

Kascha Semonovitch and Neal DeRoo, eds.
Merleau-Ponty at the Limits of Art, Religion, and Perception.
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This volume is a collection of ten essays that engage with Merleau-Ponty's philosophy by way of its interdisciplinary intersections with certain forms of 'non-philosophy'. The goal is thus twofold: to 'offer new insight' into Merleau-Ponty's work itself and, more generally, 'to rethink the inter- and intradisciplinary boundaries of philosophy' (3). The idea is to achieve this by investigating the way in which Merleau-Pontian phenomenology is inherently marginal or liminary inasmuch as it 'redirects philosophical thought toward its prereflective ground in lived experience' (10)—a 'primordial' ground that is taken to be existentially prior to disciplinary boundaries.

Although the volume's title indicates a threefold distinction, the contributions actually fall into four parts dealing, respectively, with the 'limits' of i) art, ii) perception, iii) temporality and phenomenology, and iv) faith and sacramentality. Although the editors' introduction provides an overall synopsis, no clarification is given concerning the extra part—that is, whether 'the limits of temporality and phenomenology' are to be seen as just another topic among others, or rather (as is more likely) as the self-referential theme to which issues arising in connection with external limits motivates a return. (In this regard it is noteworthy that the two chapters comprising this part—the part not prefigured in the title—are the two longest contributions overall.)

The first part contains three chapters. Chapter 1 is a short piece by John Sallis, which is basically a reading of Merleau-Ponty's 'Eye and Mind' in terms of the several explicit references made therein to Paul Klee. Although a prominent and accomplished phenomenological thinker, Sallis is not a Merleau-Ponty specialist, and no new ground is really broken here. But it is valuable to have someone of Sallis' erudition and ability comment on a text as important as 'Eye and Mind.'

The next essay is a slightly longer one by Günter Figal, who is likewise a leading phenomenologist not known for specialized work on Merleau-Ponty. Figal's piece focuses on Merleau-Ponty's interest in Cézanne, and unlike Sallis' contribution it has a distinct critical edge. Figal takes Merleau-Ponty to task for approaching Cézanne's work 'as a [phenomenological] reduction in Husserl's sense' (34). This means that Merleau-Ponty fails to pay sufficient attention to 'the paintings as such'—that is, to their 'exteriority'—and that he therefore 'misses the decisive point' (39). This is certainly an interesting argument. But without broader methodological references it is unclear whether what Figal affirms as the 'decisive point' is of any real significance to Merleau-Ponty's

project.

The last chapter in this part is by Galen Johnson, and it deals with beauty and sublimity in Merleau-Ponty's work, with reference to Kant's third *Critique*. Unlike Sallis and Figal, Johnson is primarily known for his work in this area—the chapter is excerpted from his recent and important book on Merleau-Ponty and aesthetics—and his contribution thus shows a much deeper familiarity with the Merleau-Pontian corpus. Johnson contends that Merleau-Ponty's ongoing critical engagement with Kant's 'transcendental aesthetic' led him to develop a notion of 'strong beauty' (49), as well as new perceptual, historical, and ontological conceptions of the sublime (54-5). Some may feel that this overstates Merleau-Ponty's aesthetic concerns, but it is a forceful interpretation nonetheless.

The second part contains two chapters. In the first, Gabrielle Bennet Jackson discusses similarities between Merleau-Ponty and Gilbert Ryle in terms of their respective critical rejections of the Cartesian mechanical body. This is developed in terms of a notion of 'skill' that seems to be drawn from the work of Hubert Dreyfus, and a number of interesting parallels are identified. But there are at least two issues to note. First, Jackson oddly neglects to mention the 1960 conference at Royaumont where the two thinkers engaged one another directly and where Merleau-Ponty made several approving comments regarding Ryle's *Concept of Mind*. Second, readers unfamiliar with Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of embodiment should be warned that Jackson partly forces her Dreyfusian reading by translating the expression 'le corps habituel' as 'the skill body' (77 n15)—a choice which, whatever its interpretive merit, is wholly untenable in translational terms.

Next, Susan Bredlau explores the idea of 'phantom worlds', by which she means experiences analogous to those of phantom limbs, but at the level of worldly horizons. Her discussion is developed on the basis of Merleau-Ponty's account of perceptual 'synchronization' and the possibility of its failure, and it suggests new insights regarding both the nature of the determinacy of the world itself, as well as of any individual or social pathologies that stem from an unresponsiveness to historical or environmental change.

The third part also contains two chapters (as noted above). In the first, Michael Kelly provides a detailed analysis of the contrast between Merleau-Ponty's early and late thinking concerning temporality. His claim is that, its more radical intentions notwithstanding, Merleau-Ponty's position in *Phenomenology of Perception* remained essentially Husserlian—albeit with a 'bad ambiguity'—inasmuch as it was still committed to a form of 'absolute time-constituting consciousness' that was in tension with his view of the passivity of operative intentionality. According to Kelly, by the time of *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty was moving toward a resolution of this tension through his ontology of 'wild being', an account which effected a reversal of his earlier

position with regard to the relative priority of temporality and consciousness—an account, in other words, of ‘absolute time constituting consciousness.’

The salient point of Kelly’s excellent contribution is that there is a crucial shift between Merleau-Ponty’s early and late thinking. In the other contribution on temporality, Glen Mazis defends a contrary view according to which there is a smoother continuity between his early and late thought—that beginning with the account of lived of embodiment offered in *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty had ‘already started to break from Husserl’s transcendental approach’ (123). Mazis develops his argument primarily through inspired exegeses, although at times he does multiply the rich metaphoricality of Merleau-Ponty’s texts in ways that some readers could find bewildering. But the result is a solid contribution from a recognized Merleau-Pontian thinker.

Mazis concludes with a claim that Merleau-Ponty’s thought implies a sort of ‘ecospirituality’ (143), an idea that provides a serendipitous segue to the volume’s final part, which deals with faith and sacramentality. There are three chapters here, the first two of which are concerned with questions of religion. Concerning these, the editors claim that they provide ‘one of the first sustained accounts of Merleau-Ponty’s relation to religion or sacramentality’ (14), while the publisher’s blurb less modestly asserts that they offer ‘the first’ such reflections. Neither claim is accurate. While religion is not the most prevalent theme within Merleau-Ponty scholarship, its importance has long been recognized and serious work has certainly been done. (See, for example, recent articles by Emmanuel de Saint Aubert and Gilles Labelle, as well as earlier contributions from the 1960s and 1970s by Régis Jolivet, John Bannan, Francis Ryan, and Barry Cooper, among others.)

In the first chapter, Richard Kearney—who, like Sallis and Figal, is a major figure but not a Merleau-Ponty specialist—discusses ‘the sacramentality of the flesh’. He makes several suggestive points about how Merleau-Ponty ‘offers fresh insights into the eucharistic [*sic*] character of the sensible’ (162) and, aligning him with St. Francis (160), how his ‘phenomenological accounts serve to revitalize theological and sacramental idioms in a postmetaphysical language’ (155), i.e., the language of ‘anatheistic’ divinity. But in the absence of any detailed and reliable contextualization of Merleau-Ponty’s own religiosity—e.g., in dating Merleau-Ponty’s loss of Catholic faith, Kearney relies on an inaccurate claim from Sartre—it is unclear just how far these suggestions can plausibly be taken.

Such is, in part, the perspective of the next piece, in which Joseph O’Leary offers a critical response to Kearney. O’Leary argues that Merleau-Ponty’s sacramental language has much more to do with the ‘sacrificial transformation’ characteristic of much modern aesthetic creation than with anything specifically religious. For O’Leary, Merleau-Ponty is ‘a rather sturdy atheist’ (178) who, like other modern writers, ‘use[s]

religious diction in a thoroughly secularized sense' (177). This is a useful counterpoint to Kearney's argument, even if it, too, leaves a lot of relevant material unexploited; but it is perhaps better read as a contribution to Merleau-Pontian aesthetics.

In the final chapter, Darian Meacham examines the idea of faith in Merleau-Ponty's work, in particular in his political thinking, and how this idea connects with themes such as style and *virtù*. This is a particularly important contribution. For while philosophers typically pay little or no attention to Merleau-Ponty's political thought, Meacham shows that it provides a key axis of longitudinal continuity across his corpus, and that it can thus help shed light on Merleau-Ponty's later unfinished work, in particular with regard to the 'ontological faith' that it involves, and hence the very meaning of 'the invisible'.

Overall, the volume will certainly be of interest to anyone working closely with Merleau-Ponty. And this is true even if—or perhaps just because—it fails in its stated aim, which was 'to answer the question of what constitutes the limit of philosophy from within Merleau-Ponty's oeuvre' (3). For any pretension to a conclusive resolution or a 'total answer' (cf. 8) would prove disloyal to the open-ended nature of Merleau-Pontian phenomenology. Perhaps this is why, within Merleau-Ponty scholarship, anthologies such as this, in which a chorus of (sometimes discordant) voices explores a series of (relatively) discrete themes, have often proved particularly stimulating. At any rate, while this particular volume may not itself become a landmark of any sort, it does at least continue this salutary pattern.

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