



Intertwinings

INTERDISCIPLINARY ENCOUNTERS WITH MERLEAU-PONTY

Edited by
GAIL WEISS

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*Interdisciplinary Encounters
with Merleau-Ponty*

Edited by
Gail Weiss

State University of New York Press

Published by
State University of New York Press, Albany

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For information, contact State University of New York Press, Albany, NY
www.sunypress.edu

Production by Diane Ganeles
Marketing by Michael Campochiaro

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Intertwinings : interdisciplinary encounters with Merleau-Ponty / edited by
Gail Weiss.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-7914-7589-8 (hardcover : alk. paper)

1. Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, 1908–1961. I. Weiss, Gail, 1959–

B2430.M3764I58 2008

194—dc22

2007049730

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Acknowledgments

Edited volumes are always collaborative efforts and I am very grateful to *Intertwinings*' contributors for their assistance in putting this collection together. They have been patient with the inevitable delays and prompt when quick responses were called for; it has been a pleasure to work with each and every one of them. Each of the contributors has presented papers at one or more Merleau-Ponty Circle annual conferences and I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the crucial role the Circle has played in bringing together a diverse group of increasingly interdisciplinary scholars who share a serious interest in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, particularly its emphasis on the primacy of embodied experience. I would like to thank The George Washington University for allowing me to host the 2000 meeting of the Merleau-Ponty Circle on the theme, "Merleau-Ponty, Feminism, and Intersubjectivity" since the idea for this volume initially arose out of the topic for that conference. Jane Bunker, senior editor at SUNY Press, has been enthusiastic about this project from the outset; it has been delightful to have the privilege of working with her a second time on a wonderful anthology. The anonymous reviewers provided extremely helpful recommendations that have strengthened the volume as a whole, and I'm indebted to them for their crucial, behind-the-scenes contributions. I am deeply appreciative of the excellent work done by *Intertwinings*' copyeditor and the SUNY production staff as they shepherded the volume through the various stages of the pre-publication process. Valerie Hazel has done a terrific job with the index for this book just as she has for so many others, and her expertise, calm, cheerfulness, and dependability always make this part of the final production stage go incredibly smoothly. My family has supported me throughout my work on this volume. I cannot imagine accomplishing any of the things I have done without them.

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Introduction

GAIL WEISS

Although he was formally trained as a philosopher, Merleau-Ponty, who occupied the chair of child psychology at the Sorbonne at the time of his death in 1961, would himself be considered an interdisciplinary scholar by contemporary standards. Neurophysiology, gestalt and developmental psychology, political theory, literary and aesthetic theory, anthropology, and linguistics were familiar terrains that he actively drew upon in developing his phenomenological descriptions of perception, language, political life, art, literature, and history, all of which elaborated, in excitingly original and different ways, the primacy of the lived body in our everyday experience. For this reason, it should not surprise us that the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty has had a profound influence not only upon continental philosophers, but also upon literary theorists, cognitive scientists, architects, anthropologists, feminist theorists, psychoanalytic theorists, critical race theorists, and cultural theorists, some of whose work is included in this volume. For Merleau-Ponty, as for his teacher Edmund Husserl, the attempt to provide a comprehensive description of any given phenomenon leads one inevitably outside of the domain of philosophy proper to all the other disciplines that can help us to understand the “what” of its appearance. As Merleau-Ponty observes in the preface to his *Phenomenology of Perception*: “philosophy itself must not take itself for granted, in so far as it may have managed to say something true . . . (xiv)” and he argues that philosophy, the sciences, and all other disciplines, depend upon a prereflective embodied experience that provides the basis for all human inquiry. The essays that follow take up Merleau-Ponty’s Husserlian challenge to “return to that world which precedes knowledge, of which knowledge always *speaks*” (1962: ix) and they enter into dialogue with Merleau-Ponty through a variety of disciplinary avenues to explore the intertwinings that dynamically join us to the shared world of our concern.

In part I: “Ontological and Developmental Concerns: Difference and the Other,” Elizabeth Grosz, Lawrence Hass, and Talia Welsh advance our understanding of how Merleau-Ponty’s ontology, his view of alterity, and his conception of human development can meaningfully address the always shifting

boundaries between self and other, as well as between bodies and the world they inhabit. In “Merleau-Ponty, Bergson, and the Question of Ontology,” Grosz reveals fundamental affinities between Merleau-Ponty’s ontological conception of the flesh and Henri Bergson’s ontology of becoming. Regarding the feminist implications of their work, Grosz argues that:

Merleau-Ponty and Bergson, while being unable to account for or elaborate new concepts of woman or the feminine, may nevertheless prove indispensable in helping to formulate how we might know differently, how we might challenge and replace binarized models (of subject and object, self and object, consciousness and matter, nature and culture) with concepts of difference, what the objects of our representational and epistemological practices might be if they were undertaken with this concept of difference, the difference in being that is becoming, the difference in subjectivity that is biological openedness, this difference in the world that is life, were a guiding principle. (26)

By tracing the enduring influence of Bergson on Merleau-Ponty, and by emphasizing their relevance for theorizing difference as becoming, biological openedness, and life, Grosz brings both authors into a twenty-first-century conversation about difference that has only just begun.

Lawrence Hass engages Merleau-Ponty in a productive dialogue with another of his French interlocutors, namely, Emmanuel Levinas. In Hass’s essay, the notorious “problem of the other,” a problem that has haunted philosophy at least since the Ancient Greeks but which has been an especially salient concern for phenomenologists, is addressed through an exploration of the productive tensions in Levinas’s and Merleau-Ponty’s respective views of the ontological and ethical implications of intersubjective existence. Both Levinas and Merleau-Ponty, Hass argues, have creative and substantive contributions to make to our understanding of the complex relationships we sustain with others: “Levinas,” he claims:

teaches of the binding of these relationships, of the responsibility that flows toward others from our shared mortality, of the myriad ways our ipseity is called into question by the frank regard and appeal of others. He stresses the distance between self and other that cannot be consumed, and so illuminates the very nature of generosity and respect. And yet Merleau-Ponty reminds us of another binding: that the self and others are intervolved in living experience through the interanimation of flesh and behavior. These “intersubjective” relations aren’t the stuff of totality and they don’t eliminate the differences between us. They are, instead, the very possibility of contact and community, the opening approach to transcendent others who live and breathe, suffer and perish in their bodies and not outside of them. (40–41)

While both Hass and Grosz's essays reveal, albeit in different ways, the continued importance of Merleau-Ponty's work for contemporary scholars who are committed to an ontology of difference and becoming, Talia Welsh's essay, which concludes part I, turns directly to the question of gendered bodies, specifically Merleau-Ponty's discussion of female embodiment and development in his 1949–1952 Sorbonne lectures in psychology. Welsh seeks to address persistent feminist criticisms of Merleau-Ponty's allegedly masculinist account of human embodiment and to show how the complex intertwining of physiological factors with cultural norms and stereotypes must be acknowledged and addressed in accounting for the specificity of gendered corporeal experience. Drawing directly upon Merleau-Ponty's insights, Welsh writes: "To live is to breathe, to eat, to move. Through these behaviors we are drawn again and again into a life much larger than our own and required for our own personal flourishing. Pregnancy might be the ultimate reminder of this connection" (56).

In part II, Annemie Halsema takes up this theme of being connected through one's gendered body, to "something that is larger than oneself, being part of a community" through a close analysis of the profound resonances between Irigaray's and Merleau-Ponty's thought (72). Despite Irigaray's very critical response to Merleau-Ponty's work in her chapter, "The Intertwining—The Chiasm" in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, Halsema argues that Irigaray offers a "phenomenology in the feminine," a gendered phenomenology that builds upon, rather than opposes, Merleau-Ponty's own phenomenology of the body. Irigaray's phenomenology of sexual difference, Halsema suggests, is not so much a phenomenology of the female body as distinguished from the male body, but rather "a phenomenology that reflects on being two, on relating to the other, in short: a phenomenology that is intersubjective" (76). Halsema shows how Irigaray's understanding of the "negative" dimensions of sexual difference not only serves as the basis for an intersubjective ethics but can also be utilized productively to develop phenomenologies of other embodied differences, thereby helping to combat the charge of essentialism that has so often been leveled against Irigaray for privileging sexual difference.

Bruce Young introduces the term "subject-being" in his discussion of Merleau-Ponty and Irigaray, "to designate not the self but a matrix wherein self is related to what is other than it and indeed is constituted in relation to this relation" (85). There are not one but many ways to be related to otherness, Young continues, and "these constitute different forms of subject-being, each of which opens up different possible ways of being a self" (85). Young argues that fear of otherness constitutes the dominant form of subject-being in contemporary Western culture and he creatively demonstrates how the "ontology of noncoincidence" Merleau-Ponty develops in his later work offers a positive, alternative conception of otherness that provides the foundation for Irigaray's

own “language of the lips.” According to Young, the symbolic that Irigaray proposes “within which it becomes possible to ‘speak (as a) woman’ is not a semantics private to women, but a syntax that facilitates a dialogue of noncoincidence—that is, effective and articulate interaction between people who are different” (92). By illustrating the close connection between Merleau-Ponty’s and Irigaray’s projects, despite the latter’s privileging of sexual difference and the former’s lack of attention to its corporeal significance, both Halsema and Young provide us with new ways of thinking about the ethical implications of the differences that serve to distinguish self from other.

The two chapters that comprise part III of this volume explore the ways in which Marcel Proust and Gertrude Stein respectively enact, through their literature, the chiasmatic relationships Merleau-Ponty describes between the visible and the invisible, and the inside and the outside. Patricia Locke, in “Among the Hawthorns: Marcel Proust and Merleau-Ponty,” closely examines Proust’s leitmotif of the hawthorns, which first make their appearance at the outset of Volume One of *Remembrance of Things Past*, *Swann’s Way*, “to show how nature gives itself to Marcel as artful, as a living church, as a symbol of life in death, and as an impetus to sexual awakening” (107). Locke eloquently traces the ways in which the visibility of the hawthorns evokes, for the young narrator, the intangible invisibles that are central to his own existence. Chief among these latter is the very movement of temporality itself, the dynamic ways in which the rhythms of the past are taken up in the present and call forth the future; indeed, in homage to Proust, Merleau-Ponty declares: “the *true* hawthorns are the hawthorns of the past” (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 243, quoted in Locke: 107). For Locke, both Proust and Merleau-Ponty reveal that “the truth in art is necessarily screened and partial. It is a wounding that comes from life experiences, but it restores life in an aesthetic transfiguration” (106).

Justine Dymond offers us another means of literary access to the “wounding that comes from life experiences,” namely via a journey through several of Gertrude Stein’s writings. In the process, she explores both the promise as well as the limits of Stein’s own linguistic experiments. Drawing upon Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of subjective experience as always informed by the intersubjective horizons out of which it arises, Dymond reveals how Stein disrupts these familiar horizons in her work. More specifically, by reading the “inside” through the “outside,” detaching the signifier from the signified, and destabilizing our customary referential assumptions in the process, Stein makes us more aware of the presuppositions that we are continuously making about language, meaning, and the social world in our everyday lives. Dymond uncovers a tension in Stein’s work, however, between her attempt to unmoor language and meaning from their sedimented histories so as to produce new interpretative possibilities that are nonheteronor-

mative, and Stein's repeated invocation of racial stereotypes that produce (over)determined and fixed meanings that reinforce the degradation of the racialized other. As Toni Morrison suggests in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, foregrounding and deconstructing an author's uncritical use of racist stereotypes is essential to understanding the continuing pervasiveness and power of such imagery in the western literary tradition. Through Dymond's own recontextualization of Stein's work, we can see how, "Stein's narrators and her formal experimentation cannot fully undo the racially embedded meanings of modernity's racializing legacy" (125). This, in turn, exposes the perils of reifying "the constitutive power of language to construct subjectivity as an inside created by an *othered* outside" (125).

The essays that comprise part IV, "Ethical Challenges: Recognition, Reciprocity, Violence, and Care," are directly concerned with an implicit question raised by Dymond's critical analysis, namely, the extent of our individual and collective responsibility for the types of relationships we sustain with others. Kelly Oliver's chapter, "Beyond Recognition: Merleau-Ponty and an Ethics of Vision," counterposes Merleau-Ponty's view of the chiasmatic relationship between vision and visibility to several of his intellectual interlocutors' view of the gaze and its implications for both subjectivity and intersubjectivity, including Sartre, Hegel, Descartes, Freud, Lacan, Levinas, and Irigaray. Oliver also allows several other voices to enter the conversation, theorists and practitioners who share Merleau-Ponty's "insistence on embodied subjectivity" (175) including J. J. Gibson with his ecological optics, Emile Durkheim and his understanding of social energy, and Dori Laub who introduces the notion of the "inner witness" that developed out of her therapeutic work with other Holocaust survivors. Weaving central insights from these various theorists together, Oliver shows how they help to explain and affirm our infinite "response-ability" not only to other human beings but also to other animals and our environment. Ultimately, Oliver argues for an "ethics of vision" that moves "beyond recognition," beyond the conflictual understandings of the relations between self and other that have marked the phenomenological, existential, and psychoanalytic traditions, thereby opening Merleau-Ponty's own work up to "its own most promising engagements with otherness, and in the spirit of his double-vision, we see that subjectivity itself is necessarily both political and ethical" (149).

Merleau-Ponty, Sally Fischer argues, "has been able to deconstruct the notion of the human being as a transhistorical metaphysical constant, and has opened up an understanding of the body-subject that leaves room for different bodies, or different bodily styles of existence, variously inscribed" (153). She views Merleau-Ponty's conception of the body-subject to be particularly useful for feminist theorists' attempts to move beyond oppressive sex and gender binaries that presume that there are only two possible forms that bodies

may take and two possible styles that they can and should embody. Despite the fact that Merleau-Ponty never published a formal ethics, Fischer claims that “his phenomenology of embodied intersubjectivity . . . can serve as a fruitful ground from which to build an ethics of interpersonal relations” (153). Her chapter focuses on how Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of the embodied self as decentered from herself and from others generates, through dialogue, an “ethical pact with the other.” This pact, Fischer concludes, “requires that we keep the dialogical circle open to the disruptions of our own perspective by the other, and at the same time, aim to facilitate a non-totalizing dialogical communion in which we can dwell in our sensuous everyday existence” (164).

Greg Johnson shares both Oliver’s and Fischer’s emphases upon the ethical importance of keeping dialogue open through an acknowledgment of the otherness of the other, and he argues that Merleau-Ponty’s concept of reversibility offers an optimal framework for accomplishing this goal. Through a critical examination of the well-known debates between Seyla Benhabib and Iris Marion Young concerning reversibility and reciprocity, Johnson highlights the importance of avoiding the Scylla of solipsism on the one hand (where I am forever trapped within my own perspective), and the Charybdis of a false universality on the other hand (where I presuppose the transparency of others’ perspectives and, ultimately, their reducibility to the understanding that I have of them). Ultimately, Johnson argues that an ethic of reciprocity, in a Merleau-Pontian sense, is founded upon a primary relationship of reversibility between myself and the other, and that the latter, as Merleau-Ponty depicts it, and, as feminist philosophers have shown us, “does not assume a completely mutual understanding but recognizes the other in a way that can understand their sufferings so that in our response we can choose to recognize this otherness and not eradicate it” (184–185).

The focus of chapter 11 by Janice McLane is on the ways in which the reciprocity Johnson describes is rendered impossible for women through their active silencing in patriarchy. This produces what McLane calls an “existential stutter,” a woman’s lived experience of “distance from herself, from other persons, and the world” (194, 198). She distinguishes this oppressive patriarchal silencing of women from the “fecund” silence Merleau-Ponty discusses in *The Visible and the Invisible*, “the silence from which language arises” (200). This latter silence, she argues, requires that we “enter more fully into reversibility, the doubled nature of a self connected to others” (200). Women can achieve this goal, McLane suggests, by “entering the place we already live,” that is, by mining the expressive possibilities latent in gendered experience, thereby reclaiming women’s voices.

Maurice Hamington shows us how the intertwinings of our bodies with the world and with other bodies, as described by Merleau-Ponty throughout

his work, is an indispensable resource for contemporary feminist ethics of care. More specifically, Hamington argues that Merleau-Ponty's corporeal-centered epistemology itself reveals "the embodied basis of care" (204). By examining closely four key features of this epistemology that Merleau-Ponty discusses in depth, namely, perception, foreground-background focus phenomena, habit, and the flesh, Hamington shows how "Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of the body provides an epistemological foundation for an embodied notion of care" (216). In so doing, Hamington's work complements and adds to the critical insights of Oliver, Fischer, Johnson, and McLane, persuasively demonstrating the important contributions both Merleau-Ponty's earlier as well as his later work can collectively make to contemporary ethical theorizing and praxis.

Part V, "Sedimented Meanings: Conservation and Transformation" focuses on the diverse social forces that help to constitute the meaning of the habits we have formed, our individual and cultural identities, and the buildings whose bodies shelter our own. My chapter, "Can an Old Dog Learn New Tricks? Habitual Horizons in James, Bourdieu, and Merleau-Ponty," explores these authors' oftentimes ambivalent accounts of habit as both necessary to preserve social stability (i.e., maintaining the status quo) and as an equally crucial ingredient in achieving genuine individual and social change. Opening with a passage from Proust in which he identifies habit as a "skilful but slow-moving arranger," I argue that Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on the intersubjective, embodied dimensions of habit offers "a way of accounting for the creative aspects of habit that cannot be done justice to by either James or Bourdieu" (233). And yet, both James and Bourdieu's emphases on habit as a class-based phenomenon enrich Merleau-Ponty's view of the habit-body to give us a more comprehensive picture of how habits function to consolidate as well as potentially transform the meaning of individual, cultural, and social existence.

Rashmika Pandya considers how the meaning of our experience is continually transformed as we become habituated to our world. Following Merleau-Ponty, she describes how stylistic differences among individuals with varying cultural experiences are expressed as unique ways of "singing" the world. Pandya critically analyzes Merleau-Ponty's claim that "one never does belong to two worlds at once" (1962: 187) from an autobiographically informed perspective and argues that it is through the unity of narrative that we construct our identities, identities that perpetually negotiate and integrate cultural differences (without erasing them) into a coherent whole. Influenced by anthropologist Arjun Appadurai's concept of "imaginary identities" that "suggest a space created between cultures and traditions," she argues that "this space is not only apparent in those of us who have left our ancestral homes to create new homes elsewhere but is increasingly the state of all of us in a global world" (243). Pandya offers a close reading of Merleau-Ponty's gestural theory of speech in

order to show how the “expressive function of language always transcends the purely structural aspects of a language” (258). The “‘oblique passage’ from one language to another,” she suggests, “opens the possibility that we may be able to incorporate various worlds in our notion of self” (259).

Rachel McCann’s “Entwining the Body and the World: Architectural Design and Experience in the Light of ‘Eye and Mind’” is the concluding chapter of the volume and it eloquently reveals the ways in which architects inhabit the (imaginary) spaces they design, integrating past, present, and future, self and other, vision and movement, body and world. McCann cites Merleau-Ponty’s reference to painting in “Eye and Mind” as a “carnal echo, a formulation that locates generative power within the active and intersubjective relationship between human beings and the surrounding world” (266) and shows us how architecture itself functions as a carnal echo of our embodied experience in the world, an echo that is differentially repeated across subjects and across time and that reverberates in turn in the durative, dynamic quality of buildings themselves. By creatively extending Merleau-Ponty’s insights regarding painters and painting, vision and visibility to architecture, McCann is also able to counter the criticisms of theorists such as Irigaray who take Merleau-Ponty to task for allegedly privileging vision over the other senses. This is because architecture provides a kinaesthetic experience of the building’s own depth, its multidimensionality that we access directly not only through vision but through the very movement of our bodies in space, integrating all of our senses and entwining our bodies with the space we inhabit. As McCann illustrates, the carnal echo we experience as we move through the space of the building allows us to interrogate simultaneously “the larger world and the recesses of the self” (265).

As I hope to have demonstrated throughout this introduction, despite the diversity of approaches and themes taken up by the authors in this collection, there are also important resonances that unite the various chapters together. Most notable among them, I would argue, is the importance of Merleau-Ponty’s intersubjective ontology as a foundation for contemporary theorizing about bodies, their complex interrelationships with other bodies, and with the world(s) that we jointly (yet differentially) inhabit. The chapters in this volume reveal the enduring influence of Merleau-Ponty’s thought not only upon philosophy but also upon feminist theory, literary theory, psychoanalytic theory, cultural studies, and architectural theory and practice. Each essay, in the spirit of Merleau-Ponty’s own work, opens up new problems that cannot be anticipated or resolved in advance, but which are dynamically enacted in and through the acts of writing and reading. These interdisciplinary encounters will hopefully find their own “carnal echo” in the reader’s experience, revealing the depth and complexity of the “wild being” that, for Merleau-Ponty, unites us to one another in the flesh of the world.

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PART I

Ontological and
Developmental Concerns:
Difference and the Other

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CHAPTER 1

Merleau-Ponty, Bergson, and the Question of Ontology

ELIZABETH GROSZ

Far from being concerned with solutions, truth and falsehood primarily affect problems. A solution always has the truth it deserves according to the problem to which it is a response, and the problem always has the solution it deserves in proportion to *its own* truth or falsity . . . (Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, Trans. Paul Patton, London: Columbia University Press, 1994: 158–159)

The relation of the philosopher to being is not the frontal relation of the spectator; it is a kind of complicity, an oblique and clandestine relation.

—Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 15

Ontologies of Becoming

Instead of the more pressing feminist questions directed to political and ethical concerns, to guaranteeing a specific mode and direction of change in the world, I want to step back to take up a position of greater distance and abstraction, a position where the solution has no place, but where the question must be raised as such: to ontology and thus, ultimately, to metaphysics, that much reviled and undecidable arena where feminism is required to turn, in spite of itself, in reformulating questions of subjectivity, intersubjectivity, body and matter that are so central to the long-term development of its political and intellectual projects.¹ To turn away from feminism, at least to turn away from it directly, only in order to be able to see it more indirectly and thus less instrumentally, we must return, as Merleau-Ponty did, to the question of ‘wild being,’ to the question of the substance of the world, to the relations between mind and matter and the centrality of perception to conceptualizing their interface, a concern that occupied all of his work, and became the enigmatic focus of his final writings.

These questions of mind, matter, things—the provocation of the world, the entwinement of the thing with the subject and the subject with the thing, that is, ontological differences—are contemporary reformulations of metaphysics, the ways it has transformed the intractable metaphysical problems of classical philosophy into the most fundamental questions of experience, its frame and horizon, in the present. I want to celebrate the investment of knowledges in metaphysical and ontological commitments, and to discuss without defensiveness the metaphysics of Merleau-Ponty, its often neglected relations to a philosophy of process and action developed early in the twentieth century and thus, indirectly, the necessity of a return to the ontological as a question by and for feminist theory.

In this chapter, I would like to throw Merleau-Ponty's writings into another context than that in which they are commonly placed: instead of within his own self-consciously acknowledged lineage of phenomenological thinkers, from Hegel through Husserl to Heidegger and Sartre, I will place his work in a less understood and examined context, still well-documented in his own writings, of the philosophy of nature, of biology, and of movement developed since the mid-nineteenth century, and particularly since the provocations of Darwin, whose work on the active dynamism of the natural world, and thus on the active thing and the active subject it generates, not only transformed the biological sciences, which Merleau-Ponty, more than most, addresses but also changed the very task and image of philosophy itself. Philosophy after Darwin could no longer justifiably devote itself to the classical contemplation of an eternal and unchanging existence, but had to convert itself into something like an attunement to the particular and its history. It is required henceforth, as Merleau-Ponty's work testifies, to take seriously the immersion of consciousness in life, and the immersion of life in time and matter that Darwinism entails but has left underdeveloped and has thus left as a question, a gift, to philosophy that follows. In particular, I would like to counterpose Merleau-Ponty's work, not with Darwin himself, though that would be an interesting project, but with the most Darwinian of philosophers (Daniel Dennett notwithstanding!), Merleau-Ponty's own predecessor (literally, in the Chair of Philosophy at the College de France), Henri Bergson. Instead of comparing and contrasting them, I want to look only at the ways in which Merleau-Ponty addresses Bergson's work, at Merleau-Ponty's complex and changing relations with Bergsonism and with Bergson's concern with an ontology of becoming.

In establishing his own phenomenology of perception, one in which perception is understood as intermediary between mind and matter, Merleau-Ponty retains a peculiar ambivalence to Bergson's writings, while remaining tantalizingly close to his position. He insists, in ways that are not entirely fair or accurate, that Bergson be positioned within the vitalist tradition that he

counterposes with mechanism, though Bergson himself remains highly critical of vitalism. Bergson too eschewed any superadded integrity, unity, or telos to organic existence and instead sought out the latent forces, impulses that lie behind not only life in its specificity but in the material world from which life emerges and against and within which it develops. One suspects that in the too rapid dismissal of Bergson's key concepts—intuition, duration, intellection, and in the accusations of mysticism and a lack of interest in history—there is an anxiety of influence, which has often been noted.²

In this chapter, I intend to deal with two well-known papers Merleau-Ponty devotes to Bergson's work and its impact on the philosophy that followed: his inaugural lecture at the College de France, presented in 1953, and published as a long section called "Bergson" in part 2 of *In Praise of Philosophy*; and "Bergson in the Making," a lecture presented in May 1959 for the Centenary of Bergson's birth, translated in *Signs*. There is scarcely a text in which Bergson's name is not mentioned in passing: the trace of Bergsonism is faint, though ineradicable and it returns to haunt Merleau-Ponty's writings until the end. The texts Merleau-Ponty devotes directly to Bergson explicitly honor him; yet there is a reluctant subtext, in which he attempts to establish as much distance as possible, to characterize Bergson with little generosity in elaborating his position.³ In his earliest paper on Bergson, Merleau-Ponty explicitly welcomes Bergson's openness to the questions of life and the living, his refusal to tie the study of life to the protocols of either the natural sciences, academic philosophy or institutionalized religion:

If we have recalled these words of Bergson, not all of which are in his books, it is because they make us feel that there is a tension in the relation of the philosopher with other persons or with life, and that this uneasiness is essential to philosophy. We have forgotten this. (*In Praise of Philosophy*: 33)

Merleau-Ponty seeks to return to the freshness of things in the making (including philosophy itself), rather than things made, seeing in Bergson an opponent of the trends that followed, describing as Bergsonian a continuous grasping for the new and the unthought, the disquieting and the unsettling in philosophical and scientific systems. The Bergson Merleau-Ponty admires cannot be identified with either his earlier or later periods, but with a spirit and intellect that remains consistently committed in all his works to the refusal to accept what is given without submitting it to the exigencies of an analysis of its role in experience, in lived reality, with submitting it to intensity:

The truth is that there are two Bergsonisms. There is that audacious one, when Bergson's philosophy fought and . . . fought well. And there is that

other one after the victory, persuaded in advance about what Bergson took a long time to find, and already provided with concepts while Bergson himself created his own. When Bergsonian insights are identified with the vague cause of spiritualism or some other entity, they lose their bite; they are generalized and minimized. What is left is only a retrospective or external Bergsonism. . . . Established Bergsonism distorts Bergson. Bergson disturbed; it reassures. Bergson was a conquest; Bergsonism defends and justifies Bergson. Bergson was in contact with things; Bergsonism is a collection of accepted opinions . . . (Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*: 182–183)

In spite of his reluctant openness to Bergson himself, what marks these early papers is his refusal of Bergsonism in the derivative sense. Especially after World War I, Bergsonism became more and more attenuated from its roots in both the history of philosophy and in the natural sciences, became more orthodox and dogmatic, as is the tendency with all discursive positions that gain a certain level of popularity and/or notoriety (we have witnessed it ourselves more directly with the rise and fall of various figures—Sartre, Althusser, Lacan, Derrida, and so on). Merleau-Ponty quite justifiably remains wary of what he calls Bergsonism while embracing elements of Bergson's own writings. He aspires to a Bergsonism in the first sense, while attempting to distance himself from it in the second sense.

Resonances

In spite of his reluctance to be too closely identified with Bergsonism, nevertheless, in a less doctrinaire sense of the word, Merleau-Ponty can be understood as Bergsonian.⁴ There are a number of apparent homologies or close resemblances between their respective positions, which I will simply indicate:

1. Like Bergson, Merleau-Ponty is committed to the primacy of perception (though unlike Bergson, for whom it is fundamentally connected to the practically oriented intellect and thus to action, for Merleau-Ponty perception is our living immersion in matter, a synthetic, additive rather than an analytic, subtractive ability. Perception synthesizes our relations with a world, projecting onto the world its status as milieu or horizon, rather than reduces and simplifies, silhouettes, a world). Perception remains, for both, the active energy of labor that brings together the living and the human with the resources of the nonliving;

2. Bergson's understanding of the convergence of matter with memory in action and intuition, like Merleau-Ponty's understanding the relations of subject and object as a shared self-enfolding flesh, moves toward a fundamental

ontology of difference, in which there are not two binarized or opposed identities, mind and matter, subject and object, consciousness and world, but a relation of emergence (and thus debt) from the one to the other, a relation in which one (mind, subject, consciousness) emerges and establishes a relation of differentiation from the other (body, object, and world). This relation is not a reciprocity of two terms, the mutual embrace of equivalents, but a relation of debt and belonging that one term owes but cannot acknowledge to the other;

3. Nature is not understood as passive inertia, Cartesian substance, fixed immanence, on which mind imposes its categories, its designs and plans, but is conceived as a dynamic and productive set of forces in which the constraints of determinism in the nonliving world, and the more complex constraints of biological regulation in the living world do not clash or complement each other but differentiate out of one another, and thus merge by degrees from certain points of view and levels of explanation.⁵ Nature is that which is both within and without us, a non-normative order that suffuses but never fixes us, which always places us within its constraints and requirements;

4. The subject is neither a free consciousness, existing independent of perception and action (as Sartre suggests), nor a being immersed in mere reaction to the world but fully corporeal, a being whose corporeality extends it indefinitely out into the world, through its projects, its possible and real actions. The subject's freedom is not simply given or reflective but acted. These are not just subjects in the world, they are subjects for whom perception, proprioception, and comportment, the configuration of the senses that constitute the human, provide limits and directions within which there is immense flexibility for production and innovation, for newness. Where Merleau-Ponty posits a certain indetermination in the subject's perceptual rendering of the world, Bergson positions this indetermination in the interval or gap between stimulus and reaction, within the nervous system and the ramifying structures of neuronal organization. This indetermination is for both the site of a freedom to elaborate and invent;

5. The subject is not a subject because of a particular consciousness but rather because of a particular biology and bodily constitution. Where for Bergson it is primarily creative evolution, for Merleau-Ponty it is phylogenetic development that brings this subject into being: but for both, the subject is not a divergence from biological or bodily processes but the consequence of a particular and concrete bodily configuration. Hence neither Bergsonism nor phenomenology in Merleau-Ponty's terms retains a trace of hostility toward biological, physiological, or natural science, which marks much of metaphysics and most of phenomenology. Each remains avidly interested in the empirical formulations offered by scientific observation and speculation. Biological and physiological discourses provided data to be used rather than refuted, tools for speculation and conjecture, which are elaborated in and as experience, lived reality;

6. For both, the body-subject is the site of an inherent doubling: for Bergson the body is simultaneously the locus of a geometrical, spatial, material calculation, and the site of consciousness with its own complexity and corporeal parameters: these are not two bodies or two locations but one that is both fully spatial, occupying all of space, and another that is always and only localized and concerned with the practice of its desires and needs, a vast body and a local, small body, depending on where it is focused and whether it functions through intuition or perception:

For if our body is the matter to which our consciousness applies itself it is coextensive with our conscious, it comprises all we perceive, it reaches to the stars. But this vast body is changing continually, sometimes radically, at the slightest shift of one part of itself which is at its centre and occupies a small fraction of space. This inner and central body, relatively invariable, is ever present. It is not merely present, it is operative: it is through this body and through it alone, that we can move parts of the larger body. And, since action is what matters, since it is an understood thing that we are present where we act, the habit has grown of limiting consciousness to the small body and ignoring the vast one . . . the surface of all our actual movement, our huge inorganic body is the seat of our potential or theoretically possible actions. (Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*: 258)

The vast and small body is given its scope and constraints through degrees of contraction and dilation, relations of proximity and possible effect: the smaller body is the center of directed action, the larger body the locus of theoretical, possible or virtual action.⁶ For Merleau-Ponty too, the body is always doubled, reduplicated either in the form of a corporeal schema, which re-presents its organic capacities in a psychical and signifying mapping of the body, producing a ghostly and relatively autonomous spectral representation in his earlier writings,⁷ or of an enfolding, intertwining of living and nonliving bodies, the seer doubled up in the seen in his later writings:

We say there that our body is a being of two leaves, from one side a thing among other things and otherwise what sees and touches them; we say, because it is evident, that it unites these two properties within itself and its double-belongingness to the order of the 'object' and the order of the 'subject' reveals to us quite unexpected relations between the two orders. It cannot be an incomprehensible accident that the body has this double reference. (Merleau-Ponty, "The Intertwining—The Chiasm." *The Visible and the Invisible*: 136)

This duplicity of the body—its simultaneous orientation to the world and its own inner states, to space and to duration—is necessary to account for

its complex emergence from the world and its capacity to live in and remake the world; and

7. Both Bergson and Merleau-Ponty situate the living being in its corporeal locatedness as both a world in itself, and a small participant in a larger world, a being who lives in a world but relocates and resignifies a transcribed world of relevance within itself. For Bergson, it is our participation in our own individual duration, in the specific movements as we live them in their unity and simplicity that necessarily place us within the more cosmological universal duration. Each duration forms a continuity, a single, indivisible movement; and yet, there are many simultaneous durations, which implies that all durations participate in a generalized or cosmological duration, which allows them to be described as simultaneous. For Merleau-Ponty too, our smallness, our concrete locatedness in our bodies directly yields for us the larger world, a greater context, out of which the living are produced. The 'fundamental narcissism of all vision' as he describes it ("The Intertwining," 139) entails that we find in ourselves the very substance of the world; from within our selves we have presented to us the world we live in, as our condition of living in it.⁸

Complexity

Most significantly, what Merleau-Ponty and Bergson share is an ontology of becoming, an ontology in which consciousness and life, respectively, do not find themselves in a world but make themselves subjects, and make the world into things, objects, entities through their activity, their engagement, their labor. Active becoming is emergent. It elaborates itself from and on a field of active forces as their contingent frame. Instead of a being dictated by the world, or at the mercy of other subjects (as Sartre hypothesized), both speculate that the living and the human, perceptual beings, are simultaneously dynamic sites of unpredictable productivity; and systems of coherence, both organic and conceptual unities drawn from fields of disparity, which integrate and locate what is fundamentally a mode of difference, the being's difference from itself, its inherent orientation to the future, to what it is becoming, to what does not yet exist.

Merleau-Ponty recognizes in Bergson's heritage this affinity of life with matter, the ways in which matter induces in life, in consciousness, a kind of elevation of itself as well as a sharing, a coexisting temporality between the living and the nonliving:

We are not this pebble, but when we look at it, it awakens resonances in our perceptive apparatus; our perception appears to come from it. That is to say our perception of the pebble is a kind of promotion to (conscious) existence