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# MERLEAU-PONTY AND THE POSSIBILITIES OF PHILOSOPHY

*Transforming the Tradition*

*Edited by*

BERNARD FLYNN, WAYNE J. FROMAN,  
*and* ROBERT VALLIER

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POSSIBILITIES OF PHILOSOPHY



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*David Pettigrew and Francois Raffoul, editors*

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Bernard Flynn,  
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Robert Vallier

**SUNY**  
PRESS

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## ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations appear in the text:

- BT     *Being and Time* by Martin Heidegger, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962)
- Hua     *Husserliana: Edmund Husserl—Gesammelte Werke* (Heidelberg: Springer Verlag)
- HT     *Humanism and Terror*, trans. J. O'Neill (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969)
- Praise     *In Praise of Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. J. O'Neill by Maurice Merleau-Ponty (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1988)
- Nature     *Nature: Course Notes from the Collège de France* by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, compiled by D. Seglard, trans. R. Vallier (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2003)
- PhP     *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. C. Smith, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (London: Routledge, 2006)
- Pri     *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays*, trans. W. Cobb (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1964)
- SB     *The Structure of Behavior*, trans. A. Fisher (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Duquesne University Press, 1983)
- Themes     *Themes from the Lectures at the Collège de France 1952–1960*, trans. J. O'Neill (Evanston Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1970)
- VI     *The Visible and the Invisible (Followed by Working Notes)*, trans. A. Lingus (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1969)

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## INTRODUCTION

BERNARD FLYNN AND WAYNE J. FROMAN

In lectures in the late 1950s and up until his death in 1961, Merleau-Ponty, who at that time held the Chair in Philosophy at the Collège de France, addressed the topics of Nature and philosophy today. The latter topic would account for his interest in Nature and the direction it would take. The title of one of his courses in 1959–1960 was “Nature and Logos: the Human Body,” and the titles of two of the courses interrupted by his death were “Philosophy and Non-Philosophy Since Hegel” and “Cartesian Ontology and Today’s Ontology.” Merleau-Ponty had discerned a possibility for philosophy in our time. When the work of major proportions with which he was engaged when he died, later published as *The Visible and the Invisible*, was left incomplete, it appeared that the possibility he had glimpsed was simply gone. But the stakes proved too important and the work of delineating features of this possibility and assessing its strength was taken up eventually, as the work in this volume demonstrates.

Although in the course of his work, Merleau-Ponty was a proponent of a certain “primacy of perception,” to see in this a reductionist bias is a mistake because it is in perception, which Merleau-Ponty never did stop questioning with regard to what it may be, that Merleau-Ponty discovered certain formidable resources that challenged the long-standing model of perception and so many elements of the philosophical tradition that took this as a secure point of departure. To see in Merleau-Ponty’s sense of “the primacy of perception” grounds for neglecting the way in which issues belonging to the history of thought were at stake in his work is tantamount to thinking that nature, on the one

hand, and the human world, on the other, are regarded by Merleau-Ponty as mutually exclusive, which is likewise a mistake. Essays in this volume address the import of Merleau-Ponty's thought vis-à-vis Husserl and Heidegger, his phenomenological predecessors, Bergson, a twentieth-century predecessor at the Collège de France, Schelling, a pivotal figure in the history of the previous two centuries, Hume, a precursor figure in the analytic philosophical context, Descartes and the rationalists, major contributions in the opening Greek philosophical period, including the pre-Socratics and Plato, as well as vis-à-vis the more recent philosophical work of Emmanuel Levinas and Jean-Luc Marion, and signal features of major Asian traditions. In the course of this volume, contributors address and assess the import of what Merleau-Ponty says in regard to epistemological issues, ethical issues, ontological issues, the philosophy of logic and language, the philosophy of art, and the philosophy of nature. Specific topics include time, subjectivity, the intersubjective, the bodily, skepticism, the status of nothingness, the relation between seeing and hearing, the relation between spontaneity and receptivity, and the significance of an element that Merleau-Ponty found had no name in any philosophy and that he discussed as *la chair*, the flesh.

The volume opens with two essays from Paul Ricoeur. The first, and the earliest essay in the volume, dates from the time of Merleau-Ponty's death in 1961 at the age of fifty-three. The essay still registers the shock and sense of loss that was felt at the time. Ricoeur discusses how Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological description of perception in *Phenomenology of Perception* became "the touchstone of the veritable human condition" and how the philosophical implications drawn by Merleau-Ponty contain "an entire conception of action, and even an entire politics." The politics, at first, would be understood in terms of how "to continue the young Marx, against the old Marx," but eventually, Ricoeur observes, the disagreement in depth with Marxism altogether weighed more heavily, and Merleau-Ponty concluded that "once the communist nostalgia was conjured away, then everything becomes interesting and new again." The estrangement between Merleau-Ponty and Jean-Paul Sartre dates from that point. Ricoeur expresses doubt that Sartre's development, in *The Critique of Dialectical Reason*, of a conception of history in terms of totalization, even if "detotalizing," could have found favor where Merleau-Ponty was concerned.

Features of *Phenomenology of Perception* that Ricoeur emphasizes as particularly admirable include Merleau-Ponty's constant attention to the relation between the human sciences and philosophy, how Merleau-Ponty brought to bear "the magisterial teaching of the founder of phe-

nomenology, Edmund Husserl, whose published and unpublished work he knew perfectly,” in such a way as “[to continue] the movement on his own account, without regard for orthodoxy,” and the way in which Merleau-Ponty installed the theme of one’s own body in his own reading of the world and of the human being in the world. Still, when Merleau-Ponty died, the basis for this important work had long been put into question in his thinking. With this, themes concerning nature that had been at the forefront of Merleau-Ponty’s first book, *The Structure of Behavior*, would reassert themselves, the question concerning language would become more insistent, and the bearing of Heidegger’s philosophy of Being and of speaking would become more significant. At the time of his death, the second landing in Merleau-Ponty’s work had not yet emerged from the underlying dynamic of his thought.

Paul Ricoeur’s second essay, “Merleau-Ponty: Beyond Husserl and Heidegger,” was written eighteen years after Merleau-Ponty’s death. Here, Ricoeur finds in the chapter of *Phenomenology of Perception* devoted to temporality, the central chapter in the third and final part of that work, a condensed reading of a give and take between Husserl and Heidegger on this issue that was in fact crucial where the interaction between the two of them was concerned. The opening chapter that precedes this is an analysis of the *Cogito*. The import of this topic would itself seem to affirm a Husserlian allegiance. But the analysis of the inseparable character of the reflexive operation and an “active transcendence” suggests both Husserlian intentionality and Heideggerian being-in-the-world. The appeal here to “sedimentation” and the sense of a “temporal thickness” of the *Cogito* do seem to reinforce a Husserlian allegiance. Yet, Ricoeur points up how what Merleau-Ponty says here concerning the priority of a “tacit *Cogito*” moves in the direction of Heidegger’s sense of being-in-the-world. “Tacit *Cogito* and original project of the world are one single and same thing. What is the significance of the oscillation here between Husserl and Heidegger?”

Ricoeur turns to the chapter on temporality for an answer. The language of consciousness and intentionality is retained throughout the analysis. But, in the course of the analysis, a subtle reorientation takes place with the introduction of the question of the passage of time in its totality, a question that leads in the direction of Heidegger’s analysis of “temporalization.” And then, when Merleau-Ponty says, “[B]ut the present (in the broad sense, with its originary horizons of past and future) still has a privilege because it is the zone where being and consciousness coincide,” Ricoeur observes that “one thinks that one hears Husserl again.” The question here is whether indeed Heidegger’s hermeneutics of care succeeded in supplanting a priority of the present

with a priority of the future, and to reinforce that question, Ricoeur brings forward Heidegger's own analysis, toward the end of the portion of *Being and Time* that was completed and published, of the point where "resolute anticipation" and the revival of received legacies intersect at the moment of repetition. What Merleau-Ponty has discerned, finds Ricoeur, is a "profound relationship between two successive philosophical projects, at a certain period of indecision in each of them." Here, by way of "operative intentionality" and the dynamic of "passive synthesis," Husserl's subjectivism is set on the road to surpassing itself via the phenomenology of time, and Heidegger's analytic of *Dasein*, in *Being and Time*, remains attached to a sense of subjectivity and in so doing demonstrates how that analytic belongs to the *phenomenological* age of ontology. In what Ricoeur calls the "most audacious rapprochement" that Merleau-Ponty attempts, he appeals to Kant's sense of "self-affectivity" in making the point that "the explosion or the dehiscence of the present toward a future is the archetype of the *relation of self to self* and indicates an interiority or an ipseity." Ricoeur concludes that Merleau-Ponty, in revealing a convergence in depth of Husserl and Heidegger goes beyond both, "[b]ecause, to reveal this convergence is to *institute it*."

In "The Turn of Experience: Merleau-Ponty and Bergson," Renaud Barbaras explores the relationship between the thought of Merleau-Ponty and the philosophy of Bergson. In the process of doing this he reveals an important dimension of Merleau-Ponty's thought, showing that its relationship to Bergson is both complicated and subject to reversal. At the time of the writing of the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty makes a sustained critique of Bergson from the perspective of phenomenology. While sympathetic to Bergson's critique of positivism, Merleau-Ponty argues that his critique of spatiality in the name of temporality fails to go to the roots of positivism because it reproduces an opposition between an externality grounded in spatiality and a pure internality that he characterizes as *duration*. In Merleau-Ponty's opinion, Bergson had failed to transcend a realist prejudice because he had not understood "consciousness as intentionality." He conceived of consciousness not as a subject of acts that have the world as their intentional correlate but as a "liquid in which instants and positions melt together." In Bergson's thought, realism and spiritualism do not only coexist but they live off one another.

In Merleau-Ponty's later thought, he characterized phenomenology, at least in its classical form, as a variant of the philosophy of consciousness. Subsequently, he made a strong critique of the philosophy of consciousness and thus one should not be surprised that he reevaluated his



relationship to Bergson. In brief, the problem with any philosophy of consciousness is that it will think "being" in the form of an object, thereby viewing positivity as presence. It is as though Merleau-Ponty saw in the philosophy of Sartre the *denouement* of the concept of consciousness conceived of as intentionality, and this critique of Sartre moved him in the direction of Bergson's critique of negativity. Barbaras cites Bergson to the effect that metaphysics arrives at Being only by starting from, by passing through, Nothingness. Being is defined as that which resists Nothingness. Arriving at a similar position, Merleau-Ponty refers to this way of thinking as a "philosophy of something." Nonetheless, in *The Visible and the Invisible* he makes a critique of a philosophy that would escape negativism by a fusion with Being. This could appear to be a critique of Bergson's notion of intuition. However, Barbaras shows that this need not be the case, since Bergson's conception of a "partial fusion" can be read, and was read by Merleau-Ponty, as adumbrating a conception of Being that does not simply refuse Nothingness but integrates it into itself in the form of a necessary distance, an irreducible concealment.

In "Community, Society, and History in the Later Merleau-Ponty," Marc Richir carefully explicates some extremely enigmatic ideas concerning history and society found in the Working Notes of *The Visible and the Invisible*. Evoking the sense of "the experience of the other" in the work of Merleau-Ponty and Husserl, he considers the question of the communalization of our intentional life, in the Husserlian sense of "transcendental subjectivity is transcendental intrasubjectivity" and correlative, in Merleau-Ponty's sense of the "worldliness of the mind" in the sedimentation of meaning in the visible. Richir cites a working note of 1959, "In the visible there is never anything but the ruins of spirit," ruins in the sense of the ruins of the Roman Forum, the traces of what was once instituting. The field of sedimentated meaning constitutes the articulation of our field of experience, and these sedimentations are essentially communal and unconscious. Merleau-Ponty writes, "intra-subjectivity is very much beyond lived experience," we are always already in an articulated field of meaning. Condemned to meaning, it is the elementary tissue of "the flesh of history" which gathers the community and holds it together.

Richir directs his attention to the notion of a phenomenological community as an incarnated community. In his reflection on the tissue of intrasubjective meaning, he presents some critical comments on Merleau-Ponty. For Merleau-Ponty, originating language breaks the silence of the world and is thus the act of a savage mind. "Savage mind is the mind of the incarnated phenomenological community." Richir's

contention is that Merleau-Ponty does not give a satisfactory explanation of the relationship between what Richir calls the “phenomenological symbolic” and the “conventionally instituted symbolic.” Richir writes, “[T]hat which goes without saying in its self-evident givenness precedes always from the symbolic institution. And it is only in that which does not go without saying (that which is not self-evident) that the savage mind [and the phenomenological symbolic] puts itself into play again.” The savage mind is radically heterogeneous from what is conventionally instituted symbolically. Richir ends by sketching out what a more adequate interpretation of the phenomenological symbolic would look like.

In “Tracework: Experience and Description in the Moral Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty and Levinas,” David Michael Kleinberg-Levin attempts to show that in Merleau-Ponty’s reflection development, one on the prepersonal subject of perception, there is implicitly a possible theory of moral that would bring Merleau-Ponty’s thought into line with the moral philosophy of Levinas. According to Kleinberg-Levin, Levinas claims that man, at the deepest level of experience, is not fundamentally egotist and that there is a relationship with the other in the form of an intercorporeality which could be viewed as subtending, or developmentally protending, the type of ethics elaborated in *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise Than Being*, that is, an ethics of the presence of the other. What Kleinberg-Levin attempts to show is that both Levinas and Merleau-Ponty were engaged in a “trace work,” a return to the primordial body of experience. They both wished to express, in the language of phenomenology, the articulation of an original assignment of motivations that make possible a stage of moral development beyond that of the “logical subject.” Kleinberg-Levin discovers structural similarities in the works of Merleau-Ponty and Levinas, similarities which he contends have not been seen before.

Bernard Flynn’s chapter, “Merleau-Ponty and the Philosophical Position of Skepticism,” is engendered by an early remark in *The Visible and the Invisible* that concerns Merleau-Ponty’s notion of a *pre* or *non*-cognitive relation to Being. His reflections begin with both a presentation and a refutation of Pyrrhonian skepticism, showing that it contains unproblematized presuppositions, for example, a representational conception of consciousness and a conception of “truth in itself.” He argues that rather than abandoning the notion of skepticism, one must reformulate the skeptical arguments. He questions *why* there has been, and still is, a continued fascination with skeptical arguments. It would seem there must be something in our experience that offers a basis for

this way of thinking, namely, that we believe both that our perceptions present the world as it is and that they are, in some respects, formed by my own body. When these two dimensions of experience are reflected upon, they become contradictory and give rise to skepticism. Flynn evokes Hume as a philosopher who has both elaborated the skeptical position in great detail and who has shown that this position is unoccupiable. Intelligibly compelling as skepticism may be, we are psychologically constituted in such a way that we cannot believe it.

Kant, who was awakened from his “dogmatic slumber” by Hume, elaborates his system of transcendental philosophy against him. Notwithstanding his great respect for Hume, Husserl gives birth to phenomenology by elaborating arguments against psychologistic positions that have Hume as their ultimate source. He does so through his conceptions of the phenomenological and the eidetic reductions. Merleau-Ponty makes a critique of the movement of analytic reflection by which transcendental philosophy is established. He criticizes the possibility of a completed phenomenological reduction and also the “process of free variation” through which the eidetic reduction is established. Having rejected all the arguments brought to bear against skepticism, how does Merleau-Ponty stand in relationship to it? Flynn suggests a certain convergence between an aspect of Hume’s philosophy as a “philosophy of belief” and Merleau-Ponty’s conception of “perceptual faith” as our noncognitive insertion into the *there is* of Being.

Robert Vallier’s chapter, “The Elemental Flesh: Nature, Life, and Difference in Merleau-Ponty and Plato’s *Timaeus*,” is fueled by two lines from *The Visible and the Invisible* that return us to the Greek context: “Nature is the Flesh, the mother,” and, “The Flesh is an element of being.” Merleau-Ponty claims that he is using the word *element* in the ancient Greek sense of Earth, Fire, Air, and Water; he does not elaborate any further on this ancient sense of element, but Vallier does. By intertwining aspects of Merleau-Ponty’s late work with a reading of Plato’s *Timaeus*, he creates a highly imaginative intertext. This is justified by the contention that a meditation on the notion of the element in the *Timaeus* can help to clarify the meaning that this notion has in the work of Merleau-Ponty. After an insightful rehearsal of the basic structures of the *Timaeus*, Vallier arrives at the idea that the elements are effected by an “event cause,” and are thus implicated in a circle of “‘self-othering,’ a negative movement of self-differentiation, such that they can never be ‘this’ or ‘that’ but only ‘suchlike.’” He refutes the contentions made by some hasty readers of Merleau-Ponty who claim that the flesh functions as a sort of metaphysical foundation in Merleau-Ponty’s work, arguing

that the flesh is not an “elementary substrate.” On the contrary, the flesh is *elementality* and it never appears as such. Through its movement of self-differentiation, things come to show themselves. Vallier offers some striking connections between the thought of the Earth in the *Timaeus* and the Earth in the late work of Husserl.

Wayne Froman’s contribution, entitled “The Blind Spot,” relates the “irreducible concealment,” which was addressed earlier in Renaud Barbaras’s comparison of Merleau-Ponty and Bergson, to Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie*, which was continually in the background of Robert Vallier’s essay. In the experiences of the touching/ touched and the seeing/seen, there is always a moment of noncoincidence in which “the hand that is touching” is not really touching an object in the same way as “the hand touching it.” There is a certain “blind spot” whereby what is interior and what is exterior constantly circle around one another. Froman cites Deleuze’s claim that Merleau-Ponty shows us the possibility of a horizontal relation between seeing/seen and also creates the possibility of the derived relationship between the exterior and the interior. Deleuze writes, “It is even this twisting which defines ‘Flesh’, beyond the body proper and its objects.” It is this blind spot that anchors “the point of view” in “a being always already there,” preconstituted or not completely constituted. Following Merleau-Ponty, Froman connects the blind spot with what Schelling called the “barbarous source,” a generality or communality that lies “between the inert essence, or *quidditas*, and the individual located at a point in space and time.” The blind spot is the Flesh considered from the point of view of cognition.

Froman seeks to explicate the ontological dimensions of this idea, which on an epistemological level prevents “perspectivism” from spinning off into a vertiginous skepticism (recalling Bernard Flynn’s essay), or employing Wittgenstein’s metaphor, “a thought which cannot move because it cannot get traction.” Merleau-Ponty connects this “barbarous source” to the Stoic idea of a brute unity through which the universe “holds.” Developing this idea further, Froman evokes the Heideggerian idea of *physis* and Husserl’s conception of an original opinion (*Urglaube* or *Urdoxa*) that is prior to any attitude or point of view. *Urdoxa*, or perceptual faith, does not give us a representation of the world but rather the world itself, and to question this would be a kind of madness that asks questions such as: “Where is the world? Am I alone? Am I the only one to be me?” Froman ends his article by forging a connection between these “philosophemes” and Heidegger’s conception of Fate.

In “Proximity and Distance: With Regard to Heidegger in the Later Merleau-Ponty,” Michel Haar addresses the relation between Merleau-

Ponty's thought and Heidegger's. Haar contends that Heidegger's thought served in fact as an inspiration, if not a model, for Merleau-Ponty in *Phenomenology of Perception* in regard to the emphasis on the irreducibility of world where phenomenological reduction is concerned and in regard, moreover, to *Phenomenology of Perception*'s challenge to subjectivity. But instead of making the role of Heidegger's thought explicit, Merleau-Ponty associated *Phenomenology of Perception* more closely with Husserl's work, probably by virtue of the crucial role that the world as perceived plays in Husserl's thought. Haar suggests as a reason that Merleau-Ponty did not make the bearing of Heidegger's thought on *Phenomenology of Perception* explicit is that Merleau-Ponty positioned Heidegger's thought next to Sartre's in regard to a heroic assertion to overcome the world in its facticity. The motif that makes it possible eventually for Merleau-Ponty to appeal explicitly to Heidegger's thinking of Being, and in so doing to carry out a "turn" in his thought that is comparable to the "turn" in Heidegger's thought, is how for Heidegger, with the dispossession of "man's properties or faculties," they are "transferred to Being," signaled, in particular, by Heidegger's dictum, in his later efforts to think the question concerning language from the question concerning Being, to the effect that it is not we who have language, but rather language that has us. But Haar finds that the result, where Merleau-Ponty is concerned, amounts to a "quasi-naturalism" and an "abstraction" from what Heidegger means by the "*there is*," the "*il y a*," the "*es gibt*." Haar makes the point that while for Heidegger, what is found at the point where we reach the "there is" has no single name, and accordingly, time, first of all, and then world, truth, history, and language are only "prenames" of Being, for Merleau-Ponty, by contrast, the name for what is found there is "*la chair*," "*the flesh*," and what this signals is Merleau-Ponty's "quasi-naturalism." Haar suggests that this amounts to a relapse into a metaphysical thinking of nature and of life such as we find in the post-Kantian metaphysical works of Schopenhauer, Schelling, and Bergson.

Haar takes aim at Merleau-Ponty's qualifications with regard to the phrase "flesh of the world," which Merleau-Ponty employs only to add that the world is not "flesh" in the same sense in which my body is. Resultant equivocations that Haar delineates here only highlight a hesitation resulting from resistance to a thoroughgoing naturalism, which in fact, although inadequate, is the only means, Haar finds, that Merleau-Ponty has available to follow Heidegger in regard to the "properties and faculties" that are "transferred to Being." With regard to Merleau-Ponty's specification of a "dehiscence" characteristic of the flesh and pivotal to a chiasm of flesh and world, Haar writes:

The Heideggerian model of the dispossession of man is not applicable to the philosophy of the flesh, for the latter—which, not without analogy with Being, oscillates between the thickness of the element and the differential finesse of “dehiscence”—would not have an initiative, not produce a “destinal sending,” that of which it is by the way necessarily incapable because of non-historicity. Man can respond to being thrown because he is historical but how can he respond to the flesh that has no age, and that englobes him?

To any “jointure,” or any “identity” between the “always historical and languagely *world*,” and “ageless *life*,” Haar counterposes “the prudent Heideggerian limitation of the ‘clearing’ of Being as this is separated from the ‘black of the forest.’” Further, Haar concludes that what Merleau-Ponty says of the flesh closes off another difficulty, and that, for Haar, is how Merleau-Ponty’s thought is totally lacking in regard to any principle of conflictuality or strife that would be needed in order to reach Heidegger’s radical sense of strife in the intimate relation of earth and world. Ultimately, what is announced by Merleau-Ponty’s “abstraction” from Heidegger’s sense of the “there is” is what Merleau-Ponty makes of negativity, of nothingness, and Haar assesses this as the “most benign and least redoubtable figure of nothingness in the history of philosophy.” In effect, Haar’s essay is opposed to the argument that the dispossession of the elements of subjectivity is more radical in Merleau-Ponty’s thought than in Heidegger’s, and it also denies the association that Wayne Froman draws between the two based on the affinity of Heidegger as well as Merleau-Ponty’s thought to Schelling’s thought.

In “Chiasm, Flesh, Figuration: Toward a Non-positive Ontology,” Véronique Fóti brings forward a movement in Merleau-Ponty’s later thought toward an ontology that is “non-positive,” and Fóti does so by turning our attention to the role that art, in particular painting, plays for that thought. Her chapter is the first of three that address the import of Merleau-Ponty’s interrogation of painting. Tracing the intricacies of Merleau-Ponty’s descriptions of the latencies of the flesh and its chiasmic dynamics, Fóti leads us to the heart of the mirror-play of the carnal and the world. These latencies recall both Leibnizian and Spinozistic motifs and yet, for Merleau-Ponty, what we find here is not to be understood in substantialist terms. Phenomenology does not take Merleau-Ponty to a “pristine positivity,” nor to a nothingness understood as its counterpart. Fóti cites Marc Richir in “Le sensible dans le rêve,” where Richir writes that “Merleau-Ponty better than many others understood that phenomenology has to do with the fundamental non-

positivity of all that is, of all that is practiced and of all that can be thought.” (Barbaras and Robert, *Notes de Cours* 1959, 239–54). Phenomenology leads Merleau-Ponty to sedimented layers deposited by chiasmatic dynamics and ultimately to a “nucleus of absence,” as Merleau-Ponty puts this in a *Working Note* for *The Visible and the Invisible*, in what Fóti specifies as one of Merleau-Ponty’s most succinct and daring formulations:

The invisible is here without being object; it is pure transcendence without an ontic mask. And the “visibles” themselves, they are, in the last analysis, likewise only centered upon a nucleus of absence—(VI, 282f; 229)

The “dehiscence” of the flesh, its “bursting forth” (*éclatement*), Fóti notes, works a “dispossession,” and this work must be taken up by philosophy.

The *punctum caecum*, the “blind spot” of visibility (that pertains to a theme discussed by Wayne Froman in this volume), which is emblematic for Merleau-Ponty of sensibility as such, and which in fact makes for the possibility of vision, ordinarily gets obscured by vision in so far as vision prefers the object to Being. The painter, by contrast, refuses both this transcendental illusion as well as the intellectualist illusion according to which vision is, to begin with, derivative from, or mediated by, thought, and by means of figuration the painter brings forth a visible of the second power, an icon, which responds to that which “senses itself” in her or in him. This icon itself may or may not be figurative. It marks, in Heidegger’s language, an *Unverborgenheit der Verborgenheit* (unconcealment of concealment), “an originary presentation of what is incapable of originary presentation.” The artistic figuration described closely here by Fóti can, Merleau-Ponty found, guide philosophy, and first of all, phenomenology, to the essential unthought of Husserl’s late work.

Jenny Slatman’s “Phenomenology of the Icon” approaches Merleau-Ponty’s aesthetics not merely as a branch of his philosophy, but more importantly as revealing an essential dimension of his thought. She begins by making a distinction between the three terms *idea*, *icon*, and *idol*. The notion of an idea is the traditional conception of a second domain of positivity, an invisible world behind or above the visible one. In the notion of the icon, the essence is revealed not behind but within the visible. Slatman cites Merleau-Ponty’s “Eye and Mind” where he argues that in the painting there appears “a visibility to the second power, a carnal essence or icon of the first,” along the lines of what

Merleau-Ponty will say of the invisible of the visible. Drawing from Jean-Luc Marion's work, she makes a distinction between the icon and the image. The icon contains within itself a relationship with the invisible and also the reversibility of the visible and the invisible, whereas the idol intends only the visible. The idol has as its correlate a subject conceived within the Cartesian tradition, while the icon is given to a vision and is itself part of the visible. Her explication of the ontology of Merleau-Ponty through a reading of his aesthetics is fueled by the description and consideration of a number of works of art, some of which were dealt with by Merleau-Ponty and others not. Slatman concludes her article by reflecting on Merleau-Ponty's conception of expression and institution in both painting and language, asking what would, or could, it mean for the type of linguistic practice of philosophy itself, suggesting that we reconsider our conception of the relationship between metaphorical and nonmetaphorical language.

In the third chapter to address the import of painting in Merleau-Ponty's thought, "On the 'Fundamental of Painting': Chinese Counterpoint," Jacques Taminiaux takes his point of departure from an exhibition of paintings by the twentieth-century Chinese painter Zhu Qizhan (born in 1892) organized by the British Museum in 1995. Zhu Qizhan's work represents a "transcultural possibility" that contrasts with both the reduction to a lowest common denominator and the subjugation of one tradition to the other. Taminiaux responds with insights gleaned from Merleau-Ponty's interrogation of painting, insights that Taminiaux finds conducive for this "transcultural possibility." Painting in the West, beginning with Cézanne, exhibits a certain "fundamental of painting" more explicitly than did earlier painting in this tradition. No longer governed by the early Byzantine sense of painting that accords with the long-standing Christian Platonic tradition and where painting is to convey us to a heavenly world beyond the image of the world in which we find ourselves (a point that recalls Jenny Slatman's discussion of Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the "iconicity" of painting and how it differs from what Jean-Luc Marion says concerning "iconicity"), nor governed by the Renaissance sense of perspective, which remains allied with an insistence on a transcendent vantage point, beginning with Cézanne, painting more explicitly exhibits our primordial and carnal belonging to the world of multiple perspective and appearance. This marks an affinity with the Chinese tradition of painting that Taminiaux illustrates first in terms of the significance of the fact that "still life" is not one of the classifications found in the tradition of Chinese painting, and then in terms of principal features that are found in Chinese landscape painting.



Furthermore, in Merleau-Ponty's delineation of the reversibility marking the chiasmatic dynamics of flesh and world that are deployed, for example, in paintings by Cézanne of Mt. St. Victoire, where we find how it happens that "essence and existence, the imaginary and the real, the visible and the visible, painting confuses all our categories by deploying its oneiric universe of carnal essences," Taminiaux detects a strong affinity with the sensibility in regard to oppositions found in Chinese painting. This pertains to the oppositions of being and non-being, and the visible and the invisible in painting (a point that recalls Véronique Fóti's discussion of Merleau-Ponty's interrogation of painting and its implications for a "non-positive ontology"). Taminiaux points out that this marks an opening for interaction between Merleau-Ponty's thought and both the Taoist and the Confucian traditions that Chinese paintings reflect.

In "Variations of the Sensible: The Truth of Ideas and Idea of Philosophy in the Later Merleau-Ponty," Mauro Carbone turns our attention directly to Merleau-Ponty's last lecture courses where the principal themes are Nature and the possibility of philosophy today. What joins the two is Merleau-Ponty's sense of a mutation in the relation of our selves to Being, a phrase that Merleau-Ponty deploys in "Eye and Mind" to characterize what he detects when he holds classical thought en bloc up against what we find in the work of modern painters. This mutation in the relation of our selves to Being is indicative of an innovative ontology that Merleau-Ponty holds is already implicit in recent scientific work (which, although providing no ontology at all, may yet be philosophically instructive) and in the art of our time as well. Carbone explores this link between the two major themes of Merleau-Ponty's last lectures.

In his work on Nature, Merleau-Ponty drew on the contribution in biology made by Jakob von Uexküll. Von Uexküll developed an understanding of the relation between the organism and its animal environment or *Umwelt* that is neither causalist nor finalist, nor dependent upon a Platonist *eidos*. Rather, what Von Uexküll discerned was a deployment of an *Umwelt* that took the form of a "melody that sings itself." Merleau-Ponty (recovering themes from his early book *The Structure of Behavior*) detected in this a basis for specifying an ontological value for the notion of species. Carbone explains this in terms found in Merleau-Ponty's notes for the lecture course "Cartesian Ontology and Ontology Today" where we find a discussion of seeing as "voyance," ordinarily understood as clairvoyance with its "double vision," but understood here as seeing in so far as it "complies with" the self-showing of the seen, in contrast with the Cartesian context (where, in

effect, thought displaces seeing), and indicative, along these lines, of the “Renaissance beyond Descartes.” With “voyance,” a level of generality opens up and remains open, relating particulars although not given as such in any one, and rendering these particulars simultaneous. This suggests the dynamics of a “melody that sings itself” and the level of generality indicates how an ontological value of species is to be understood. Merleau-Ponty detects “voyance” in literary work by such authors as Valéry, Claudel, and Proust, and Carbone both points out that what Merleau-Ponty says of Proust here (as well as the association he makes explicitly, in the work on Nature, between the “melody that sings itself” and Proust’s understanding of melody) helps us elaborate on our understanding of the discussion of Proust in *The Visible and the Invisible*, and makes the point that Merleau-Ponty’s concentration on painting should not lead to a neglect of what he says regarding literature. Carbone also relates the discussion to Merleau-Ponty’s reference elsewhere to Rimbaud’s sense of poetry as “voyance.” “Voyance” ultimately indicates a *Wesenschau* that must be understood in terms of the “sensible idea” and the “carnal essence,” recasting, in fact, our understanding of the relation between the sensible and the intelligible and pointing us toward what is meant by a phrase from Claudel, commented on by Merleau-Ponty, concerning a “listening eye.” Carbone finds a possibility here for the elaboration of the “new ontology” begun by Merleau-Ponty.

In “The Body of Speech,” Françoise Dastur addresses Merleau-Ponty’s findings in regard to language. Dastur makes the point that as early as *The Structure of Behavior*, Merleau-Ponty challenged the instrumental conception of language as he appealed to the notion of *Gestalt* in analyzing the interaction of an organism and the environment. The sense of *Gestalt* as a “joining of an idea and an existence which are indiscernible” points in the direction of a primordial operation of expression, one that would be understood along the lines of an “inhabitation,” a “transcendence in inherence,” and eventually a dynamic of “institution.” In *Phenomenology of Perception*, where Merleau-Ponty leaves behind “the massive oppositions of reflexive philosophy,” his decisive findings in regard to the indissociability of a phonetic and a semantic element of language move directly toward the phenomenon of expression at the same time as they call into question both the logicist element in Husserl’s earlier work that would disengage signification from the contingent “clothing” of linguistic signs, and the determination by Heidegger, in *Being and Time*, to the effect that assertion is a derived or a supplemental linguistic mode. Heidegger would later unequivocally reject the priority ascribed here to signification vis-à-vis

speaking. We now know that in Heidegger's 1934 course *Logic* he would seek a way to think logic from the same origin as language and that it was in the 1930s that he would turn to poetry as a more originary modality of language where language could be thought in terms of Being. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty had indeed found that the specificity of language as a mode of expression would have to be sought in originary instances of speech.

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, the same finding in regard to the indissociability of a phonetic and a semantic element means that language understood as gesture rules out conceiving of "communication with the other as the operation that would consist in compensating for or getting around the abyss that separates us from the other, and which would thus be similar to that which procures for us the knowledge of beings different from us, [but] on the contrary it would be necessary for us to 'restitute the experience of the other deformed by intellectual analyses,' just as much as the concern is to 'restitute the perceptual experience of the thing' over against the same analyses that see a knowing in perception." Beyond the impasses of realism and idealism, Merleau-Ponty looks to the originary alliance of spontaneity and receptivity that he will designate as "institution" and that brings him into close proximity with Humboldt's indications regarding nature and culture in the origin of language. To find in speech not the "clothing" of thought but rather its emblem or its body requires that we renounce the idea of transparency in language and we recognize language as a specific case of "this irrational power that creates significations and that communicates them."

The volume concludes with an early article (1971), "Body, Flesh," by Claude Lefort, who was Merleau-Ponty's literary executor. This rich text evokes the difference between the role of the body in the *Phenomenology of Perception* and that of the flesh in *The Visible and the Invisible*. In a certain sense, Lefort's chapter concerns itself with Merleau-Ponty's reaction to a line of Husserl cited in the preface to the *Phenomenology of Perception*, which reads, "It is that as yet mute experience which we are concerned to lead to the pure expression of its meaning." It is Lefort's contention that Merleau-Ponty remains faithful to threads of Husserl's unthought, "his shadow," while rejecting his project of a "pure" phenomenology. This rejection is what marks the difference between the *Phenomenology of Perception* and *The Visible and the Invisible*. He argues that Merleau-Ponty's trajectory is a process of learning that "the place from which" the restitution of mute experience to its pure meaning is to proceed is a place that it is *impossible* to

occupy. The desire to occupy this place is the “last illusion” of metaphysics. This illusion is a belief in the possibility of returning to a privileged place, a point of origin through which reflection could come to coincide with prereflective experience. In the *Phenomenology of Perception*, the phenomenology of the body is what marks such a place. In the form of objectivism, metaphysics has denied the body by giving it the status of an object. Thus, the critique of objectivism should reveal the body as the place of the origin. Lefort writes, “Must we not wonder if the body does not leave its author in the prison whose task it was for him to escape?” It is the search for an “original,” an ultimate text, that constitutes the last metaphysical illusion. He argues that *The Visible and the Invisible* rejects the conception of a *tacit cogito*, and with it the possibility of reflection coinciding with the prereflective, “the fiction of coincidence by right between being and thinking.”

In *The Visible and the Invisible* Merleau-Ponty writes that “the originating breaks up, and philosophy must accompany this explosion, this coincidence, this differentiation.” The flesh is the term that Merleau-Ponty uses to indicate a thought that could accord itself to this enigma, a thought that is not one of man, but as Merleau-Ponty says, one of Being. The flesh is not the successor of the body. In *The Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty identifies the body as the subject of perception. He contends that: I should not say that *I* perceive, but rather that one (*on*) perceives, and that this “one” is the anonymous subject of the body. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, he tells us that we should not say that the body perceives, but rather that the body is built around perception, that perception dawns through it. Lefort writes, “The flesh is not a successor of the body, a more elaborate version of mute experience or of the last text that was otherwise discerned through the body. He attempts to view Merleau-Ponty’s critique of metaphysics as something other than its reversal, and as other than the expectation of an apocalyptic “new beginning.” The flesh (reflecting that originary alliance between receptivity and spontaneity that Françoise Dastur pointed up in what Merleau-Ponty says of language) is both in continuity and in discontinuity with the past.



## HOMAGE TO MERLEAU-PONTY

PAUL RICOEUR

Great and pure was the consternation of the colleagues, disciples, and friends who had come on that Saturday afternoon to accompany the mortal remains of Maurice Merleau-Ponty to the houses of the dead. When the funereal task was complete, each had been hesitant to take their leave; no discourse had been given, and I believe no one regretted that: this death, more improbable than any, had literally *cut off speech*. At fifty-three years old, the philosopher was gone from us, without having had the time to say that which was ripening in him and which it appears would have been called *The Visible and the Invisible*. The supplemental leaflet that had been inserted in the last collection of articles, entitled *Signs*, tells in a terribly premonitory manner of the state in which the interrupted discourse was stopped and frozen: "Signs, which is not to say a complete alphabet, and not even a discourse followed. But rather signals, as sudden as a glance, which we receive from events, from books and from things." In a single stroke a trait is emphasized, a trait that had had a completely different meaning when he was alive and his speech underway was still inclined toward a future; yes, in a single stroke, the meanings of the calculated inexactitude, the englobing complexity, this sparkling density of Merleau-Ponty's last writings all changed. The void [*creux*] of incompleteness will henceforth be imprinted on the same texts that had seduced us and embarrassed us by their surfeit of meaning.

The philosopher had certainly and explicitly professed this incompleteness. His 1953 inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, entitled "In Praise of Philosophy," began without slyness with these words:

"The man who witnesses his own research, which is to say, his own internal disorder, can hardly feel himself to be the heir of the accomplished men whose names he sees on these walls. If, in addition, he is a philosopher, which is to say that he knows that he knows nothing, then how could he believe himself justified to assume this chair, and how could he even wish it? Is he able to desire this? The answer to these questions is very simple: What the Collège de France, since its founding, is charged with providing to its audience are not acquired truths, but rather the idea of free investigation" (*Praise*, 3). And a bit farther on: "The philosopher does not say that a final overcoming of human contradictions is possible and that the complete man awaits us in the future: like everyone, he knows nothing of this. He says—and this is something altogether different—that the world begins, that we do not have to judge its future by what has been its past, that the idea of a destiny in things is not an idea but a vertigo, that our relations with nature are not fixed once and for all, that no one can know what freedom may be able to do, nor imagine what the customs [*moeurs*] and human relations would be in a civilization no longer haunted by competition and necessity. He does not place his hope in any destiny, even a favorable one, but precisely in what in us is not destiny, in the contingency of our history, and it is its negation or denial that is position" (*Praise*, 43–44).

The lack of a completion of a philosophy of incompleteness is doubly disconcerting.

And nevertheless, Merleau-Ponty's philosophy had from the beginning attained a *landing* [*palier*] where it was provisionally stabilized, before putting itself back en route toward something else. This first landing was the *Phenomenology of Perception* in 1945. We will have to return continuously to this masterwork in order to check the drift of this striking [*foudroyé*] work.

How was a simple description of seeing, hearing, or sensing able to contain such a philosophical responsibility [*charge*]? Ordinarily, the psychologists' books about vision, hearing, and touching do not have these repercussions or effects [*retentissement*], in all senses of this word. What the philosopher proposed by means of this description, and beyond all psychophysiology of sensation, was a manner of seeing the world and of being seen in the world. The description of perception became the touchstone of the true human condition. What is astonishing about perception is that we ceaselessly decipher a sense that is continuously removed from the opacity of the brute and mute presence, without ever being detached itself from the limitation of a perspective, without ever renouncing the inherence of consciousness in a point of view. In the same stroke, perception reveals the properly human level of

existence, namely, that we move in *the interim of non-sense and the absolute*, halfway between a phantasmagoria of silhouettes that succeed each other without ever meaning anything and an absolute intemporal truth, which would be the truth of a non-situated discourse, of a science without point of view or perspective.

Many things were admirable in this great book: first, a manner of taking up again the results of the human sciences and enlisting them in a properly philosophical purpose. Merleau-Ponty closely followed work done in physiology, psychophysiology, experimental psychology, and psychopathology; he never stopped reflecting on the relations of philosophy to the human sciences, reflecting not only on the results but also on the methods. On the other hand, in order to provide this liaison, Merleau-Ponty returned to the magisterial teaching of the founder of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl, whose published and unpublished work he knew perfectly. But he did not enclose phenomenology (which claimed to be a descriptive science of what appears) in a Husserlian archaeology or scholasticism: he continued the movement of phenomenology for his own account, without regard for orthodoxy. Finally, with no less liberty and in order to install it in his own reading of the world and of the human being in-the-world, he took up again the theme of the lived body [*le corps propre*] (which had been introduced by Marcel), the living experience of my body, of this body that is neither an object known from without nor a subject transparent to itself. With Merleau-Ponty, the theory of the body is thoroughly a theory of perception: the body becomes the place of the general symbolism of the world.

The findings of the human sciences, the method of phenomenology, and the philosophical aim of existentialism are thus found mixed together in a complex ensemble. The import of this enterprise was considerable from the start: perception appeared as the model of all human operations, with its play of significations that refer one to the other, without ever halting in an object, seen from nowhere and thoroughly known. "In a general manner," he said, "all of our experience, all of our knowledge, involves the same fundamental structures, the same synthesis of transition, the same type of horizons that we believe are found in perceptual experience." "There is meaning. Simply put, rationality is neither a total nor immediate guarantee. It is somehow open, which is to say threatened." "All consciousness is perceptual consciousness, even the consciousness of ourselves."

It is not exaggerated to say that these formulae themselves contain an entire conception of action, and even an entire politics. For if perception is the model of existence, then this means that there is in action no longer an "all or nothing," and that politics is likewise approximate.

From the *Phenomenology of Perception* onward, Merleau-Ponty's philosophical style thus distanced itself from Sartre's. On the basis of such a model of perception, how could one oppose the "in-itself" of things and the "for-itself" of freedom? How could one posit a freedom that nothing could limit, except what freedom itself determined as a limit, by its own initiative? How could human being be the nothingness of things? For Merleau-Ponty, the only concrete and effective freedom is that which takes up some worldly propositions, takes the measure of things, and transforms obstacles into support: "Our freedom does not destroy our situation, but is geared to it: our situation, in so far as we live in it, is open, which implies both that it calls for privileged modes of resolutions, and that by itself, it is impotent to obtain any of them."

We didn't mean anything else when we called this philosophy a philosophy of ambiguity: what is realized in history is never properly speaking wanted or represented; the ends are recognized only at the moment of being attained. There is neither destiny nor absolutely free act; here too, only the double or the in-between is real.

It is an entire philosophy of *praxis*, of effective action in the world, that Merleau-Ponty intended to outline in the prolongation of his philosophy of perception. He thus intended to continue the young Marx, against the old Marx, and especially against Engels: "What Marx calls *praxis* is the meaning that is spontaneously decided at the intersection of actions by which humans organize their relations with nature and with others. It is not at first directed by an idea of total universal history. We recall that Marx insists on the impossibility of thinking the future. It is rather the analysis of the past and present that lets us glimpse in outline a logic in the course of things, a logic that does not regulate it from the outside, but that rather emanates from within it, and which is fulfilled only if humans understand their experience and want to change it" (*Praise*, 50–51).

All of Merleau-Ponty's political writings (*Humanism and Terror* in 1947, *The Adventures of the Dialectic* in 1955, and a number of texts in *Sense and Non-Sense* [1948] and in *Signs* [1960]) are dominated both by the will to "understand," to understand what there is of rationality sketched out in or underway up until the Stalinist "Terror," and by the refusal to grant that some reason governed history. In truth, the agreement with the young Marx concerning always the evolving meaning of intersubjective praxis, weighed less heavily than the profound disagreement with Marxism as a whole: Merleau-Ponty could not believe that there was a *universal class* and that the proletariat was this class. This is why history was for him without an absolute point of view, without a true perspective. *Humanism and Terror* ended in this way: "The human