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### Starting with Merleau-Ponty

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*Starting with Merleau-Ponty*

By Katherine J. Morris

Continuum, 2012. Pp. xviii+192. ISBN 978-1-847-06281-9. £14.99 (pbk)/  
£45.00 (hbk).

Merleau-Ponty scholarship is proliferating within contemporary Anglophone philosophy. The publication by Routledge in 2011 of a new and greatly improved translation, by Donald A. Landes, of Merleau-Ponty's seminal text, *Phenomenology of Perception (PP)*, is a very welcome and long-anticipated addition to the English language Merleau-Ponty literature. In many respects, it is not at all surprising that there is a renewed interest in Merleau-Ponty's work and a recent flurry of publications engaging directly with his ideas. Merleau-Ponty's philosophical writings – reframing philosophical questions regarding subjectivity and perception as questions regarding situated embodiment – are not only insightful and original within the philosophical and phenomenological traditions within which they are situated, but have increasing significance for a multitude of disciplines where the lived body is central, such as biomedicine, cognitive science, architecture, women's studies, gender studies, anthropology, disability studies, psychology, sociology and so on.

As a result, several guidebooks to Merleau-Ponty and his thinking have appeared in recent years, not to mention monographs and edited collections which have used his work insightfully within philosophy and through many of the above-mentioned disciplines. For instance, very recent additions to the Merleau-Ponty literature include: *Merleau-Ponty: Key Concepts* (Diprose and Reynolds (eds), Acumen, 2008); *Merleau-Ponty and Buddhism* (Park and Kopf (eds), Lexington, 2011); *Merleau-Ponty and Environmental Philosophy* (Cataldi and Hamrick (eds), SUNY, 2007); *Intertwinings: Interdisciplinary Encounters with Merleau-Ponty* (Weiss (ed.), SUNY, 2008); *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Merleau-Ponty and the Phenomenology of Perception* (Romdenh-Romluc, Routledge, 2011); and *Merleau-Ponty and the Paradoxes of Expression* (Landes, Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), among several other monographs and edited collections.

Although one must ultimately question whether another guidebook to Merleau-Ponty is warranted considering this proliferation of publications which already includes several introductory texts in recent years, Katherine J. Morris offers a modest but thoughtful contribution to the recent literature. Entitled *Starting with Merleau-Ponty*, this concise guidebook largely focuses on the ideas set forth in what is considered his most important contribution to twentieth-century philosophy, *Phenomenology of Perception*. Morris's choice to confine her analysis and summary of Merleau-Ponty's ideas to *Phenomenology of Perception* means that her

book is thematically very focused. However, at the same time, it omits sustained consideration of many key ideas in Merleau-Ponty's *oeuvre*, including his reflections on art, Marxism, temporality, language and freedom. Further, it does not address the themes – flesh, chiasm, intertwining – of his later writings in the posthumously published *The Visible and the Invisible*.

However, these omissions of Merleau-Ponty's lesser known works are not surprising as Morris's book is part of Continuum's *Starting with...* series, which endeavors to offer succinct and accessible introductions, aimed at first-year students, to key thinkers in philosophy. Morris is well positioned to write such a guidebook as she is well known for her work within existential phenomenology, particularly with respect to the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty's contemporary, Jean-Paul Sartre, about whose work she wrote a well-received commentary, entitled simply *Sartre* (Blackwell, 2007), for the Blackwell Great Minds Series.

Much like her guidebook to Sartre, Morris tackles Merleau-Ponty's philosophy thematically and offers a positive account of Merleau-Ponty's ideas, bringing him into dialogue with many of his contemporaries and predecessors. Indeed, Morris is at pains to contextualize Merleau-Ponty within the twentieth-century philosophical traditions from which his thinking arises, namely phenomenology, *a la* Husserl and Heidegger, and existentialism, *a la* Sartre. As a result, *Starting with Merleau-Ponty* is divided into six chapters which first set the stage for Merleau-Ponty's ideas, and then move on to analyze key themes which arise in his analysis of embodied and situated perception.

To give an outline of the structure of the book, Chapter 1 provides a summary of the key ideas in Husserl and Heidegger, the principle figures in phenomenology with whom Merleau-Ponty engaged extensively. Chapter 2 continues this stage-setting offering an outline of the leading ideas about perception within the empiricist and intellectualist traditions which dominated philosophical and psychological thinking during the time in which Merleau-Ponty was writing. Merleau-Ponty's theories of the lived body and perception, as Morris outlines in the following three chapters, are an explicit attack on the distorted views about perception that the empiricist and intellectualist approaches entail. Chapter 2 also provides an outline of what Morris terms 'Gestalt qualities' (p. 22), which are ideas within Gestalt psychology which Merleau-Ponty utilizes in the development of his own theories of embodied perception.

The core of the book, Chapters 3, 4, and 5, addresses the themes of 'The Body', 'The Body and the Perceived World', and 'Others', as the chapters are respectively entitled. The final chapter, 'Merleau-Ponty *Vivant*', aims to 'provide a sense of the continued fertility of Merleau-Ponty's thought' (p. 125), addressing four areas of investigation – which Morris admits are 'unashamedly personal' in choice (p. 125) – where

Merleau-Ponty's ideas have proven particularly relevant: illness, women, culture and animals. Each of the six chapters culminates with a coda in which Morris attempts to provide supplementary information which may anticipate questions arising for students with respect to the main themes of the chapter.

Despite being an introductory text, Morris's treatment of Merleau-Ponty contains originality and nuance. Giving a fairly standard summary of Merleau-Ponty's position on perception and his overall descriptive project to 'render visible what is invisible because of its very familiarity' (14), Morris systematically highlights how Merleau-Ponty's project to rethink perception is 'also to radically rethink *the body* ... to rethink the *world* [and] entails a reconceptualization of *others*' (xvii).

In doing so, Morris draws attention to well-known features of Merleau-Ponty's work in insightful ways. Describing his penchant for ambiguity and indeterminacy in his conceptual repertoire, Morris coins the idea of "'between"-concepts' (p. 17). These are concepts which contain an inherent ambiguity or fall between two already well-established concepts. She cites the example of motor intentionality; this concept of intentional motility falls *between* 'mere movement' and 'thought about movement' (p. 17). Further utilizing this notion of the 'between'-concept, Morris points insightfully to a common misconception regarding the lived body which often arises among novice students of Merleau-Ponty. She writes: 'There is a temptation to read the body in Merleau-Ponty as a "body-subject", where this is understood as the claim that Merleau-Ponty wants to attribute to the body "the attributes that classical philosophy gives to the subject"' (p. 93). To read Merleau-Ponty thus, she argues, would be 'exactly wrong' (p. 93). The body is neither strictly object nor strictly subject, it falls somewhere *between* these two poles: 'I am my body, and yet I am not: there is "another subject beneath me" which is my body' (p. 93). Framing the lived body as a 'between'-concept holds true the sense that the body is both the 'seen' and the 'seer', the 'visible' and the 'invisible', an ambiguity that Merleau-Ponty develops and explores at length in his later writing.

In another insightful move, Morris draws attention to the concept of 'motive' – understood as 'something between "cause" and "reason"' (p. 75) – as a useful way to understand how causation and reasoning are deficient explanations when considering a more situated and holistic view of action and perception, or in other words, how 'I simply "take up the situation" ... with which I am confronted' (p. 77). She gives an example – one of many clear real-life examples throughout the book that well illustrate a complex philosophical point – of how the news of her aunt's death motivates her to book a flight to Boston to attend her funeral (pp. 76–7). As Morris explains it, trying to use causation or reasoning to explain the connection between receiving a phone call

relaying the news of the death and the booking of a flight to Boston, will fail to adequately capture the situation. There is no causal link (in the physical sense) between the phone call and the flight. Nor is ‘a *rational* story’ (p. 77) sufficient, as although the phone call may provide a reason to book a flight, that reason is only meaningful within a whole ‘situation’ which would implicitly encompass cultural norms, individual circumstances and an entire ‘background of significance’. The concept of motive, draws attention to Merleau-Ponty’s insight that any understanding of perception or action occurs within a complex ‘system’ of ‘Self-others-things’ within a shared ‘interworld’ layered with social, cultural and embodied meaning (pp. 109–10).

Despite these points, and others, of originality in the description of Merleau-Ponty’s ideas, Morris’s book is not entirely devoid of shortcomings. In what is perhaps a minor and pedantic criticism, Morris fails to make mention of the notorious inaccuracies of translation that litter Colin Smith’s 1962 translation of *Phenomenology of Perception* (which she employs as her English language reference to the text) and the subsequent repagination of the text in the Routledge Classics series in 2002 (see Timothy Mooney’s recent review of Donald A. Landes translation of *PP* for a protracted discussion of these translation issues). Of note, although she discusses Merleau-Ponty’s conception of the ‘body schema’ at length, she does not discuss the terminological discrepancies between ‘*schema corporeal*’ and Smith’s, at times, conceptually misleading translation of this term into ‘body image’, perhaps failing to signal to a novice reader the conceptual distinctions and confusions between the two terms. Further, in her discussion of proprioception, Morris remarks on Merleau-Ponty’s rare use of the term – she cites in passing an instance in *The Structure of Behavior* – commenting that ‘he evidently uses it in the sense he uses “introceptivity” in *PP*’ (p. 54). In fact proprioception [*proprioceptivité*] is a term used by Merleau-Ponty in *Phenomenology of Perception*; however, it is entirely lost in Colin Smith’s English translation of the passage in which it appears (see: *PP* p. 113, cf. p. 125 of the 1945 French original).

However, these are admittedly minor complaints. What Morris does succeed in doing in this introductory guidebook is to remind newcomers to phenomenology, perhaps accustomed to a more explanatory Anglo-Analytic style of philosophy, that Merleau-Ponty’s aim with the *Phenomenology of Perception* is not to demonstrate ‘*the correctness* of his vision of perception and the perceived world’ (p. 144), but, instead, to perhaps free philosophers from the grip of scientism by offering a description of perception and lived subjectivity that arises from *immediate experience* rather than theoretical explanations of it. As Morris points out, Merleau-Ponty endeavors to ‘help his readers “re-learn to look at the world”, to “rediscover the world in which we live, yet which we are always prone to forget”’ (p. 144).

As far as introductory guidebooks go, this one does much more than an adequate job. Morris's writing style is clear and engaging and her philosophical claims are accurate. She offers not only a summary of Merleau-Ponty's ideas, but further situates them within the thought of his predecessors, contemporaries and successors. As *Phenomenology of Perception* is a dense work, and it is often necessary to read at length around any given passage in order to determine whether Merleau-Ponty is offering his own argument or merely setting up an opposing position in order to be able to refute it more effectively, Morris's efforts to situate Merleau-Ponty's arguments in the philosophical and theoretical contexts within which he was writing are all the more important for students coming to his work for the first time. In addition, Morris makes salient the significance of his ideas within philosophy and points to current and future threads of inquiry where Merleau-Ponty's thought has relevance. For a first introduction to Merleau-Ponty, this book hits the mark.

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*The Memory of Place: A Phenomenology of the Uncanny*

By Dylan Trigg

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In the introduction to his book *Material Phenomenology* (Fordham University Press, 2008) Michel Henry states: 'Today the renewal of phenomenology is only possible on one condition: that the question that determines it entirely and that is philosophy's own *raison d'être* be renewed' (p. 2). Written twenty years ago this may seem irrelevant. However, continental philosophy's *raison d'être* is undergoing a shift through both the advancement of new materialist theories, and to what is called Speculative Realism. In this sense, phenomenology can be seen to have fallen into disrepute, consigned to the history of philosophy. In various ways, however, Dylan Trigg's work *The Memory of Place: A Phenomenology of the Uncanny* exemplifies the pertinence of the phenomenological method. Through an analysis of the body, place, and time, phenomenology becomes something beyond the traditional subject-object divide, and the demarcation between noema and phenomena. In what follows we will see how.

Rather than give a chapter by chapter analysis, I want to focus on three main themes (body, time and place) of *The Memory of Place*, and