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NOTE

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Starting with Merleau-Ponty, by Katherine J. Morris. New York: Continuum, 2012. 216 pp. ISBN 978-1-84706-281-9 $24

Maurice Merleau-Ponty begins *Phenomenology of Perception* with a succession of examples. He describes a patch of light on a red carpet (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 5). He invites us to consider the perceptual experience of the area behind our back (6). He calls attention to the boundary separating the visible from the invisible (6). He discusses Muller-Lyer's visual illusion (6); the perception of a crystal (11); the conjunction of three points in space (14); gestalt shifting between negative and positive space (16). On one reading, the main themes of the book are revealed in these examples. And the brief, somewhat mysterious, remarks Merleau-Ponty offers about them at the start are only slowly unpacked in the subsequent 400 pages. Returning to the introduction after finishing *Phenomenology of Perception* is like rereading the first chapter of a mystery novel after having finished the book—it is suddenly so obvious, so inevitable. Everything we came to know explicitly was already there in the start!

Consider Muller-Lyer's visual illusion. We think that what is interesting and important about Muller-Lyer's illusion is that the two horizontal lines 'look' or 'appear' unequal in length when they 'are' 'actually' equal in length. We must then explain this difference between appearance and reality with as few contortions as possible. How can things appear one way when they are some other way? What is this difference between what is experienced and what is real? And so forth? Any theory of perception can answer these questions. Merleau-Ponty, however, does something quite remarkable about Muller-Lyer's illusion. He objects to the premise that the lines look, but are not, unequal in length. The two horizontal lines, he asserts, are 'neither equal nor unequal' (6). How can that be? Merleau-Ponty's answer is that 'the visual field is this strange milieu in which contradictory notions intertwine' (6). Now how can *that* be? One must read *Phenomenology of Perception* to unpack what he means. But not all of us have years to devote to studying a single text in order to solve the mystery that Merleau-Ponty adumbrates. Some of us are impatient detectives. We want to be told 'who done it', in which case, we should read Katherine Morris's *Starting with Merleau-Ponty*.

Morris's excellent book helps us along, just enough, making *Phenomenology of Perception* accessible to the interested, 'both to undergraduates reading philosophy . . . and to more advanced students or professionals in psychology, psychiatry, sociology and anthropology' (Morris 2012: xv). And she does so without committing herself to the kind of Merleau-Ponty scholarship that contains strong ideological prejudices—or worse, tendentious philosophical commitments. This may frustrate scholars who believe there is only one proper reading of *Phenomenology of Perception*. But then this is not their book. *Starting with Merleau-Ponty* is good and exciting because it is for the curious and the uninitiated.

The structure of *Starting with Merleau-Ponty* mirrors the structure of *Phenomenology of Perception*, loosely tracking the chapters of the book. It is not organized by idea, like some other companion texts (e.g., Carman 2008; Romdehn-Romluc 2011). Morris's choice to

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proceed in this fashion makes sense because *Phenomenology of Perception* is organized dialectically: key concepts are introduced in a somewhat incomplete or transitory fashion, and then reappear throughout the book, in each instance gaining meaning, until they are more fully concretized by the end. For instance, in *Phenomenology of Perception*, it is significant in its own right that the perception of length is discussed in relation to Muller-Lyer's illusion in the 'Introduction,' and *not* 300 pages later in 'The Thing in the Natural World,' where the perception of length is treated as a complex relation between perceiver and perceived, and is manifest as a 'bodily attitude' that 'oscillates around a norm' (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 316). Though, at that later point, we understand why it made sense to say, about Muller-Lyer's illusion, that the two horizontal lines are neither equal nor unequal in length.

Morris starts her book with helpful instructions in the *Preface*—identifying aspects of Merleau-Ponty's writing style that might flummox first-time readers of *Phenomenology of Perception*. She reports that the views Merleau-Ponty rejects are often presented so sympathetically and compellingly that they can be difficult to distinguish from his own view. She acknowledges that his central ideas are often tucked in to the middle of paragraphs or footnotes. She warns that key concepts can be referred to by name, but only a handful of times. She prepares us for his presentation of scientific work, which can be unexpectedly detailed.

Stylistic caveats noted, *Chapter 1: Starting with Merleau-Ponty* proceeds with Morris situating Merleau-Ponty's work in relation to classical phenomenology. She offers an interesting gloss on *Phenomenology of Perception* as attempting to reconcile the apparent irreconcilable differences between Husserl and Heidegger (noting that contemporary Merleau-Ponty scholarship is divided over whether his phenomenology is more Husserlian or Heideggerian). The difference amounts to whether phenomenology is a kind of transcendental idealism (in which case phenomenology is the practice of characterizing the invariant structures of mental phenomena) or a kind of existential philosophy (in which case phenomenology is the practice of characterizing the invariant structures of human embodiment and embeddedness). Morris claims that Merleau-Ponty offers a 'Husserlian phenomenology, despite its appearance of entailing some form of idealism, is after all an existential philosophy and is, to that extent at least, compatible with Heidegger's' (Morris 2012: 10). To this end, she describes how Merleau-Ponty renders key themes from Husserl's writings as consistent with Heidegger's work.

Morris also introduces some distinctly Merleau-Pontyan themes right away: the *ambiguous*, the *between*, *indeterminacy*, *pre-awareness*, and the *reciprocal* (17). The importance of these motifs for understanding *Phenomenology of Perception* cannot be overstated. Morris justifiably frames *Phenomenology of Perception* as using these themes to undermine a particular set of assumptions, ones that when lumped together, amount to a general form of a theory of perception that Morris calls 'the Picture.' Merleau-Ponty identifies theories that are committed, in one way or another, to the Picture by using the general terms 'intellectualism,' 'empiricism,' and 'gestalt psychology.' According to Morris, 'this picture can appear wholly natural, but actually embodies a number of assumptions. The dominant overall trajectory of *Phenomenology of Perception* can be seen as an attempt at a root-and-branch upheaval of these assumptions' (xvii–xviii).

The Picture characterizes perception as a two-part process whereby: (1) determinate qualities of the world are registered by the objective body as stimuli; and (2) stimuli are transformed by the subjective mind into determinate sensations. If veridical perception occurs, then the sensory experience correlates with what is experienced in the world. As

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compelling as this seems, the Merleau-Pontyan themes Morris highlights all strive to undermine aspects of this view.

For example, in *Chapter 2: 'Intellectual Prejudices' in Analyses of Perception*, Morris describes how the Picture relies on determinacy—of the world, of stimuli, of sensation, of perception. As such, the Picture cannot accommodate *indeterminacy*, which Merleau-Ponty argues is an essential feature of perceptual experience. Not only do we perceive indeterminate things (indistinct sounds, blurry objects) without altogether failing to perceive, but 'clear' perception, too, involves some degree of indeterminacy (along the occluded sides of objects, or in the boundary of the visual field). Morris shows how Merleau-Ponty uncovers the insufficiency of the Picture in explaining these perceptual phenomena.

Morris presents some of Merleau-Ponty's central ideas, about the body and its relation to perception, in Chapters 3 and 4. In *Chapter 3: The Body*, we are offered an alternative to the Picture's concept of the body as an object. Merleau-Ponty recalls that our relation to our bodies is fundamentally different than that to any other object: witness proprioception (awareness of the feelings in the body) and kinesthesia (awareness of the position, orientation, and movement of the body). These observations encourage us to acknowledge the body, 'not as a *special* object, but as *not an object*' (51). This does not mean the body is a subject, however. Eschewing the orthodox dichotomy, and instead falling somewhere *between* object and subject, Merleau-Ponty offers us the notion of the 'body schema.' Morris characterizes the body schema as an amalgamation of acquired motor skills which are both directed towards the world (as 'motor intentions') and are summoned by the world (as 'the power to reckon with the possible') (68).

In *Chapter 4: The Body and the Perceived World*, Morris further develops the idea of the body schema and its correlative notions of 'perceptual motives' and 'non-thetic awareness' (or *pre-awareness*) (76). Morris writes that environmental features neither cause nor supply reasons for the exercise of motor skills. Instead, they 'motivate' them in a 'non-thetic' way—that is, they guide them without our being fully aware of them. To closely paraphrase one of Morris's examples, what first strikes us when we look at a painting may be a figure in the distance. A critic might tell us that the figure is made to look distant by varying the size of other objects in the painting. If we want to describe properly our first encounter with the painting, however, this posit both does and does not capture the experience. While the critic's lesson is not a total surprise (we were not unaware of the interposed objects), what initially hit us was the figure's distance. 'The size of the painted tree, the intervening objects painted between the one tree and the others "motivated" the perception of the distance . . . [and] we were non-thetically aware of them prior to our explicit reflection' (78). Outside the museum, depth perception is similarly non-thetically motivated, by such things as ocular convergence, binocular disparity, size of the image on the retina, variations in hue. Morris rightly observes, following Merleau-Ponty, that these are all exercises of motor skills. As such, 'the non-thetic awareness of the motives of perception is . . . a bodily awareness' (88). The body is aware of ocular convergence or divergence as the eyes rotate in their sockets; it is aware of how the image on the retina fluctuates by moving forward and backward; etcetera. The painter achieves technically what the body knows practically.

Morris turns to the topic of other minds in *Chapter 5: Others*. There she describes how the Picture involves a fundamental asymmetry between the first-person 'I' and the third-person 'other', which can generate skepticism about the existence of other minds. To address this skepticism, Merleau-Ponty claims that my access to my own existence and experience is 'the reverse side' of my access to the other's existence and experience (103).

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This leads him, according to Morris, to reconceive the self-other relation in terms of a second-person 'you' or 'a first person who is not me' (Merleau-Ponty 1992: 96). I live in a world with you that we perceive together. This shared world of perception (or 'interworld') is experienced, in characteristic Merleau-Pontyan fashion, as a form of bodily *reciprocity*. To give a very crude example, I perceive the occluded side of the water glass on the café table because my companion sitting across from me sees it, and I transpose my experience into his body. Morris writes, 'Others' (actual and possible) perceptions of objects form the horizon of my own, and vice versa . . . There is a kind of "postural impregnation" of my own body by the conduct I witness' (Morris 2012: 109; 117).

Morris devotes the final chapter of her book for a discussion of the reception of Merleau-Ponty in contemporary philosophical discourse. *Chapter 5: Merleau-Ponty Vivant* introduces appropriations of Merleau-Ponty to feminism, embodied mind theories, and the philosophy of illness. Morris's list is not exhaustive, certainly, but demonstrates the ways in which Merleau-Ponty scholarship is alive in present-day discourse. 'I want to urge that *Phenomenology of Perception* really is a classic and not a "museum piece.". . .It is rather an invitation for us to take up where he left off: to think with him, and against him, in new directions' (xviii).

If one seeks criticism of *Starting with Merleau-Ponty*, there are instances when Morris strains to present Merleau-Ponty's ideas simply and clearly. In these rare cases, we might wonder: is the presentation of the Merleau-Pontyan idea confusing because the idea is complex, or confusing because the presentation is inadequate? This puzzlement is not unique to *Starting with Merleau-Ponty*. It is a practical inevitability of writing an introductory companion text to a book whose author advocated 'a philosophy of the ambiguous' (Waelhens 1963: xviii). *Phenomenology of Perception* revels in mixed concepts and notions that don't quite have a name; it is critical of a standard kind of philosophical reflection, works against intuitions and prejudices, and fractures traditional binarisms. This disregard for 'easiness' can be frustrating, or seem wilful. But with the proper guidance, as that offered by Morris, it can be intellectually liberating. She claims that the purpose of her book is 'to give the reader some help in getting started with reading Merleau-Ponty, to forestall some misunderstandings that may get in the way of grasping his way of looking at things, and, most importantly, to give an indication of why that effort is worth it' (Morris 2012: xv). Insofar as these are her ends, she surely succeeds. Should we then start with Merleau-Ponty? Yes, with Morris's guidance, absolutely.

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***The Extended Mind*, by Richard Menary (ed.). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010, 390 pp. ISBN 9780262014038**

Externalism in the philosophy and science of the mind comes in varieties and degrees. Since the 1970s, familiar discussions of the externality of mind have been concerned with what Susan Hurley called in *The Extended Mind* the 'what' (question) of mental states—what makes it the case that mental states have the content they do. Content or 'what-externalism' set the framework for a prolific research programme in the naturalization of mental, *i.e.* intentional content and is now, by and large, mainstream philosophy of mind. Recently, content externalism has also been an incubator of a family of more problematic views grouped under the label of 'active externalism'. *The Extended Mind* is the definitive point of entry into this literature. The volume, edited by Richard Menary, gathers together contributions on the most pressing issues of active externalism, from its founding statement to the latest wave of research, by some of the most authoritative voices among friends and opponents of the 'extended mind thesis'.

The best way to describe the active approach to mind and cognition is by opposition to 'passive' versions of (content) externalism. The general idea of the traditional approach championed by Putnam and Burge is that mental states acquire their contents in virtue of a relation between internal states of the brain and the social and physical environment. This relation is often presented as a causal-historical chain that is distal in nature, so the behaviour of an agent *in the present* can be indistinguishable from that of one's twin on Twin Earth, that is, somebody with the same internal make-up living in a (slightly) different environment. But to say that current differences in the environment do not involve differences in the truth conditions of the mental states generating behaviour suggests that actions in the here and now are caused by mechanisms that are entirely located in the head of agents. Hence the unwanted conclusion that content externalism is compatible with an internalist view of the 'vehicles' of cognition—the view that those content-enabling mechanisms are all internal to the skin (skull) of the agent.

Active externalists challenge vehicle internalism with an approach that is broader in scope, and more radical in nature, than content externalism. The core claim is that the externality of content depends on the externality of vehicle. Mental content is partially individuated by external features of the world because it is enabled by resources and processes which do not fall into the boundaries of *either* the biological organism, *or* the physical environment, *or* some non-neural artefact, etc., but spread across all these aspects of the world. Active externalists are thus content externalists in spirit, but vice versa is not generally true. Furthermore, active approaches to cognition are so called because they draw conclusions about the extended mind from research on the way actual agents perform cognitive tasks in everyday life. The claim of extended mind is thus an empirical claim, one that relies primarily on scientific observations about the dynamics of cognition and not just on arguments based on Twin-Earth-like thought experiments.

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