

Book Review

Emmanuel Alloa, Frank Chouraqui, and Rajiv Kaushik
(eds.), *Merleau-Ponty and Contemporary Philosophy*
(Albany: SUNY Press, 2019)

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In their editorial introduction, Emmanuel Alloa, Frank Chouraqui, and Rajiv Kaushik set a mandate for this collected volume that may strike the reader as excessively ambitious: to demonstrate the relevance of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's work to contemporary philosophy across the themes of ontology, epistemology, anthropology, embodiment, animality, politics, language, aesthetics, and art. The fourteen chapters comprising the volume, accompanied by an epilogue from Jean-Luc Nancy, further aim to show both how Merleau-Ponty reconceptualized some of philosophy's most enduring problems and to present the relevance of his work to interdisciplinary studies today.

Merleau-Ponty and Contemporary Philosophy lives up to such a tall task. It provides a rich resource for Merleau-Ponty scholars who are interested in novel applications and understudied aspects of his thought. It also opens up Merleau-Ponty's oeuvre to the general reader by presenting many possible entryways into the diversity of his work. The chapters of this volume are sectioned into four major themes, namely, "Legacies," "Mind and Nature," "Politics, Power, and Institution," and "Art and Aesthetics." Given the thematic breadth of the volume, I will attend more closely to those chapters that I find most insightful or problematic.

"Legacies," the first section of the volume, initially situates Merleau-Ponty's in relation to classic philosophical concerns with embodiment, sensory experience, temporality, and language. In the first chapter "The Three Senses of Flesh: Concerning an Impasse in Merleau-Ponty's Ontology," Renaud Barbaras presents his account of Merleau-Ponty's central notion of the flesh (*la chair*). Barbaras argues that there are three senses in which this should be comprehensively understood: the ontic flesh that is subject's own sentient and self-sensing body (*corps propre*); the ontological flesh of the world (*la chair du monde*) that is sensible, but not self-sensing; and Barbaras's own notion of transcendental flesh. The latter is meant to avoid a dualism and yet retain a clear distinction between the first two senses. For Barbaras asserts that the *corps propre* is part of the world but is nonetheless a distinct part because it intentionally constitutes the appearance of the world through desiring its

flesh. His argument is convincing, yet what is absent from Barnabas's account is any consideration of what sense another sentient and self-sensing subject who is encountered in the world might have. This chapter is followed by "Vortex of Time: Merleau-Ponty in Temporality," in which Bernhard Waldenfels and Regula Giuliani argue that "the central task of a phenomenology of time consists in grasping time in the flesh" (46). This means understanding time, following Merleau-Ponty, neither as a force or series of events that affect the subject from the outside nor as a purely subjective creation, but rather as a continual structuring of bodily behaviour in the world. These first two chapters are terminologically dense. As such, they are largely of interest to those who are well-acquainted with Merleau-Ponty while being difficult to access for the general reader.

By contrast, Emmanuel Alloa's "Undergoing Experience: Sensing, Bodily Affordances, and the Institution of the Self" presents a refreshing shift in style, giving a clear and lucid answer to the question of how the relationship between the self and its sensory experiences should be theorized. Alloa, applying Merleau-Ponty's notion of "institution," argues that sensory experience should be understood as being instituted by the subject in the sense that sensations are actively given meaning by the subject rather than reaching them as discrete, preformed data from external objects. Sensory experience should also be understood as instituting the subject in the sense that undergoing an experience means actively and habitually responding to sensations and thereby being shaped by sensory experience. Alloa's closing claim that "selves are just as transitive as experiences are" (80) is reminiscent of Buddhist analyses of sensory experience that arrive at a similar conclusion. Although *Merleau-Ponty and Contemporary Philosophy* deals only with contemporary Western philosophy, this point indicates that the work of Merleau-Ponty has relevance for contemporary cross-cultural philosophy as well. "Legacies" is concluded with Stephen Watson's chapter on the relationship between sense and nonsense in terms of the relationship between consciousness and language.

The next section, "Mind and Nature," addresses the relationship between the human subject and the natural world. This is perhaps the most engaging section of the volume, since the reader is presented with three distinct applications of Merleau-Ponty's reflections on nature. In his chapter, "The Truth of Naturalism," Jocelyn Benoist puts forward the argument that without reducing intentionality to nonintentional nature, Merleau-Ponty is able to situate intentionality within the natural world by recognising that intentionality is fundamentally embodied. Benoist concludes with the view that our concept of nature "should always remain resistant to full-blooded mindedness" (117) but leaves open the question of whether perception should be excluded from it. Jennifer McWeeny takes up this question in "The Panpsychism Question in Merleau-Ponty's Ontology." McWeeny asserts that Merleau-Ponty's ontological notion of the flesh entails panpsychism, that is,

in the sense of a mind-like quality being present throughout the world. McWeeny considers Merleau-Ponty's notion that the body is made of the same flesh as the world to mean that if my body is sentient and self-sensing, then the whole world must be also. McWeeny's argument is, however, generally difficult to accept since she insists on an all or nothing approach to the question of sentience, rather than elaborating on whether there may be a spectrum of sentience in the world. This chapter is followed by a far more measured approach to the question of subjective meaning in living beings. Annabelle Dufourcq compellingly argues for the importance of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy for the field of biosemiotics. The aim here is to show that the behaviors and appearances of animals are not reducible to the rigid, predefined functionality that a positivistic approach maintains. Instead, they should be understood as symbolic, i.e., as being creatively instituted in response to the perception of other living beings and as having ambiguous meaning in an intersubjective field that requires imaginative interpretation.

The section "Politics, Power, Institution" begins with Bernard Flynn's chapter, "The Institution of the Law: Merleau-Ponty and Lefort." Flynn is of the opinion that one can uphold the normativity of the law without appeal to any supersensible, transcendent foundation for it. This requires understanding the law according to Merleau-Ponty's notion of the institution. The law must be understood both as being historically instituted by the activity of political subjects and as instituting them as political subjects. Flynn further contends "that the institution of the law is prior to the existence of human beings" (179) and that it has an evolutionary precedent in social organisations in the animal kingdom. Flynn concludes that the normative character of the law is justified with reference to this evolutionary institution. He adds, without any explanation, that we should elaborate a politics that is "able to exercise coercive power" (181) with the goal of human flourishing. Yet the basis of this contention is unoriginal and its conclusion problematic. Peter Kropotkin, the classic anarchist thinker, already argued in his 1902 work *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* that social organization is prior to the existence of human beings, and extensively demonstrated that the coercive power exercised by the human institution of law is *detrimental* to human flourishing. Flynn, however, makes no mention of Kropotkin or anarchism, except when ambiguously stating that Pauline Christianity could be a form of anarchism given its indifference or hostility to the law and politics in general. Yet in Kropotkin's anarchism one can find an affirmative and normative view of politics as an evolutionary institution.

The next chapter by Frank Chouraqui presents a novel approach to the problem of post-truth politics. Chouraqui explains that Merleau-Ponty's critique of cognitivism as well as his notions of recognition, institution, and power can render comprehensible the widespread adherence to and impact of non-credible political narratives. Political power and narratives are instituted as credible only because they are recognized as such, not because

they are cognitively grounded in truth that is independent of the subjects who recognize it. Having been thus instituted, they are recognized as credible in a circular fashion. Unfortunately, after setting up a strong framework, Chouraqui does not apply it to any concrete instances of post-truth politics.

The section is concluded with the highlight of the volume; Sara Ahmed's "Institutional Habits: About Bodies and Orientations that Don't Fit." Here, Ahmed uses Merleau-Ponty's model of the habitual body to account for how bodies inhabit institutional spaces, are habituated by them, and how certain bodies are implicitly instituted as those that "fit right." Ahmed explains that institutional norms are somatic norms, arguing in the context of institutional racism that the white body is habitually assumed as the right fit in most institutional spaces even if that space is explicitly open to all bodies. This means that white bodies comfortably and unwittingly inhabit institutional spaces that fit their habits, while other bodies are forced to conform or otherwise stick out like a sore thumb. In this face of this problem, Ahmed presents a compelling account for diversity work as a phenomenologically oriented task of changing institutional habits.

In the final chapters of the volume, belonging to the section "Art and Creation," Galen A. Johnson takes the framework of Merleau-Ponty's aesthetics to the theme of art and politics, arguing that if politics is a realm of appearances and a linguistic field then a commitment to aesthetic sensibility and open dialogue derived from Andre Breton's conception of "mad love" is required. Mauro Carbone further contributes a much-needed engagement with Merleau-Ponty's understudied reflections on cinema as a kind of "a-philosophy." In connection with Gilles Deleuze's reflections on cinema, Carbone explicates the potential of cinema as a style of thought and expression that is eminently concerned with the visible, like phenomenology, and yet is free of the abstract conceptualizations of formal philosophy. Veronique M. Fóti's "Strong Beauty: In Face of Structures of Exclusion" grapples with the question of what kind of beauty is resistant to being appropriated for the purposes of political domination. Fóti's answer is "strong beauty": art that articulates a meaningful form while simultaneously acknowledging what exceeds it and cannot be appropriated and dominated. Unfortunately, these chapters are made up primarily of dense, intertextual references that blur their lines of argument. The notable chapter of this section, however, is Rajiv Kaushik's critique of the museum. Kaushik argues that Merleau-Ponty's notion of "institution"—which has proven in many chapters to be one of Merleau-Ponty's most prodigious concepts—"undercuts the very notion of a museum as an institute" (256). This is because museums typically display an ignorance of the ambiguity, contingency, and plurality of meanings that an artwork is capable of as it shapes our way of seeing. Instead, museums treat artworks as fixed objects that do not affect our vision and present them according to a rigid art history. Kaushik calls instead for an anti-hegemonic museology that puts art "on display from the perspective of their

execution" (262) and orientates the museum around the relational institution of meaning that occurs between art and observer.

The volume is concluded with an epilogue provided by Jean-Luc Nancy who very briefly reflects on whether his work bears any notable relation to that of Merleau-Ponty. While Nancy provides an interesting explanation for including an epigraph from Merleau-Ponty in his forthcoming publication *The Deconstruction of Sex*, this epilogue is rather awkwardly tacked on to the end of the volume. It consists of several points of interest in Merleau-Ponty's work for Nancy, but doesn't contribute much to the volume except for an intriguing connection with a significant contemporary philosopher.

Each thematic section of *Merleau-Ponty and Contemporary Philosophy* could be the subject of a separate volume itself, and perhaps would then have respectively benefited from a more cohesive treatment. But their inclusion in a single volume undoubtedly presents a forceful display of the wide-ranging relevance of Merleau-Ponty's work to contemporary philosophy and the range of possibilities that are open to further research.

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