

Late Merleau-Ponty, revived

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Since his untimely death in 1961, Merleau-Ponty has undergone a *postmortem* decline in interest, though he has never fallen entirely out of view: not only has he retained a following among philosophers, but he has attracted considerable attention from psychologists, sociologists and literary theorists. Now, however, there are signs of a more general revival, with the publication of a number of books and articles on his work, inspired in part, perhaps, by the reflection of some of his central themes in the contemporary analytic debates between such figures as Evans, McDowell and Peacocke. Much of the revived interest focuses on Merleau-Ponty's later thought, as expressed in the posthumously published *The Visible and the Invisible*, and other works written in the last years of his life.

Three recent books are part of this revival.* *Nature* is based on notes for three courses that Merleau-Ponty delivered at the Collège de France, in 1956–7, 1957–8 and 1959–60. The concept of nature was crucial to his later thought. The other two books are commentaries on his philosophy. The work by Mauro Carbone is entirely concerned with Merleau-Ponty's later thought. The *Cambridge Companion* is a collection of essays, most of which at least take into account developments in his later period.

Merleau-Ponty's later philosophy is often presented as a move away from the Husserlian phenomenology of his major early work, *Phenomenology of Perception*, in the direction of more Heideggerian ontological concerns. But this is rather oversimplified. Even in *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty was a 'phenomenologist' only in the sense that he had an aversion to abstract theorizing; but, as Carman and Hansen rightly point out in their Introduction to the *Cambridge Companion*, he was already dissatisfied with Husserl's sharp distinction between subject and object. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, he chides

himself for not being sufficiently dissatisfied on this issue in his earlier work, and tries to set out more plainly a rejection of the distinction. But, despite what he says there, the basis for such a rejection was already present in his earlier conceptions of embodied subjectivity and of human being as being-in-the-world. In *The Visible and the Invisible* we can see his attempt, never completed because of his death, to develop the logical implications of these conceptions; and in his lectures on *Nature*, written at the same time, we can find clues to help us in interpreting his aims in that work.

The unfortunate thing, from this point of view, is that what we have of these lectures is not a full text of what was said, but only a version based in part on notes taken by an unknown student who attended the first two courses and in part on Merleau-Ponty's own very sketchy and often illegible working notes. It is impossible, of course, to place too much reliance on this kind of evidence: it is often obscure in expression, and it is always difficult to tell whether the text expresses Merleau-Ponty's actual thinking or simply the student's perhaps garbled understanding of it. Ironically, instead of using the lectures to help in understanding *The Visible and the Invisible*, commentators often have to use their interpretation of the latter (itself an incomplete and obscure text) as a key to understanding the lectures. Nevertheless, in the absence of much else as evidence for the later thought, we are obliged to make whatever use we can of the clues we can find here.

So what was going on in Merleau-Ponty's later thought? Carbone several times cites a remark of Merleau-Ponty's from another late text, 'Eye and Mind'. Merleau-Ponty there says that he feels that a 'mutation of the relationship between humanity and Being' is taking place in our age, and that what is

* Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Nature: Course Notes from the Collège de France*, compiled and with notes by Dominique Séglaard, trans. Robert Vallier, Northwestern University Press, Evanston IL, 2003. xx + 296 pp., £69.95 hb., £14.95 pb., 0 8101 1445 3 hb., 0 8101 1446 1 pb.; Mauro Carbone, *The Thinking of the Sensible: Merleau-Ponty's A-Philosophy*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston IL, 2004. xi + 93 pp., £39.95 hb., £15.50 pb., 0 8101 1363 5 hb., 0 8101 1986 2 pb.; Taylor Carman and Mark B.N. Hansen, eds, *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005. 406 pp. £40.25 hb., £17.99 pb., 0 521 809894 hb., 521 00777 1 pb.

needed is to develop a 'new ontology' to give expression to that mutation. What is meant by an 'ontology' here seems to be an account of the relation between consciousness and what we are conscious of. 'The ontological problem', Merleau-Ponty says in *Nature*, is 'the problem of the relation between subject and object'. In the Cartesian ontology, which provided the framework for classical physics (and so for science in general in the early modern period), this relation was conceived of as holding between a disembodied and timeless subject and an entirely external objective reality. Classical science is thus based on an 'objectivist' conception of nature, as an 'in-itself' to which we, as subjects, have access only from the outside. This objective reality, which includes our own bodies and living matter in general, is seen as existing in an absolute space and time, and as operating in accordance with causal laws.

Nature

Merleau-Ponty is by no means against science. Indeed, he says in *Nature* that we need 'to be interested in science in order to know what Nature is'. Science is 'experience in its most regulated form', and so must be our starting-point in thinking about what we mean by nature. Nevertheless, ontology is not part of science's business, and must rather result from philosophical reflection on the results of science. One reason why we need a new ontology is that science itself has developed in new directions in the twentieth century. In particular, quantum mechanics has forced us to reformulate the way we see the relationship between ourselves and nature, and above all to abandon the sharp distinction between nature as 'in-itself' and ourselves as 'for-itself'.

In the Cartesian ontology, 'nature' had a double meaning. On the one hand, it meant 'something about which we cannot say anything except through our senses'; on the other, nature 'is known as *constructum*'. In the first series of lectures, Merleau-Ponty reviews some of the attempts made by post-Cartesian philosophers to cope with this ambiguity. Kant, for example, is seen in his transcendental idealism as seeking to unify the two meanings by treating Nature, at least for us, as something constructed out of our representations. But that of course leaves nature-in-itself as something distinct and unknown. This led Schelling to see nature as 'barbaric', as something which appears as if it could be teleologically understood, but in fact is rationally unintelligible, governed by a 'blind mechanism'. In the twentieth century, Bergson followed Schelling by seeing nature as a 'primordial lost non-dividedness',

but governed by an *élan vital* which was neither mechanical nor strictly teleological.

In addition to developments in modern physics, Merleau-Ponty was also impressed by some aspects of modern biology, in particular the new interest in animal *behaviour*, represented by such figures as Konrad Lorenz and Wolfgang Koehler. Even to talk about the things which animals do as 'behaviour' is to regard them as more than a passive response to an external stimulus, governed by mechanical laws (a view which implies that biology is reducible to physics). It is to see them as having a *meaning* for the animal itself, and so as admitting of 'understanding' rather than simply of causal explanation. The 'active/passive' distinction is transcended: animals are actively involved with their surrounding world (*Umwelt*, as the biologist Uexkull called it), but are also 'passive' in the sense that the meaning they can find in the *Umwelt* is constrained by what is actually there, and by their own physiological structures and biological needs. In this way, the scope of intentionality is extended from the conscious activities and cognition of human beings to include the unconscious and non-cognitive relations of animals (and indeed of human beings themselves).

The principal thing that is different about human behaviour, from this point of view, is that human beings have an articulated language, which enables them to formulate more complex and individual purposes for acting. But this does not imply that human beings, unlike other animals, are essentially disembodied. Rather it implies, as Merleau-Ponty already saw in *Phenomenology of Perception*, that the human body is not, as in the Cartesian conception, a mere object in the 'external world' like any other, governed by mechanical laws alone. Human beings as subjects are essentially embodied, so that their being is in-the-world. The human body is a part of nature, but a very special part because of the human possession of speech (*logos*). In this sense, it is the intersection of nature and logos. This notion of human subjectivity as embodied is, as was said, extensively developed in Merleau-Ponty's earlier thought: in his latest period it is radicalized into the concept of 'the flesh', characterized by Merleau-Ponty in *Nature* as 'that-is-openness to things, with participation on their part'. This radicalization effectively abolishes the whole subject-object distinction, making nature part of ourselves, as we are also part of nature. Merleau-Ponty identifies with Whitehead's view that 'There is a sort of reciprocity between Nature and me as a sensing being.'

An embodied being is thus necessarily actively involved with, and inseparable from, its surrounding

world. Indeed, it can be said, in virtue of its purposes as an organism, to ‘sketch out’ its surrounding world. In the higher animals, including human beings, ‘The world is possessed by the animal.’ That is, as Merleau-Ponty goes on to explain, the more complex the nervous system, the more differentiated its responses to the surrounding world can be, and so the more complex the world that the animal can ‘possess’. Physiology has to be understood, on this view, not as an account of a set of passive responses to the external world, but as a means of active engagement with that world. Biology becomes not simply a derivative of physics, but a science which involves the interpretation of the meaning of actions performed by living beings. This is not a return to ‘vitalism’, the idea that there is a life force independent of matter which directs the operations of living organisms – that is simply another form of causal explanation. What Merleau-Ponty seems to be saying rather is that a completely different form of explanation needs to be used, not only of the actions of human beings, but of the neurological processes which lie behind those overt actions.

Merleau-Ponty explicitly says in *Nature* that no new force is involved – that ‘The living being works only with physicochemical elements’. The difference in his view from that of classical mechanistic science is the idea that the animal itself *regulates* the way in which the ‘physicochemical elements’ operate. In turn, the *Umwelt* comes to be characterized in terms of the meaning which objects in it have for the animal. This is most obviously true, for the reasons already stated, of the human animal. Our own bodies are no longer seen as objects, but as relations to the surrounding world, which in turn is defined by its relation to ourselves as embodied and active beings. In his earlier thought, this was expressed in the doctrine that it is our bodies themselves which are the subjects of experience. But in the more radicalized version of his later thought, Merleau-Ponty seeks to escape from the subject–object distinction altogether by means of a concept already mentioned, that of the ‘flesh’. According to this conception, my body is ‘in a circuit with the world, an *Einfühlung* with the world, with the things, with the animals, with other bodies’.

The last three words in that quotation are important. To abolish the distinction between ourselves as subjects and the world of which we are conscious, to see our being as an engagement with the world, is also to abolish any ultimate distinction between ourselves and other human beings (or even, as in the quotation, other animals). Since other human beings are, like ourselves, essentially embodied, our relation to them

is ‘with other bodies’. This enables Merleau-Ponty to incorporate into his thinking the insights of Freudian psychoanalysis, with its emphasis on an all-pervasive sexuality in our relations to the world and to other people. The *Einfühlung*, or empathy, which we as embodied beings have with other embodied beings is identified with the Freudian notion of *libido*, or desire. Our being for others is rooted in this way in the natural libidinal structures of our bodies.

In this way, the conception of human being as being-in-the-world, which had been present in Merleau-Ponty’s thought from the beginning, is given a more radical interpretation. There is no room any longer for a notion of the ‘subject’, for a distinction between the ‘in-itself’ and the ‘for-itself’. Merleau-Ponty’s position is thus sharply differentiated from that of Sartre. Although Sartre too speaks of human being as ‘being-in-the-world’, the distinction between ‘in-itself’ and ‘for-itself’ is crucial for his philosophy. Merleau-Ponty criticizes this element of Sartre’s thought in *Nature*. Sartre’s view, he argues, leads to the conception of the ‘for-itself’ as a ‘nothingness’, which has to be overcome in order to be in the world, an impassable subjectivity set over against both the world and other, equally impassable, subjectivities. (Hence his view that conflict is the essence of our being-for-others, and the dramatic descriptions in *Being and Nothingness* of sadism and masochism as the only possible ways in which we can relate to others, both equally doomed to failure.) We ought rather, Merleau-Ponty argues, to conceive of ‘the true nothingness’ as ‘an *Etwas* [something] always on the horizon’. This in turn implies at least the possibility of relations with other human beings which are not simply sado-masochistic.

But human embodiment is essentially ambiguous. The human body is, as said earlier, at the intersection of nature and logos: the possession of language, and thus of the possibility of articulating subtly differentiated purposes and meanings, makes a significant difference. In particular, it makes it possible to see human existence as not just biological but historical. There cannot be a history of life as such, he argues, because we cannot say what life ‘wants’. We can, on the other hand, say what human beings want, so that for them history is possible.

It should be said, however, that the passage just cited is full of textual uncertainties and editorial queries, so that it is impossible to know whether one has read Merleau-Ponty’s thinking correctly. This illustrates a general point made earlier about this book. What we have in it is not Merleau-Ponty’s own worked-out expression of his thinking, but either a

student's attempts to understand what was said in the lectures or else Merleau-Ponty's very sketchy notes. But we all know both how easy it is for students to get hold of the wrong end of the stick and how little can be contained in a lecturer's outline notes, which are often more of an *aide-memoire* than anything else. If we had the full transcript of the lectures, much more reliance could be placed on them as a source for the later thought. But we don't, and so we have to rely on our interpretations of the fragmentary evidence we have. One might wonder whether there is any real value in publishing such an unreliable text. It certainly gives the reader some of the intellectual exercise and fun of a detective story or an archaeological dig, but it would be unwise to place too much reliance on what emerged from that exercise.

Effects

If (and it is a big 'if') one accepts the reading of these lectures I have given here, some general philosophical worries arise about the direction Merleau-Ponty's thinking was taking in the last years of his life, which was at least in line with, and possibly influential on, the philosophical developments that took place in France in the generation of thinkers who succeeded him. Can we really, for instance, abolish altogether the subject-object distinction? Even to say that they have a reciprocal relation is to accept that they are to some extent distinguishable. And it seems inescapable that different human beings are distinct subjects: to say that we communicate with each other, or are involved with each other, is in itself to imply that we are separate individuals. The paradox of our humanity is that we are distinct from each other and yet essentially related to other subjects. We can reject 'humanism' by rejecting one half of that paradox, but in so doing we would be rejecting something which seems plainly true. It may be true, as the editors of the *Cambridge Companion* say in their Introduction, that 'What might be gained by a return to Merleau-Ponty now ... is a turn away from the antihumanist radicalization of ontology and the cultivation of new ways of exploring the ontological correlation of human beings and the world.' But this falls short of the much more radical ontological claims which seem to be implied by the later work.

The interpretation presented above is also the reading of Merleau-Ponty's later phase found in Mauro Carbone's book, a collection of papers originally delivered to various audiences of Merleau-Ponty specialists. (Carbone, Professor of Aesthetics at the State University of Milan, is a leading scholar of

phenomenology and post-phenomenology, in particular of the work of Merleau-Ponty.) Carbone speaks of Merleau-Ponty's quest for a 'new ontology', emphasizing the notion of 'chiasm' found in a working note of *The Visible and the Invisible*. According to this notion, 'every relation with being is *simultaneously* a taking and a being taken'. Merleau-Ponty sees this as the essence of the change in the relation of humanity to Being which characterizes our age, expressed both in quantum physics and in modern art, literature and music. It means, as Carbone interprets it, that what used to be called subjectivity is not confronted by the world as an object, but is rather a 'resonance chamber for our encounter with the *flesh* of the world'. Merleau-Ponty uses an image derived from Proust to clarify this idea: 'the body is suspended in what it sings, the melody incarnates itself and finds in the body a type of servant'. The world, in other words, expresses itself in the human body.

This reference to Proust is but one illustration of the importance of the novelist to Merleau-Ponty, which is extensively discussed by Carbone. Already in *Phenomenology of Perception* there are references to Proust in connection with Merleau-Ponty's discussion of time. Subjectivity is there identified with temporality, in line with the Proustian tendency to personify time, in which past, present and future flow into each other. This Proustian conception, with which Merleau-Ponty sympathizes, describes a life, in the latter's words, 'without interiority', which Merleau-Ponty intends to restore by his philosophy, just as Proust had sought to do in his novel. In effect, Carbone argues, both show that very disintegration of the idea of the subject which is the essence of the new ontology. In a striking anticipation of the next generation of philosophers, Merleau-Ponty even speaks in *The Visible and the Invisible* of language as 'having us' rather than of our 'having language': 'it is being that speaks within us and not we who speak of being'. Being is always already there before us; it 'overflows' us and we are 'caught up in it', rather than constituting it.

This implies something about the nature of philosophy itself. Philosophy cannot be, as it was classically conceived, a rational reconstruction of reality as experienced, but must seek to make a close connection with the actual experience of existing human beings. Merleau-Ponty saw the classical philosophical tradition as having undergone a steadily deepening crisis after Hegel, to be seen in the work of Marx, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Heidegger. It has moved steadily towards becoming a 'non-philosophy', meaning not the rejection of philosophical reflection, but what Carbone calls

‘a-philosophy’, a negative approach to Being. Non-philosophy is not centred on a ‘theory of knowledge’, an account of the ways in which rational subjects can have access to the truth from the outside: we are already in the truth, in the absolute. In that sense, the common opinion or natural attitude is the necessary beginning of knowledge, and phenomenology becomes the making manifest of what is involved in that common experience, which is, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, ‘not an effect of the absolute, but the absolute itself’ (Merleau-Ponty, *Notes des cours au Collège de France 1958–1959 et 1960–1961*, Gallimard, Paris, 1996, p. 282; trans. as ‘Philosophy and Non-Philosophy since Hegel’, in Hugh J. Silverman, ed., *Philosophy and Non-Philosophy since Merleau-Ponty*, Routledge, London, 1988, p. 15).

In this respect, Merleau-Ponty shows the influence of the structuralist thinking of his friend Claude Lévi-Strauss. But, in their Introduction to the *Cambridge Companion*, Carman and Hansen argue, following Vincent Descombes, that ‘Merleau-Ponty’s interpretations underestimate the extent of the structuralist break with the philosophy of the subject’. On this view, Merleau-Ponty remained too much of the ‘humanist’, with some slight modifications, to take on board fully the implications of that crisis in philosophy of which he himself spoke. Carbone’s reading, on the other hand, both of the lectures on *Nature* and of *The Visible and the Invisible*, makes the late Merleau-Ponty into as much of an anti-humanist as any structuralist.

The *Cambridge Companion* ranges widely, with no single unifying theme. Charles Taylor’s characteristically illuminating paper on ‘Merleau-Ponty and the Epistemological Picture’ presents Merleau-Ponty’s view of experience as a form of holism different from, for instance, the Quine–Davidson version. What is distinctive about it, according to Taylor, is that the whole is necessary to give sense to the elements of experience, providing a ‘locus of shared understanding’ based not on theoretical information, but on a shared practical ‘ability to cope’. In the same vein, Hubert Dreyfus, in his contribution, explores the differences between the emphasis of recent cognitive science on representations as the basis for intelligent behaviour and Merleau-Ponty’s account of skilful coping, without representations, as the most basic type of intelligent behaviour.

This emphasis on active involvement and the resulting meaningfulness of our environment is found again in Mark Wrathall’s discussion of Merleau-Ponty’s account of the explanation of human action in terms of reasons rather than causes. This account means,

according to Wrathall, that the human lived body is neither completely determined nor completely free. Wrathall sees Merleau-Ponty’s account of motivation as following in the tradition of Husserlian phenomenology. Similarly, Renaud Barbaras sees Merleau-Ponty as completing the Husserlian project by developing a ‘phenomenology of life’, which aims to give sense to Husserl’s concept of the ‘lifeworld’. In his discussion of Merleau-Ponty’s later thought, by contrast, Mark Hansen sees a move away from the Husserlian phenomenology of *Phenomenology of Perception*. I would question, however, Hansen’s claim that Merleau-Ponty in that earlier work ‘took for granted’ a dichotomy between mind and body on the one hand and world on the other. The emphasis in the earlier work on embodiment and being-in-the-world seems to me to be already a move away from transcendental phenomenology, if not from the Husserl of the *Crisis* volume. Hansen makes too sharp a distinction between the earlier and later Merleau-Ponty. Apart from anything else, this is inconsistent with the remarks, cited earlier, in the editorial Introduction he wrote jointly with Carman.

Other papers in the collection consider aspects of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy that are not directly connected with ontology or metaphysics, though even in these cases there are indirect links the papers bring out. Joseph Rouse, for example, has many interesting things to say about Merleau-Ponty’s conception of science, including comparisons with Kuhn and Lakatos. He emphasizes Merleau-Ponty’s critique of realism. Jonathan Gilmore discusses the relationship Merleau-Ponty saw between painting and philosophy. Any theory of painting, in Merleau-Ponty’s view, must consider the relation of the artist to the world, and so must imply a metaphysics, ‘a conception of how the self, body, mind, and world interrelate’. Finally, the papers by Lydia Goehr and Claude Lefort explore aspects of Merleau-Ponty’s political thought, in particular his differences with Sartre over the relation between philosophical engagement and political commitment. Goehr makes connections between Merleau-Ponty’s account of the arts and his political thinking, arguing that ‘a philosophical text, a novel, or a film can be engaged by having “political bearing” even if it has no explicit political content’. Lefort sees Merleau-Ponty’s idea of a politics of indeterminacy, committed to debate, as ‘not alien to the spirit of Marxism’. Marx, he argues, in his account of the proletariat, can be seen as ‘calling into question, in the very movement of history, man’s relation to being’. Even in politics, in short, ontology is inescapable.