

**George J. Marshall**

*A Guide to Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception.*

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Why another guide to Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*? Such is the opening question of George Marshall's guide to the *Phenomenology of Perception* (hereafter, *PP*). It is an important question to ask given the sheer number of guidebooks now available, many of which are distinguished works of philosophy in their own right. What does Marshall's guidebook do that others do not? Marshall's response to this question is terse: "The *Phenomenology of Perception* is an important work that deserves such attention" (7). That this is the case is beyond doubt; where it leaves Marshall's book within the context of other guides is not made clear at the outset.

Nevertheless, the reader gains a fuller sense of the specific intentions of Marshall's book later on. This is a guidebook that is primarily at "the North American reader," who might find that Merleau-Ponty's "paragraphs are sometimes too long" (9). As such, the guidebook assists with the task of translating Merleau-Ponty's book into a more understandable format. Marshall is clear to point out that the guidebook is not meant as a replacement for the actual reading of *PP*, instead, it is meant to assist the first time reader in "undertaking such a reading" (9). To this end, the book retains a largely neutral character, with the voice of Marshall and any critical interventions more or less minimal.

The structure of the book mirrors this explanatory intention. Divided into four sections, the first section places Merleau-Ponty in the context of the history of philosophy before offering a brief overview of *PP*. The second has the bulk of the philosophical material, essentially providing a commentary on the book. Section three is a useful glossary on technical terms while the final section presents a bibliography of works on Merleau-Ponty.

The principal merits of the first section of the book are twofold. First, Marshall places *PP* in the context of Merleau-Ponty's other works, specifically with an eye towards understanding *PP*. Second, Marshall places *PP* in the context of the history of western philosophy. As regards the first point, Marshall sounds a warning: "One needs to be a little more discerning about what one reads and does not read" (22). This leads Marshall to advocate the earlier and mid-period work of Merleau-Ponty over the latter material. The omission of *The Visible and the Invisible* in Marshall's recommended reading list is odd, and indeed the presence—rather, absence—of this text in the guidebook remains a problem, given the importance of this late work for an understanding of *PP* as a whole.

Section one ends by asking: what is *PP* actually about? Marshall responds to this question by accentuating the ambivalent role of perception within the book. If Merleau-Ponty is writing a phenomenology of perception, then he is also engaging in a phenomenology of time, being, truth, and freedom. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty's usage of "perception" is peculiar insofar as it points to a "nascent *logos* [which] appears against the background of non-human nature" (55).

As with Husserl, the phenomenology in *PP* is orientated towards a gesture of returning to the origin of things, a gesture that Merleau-Ponty will pursue throughout his career.

Into this context, Marshall introduces the dialectical distinction between empiricism and intellectualism, which becomes a recurring leitmotif in *PP*. Marshall defines the distinction accordingly: “The first reduces reality to the material or physical and the other raises reality to the status of an idea or to pure rationality” (56). As Marshall indicates, a central task of *PP* is to thematize the shortcomings of each of these positions while also recognizing the role they play in partially grasping reality. In turn, Marshall points to several ways in which the distinction is undercut by Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of ambiguity.

Section two is the most helpful part of the book. In this section, Marshall provides a topographical map of the arguments of Merleau-Ponty’s text, allowing the reader to navigate through the maze of Merleau-Ponty’s prose. How this works in concrete terms is that Marshall introduces the themes of the chapter, breaks each of the chapters down into sections, and then presents a numerical list of the salient points of each section. Each of these points is helpful in terms of extrapolating the structure of the Merleau-Ponty’s arguments, but Marshall’s interventions remain in large on the level of exposition and the reader may still be puzzled as to what Merleau-Ponty actually *means*.

Here, then, is a problem Marshall’s book confronts. In restricting himself mostly to exposition, the idea is to let Merleau-Ponty speak for himself. Yet in a book of this nature, this might be a risk, given that if the structure of the arguments requires translation, then the content would also lend itself to clarification. To be sure, the glossary at the end of the book is very helpful in allowing the first time reader to unlock not only the structure but also the meaning of Merleau-Ponty’s book. Whether or not it would have been more helpful to integrate the hermeneutic style of the glossary into the bulk of Marshall’s book is a question to be posed.

Marshall’s book has the merit of being analytically clear and accessible. The cost incurred by such clarity is that much of the original dynamism of Merleau-Ponty’s book is lost. Much of the ambiguity of Merleau-Ponty is underplayed in Marshall’s guidebook, with the emphasis being very much on converting that ambiguity into unequivocal statements. This is not to suggest that ambiguity should be glorified in and of itself, but instead to draw attention to the care needed to convey not only the structure but also the spirit of Merleau-Ponty’s book. To first-time readers of the text, this may well be an advantage if they lack the patience to adjust to Merleau-Ponty’s particular style. Yet Marshall’s dismissal of Merleau-Ponty’s “rather poetical fashion” is an oversight and overlooks the importance of style in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology as a whole (179).

To conclude, then: Marshall’s guidebook is commendable for its clarity. At best, it can be used as a tool to be read alongside the original text. Yet with its lack of critical intervention, it is hard to recommend it wholeheartedly when the philosophical market is already littered with outstanding works of scholarship on the *PP*. Works such as Gary Brent Madison’s *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1981), remain exemplary 30 years after publication because of its balance of critical engagement, exposition, and attention to the nuances of Merleau-Ponty’s style. Marshall’s book may well serve a different end in terms

of being explicitly oriented toward first time readers. But one wonders if grappling with the style of Merleau-Ponty might prove more philosophically enriching in the long run.

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