THE TROUBLE
WITH VULNERABILITY

Although the notion of agency has been of key importance in the humanities and social sciences for quite some time now and is currently being reconceptualized from posthumanist, new materialist, and other perspectives, the last years have also seen a sustained interest in the concept of vulnerability both in academia and in the broader cultural sphere. This development and its timing is not all that surprising, inspired as it arguably is by the increasing awareness of planetary crisis in the face of climate change, mass extinctions, and large-scale environmental degradation and destruction. In this light, the term “vulnerability” with its significant conceptual breadth—from the experientiality of the (human) animal body to the transspecific concerns of creaturely life in what is now often referred to as the “Anthropocene”—figures increasingly more prominently in the development of ethical and ontological perspectives that acknowledge the complex yet fragile forms of relationality and interdependence that permeate and interweave human and nonhuman life on a shared planet.

Among the more influential examples of recent work that seeks to develop the transspecific implications of vulnerability for the purpose of a more directly “animal-oriented” philosophy and ethics are the posthumanism of Cary Wolfe and Anat Pick’s *Creaturely Poetics*. Wolfe emphasizes the importance of a stronger philosophical attention to human animality as a crucial aspect in our endeavors to reconceptualize human–animal relations in terms of an ontology and ethics of creatureliness that is radically centered on “embodiment and embeddedness” compared with traditional humanist and recent transhumanist fantasies of disembodied transcendence (2010, xv). He is also critical of the tendency toward a dominant or even exclusive focus on agency as a foundation of posthumanist ethics, which, he argues, should be “based not on ability, activity, agency, and empowerment but on a *compassion* that is rooted in our vulnerability and passivity” (141 [original emphasis]). Although discussions of animal agency often evince a tendency of moving “the animal” or certain species of nonhuman animals closer to the human in terms of their abilities to perceive, affect, and actively shape their worlds, Wolfe follows a different strategy: He stresses the animal corporeality that humans share with their nonhuman kin, but—focusing in particular on the radically “ahuman” nature of language—he also

underlines the (perhaps more humbling than exalting) specificity of the human as a “fundamentally prosthetic creature, coevolved with various forms of technicity and materiality, forms that are radically ‘not-human’ and yet have nevertheless made the human what it is” (xxv).

Echoing Wolfe’s arguments, Pick’s *Creaturely Poetics* is centered in a similar way on the ethical implications of vulnerability as “a universal mode of exposure” (2011, 5) that humans share with other creatures. More clearly than Wolfe, however, she also anticipates “a likely objection to the kind of poetics I am proposing, whose main trope of vulnerability might appear overly negative.”

To begin with, why treat embodiment solely in the locus of vulnerability? And why approach animals in this way, as radically vulnerable? This would appear to foreclose the possibility of animal agency (and resistance), limit the variety of relations we have with them, and reduce animals to the status of superlative victims. (14)

For Pick, such a concern with vulnerability in terms of embodiment as exposure is supported by the relentless and historically unparalleled subjugation of animal life in the anthropocentric and speciesist dispositives of capitalist modernity. In light of these historical and contemporary realities, a focus on animal agency or agential subjectivity is bound to lead us into a philosophical and ethical dead end because it fails to articulate an effective critique of the underlying tenets of the liberal humanist tradition, in particular, the co-constitutive relationship between (specific notions of) agency, subjectivity, and ethical considerability. As an impotentiality shared by all living beings irrespective of the supposed ontological bifurcation between human and nonhuman life, the existential reality of vulnerable exposure to violence and suffering, the mortality that remains impervious to any and all imaginary or factual differences between living beings, brings into stark focus the monstrosity of the mechanized industrial-scale destruction of animal life as well as other anthropogenic cruelties, which, as Elisa Aaltola puts it, transform the animal’s body into an “enemy” and “the source of her misery and plight” (2012, 45).

Paraphrasing Bonnie Honig’s (2013) characterization of Butler’s work on vulnerability as a form of “mortalist humanism” (although, as will be discussed in a moment, Butler’s idea of vulnerability in fact cannot be reduced to this aspect), the focus on creaturely suffering

and finitude in works such as Wolfe's and Pick's might be understood in terms of a mortalist *posthumanism*. The important accomplishment of such an approach consists in the rehabilitation of vulnerability as an existential characteristic of creaturely life that has strong ethical implications rather than an abject condition that one must—and can—avoid. Yet perhaps we should pause for a moment and consider a number of possible objections to this emphasis on vulnerability: What is the specific kind of human–animal relationality that becomes visible through the lens of vulnerability, and does a focus on this concept really help us develop a vision for a future that may well be uncertain and precarious but that nonetheless requires us to think affirmatively about modes of embodied conviviality between humans and other creatures? To what extent can such a focus ever be congenial with contemporary reconceptualizations of animals as significant social and historical agents in their own right? Does it not, as Pick herself alludes to, run the risk of reifying nonhuman animals as passive–receptive objects of an at best paternalistic ethics solely shaped by human (moral) agents, thus confining animals to narratives of victimization instead of highlighting their active, co-constitutive role in more-than-human societies and histories?

Rosi Braidotti, for example, is mostly dismissive of the recent scholarly interest in creaturely vulnerability, which she sees as a “reactive bond” and a “belated kind of solidarity between the human dwellers of this planet, currently traumatized by globalization, technology and the ‘new’ wars, and their animal others” (2013, 50, 79). From this perspective, current debates about the problem of vulnerability would appear to be the politically questionable result of the idea of a global society, now increasingly imagined in transspecific terms, at the brink of catastrophe—an idea which, often articulated from a position of privilege, conveniently neglects the different potentials of vulnerability of and actual power asymmetries not only between humans and animals but also *among* humans themselves, e.g., between the societies of the post-colonial global South and North and between different groups in Western and other societies whose socioeconomic status and possibilities are strongly shaped by intersectional dynamics such as those of race, gender, and class.⁴ From a no-less-critical angle, Brad Evans and Julian Reid interpret the now widespread perception of a heightened vulnerability of human and biospheric life for its problematic involvement in the emergence of new forms of neoliberal biopolitics and governmentality. Vulnerability discourse, they argue, remains inseparable from, and indeed integral to,

the now almost hegemonic construction of what they term the “resilient subject,” which, in its anxious struggle to change, adapt, and accommodate in the face of an ever more precarious life without any promise of security, “provides new conditions of possibility for intervening upon the souls of the living, along with morally authoring the violence of neoliberal rule on a planetary scale” (2014, 41). For Evans and Reid, rather than offering a perspective for rethinking earthly life in terms of postanthropocentric ethics, the recent focus on vulnerability should be understood as a crucial element in the “changing cartography of liberal power” (41). However, even *if* we rely on the notion of a shared vulnerability of human and nonhuman existence and lifeways in times of planetary crisis as a normative basis for a new kind of animal ethics, the impulses generated by both the concept and the experience of vulnerability are neither transparent nor predictable. This is because what we might think of as the *ontological* fact of vulnerability and our awareness of existing, like other earthly beings, in a state of creaturely embodiment does not necessarily result in the hoped-for *political* or *ethical* (re)actions. Indeed, as a number of feminist critics, such as Judith Butler, Lauren Berlant, and Ann Murphy, point out,

There is absolutely no guarantee that the realization of one’s own vulnerability will motivate an attempt to respect the vulnerability of others. Indeed, there is ample evidence to the contrary. A sense of one’s own dis-possession, availability to others, and vulnerability may incite violence just as readily as it does empathy, care, or tolerance. ... [F]rom the perspective of ethics, there is no normative or prescriptive force to be mined from these experiences. (Murphy 2009, 56; more recently, Butler 2015a, e.g., 143–144)

What to make of all this? Is “vulnerability talk” headed toward a dead end or, even worse, a symptom or the ideological substance of a pernicious, all-encompassing form of biopolitics whose operations now extend well-beyond the Foucauldian focus on the regulation of human populations to the regulation of planetary life as such? As important and incisive as much of the critique of vulnerability is, this critique is to some extent itself symptomatic of what I believe to be a more fundamental problem regarding the kind of ideas and affects predominantly associated with and evoked by this concept. That is, the critique outlined previously aims at a both “commonsensical” and philosophical understanding of the term

“vulnerability” that is itself highly questionable in its tendency to reduce this phenomenon to an exclusively negative one: if not something to be avoided or overcome, then something to be endured (even if, as Evans and Reid might argue, this mode of “enduring” is about to establish itself as a new political ontology of precarious life in the Anthropocene). Vulnerability, in this understanding, figures as the problematic other of agency, with each term demarcating its conceptual territory in implicit or explicit contradistinction to the other. In fact, an influential assumption is that where vulnerability “begins,” agency vanishes, and that agency, of whatever kind and in whatever mode, hinges on an at least temporary or partial “subjugation” of or control over one’s physical and psychological vulnerability. Such predominantly negative conceptions of the term also inform some of the more sophisticated discussions of vulnerability. In sociologist Bryan Turner’s *Vulnerability and Human Rights*, for example, the definition of vulnerability that functions as the basis of his social ontology of the (human) body is “the condition of sentient, embodied creatures who are open to the dangers of their environment and are conscious of their precarious circumstances” (2006, 28). Although Wolfe’s and Pick’s insightful work adopts a distinctly postanthropocentric angle on vulnerability, its ethical impetus relies on a similarly restrictive understanding of the term. Conceived as a negative bond, it tends to reduce the relations between human and nonhuman beings to a passively shared state of existential exposure, which in turn suggests an idea of embodiment as something almost exclusively defined by the imposing realities of injurability and finitude and a somewhat impoverished notion of creaturely relationality because, in its preoccupation with embodiment as exposure, it fails to articulate a more affirmative ethical vision or a perspective in which such a vision might be grounded.

Is the vulnerable openness of our corporeal being toward the world and other bodies identical with what Turner calls the potential for “traumatic wounding” (2006, 28)? I don’t think that it is, and I don’t think that it is what we should limit ourselves to when we grapple with the ethical and political implications of the vulnerability of all creaturely life. Instead, what I suggest and attempt to work toward here is a perspective that does not think of embodied vulnerability as antithetical *to* but as complexly intertwined *with* the forms of agency involved in our worldly becomings-with. From such a perspective, vulnerability should not be understood merely in terms of negativity and passivity, nor can it be reduced to a self-imposed or extraneously imposed existential

state of exception, as is the case with the helpless being-exposed of Agambian bare life in the face of sovereign power. Being-a-body-in-the-world means being vulnerable in the sense of all earthly creatures' *constitutive* openness toward forms of agency other than and beyond (the grasp of) what we like to call the "self," and it is precisely and only in our embodied interdependency with these other forms of agency that our own agential capacities are able to realize themselves and become recognizable as such. "Vulnerability," as Erinn Gilson puts it, is never simply "a condition that limits us but one that can *enable* us" (2011, 310 [original emphasis]), a condition that cannot be adequately understood in terms of the dichotomy of self-sufficient agency and passive exposure. "As potential, vulnerability is a condition of openness, openness to being affected and affecting in turn" (310). Conversely, the negative connotations often evoked by the concept of vulnerability—as a loss or lack of control, as a passive dependence on our social environment or on the smothering limitations of our own obstinate corporeality—are not only a reflection of the enduring phantasm of the Cartesian subject: They are also informed by an implicit (and implicitly masculinist) contempt toward the *relationality* of being-in-the-world, expressive of what ecofeminist Val Plumwood (1993) calls a "denial of dependency." As Lauren Berlant puts it succinctly: "Vulnerability makes you worthless: survival depends on producing forms of hardened identity and closeting the soft remainders" (2011, 130). It is no surprise, then, that vulnerability is often relegated to the margins of an existence imagined and idealized in terms of autonomy and a quasi-disembodied—or discretely and unintrusively embodied—subjectivity. Nancy's perceptive remarks in *Being Singular Plural* on the notion of "coexistence" and its devaluation in neoliberal discourse aim in a very similar direction:

It is remarkable that this term still serves to designate a regime or state more or less imposed by extrinsic circumstances. ... Always subject to weak and unpleasant connotations, coexistence designates a constraint, or at best an acceptable concomitance, but not what is at stake in being or essence, unless in the form of an insurmountable aporia with which one can only negotiate. (2000, 43)

While, understood as an existential characteristic of the human condition, vulnerability now increasingly constitutes the ethico-political focus of "new humanist"⁵ perspectives—such as Paul Gilroy's vision of a "planetary

humanism capable of comprehending the universality of our elemental vulnerability to the wrongs we visit upon each other” (2005, 4)—the still dominant and dominantly negative conception of vulnerability is symptomatic of the legacy of *traditional* humanist notions of the rational agency of Man in contradistinction to an abject, dependent animality projected onto the bodies of both nonhuman creatures and marginalized groups of humans. In this light, the attempt to disentangle vulnerability from its reductionist discursive legacy, together with a critical awareness of the political stakes of vulnerability discourse, might be a worthwhile endeavor for an intersectionally oriented postanthropocentric criticism in line with what Ralph Acampora calls the “truly posthumanist task of reappreciating bodily animacy as such [and] recognizing our own vital status as animate zoomorphs” (2006, xiv).

It has been feminist theorists and philosophers, in particular, for whom vulnerability—its forms and meanings, its ethical or political implications, and its relation to other concepts such as autonomy or (inter)dependency—has been a topic of enduring concern (for recent examples, see Gilson 2014; Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds 2014; also see Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000; Kittay and Feder 2002). One of the more prominent and widely read feminist engagements with vulnerability can be found in the work of Butler, including her recent *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015b). To be sure, throughout the years Butler’s focus has been for the most part on the *traumatic* potentials of vulnerability and their relevance for our conceptions of human corporeality and sociality. In her 2006 essay, “Violence, Non-Violence: Sartre on Fanon” (reprinted in the 2015 essay collection *Senses of the Subject*), for example, Butler highlights the role of bodily vulnerability and agency in her discussion of the colonial dialectics of violence and violent resistance to violence, with the “scars and chains” of colonialism functioning as “the animating traces of a subjugation just short of death” (2015b, 178). It is precisely the impotence of suffering, Butler suggests, that ultimately leads to a reassertion of agency in the colonized’s fight against the social death that is life under colonial rule, and it is the body in particular that functions as the nexus of both colonial and anti-colonial discourses and practices: It represents the focal point of colonial rule and violence *and* the means through which forms of anti-colonial resistance can be articulated and realized.⁶ Crucially, however, the body also lies at the heart of a vision that ultimately transcends violence altogether in a recognition of corporeal vulnerability as the impetus for an ethics

centered on what Butler, echoing Sartre, refers to as the “infinite unity of mutual needs ... among the world’s inhabitants” (189). Ultimately, and despite his emphasis on the inevitability of violence for the overthrow of colonial rule in *The Wretched of the Earth*, Butler argues that it is Fanon himself who envisions the body in terms of “an opening toward the world and toward a radically egalitarian collectivity” (193). Accordingly, Fanon’s address (at the end of *Black Skins, White Masks*) “O my body, make of me always a man who questions!” is

an appeal as much to his own corporeal life, the restoration of the body as the ground of agency, as it is to the other; it is an address, indeed, a touch, facilitated by the body, one that ... commits itself to regarding each and every consciousness as an open dimension. ... Over and against the view that there can be no self-creation without violence, Fanon here exemplifies the philosophical truth that ... the ‘self’ is constituted precisely in a mode of address that avows its constitutive sociality. (194–195)

Butler’s interest in the role of vulnerability as a pivotal aspect of this “constitutive sociality” of the body-subject is particularly evident in *Precarious Lives* (2004) and even more so in *Frames of War* (2009), where she concerns herself with the normative discursive “frames” that hinder our recognition of the plight of those groups of humans who are not admitted into our frameworks of ethical and political consideration. In *Frames*, Butler also emphasizes the importance of a relational ontology of the body because only through a rethinking of the parameters of our bodily being-in-the-world and our bodily relations of (inter)dependence are we able to adequately address the existential realities of vulnerability and their profound ethical and political implications (2). However, despite her emphasis on the epistemic and physical exposure to violence and suffering that inevitably comes with being-a-body-in-the-world, it is important to note that for Butler vulnerability is not an exclusively negative phenomenon that must be ameliorated or even “eliminated,” as far as possible, by the dynamics of human sociality. Trauma and injury, she writes, are “one thing that can and does happen to a vulnerable body (and there are no invulnerable bodies), but that is not to say that the body’s vulnerability is reducible to its injurability” (2009, 34). Rather, Butler repeatedly points to the fundamental ambivalence of our vulnerable embodiment as living beings and our embeddedness in a biosocial and biocultural world that continuously demands and challenges us to

be receptive and responsive to its polymorphic modes of address in ways that “may include a wide range of affects: pleasure, rage, suffering, hope, to name a few” (34). Butler thus also reminds us that corporeal existence is always already *social* existence and that the ontological fact of vulnerability does not figure as the antithesis *of* but is in fact woven *into* the very fabric of human sociality and among its defining conditions of possibility. Although Butler is primarily concerned with what might be termed the “(bio)politics of vulnerability,” i.e., the ways in which the injurability and exposure of some human lives is exacerbated based on racialization or similar processes of discrimination, she also emphasizes the role of vulnerability as a shared existential reality that “mark[s] our radical dependency not only on others, but on a sustaining and sustainable world” (2015a, 150). The body, all bodies—or at least the *human* bodies Butler is concerned with here—are “exposed to history, to precarity, and to force, but also to what is unbidden and felicitous, like passion and love, or sudden friendship ... or unexpected loss” (148). Importantly, Butler also devotes her attention to the dichotomous understanding of vulnerability and agency, which—in its stubborn persistence—often prevents us from rethinking bodily existence in terms of a distinctly relational ontology. Discussing how we, as humans, are permanently acted upon by the forces of both language and environment, she explains that this being acted upon does not simply relegate us to the status of “a passive surface or recipient.” Rather, this being acted upon

is also what enacts me, sparks my action, informs and prompts an agency that comes to be mine. I surely do not make myself, since I am already in the world of others, of language, of complex life, before I begin to act and to do as I do. All that is not me is the condition of my acting, and I could not act without such conditions. ... what we call our acting or our doing is itself always in some ways a response to what precedes and enables our action. The performative theory of action has to be resituated in a relational understanding of living organisms, human and nonhuman ... (2012, 16)

Like other living beings, humans are always already embedded in complex webs of biosocial relations, in which acting and being acted upon do not correspond with the simplistic imaginary divide between agency and vulnerability, autonomy, and dependency. As Butler explains in *Notes*, if our concept of action ties agency to autonomy and implies that acting,

instead of being an acting-in-relation, is something that allows us to remove or “liberate” our selves from an idea of relationality tainted by its association with vulnerability and passivity, “then our self-understanding as actors is predicated upon a disavowal of those living and interdependent relations upon which our lives depend. ... [T]he idea of human and creaturely life that supports our efforts will be one that overcomes the schism between acting and interdependency” (2015a, 45).

What exactly is it, however, that the “and” in “human and creaturely life” is supposed to signify? Does it indicate, in a rather traditional way, an ontological distinction, in which “creaturely” is to be taken as a mere synonym for the nonhuman animal realm in contradistinction to the specificity of human life? Does her phrase single out human life as part of yet also more than creaturely life? For Butler, the concept of human life is marked by a certain ambivalence regarding its ontological implications because, she argues, “human” and “life” are terms that “never fully coincide with one another,” that even frequently “repel one another”: Although *human* life “can never name all the life processes on which it depends,” neglecting the ways in which what we call “human” is always self-constitutively situated in the sphere of the more-than-human, human *life* is inadequate due to its failure to properly take into account that “life can never be the singularly defining feature of the human – so whatever we might want to call human life will inevitably consist of a negotiation with this tension” (42–43). To some extent, Butler’s work is characterized by a similar tension between her often half-articulated insistence on human specificity and her growing consideration of the implications of human animality and the “noncontingent relation between humans and animals” (131) for her relational ontology of embodied interdependence. Regarding the questions of “recognition” and “recognizability” so crucial to her work, Butler asks whether

the act by which humans achieve recognition implicitly pick[s] out only those features of the human that could arguably be separated off from the rest of animal life? The conceit of this form of recognition founders on itself, for would such a distinctly human creature actually be recognizable if it were somehow separated from its creaturely existence? (35–36)

Given that the human is “a living creature among creatures and in the midst of forms of living that exceed us” (43), is there not a distinctly *creaturely* dimension to the kind of embodied relationality Butler is

concerned with, especially because her claim that “the body is always given over to modes of sociality and environment” (2009, 31) surely extends beyond the facticities of *human* embodiment? If “a large set of life processes cross the human and the animal and maintain a rather steadfast indifference to the distinction between the two” (2015a, 132), and if human life, *qua* its inescapably embodied nature, is always creaturely life, surely there is no reason that the significance of this creaturely aspect should only bear on *interhuman* ethics and relations?

Butler’s theorizations of precarious life and embodied vulnerability have been discussed from both posthumanist and animal studies perspectives (see, for example, Taylor 2008; Oliver 2009, esp., 40–45; Stanescu 2012), and although she has been criticized for her failure to more fully develop the postanthropocentric potential of her work, the question of nonhuman life and human–animal relations has certainly become more prominent in her thinking.⁷ As Wolfe argues, however, although Butler’s focus on embodied relationality neither completely ignores nor straightforwardly excludes nonhuman beings, the way in which it hinges on a rather transactional idea of mutual recognition points to the anthropocentric limitations of her thought. What, Wolfe asks, “about those members of the community who *aren’t* striving for recognition” (2012, 20 [original emphasis]): How do they fit into Butler’s framework? It is not the reality of an “infinite unity of mutual needs ... among the world’s inhabitants” alone that Butler is concerned with but rather with the *recognition* of this shared reality of vulnerability and interdependency and with “changing the relation between the recognizable and unrecognizable” (2015a, 5)—and this focus on recognition implicitly delineates what *kinds* of worldly inhabitants can find a place in her theoretical and ethical framework.

At this point, it is important to spell out more clearly an aspect that has so far mostly remained implicit in my discussion of vulnerability and embodiment: Any discussion of the meanings and implications of vulnerability also hinges on presuppositions about, or explicit theorizations of, the interrelations between body and world. It hinges, that is, on our ideas about the ways in which the embodied being and intercorporeal relatings of creaturely life are woven into the biological, ecological, and social dynamics that shape life on earth. As Butler puts it regarding the creaturely embeddedness of human beings, “[o]nly in the context of a living world does the human as an agentic creature emerge,” and it is human beings’ “dependency on others and on living processes [that] gives rise to the very capacity for action” (2015a, 44).

“World” is, of course, a somewhat slippery and polysemous concept: It is used as a synonym for “planet” in general, for “our” specific planet, earth, with reference to imaginary or factual geographical and historico-cultural specifics (the “Western world”), and in a number of other ways. And although Butler’s phrasing of the “living world” as a “context” evokes the idea of a web of embodied interrelations and life processes that provides the conditions of possibility for human agency in a way that is similarly true for nonhuman beings, in modern philosophy the concept of “world” and the inquiry into the “world relations” of different kinds of earthly beings have usually not been employed to formulate an idea of zooanthropological relationality but to establish the parameters of a supposed anthropological difference. Jacques Derrida, in *The Beast and the Sovereign*, grapples with this problem at some length in his engagement with the question of “the community or otherwise of the world” between humans and other creatures (2011, 2:8). How we should think about human– or animal–world relations—and, indeed, about who or what can “have” a world in the first place—is a question that has been captured most prominently in the form of Martin Heidegger’s three theses on the “world-forming” character of human *Dasein*, the “poor-in-world” animal, and the “worldless” stone. Because his theses and their implications for ideas about human–animal difference and relations have been discussed extensively elsewhere (e.g., Calarco 2008; Buchanan 2008), I will not engage with them here in more detail. Continuing the critical engagement with Heidegger that has informed much of his earlier work, Derrida formulates three (conflicting) “theses” of his own: (1) that humans and animals *do* inhabit the same world—if by world we mean the “objective world” (earth and its biosphere); (2) that they *do not* inhabit the same world because there is an irreducible, “abyssal” difference between human and animal worlds; and, finally and most radically, (3) that given the constructedness (and hence deconstructibility) of world, just the idea of a *human* community of world is a fantasy because all there is, and all we are, is islands (2011, 2:8).

Derrida’s preoccupation with the third thesis leads him down a road that requires him, and us, to challenge the very concept of world as such, and although certainly in line with his deconstructionist approach, it is less resonant with the kind of relational ontology and ethics of the body I am interested in here. What I focus on instead is Derrida’s claim that, although the concepts “inhabiting” and “co-habiting” may always remain problematic and their meaning “different from one living being to another, taking into account what one understands by world or earth,” we can still agree

on a “minimal sense” of world as “the designation of *that within which* all these living beings are carried (in a belly or in an egg), ... *that in which* the beast and the sovereign co-habit, the very thing ... they cohabit (2011, 2:264–265 [original emphases]). The shared reality of humans and animals as living beings, that is, necessitates *some* idea of a shared world, even if this world is animated, inhabited, and perceived in widely and wildly different ways by different creatures. Before or beyond the kind of hierarchized ontology that gives rise to the actual distinction between the lowly beast and the sovereign as the epitome of agency without compromise, both of them cohabit the world in this “minimal sense” of being embodied beings and in the (radically ambivalent) mode of embodied openness to which I alluded in the previous discussion of vulnerability.

Simply positing this kind of mundane factuality, however, may not in itself accomplish very much because what matters is how this minimal-sense commonality is further developed in ethical and ontological terms. After all, bare commonality does not automatically translate into any kind of lived relationality worthy of the name, and even in post-Darwinian times the minimal sense of the embodied nature of the human animal by no means put an end to human exceptionalist worldviews. The sense of earthbound, vulnerable embodiment suggested by the notion of creaturely life can be developed in terms of a postanthropocentric relational ethics and ontology but also in a quite traditionally anthropocentric manner, in which human specificity, the *humanitas* of the human, is to be found in human beings’ self-constitutive emancipation from the minimal-sense commonality that binds them to a multiplicity of earth others. Arguably, “minimal” in this latter sense also implies “of minor relevance” in the sense that the truly important question—the question that may yield true insight into the “essence” and uniqueness of Man—must necessarily point beyond the sphere of creaturely embodiment. This has important implications for our imaginings of human–animal relationality that I will come back to and discuss in more detail later in the text.

WORLD-OPENNESS: VULNERABILITY, AGENCY, AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL DIFFERENCE

The question of human–world and animal–world relations and the supposed difference between them is of crucial importance to our conceptions of the possibilities or limitations of “creaturely cohabitation” (see Oliver, this volume). Less widely read today than Heidegger, this

question has also been of interest to his contemporaries Max Scheler and Helmuth Plessner in the field of early 20th-century German philosophical anthropology, whose principal works were published in 1928, the year between Heidegger's publication of *Being and Time* and his lecture course on *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*. Like Heidegger's own work, Scheler's *The Human Place in the Cosmos* [*Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos*] and Plessner's yet to be translated *The Levels of the Organic and Man* [*Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch*] use an at times highly idiosyncratic terminology in their attempt to develop an account of the human being that moves beyond the limitations of the metaphysical tradition.

What I focus on for the purposes of this chapter is a concept essential to philosophical anthropology's attempts at delineating anthropological difference in terms of the uniqueness of the human-world relation: the concept of "world-openness." This concept is interesting not only because it emerges from a philosophical context of extensive post-Darwinian considerations of human animality and embodiment but in particular because it reconfigures what it posits as the human being's original existential vulnerability—captured in Nietzsche's characterization of the human as the "not-yet-determined animal"—in terms of the exceptional agential potentialities of human social and cultural becoming. In other words, if the conceptualization of vulnerability in terms of embodiment as exposure discussed previously serves to emphasize the fragility and finitude of *all* creaturely life, philosophical anthropology's concept of world-openness is centered on the idea that, as an existential condition, embodiment as exposure is in fact a uniquely *human* form of vulnerability that translates into a uniquely *human* form of agency and being-in-the-world.

In philosophical anthropology, world-openness refers to the unspecific and indeterminate nature of humans' biological and morphological organization: Humans are "world-open" in the sense that they do not come into the world with a pre-given way of relating to it—a rewritten script, as it were, of behavioral traits and instincts—nor with any adaptation to a specific environment, which means that humans initially find themselves in a state of existential exposure unknown in other species. Crucially, however, it is precisely this original constitutional impotence of humans as "deficient beings"—as *Mängelwesen*, as Arnold Gehlen (1988 [1940]), a third prominent figure of the field, puts it—that lays the groundwork for the uniqueness of human agency and the development

of a “higher” form of existence defined by reason, language, and culture. World-openness, then, constitutes both a necessary task or burden (to “build” a world that is not already pre-arranged in terms of biological specialization and organism-environment relation) and a rich potentiality (to build a world that is not *constrained* in the way that the animal’s is by its respective biological specialization and organism-environment relation). Vulnerability, in short, instead of opening up a perspective on creaturely relationality, functions as the existential precondition of human exceptionalism.⁸

Despite their different and at times conflicting perspectives, Plessner and his fellow philosophical anthropologists share the core idea that humans’ *Sonderstellung*, their “special place” in the cosmos, finds its expression in the human being’s world-openness. For Scheler, who is the first to use the term in *The Human Place*, world-openness is characteristic of the human as a being that “is able to *soar* far above his status as a living entity” (2009 [1928], 33 [original emphasis]). Scheler’s argumentation is centered on the notion of spirit (*Geist*) as the core element of anthropological difference and on the relation between spirit and drive (*Drang*) as it is embodied in the human person. Unlike (all other) animals, due to its participation in spirit, the human being “is not tied anymore to its drives and environment, but is ‘non-environmental’ or, as I wish to put it, ‘world-open’” (27). What Scheler terms the “*essential concept*” (6 [original emphasis]) of the human is one that is not merely different from but in fact *opposite* to that employed by the natural sciences in the same way that the essence of the human being must be understood as “*opposite anything we call life*” (26 [original emphasis]).

The human being is a creature that, by virtue of its spirit, can take an *ascetic* attitude toward its fervent and vibrating life – The human being can suppress and repress its own drive impulses, and it can *refuse to give them* their sustenance in the form of perceivable images and representations. By comparison to animals, who always say “Yes” to reality – even when they fear and flee – the human being is the “Nay-sayer,” he is an *ascetic of life* ... (39, original emphases)

Scheler’s concept of spirit is more complex than I am able to discuss here, but it is clear that the human being’s participation in spirit lies at the heart of Scheler’s claim regarding “a series of *specific monopolies* of the human being,” namely, “his givenness to himself, his ability to

objectify his environment and his own psychic and physical being with all of their mutual causal relations” (31). Being endowed with spirit means “having world” in a sense that resonates with Heidegger’s conception of the human–world relation in terms of *Dasein*’s access to being as such.⁹ For Heidegger, to understand “the essential contrast between the animal’s being open and the *world-openness* of man” (1995, 343 [original emphasis]), we must distinguish between openness as a “being held toward” and openness as a “being taken by” (343) with the latter referring to the animal’s environmental “captivation”—that is, the way it is functionally bound to its respective environment (*Umwelt*) and the objects in it by way of a more or less rigid sensory and instinctual apparatus. Surely, Heidegger would have agreed with Scheler’s claim that, “[j]ust as a snail carries its shell [*qua* environment] with it everywhere it goes,” an animal is unable to remove and distance itself from its environment, unable to turn its environment into an “object” and to “transform its ‘environment’ into ‘world’ (or a symbol of the world)” (2009, 28). In contrast to the “embodied philistinism” that is animal existence, Scheler’s human is always striving for the transcendence of a given reality, an “eternal ‘Faust’” who is “never at peace with his enviring world” and “always eager to break through the borders of now-here-whatness (*Jetzt-Hier-So-sein*)” (40).

Although Plessner and Gehlen share his emphasis on world-openness to define the characteristics of the human *Sonderstellung*, both reject Scheler’s metaphysical preoccupation with spirit and provide a more elaborate discussion of the human being’s body–world relation. Gehlen explains world-openness with a focus on morphology by taking the observation of the human being’s “singular lack of biological means” (1988, 26) as his point of departure. As an unadapted *Mängelwesen*—without natural protection against the elements, with no effective bodily means of defense, attack, or flight, and with a long period of dependency on the care of others—in their (hypothetical) original state humans must be understood as “endangered being[s] facing a real chance of perishing” (25). For Gehlen, traditional intellectualist definitions of the human fail to take into account, or fail to do so in a nondualist way, “the relationship between the peculiar human bodily structure and the human mind,” which distinguishes humans from all other animals including other primate species as humans’ evolutionary next of kin (25–26). This uniquely “exposed and vulnerable human constitution” also articulates itself as an exposure to sensory overload, the overwhelming flood

of impressions and perceptions that are not delimited in terms of a pre-established functional organism–environment relation and thus constitute “a great burden to him which he must overcome in special ways” (27). Humans must find relief (*Entlastung*) from this seemingly chaotic, unfiltered flood of impressions and external stimuli, and it is only by “reducing immediate contact with the world” that they are able to orient themselves, make sense of, and gain control of these impressions (30). If world-openness is thus initially a burden, it is also what accounts for the uniqueness of human agency in the necessary shift from a *Mängelwesen* to what Gehlen calls an “acting being” (*handelndes Wesen*), a form of agency that is not merely of a compensatory nature (a means of obtaining relief) but also allows for a “completely new means for conducting life drawn from within man himself” (28–29). World-openness forces and enables humans to transform their natural surroundings through the creation of a “second nature”—culture—the only “nature” in which they are able to survive.¹⁰

Gehlen’s arguments are echoed to some extent by Plessner’s remark that, as an “emigrant of nature,” there is “nothing in his [*sic*] life that man does not have to do, of which he does not have to take care, which he does not have create” (1983b [1946], 64 [all quotes from Plessner’s works are my own translation]), although he certainly did not share Gehlen’s functionalist understanding of human culture in terms of survivability. Plessner’s own approach to philosophical anthropology in *Levels* is centered on an ontology of life from plant to animal to human in which the crucial aspect that distinguishes human from other forms of organic life is what he terms the human being’s “excentric positionality.” Plessner’s notion of positionality refers less to a fixed position inhabited by different animate forms but more dynamically to the types of relation that living things (*lebende Dinge*) have with both their body and their environment, or—more precisely—with the *boundary* which, by way of its permanent negotiation between inside and outside, both separates living things from their environment *and* establishes a relation to this environment, thus acknowledging the vital dependency of all organisms on what is beyond and outside yet also constitutive of their own physical organization. Although it is true that inanimate things can be identified by the demarcation or limit (*Begrenzung*) that enables us to distinguish between their physical forms, for Plessner only living things are defined by having a boundary as part of their very composition *as* living things and by having a specific, active *relation* to this boundary. As “boundary-realizing bodies”

(*grenzrealisierende Körper*) (1928, 126), living things actively negotiate the “radical conflict between the necessity for closure as a physical body and the necessity for openness as an organism” (218).

But what exactly is it that allows us to distinguish between *human* and *animal* living things? For Plessner, the “eccentric” positionality of humans allows them to stand outside of themselves, to comport themselves toward their bodies as objects, whereas the “centric” positionality of animals means that the latter remain fully absorbed into and preoccupied with the “Here-Now” (*Hier-Jetzt*) (288). As he puts it in a lecture, *Human and Animal*, the “biological weakness” that comes with the world-openness of humans is thus “the honorable sacrifice that ‘nature’ offers to [human] intellectuality (*Geistigkeit*)” (1983b, 62). Like all other living beings, however, humans always *remain* positional and as such can never relinquish or transcend embodied positionality. Humans, too, remain “essentially bound to the Here-Now,” the difference being their ability to “distance themselves from themselves, to put a gulf between themselves and their experiences” (291).

Within the broader argumentative framework of philosophical anthropology, the indeterminate potentiality and plasticity of human–world relations is conceptually dependent on the rigidly predetermined instinctuality of animal–environment relations. “Every animal can be defined anatomically and psychologically in terms of its distinct blueprint (*Bauplan*),” Plessner argues with reference to the work of Uexküll. “It lives in harmony with its *Umwelt*. Dragonflies, sea stars, dogs have their respective *Umwelt*, their expectations, their disappointments, their experiences, their satisfactions” (1983b, 58). But world is not *Umwelt*, and its unique character cannot be understood in terms of this horizontal pluralism of environments—World, that is, is more than merely the respective *Umwelt* that corresponds with the specificity of the human’s biological blueprint (59). Accordingly, as Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann put it in *The Social Construction of Reality*, what world-openness means is precisely that there is no “man-world in the sense that one may speak of a dog-world or a horse-world” (1991 [1966], 65) because the human world of culture is not limited to, and may in fact challenge or defy, the constraints of instinctive behavior, drive satisfaction, and potentially even the fulfilment of basic vital needs.

I leave aside here the obvious problem that philosophical anthropology’s theorizations of world-openness presuppose a rather impoverished notion of animal being that leaves little space for animal creativity and

precludes the possibility of animal culture or, indeed, any form of genuine agency that goes beyond the rudimentary goal-directed behavior associated with the sphere of instincts and drives. Instead, I would like to focus on a different yet intimately related question: What are the implications of a kind of thinking that distinguishes between human worlds and animal *Umwelten* in the way outlined previously for the Derridean question of the “community or otherwise of the world”? What are the possible points of intersection between animal *Umwelten* and the culture worlds of humans in their cosmic *Sonderstellung*? Is a participation in what Plessner posits as the uniquely human sphere of *Mitwelt*—the shared “with-world” of human culture and sociality—denied to animals, or can we perhaps also think *Mitwelt* in interspecific terms?

Surely, there are multiple avenues of critique here, but in line with the previous discussion of vulnerability, it is the issue of embodiment that interests me. In addition to representing one more attempt in an exhausting history of Western attempts at delineating anthropological difference, philosophical anthropology’s conception of world-openness also serves to underline the difference between what might be termed a separative and an affiliative perspective on human animal corporeality. Both the separative and affiliative perspective are “post-Darwinian” in the sense of their rejection of the dualist tradition, their acknowledgment of human animality and evolutionary kinship with other species, and an often sustained attention to the biological organization of the human (mammalian or primate) animal body. The difference between them is thus not determined by whether or not they accept human–animal kinship in evolutionary terms but by the kinds of ontologies developed from or around the biological facticity of human animal embodiment, and—given that our ontologies remain inseparable from the forms of relationality we are able to envision—whether these ontologies posit embodiment merely as a springboard or stepping stone to an exceptionalist conception of the human being or as a sphere of interspecies becoming-with that is of ethical and ontological relevance in and of itself. From a separative angle, anthropological difference emerges from a common foundation of creaturely embodiment that is of critical importance primarily in the way in which it, at least in the human case, points *beyond* itself. From an affiliative angle, in contrast, creaturely embodiment can be understood as a “with-sphere”: the actively shared intersection of worlds and the lived and living foundation of “convivial worldhood across speciated horizons,” to use Acampora’s phrasing (2006, 120).

EMBODIMENT AS WORLD-OPENNESS: FROM ANTHROPOLOGICAL DIFFERENCE TO INTERSPECIES WORLDING

Instead of thinking of world-openness as a facet or even as the foundation of anthropological difference in a way that suggests the relative impossibility of sharing a world with nonhuman beings who remain confined to their respective *Umwelten*, can we reconceptualize the notion of world-openness through an affiliative perspective on embodiment that fosters relational imaginings and practices of interspecies worlding? For Plessner, it would be a mistake to attempt a comparison of human world-openness and the culture worlds it brings about with the closedness of animal environments. There is a continuity and cross-fertilization between human cultures that defies comparison with the *Umwelten* of animals, which “exist next to each other ... without questioning each other, often even without disturbing each other” (1983a, 188–189). And yet, although he does not challenge this supposed closedness of animal environments, Plessner points to the necessary limitations of world-openness, limitations that are tied to the facticity of human–animal corporeality. World-openness without any limitation, he argues, would be possible only for a quasi-angelic, disembodied subject or a being with a “pneumatized body” (187). Embodied positionality is what ties humans, who are eccentric without, however, transcending their animal centrality, to the existential sphere of the “Here–Now” also inhabited by other living beings. However, it is Plessner’s commitment to philosophical anthropology’s quest for anthropological difference that precludes a more sustained consideration of the affiliative, interspecies potentials and implications of embodied positionality. In fact, the rigid correspondence of animal–*Umwelt* relations to the respective animal’s corporeal blueprint means that its environmental captivation corresponds to its confinement to a body that it lives *in* and *as* in strict accordance with the physio-psychological parameters of its blueprint. Animal being and animal sociality are thus never in any meaningful way more or other than what is predetermined by this blueprint, and this has important implications for the possible kinds of relations not only between human and nonhuman but also *among* nonhuman animals both intraspecifically and interspecifically. If the inclusivity of *Mitwelt* ends with the boundaries of the human, given the ever-more-widely documented importance of animal sociality, can we at least speak of a nonhuman equivalent to human *Mitwelt*—something like a ‘Mit-Umwelt’? Plessner denies this possibility as well because, for him,

animals' forms of togetherness are fundamentally different from human sociality, and to identify in the gregarious or interactive behaviors of animals an orientation toward such a shared with-sphere would be a "hasty conclusion": To an animal, there are no "fellow animals" (*Mittiere*) in the same sense that a human person relates to his "fellow humans" (*Mitmenschen*) because to an animal, these "fellow animals" only exist as part of, and ultimately and essentially remain indistinguishable from, its environment more generally (307). It is only through human world-openness, then, that more indeterminate, less functionalist modes of relating become possible—the plasticity and inventiveness, the potential for radical change and for the emergence of the unprecedented that are tied to the dynamics of human sociality and intersubjectivity. Through eccentric positionality, the very existence of such a unique "anthroposphere" is grounded in a position of *distance* to the body, and although falling short of transcendence, it is in and through this position of distance to animal embodiment that *humanitas* finds its fullest expression. It is only fitting, then, that Plessner—with a somewhat Schelerian ring to it—also refers to human *Mitwelt* as the "sphere of spirit" (1928, 303).

Rather than separating humans and their "constitutive homelessness" (309) from other animals and their instinctual absorption into narrowly pre-delimited *Umwelten*, an affiliative perspective on embodiment as world-openness might help us think about the possibility of such a "with-sphere" in a way that does not automatically exclude nonhuman beings but pays tribute to the interspecies worldings fostered by what Vinciane Despret describes as "the porosity of worlds and the flexibility of those who people them." Discussing the example of domestication, Despret explains that this phenomenon can be understood in terms of

the transformation of what was the proper world of one being by another, or, to put it more accurately, the transformation of a being-with-its-world by another being-with-its-world. Not only are cows no longer wild but there is now attached to them a world of stables, hay, hands that milk, Sundays, human odors, touches, words and cries, fences, paths, and ruts. (2016, 165)

Such interspecies worldings belie the idea of a solipsism of human and animal worlds in favor of their intersection and co-animation, especially if we shift our focus (as Despret does here) from often unquestionably anthropocentric notions of (inter)subjectivity to a more serious

consideration of embodiment, intercorporeality, and interaffectivity. I suggest that reterritorializing the concept of world-openness in *creaturely* terms—that is, beyond its preoccupation with the delineation of anthropological difference toward a recognition of interspecies worldings—is one way to take into more serious consideration the richness of many animals’ relations with their world and the worlds of other beings, especially those of humans as one of the most widely distributed species and one that has imposed itself on earthly life in unprecedented ways. This is significant for two related reasons: First, it reflects recent developments in ethological research that continue to illuminate the social and even cultural complexity expressed in the lifeways of a plethora of animal species, in particular birds and terrestrial or aquatic mammals (e.g., de Waal and Tyack 2003; Whitehead and Rendell 2015). Second, and this is what interests me here specifically, thinking of world-openness in creaturely terms encourages an ethico-epistemological stance in the sense of what Despret (2008) calls “rendering capable.” Despret employs this term to describe the kind of research apparatuses that enable animals to “speak” instead of subjecting them to a rigidly conceived research framework, to answer the human researcher’s questions on its own terms. However, I think the notion of rendering capable is also useful in a broader sense both because (1) its relevance extends beyond the context and demands of scientific knowledge production to the most mundane of our always embodied encounters with nonhuman beings; and (2) it is not only animals but also, and perhaps especially, humans who need to be rendered, or to render themselves, capable. Capable of relating to animal life and bodies in a way that does not explain (away) animal behavior in terms of the smothering a priori of instinct and a determinist idea of animal-environment relations. Capable, in a word, of being *surprised*. And indeed, as Despret would probably agree, these two senses of “rendering capable” are highly interdependent.

Let me summarize the difference between a conception of vulnerability in terms of embodiment as exposure discussed earlier and the less restrictive and negative understanding of vulnerability captured in the notion of embodiment as world-openness I have suggested here: Although embodiment as exposure (from the postanthropocentric angle adopted by Wolfe, Pick, and others) shares the affiliative perspective on embodiment, which I think is of crucial importance for a relational ontology and ethics of creaturely life, its reliance on a negative and restrictive idea of vulnerability suggests an impoverished corporeal

ontology, in which embodied relationality is reduced to the phenomenon of shared bodily exposure to injurability, finitude, and “traumatic wounding” (Turner). In contrast, once we move beyond philosophical anthropology’s human exceptionalist conception of the term, the concept of embodiment as world-openness allows for more affirmative imaginings of embodied interspecies relationality and for a more conscious recognition of the ways in which it permeates “human” lives and societies. It allows us to think of embodiment as a shared with-sphere, but it also allows us to imagine the “withness” of this with-sphere in richer terms than the passive bond of bodily exposure, instead acknowledging the capacity for the mutual transformativity of human and animal worlds.

I want to conclude this chapter with some reflections on the kind of corporeal ontology in which such a concept of embodiment as world-openness might be grounded. For Nancy, whom I have already quoted in the introductory section of this chapter, not only is ontology as such always *bodily* ontology because the “body *is* the being of existence” (2008, 15 [original emphasis]), this bodily ontology also must be understood as an “ontology of being-with” that is open to “every body, whether they be inanimate, animate, sentient, speaking, thinking, having weight, and so on” (2000, 84). Interestingly, however, Nancy’s radically relational and inclusive ontology also challenges anthropocentrism in a less direct and less visible way than through his emphasis on the inclusion of nonhuman and even inanimate bodies.¹¹ Nancy also takes aim at an idea of the body that is part of the conceptual footing of the anthropocentric figure of the autonomous individual. It is not only that all varieties of being necessarily articulate themselves corporeally but also that corporeality as such is always beyond and outside itself, positioned in an ontological “inter” or “trans” that is at the same time constitutive of what we like to think of as the individual self.

Above all else, “body” really means what is outside, insofar as it is outside, next to, against, nearby, with a(n) (other) body, from body to body, in the dis-position. ... [A] body is the sharing of and the departure from self, the departure toward self, the near-by-to-self without which the “self” would not even be “on its own.”

Nancy’s refusal of the notion of the “hermetic body”—a conceptual ally, perhaps, of the fantasy of the sovereign subject—resonates well with Butler’s call for a social ontology of the body as an entity that “is outside

itself, in the world of others, in a space and time it does not control, and ... not only exists in the vector of these relations, but as this very vector” (2009, 52–53). In fact, Nancy’s discussion of embodiment connects with a broader line of feminist theory and philosophy the postanthropocentric potentials of which have recently been more fully articulated in the form of material feminist approaches.¹² What connects these different approaches across time and disciplinary perspective is their sustained consideration of the fact that being-a-body-in-the-world is “never a private affair, but is always already mediated by our continual interactions with other human *and nonhuman* bodies” (Weiss 1999, 5 [my emphasis]). For feminist philosopher Rosalyn Diprose, embodiment must be understood in terms of a non-calculative and non-transactional “corporeal generosity” (2002), an openness and “givenness” to others that is at the heart of the existence of humans as social beings and, thus, of human existence as such. In contrast to traditional liberal–individualist conceptions, this “generosity” is not the result of any deliberate choice of a (human) subject in “possession” of a body that then enters into a sphere of intercorporeal relationships. Rather, humans—and, I would add, other living beings—are always situated in a biosocial sphere of intercorporeal corporeality *qua* the very fact of their embodiment. The body, then, finds itself existentially and self-constitutively positioned toward an address from elsewhere, from other embodied, worldly beings, to which it also furnishes the means and medium of response in a way that blurs the largely imagined boundary between agency and vulnerability. As Diprose puts it (69–70), with a brief nod across species lines:

It is because bodies are opened onto others, rather than being distinct, that we can act, be affected, have an identity, and remain open to change without conscious direction. The generosity of intercorporeal existence is not governed by choice but is where agency, perception, affectivity and, combining all of these, identity, are born. Hence, we cry at the movies, even though we sit apart from the action. And we turn into our partners, and even our dogs, just by dwelling with them.

NOTES

1. Cynthia Willett’s *Interspecies Ethics*, for example, discusses the “transspecies ideals of communitarianism and cosmopolitan peace,” noting that a “[c]ommunitarian ethics has largely dropped out of the picture for

- progressive, modern humans, who are, first and foremost, defined as individuals” (2014, 2).
2. Importantly, an ontological and ethical focus on creaturely relationality does neither mean that relationality always manifests itself in harmonious, mutually beneficial, and quasi-symbiotic modes of togetherness, nor does it preclude the possibility, or ignore the relevance, of *detachment* in human-animal relations. For the latter aspect, see the insightful volume on the “limits of relational thinking” by Matei Candea et al. (2015).
 3. This focus on corporeality is not intended as a critique of conceptualizations of animal subjectivity, nor is it supposed to question their relevance for current work in and beyond animal studies. Instead, what I stress here is the embodied nature of both human and animal subjectivity (however conceptualized) and their inextricability from the polymorphous diversity of embodied forms of being-in-the-world.
 4. See, for example, Henry Giroux’s (2006) analysis of the dynamics of race and class in the wake of Hurricane Katrina as an expression of a “biopolitics of disposability.”
 5. Ann Murphy (2011) explicitly includes Butler’s recent work on precariousness/precarity and vulnerability under this rubric.
 6. As Butler puts it succinctly: “The destitution of the body is not only an effect of colonialism, where colonialism is understood as something previous, something separate, a ‘condition’ both analytically and historically separate from the body at issue. In contrast, *the body is the animated, or rather deanimated life of that historical condition, that without which colonization itself cannot exist*” (2015b, 189 [original emphasis]).
 7. In my view, there is a discernible tendency in Butler’s work toward a stronger attentiveness to its own post-anthropocentric potentials and implications. As James Stanescu has rightly pointed out, interspersed in her work on vulnerability and precarious life are encouraging glimpses of post-anthropocentrism, and although her remarks on animal life may be “diffused, fragmentary, and lack any clear thesis,” in exploring them “we will find powerful tools for fighting for a non-anthropocentric world” (2012, 571).
 8. We should note that philosophical anthropology does not “merely” aim to develop a comprehensive account of the human by determining, and explicating the complex interrelations between, “all the essential features of man, from his [sic] upright gait to his morals,” as Gehlen puts it rather ambitiously (1988, 11). Instead, the underlying *a priori* belief that guides philosophical anthropology’s inquiries into the human place in the cosmos is that this place is not just any place but a “special place”—a *Sonderstellung*—that separates humans from all other forms of organic life. The notion of anthropological difference that substantiates this *Sonderstellung* is thus not so much the result but the premise of the

project of philosophical anthropology whose task consists of developing the precise character of this unique position. For Plessner, writing in the 1950s, the post-Darwinian and post-Freudian (and, indeed, post-Auschwitz) human being must be understood “in every respect as an open question” (1983c [1956], 134). However, this question was not about the *if* of the human *Sonderstellung* but about how this phenomenon could be explained in a comprehensive-enough manner and in contradistinction to traditional dualist conceptions—even if, as Plessner suggests, this *Sonderstellung* consisted precisely of the unfathomability of the human as *homo absconditus*, a being that, through “the power of his freedom,” ultimately defies “every form of theoretical determination” (134). For a biography of Plessner, who was classified as a “half-Jew” (*Halbjude*) according to the racial phantasms of National Socialism and barely escaped the Holocaust because his “mixed” status kept him from being deported to the extermination camps during his exile in the Netherlands, see Dietze 2006.

9. Although Heidegger uses the actual term only once in *Fundamental Concepts*, the sometimes explicit but for the most part implicit dialogue between Heidegger and philosophical anthropology is evident in the way in which the conceptual substance of world-openness suffuses his discussion of the world relation of human *Dasein*.
10. Not all too surprisingly, although Gehlen discusses in detail the specificity of human compared with animal corporeality, language turns out to play a privileged role in this process because it is through language that the condition of world-openness is not merely coped with but “productively mastered” so that “an infinite number of models for action and plans ..., a common [human] world, and a common future” become possible (1988, 42).
11. How the broader differences between animate and inanimate bodies should be addressed from the perspective of postanthropocentric ethics and ontology is surely a question worth probing into but is beyond the scope of this chapter.
12. For a material feminist perspective on embodiment, see Stacy Alaimo’s discussion of “trans-corporeality,” which considers human subjects as “inextricably part of the flux and flow of the world” (2010, 17).

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