
Feminist Interpretations of Maurice Merleau-Ponty

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Maurice Merleau-Ponty's reconceptualization of the subject as an embodied subject has inspired many feminists to engage with his work. The focus on the role of the body serves as the ideal framework for feminists to theorize the relevance of sexual differences. Arguably, his work has spawned an entirely new area of feminist philosophy. Admittedly, poststructuralist theories were already addressing the body, but the framework in poststructuralist theories following the works of Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault concentrated on the social construction, disciplinary, and, consequently, constrictive aspects of embodiment as demonstrated in the early works of Judith Butler and Susan Bordo. These works still inherently, if not absolutely, adhered to rigid philosophical dualities of mind and body, subject and object. Merleau-Ponty's work

inspires phenomenological explorations that theorize the body as integrally related to subjectivity and engagement with the world, challenging feminists to creatively reconceptualize being in the world.

Feminist Interpretations of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, edited by Dorothea Olkowski and Gail Weiss, is a collection of more recent engagements with the work of Merleau-Ponty. Through many original and a few reprinted pieces, this collection demonstrates that there still remains much to explore and develop with and against Merleau-Ponty's corpus. As a collection of more recent works, some familiarity with Merleau-Ponty's work and the initial feminist engagements with his work (i.e., the critical writings of Butler and Luce Irigaray as well as the early explorative essays by Iris Marion Young) should prove helpful for a thorough appreciation of the force of these articles. Clearly, the audience for this anthology is not comprised of students in an introductory class on phenomenology and the body, or of feminist interpretations of Merleau-Ponty's work, nor of philosophers beginning to familiarize themselves with this area of philosophy.

The anthology does not place the twelve articles under any subheadings; I take the liberty of making the following groups. Sonia Kruks and Beata Stawarska's articles address the role of anonymity or generality in perception and one's being in the world in Merleau-Ponty's work. Interestingly, the two refer to this anonymity and reach completely opposite conclusions as to whether such anonymity makes seeing difference possible. Kruks believes the anonymity makes seeing difference possible, whereas Stawarska (consistent with Shannon Sullivan's criticism of Merleau-Ponty's work) argues that such anonymity obfuscates the possibility of seeing difference. Jorella Andrews and David Brubaker explore how ethics might develop within Merleau-Ponty's work through the ethics of ambiguity and the ethics of care, respectively. Three articles by Judith Butler, Vicki Kirby, and Ann Murphy defend Merleau-Ponty's work from Irigaray's criticisms in her book *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*. Johanna Oksala's article defends Merleau-Ponty's work from Butler's early searing criticism in her article, "Sexual Ideology and Phenomenological Description." The remaining articles seem to be in categories unto themselves. Dorothea Olkowski's article critically addresses Merleau-Ponty's earlier works on child psychology. The remaining three articles by Helen Fielding, Gail Weiss, and Laura Doyle develop and apply Merleau-Ponty's work into relatively new subject areas: the perception of color, the cityscape, and the prison cells of torture survivors.

The articles in the anthology range from being primarily impressionistic to sustaining systematic arguments. An excellent article and an example of a sustained argument is Judith Butler's "Sexual Difference as a Question of Ethics: Alterities of the Flesh in Irigaray and Merleau-Ponty." I have been for some time now wary of Irigaray's criticisms of Merleau-Ponty's last text, *The Visible and the Invisible*. As such, I was pleased to read three articles effectively defending Merleau-Ponty's theories from Irigaray. Admirably, Irigaray concentrates on the role of alterity; she situates the ethical relation in the moment of incommensurability. She carefully attends to always making possible open questions and not completely knowing others. With these concerns, Irigaray contends that Merleau-Ponty's notion of the *flesh* totalizes and closes off the possibility of asking about the "never yet known, the open future" (115). To challenge her contentions, Butler begins by denying Irigaray's claim that *flesh*, as that which composes all sensate experience, is maternal. Rather, Butler asks, "[W]hy does the maternal figure that origination, when the maternal itself must be produced from a larger world of sensuous relations?" (121). With this denial, Butler explains that Irigaray's position that the flesh

totalizes relies upon a psychoanalytic theory, in which "[t]he mother becomes for him the site of a narcissistic reflection of himself, and she is thus eclipsed as a site of alterity, and reduced to the occasion for a narcissistic mirroring" (119). Hence, denying that *flesh* is the maternal, Butler disagrees with Irigaray's claim that Merleau-Ponty's notion of the flesh is narcissistic or totalizing. Butler writes, "[i]n what is perhaps the least persuasive of Irigaray's arguments, she suggests that Merleau-Ponty not only repudiates this 'connection' with the maternal in classic masculine fashion, but that he then reappropriates this 'connection' for his own solipsistic theory of the flesh" (119).

Denying that the flesh is totalizing, Butler quickly points out that Irigaray unconvincingly depicts the role of alterity in ethics as sexual difference. Under such circumstances, Butler asks: "[C]an there even be a relation of fundamental alterity between those of the same sex?" (116). Butler suggests replacing Irigaray's infinitely open question with the question of "how to treat the Other well when the Other is never fully other, when one's own separateness is a function of one's dependency on the Other" (116). Butler refuses Irigaray's framework that ethics lay in the moments of incommensurability. Butler, in agreement with Merleau-Ponty, invites conceptualizing the ethical moment as arising from being "implicated in the world of flesh of which he is a part...to realize precisely that he cannot disavow such a world without disavowing himself, that he is abandoned to a world that is not his own" (123).

Laura Doyle's article, "Bodies Inside/out: Violation and Resistance from the Prison Cell to *The Bluest Eye*," is an example of an impressionistic article that explores a few quite startling ways of thinking through Merleau-Ponty's theories, especially the relation of reversibility. She draws quite remarkable examples of the chiasmatic relation "to understand this paradoxical dynamic in which bodily vulnerability forms the ground of resistance" (183). Doyle explores two prison testimonies (Lena Constante, in *The Silent Escape* and Jacobo Timerman, in *Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number*) and Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye*. Focusing on the prison testimonies, I find quite striking the following three of Doyle's descriptions of the chiasmatic intertwining and reversal: our relation to our body passageways, our relation to things, and the relation of space and time. First, in regards to our body passageways, Doyle describes the event of the "Dirty Protest," making sense of the experiences and actions of the Irish prisoners in Long Kesh during the early 1980s. She writes, "[i]f the guards turned the prisoners' bodies inside out by making them squat over mirrors while they searched their anuses with metal instruments, the prisoners carried this logic further by turning their cells into anuses replete with shit-covered walls. A guard entering the prisoner's cell in effect was forcibly made to enter the hole he had forcibly probed" (185-86).

Second, in regard to our relation to things, Doyle challenges too simplistic an understanding of our relation to things. In our modern day capitalistic society, I had too easily dismissed any attachment to things as driven by consumerism. But Doyle explains that for prisoners, things have meaning beyond the act of purchasing and ownership. Things serve as an "organic tie between life and death" in their promise of a future (192). She writes, "[t]hrown as we are into the world of space and a future, normally things anchor us. They can do so because things survive beyond us; we live from their power of sustained presencing" (193). And precisely because of this function of things, prisoners are especially vulnerable to their seizure. Moreover, the case of Timerman's torturer wearing Timerman's watch and using his wife's lighter demonstrates that things can betray their original owners in their capacity to continue to

function for others. In this sense, Doyle describes the doubled, reversible relationship of human beings with things.

Third, Doyle explicates a quite remarkable reversal between space and time. For Timerman, locked in a cell without light and, consequently, no sense of a spatial horizon, but with endless time, “‘Time’...become[s] dimensionless, obliterating” (197). Doyle describes that “[s]o fully intertwined is the body with its surround that collapsing the external surround closes off the body and an opening of the surround likewise relaunches the body” (197). Contrary to the usual affiliation of infinity and potentiality with the future of time, deprived of a spatial horizon, Timerman does not experience time as opening to the future. Evoking Merleau-Ponty’s theoretical framework and yet exceeding the reaches of his work, Doyle utilizes his analysis to good effect with unusual subject matters.

Feminist Interpretations of Merleau-Ponty definitely provides much to think about and demonstrates, as Weiss writes, “new ways of doing philosophy” (164).