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Review of “Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Basic Writings”

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This volume fills a significant gap in the world of Merleau-Ponty studies, insofar as it provides an introductory collection of his writings. This is not the first Merleau-Ponty anthology; in 1969 Alden Fisher edited *The Essential Writings of Merleau-Ponty*, and in 1993 Northwestern University Press published *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, but the former is now dated and of limited availability, while the latter focuses primarily on Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of painting. As the title indicates, the present volume collects Merleau-Ponty’s basic writings, so the reader benefits from a selection of texts that spans Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical career (which ended tragically with his untimely death in 1961) as well as his broad range of interests. Coupled with *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, which was just published this year, this anthology gives the first-time reader some valuable resources to engage with this provocative thinker.

The collection of primary texts opens with a prospectus of Merleau-Ponty’s work, drawn up by Merleau-Ponty himself in 1952-53. In his account, the early work of *The Structure of Behavior* and *The Phenomenology of Perception* “sought to restore the world of perception.” This involves a rethinking of the nature of perception. “The perceiving mind,” he writes, “is an incarnated mind,” which demands that philosophy “re-establish the roots of the mind in its body and its world” (34). This task sets Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology against two types of opponent: On the one hand, behaviorism and any other reductive doctrine that would “treat perception as a simple result of the action of external things on our body.” On the other hand, Merleau-Ponty contends against mind/body dualism and other positions that would set consciousness apart from the body and its world, as though the mind were an autonomous, purely contemplative reality superimposed on a “thinglike body” (34-35). While these positions might seem like polar opposites, Merleau-Ponty demonstrates how they both arise from a fundamental misunderstanding of the way mind is embodied corporeally.

Merleau-Ponty’s first book, *The Structure of Behavior*, is the beginning of his attempt to correct this misunderstanding with a proper understanding of the relation between consciousness and nature. ‘Nature’ designates the multiplicity of events that are external to each other, and bound together by causal relations (43). Inquiries—whether physical, biological, or psychological—that attempt to explain the relation between consciousness and nature in terms of causes and effects have a tendency to treat these relations as “those of an automatic machine which needs an outside agent to set off its pre-established mechanisms” (35). At this point Merleau-Ponty had not yet developed
a full-fledged phenomenology as an alternative to this scientific approach, but he employs modern psychology (such as Gestalt theory) and physiology to re-think the relationships “between the perceiving organism and its milieu” (35). He starts ‘from below’ with an analysis of behavior, with the aim of “defining anew” the traditional distinctions between the mental and the physiological (45).

In beginning ‘from below,’ however, Merleau-Ponty does not undertake a ‘bottom-up’ approach to these questions. On the contrary, he concludes that we must not try to explain the higher by the lower, nor should we try to explain the lower by the higher, since the structure of behavior is such that we cannot situate it in either ‘lower’ or ‘higher’ orders. In his words, “in the experience of behavior, I effectively surpass the alternative of the for-itself (pour-soi) and the in-itself (en soi)… The structure of behavior as it presents itself to perceptual experience is neither thing nor consciousness; and it is this which renders it opaque to the mind” (48).

Merleau-Ponty goes on to contend that behavior belongs neither within the domain of things, nor within the domain of ideas. Rather, behavior is a form (49). A form is a configuration in which the elements of sensation are determined by their function in the larger context of a perceptual whole. For instance, perception of a particular colour differs depending on whether one perceives it as figure or as ground. This notion of form also pertains to “the mode of existence of the primitive objects of perception,” which “are lived as realities…rather than known as true objects” (52-53). To illustrate this point Merleau-Ponty offers the following example:

For the player in action the football field is not an ‘object,’ that is, the ideal term which can give rise to an indefinite multiplicity of perspectival views and remain equivalent under its apparent transformations. It is pervaded with lines of force (the ‘yard lines’; those which demarcate the ‘penalty area’) and articulated in sectors (for example, the ‘openings’ between the adversaries) which call for a certain mode of action and which initiate and guide the action as if the player were unaware of it. The field itself is not given to him, but present as the immanent term of his practical intentions; the player becomes one with it and feels the direction of the ‘goal,’ for example, just as immediately as the vertical and the horizontal planes of his own body. It would not be sufficient to say that consciousness inhabits this milieu. At this moment consciousness is nothing other than the dialectic of milieu and action. Each maneuver undertaken by the player modifies the character of the field and establishes in it new lines of force in which the action in turn unfolds and is accomplished, again altering the phenomenal field (53).

The anti-Cartesian implications of this analysis are obvious: “Perceptual behavior emerges from these relations to a situation and to an environment which are not the workings of a pure, knowing subject” (35). This is why Merleau-Ponty draws a distinction between the “geographical environment” and the “behavioral environment,” just as he distinguishes between “geographical behavior” (as “the sum of the movements actually executed by the animal in their objective relation with the physical world”) and behavior in the proper sense of the term, which considers these movements “in their internal articulation and as a kinetic melody gifted with a meaning” (50-51). These meaningful movements are not simply a sequence of events within the world of things, since “they carry within themselves an immanent intelligibility” (51).

It is fruitful to read this early work before embarking on the more formidable work The
Phenomenology of Perception, since throughout the latter we find references to the former. In his words, the first book locates its concerns “at the emergence of perceptual behaviors,” whereas the second book installs us “in them in order to pursue the analysis of this exceptional relation between the subject and its body and its world” (35). In this work the theme of embodied subjectivity comes to the fore, as Merleau-Ponty challenges those positions that conceive of the body and the world in purely objective terms. As is the case with behavior, when we understand the body solely as a thing among things, we cannot account for the way the lived body inhabits the world. Merleau-Ponty goes on to explore the way bodily intentionality informs, among other things, our spatiality and motility (Part I, Chapter 3), perception (Part II), and intersubjectivity (Part II, Chapter 4).

The selections from The Phenomenology of Perception comprise roughly half of this volume, which is appropriate given the size of the original text, and its significance in Merleau-Ponty’s corpus. From this work we move on to a selection from The Prose of the World, entitled “The Algorithm and the Mystery of Language,” in which Merleau-Ponty deals with the mysterious manner in which linguistic meaning develops. The volume also includes the famous chapter from The Visible and the Invisible entitled “The Intertwining – The Chiasm.” Here Merleau-Ponty introduces his notion of “flesh,” suggesting that the body opens into the dimensions of both subject and object. In his words, “my body is at once phenomenal body and objective body” (253). Here again we see Merleau-Ponty seeking to “avoid the classical impasses,” such as the oppositions between the In-Itself and the For-Itself, the material and the spiritual (254, 256). In this work, which remained incomplete at his death, Merleau-Ponty seeks to surpass these false dilemmas by tracing the chiasmic intertwining between the two dimensions in flesh. We also get a taste of Merleau-Ponty’s contribution to aesthetics via two essays. Like his philosophy of language, Merleau-Ponty’s aesthetics is thoroughly shaped by his understanding of consciousness as embodied. It is appropriate that the present volume includes both “Cézanne’s Doubt,” which is contemporary with his work in The Phenomenology of Perception, as well as “Eye and Mind,” which exhibits the influence of its contemporary, The Visible and the Invisible.

The volume closes with a selection from Adventures of the Dialectic, which gives us a glimpse of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of history and politics. Regarding the last topic, one might note the absence of Merleau-Ponty’s Humanism and Terror, which addresses “the Communist problem,” in particular the violence employed within the Soviet Union. Whatever the importance of this work, it would seem the decision to exclude it from a collection of “basic writings” is the correct one, insofar as this aspect of Merleau-Ponty’s legacy is somewhat less significant in contemporary philosophical discussion.

On the whole this volume benefits from judicious editing, as it gives a good representation of Merleau-Ponty’s corpus without yielding an unwieldy tome. Baldwin’s introduction is helpful, and its critical posture insightful insofar as it offers some basic cues for the ongoing task of understanding and applying Merleau-Ponty in contemporary discussions of metaphysics, epistemology, and philosophy of science. The volume is also well-organized. Baldwin’s introductions to the selections effectively orient the reader, which is particularly helpful since the continuity between the passages might be less obvious otherwise. That said, even a complete reading of Phenomenology of Perception can be disorienting insofar as the reader can lose site of land during Merleau-Ponty’s lengthy discussions. For this reason Baldwin inserts section headings taken from Merleau-Ponty’s own synopsis of the work. Such a collection cannot replace a reading
of these works in their entirety, but it does comprise an inspiring overture to a more in-depth reading of Merleau-Ponty.

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