

Rajiv Kaushik

Art and Institution: Aesthetics in the Late Works of Merleau-Ponty.

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Merleau-Ponty's commitment to confronting the paradoxes in the project of offering a phenomenological ontology are structured around the idea of *Stiftung* (institution) he inherited from Husserl. If phenomenology runs the risk of collapsing into idealistic metaphysics (as in Husserl) or a series of phenomenological descriptions without any suggestion of an immanent principle of being (*à la* Scheler for example), it is in his view because the notion of institution has not been radicalized enough. A genuine understanding of institution, Merleau-Ponty believes, conceives of it as a movement that precedes its objects (and with them, the subjective and objective poles of intentionality) and brings them into the world according to a pre-existing, constant and unified structure. In this sense, institution must be regarded as the structured process by which a world comes into being. It must be recognized, therefore, as an ontological principle in the Merleau-Pontian sense of an "intra-ontology" in which being becomes apprehended from within itself, and institution becomes apprehended by the instituted.

Kaushik's remarkable book thinks through this logic of institution and its ontological implications with remarkable clarity and definitive insight before taking it as its starting point towards exploring the role of the work of art, (that is to say, art works as well as the work of the artist) both for being and for ontology. Kaushik's command of Merleau-Ponty's most enigmatic and dense texts is remarkable even in the context of vibrant Merleau-Ponty scholarship, and it is completed by deep expertise in Husserl's work and in the history of modern and contemporary art. This set of talents provides an invaluable basis for his investigation of the relations between art and ontology in Merleau-Ponty, and, one cannot help but guess—beyond.

In a rich and comprehensive introduction Kaushik lays out his ambition for this book. He puts forward three main claims: firstly, art should no longer be conceived as one field of application for a general phenomenology among others, but rather, we must see that art has a privileged place in and for phenomenology (art overcomes phenomenology by disclosing its ontological ground as the process of institution). Secondly, 'institution is nothing less than the existent process prior to subject and object that makes their relation possible'; and thirdly, art provides a real understanding of institution as a process which in turn offers a viable way to overcome ontological difference.

It seems therefore that one must approach Kaushik's book as an exploration of the way Merleau-Ponty moves from classical, Husserlian phenomenology to an original ontology that avoids being structured *à la* Heidegger around the very idea of ontological difference. Indeed, many of Kaushik's remarks throughout the book (including his welcome emphasis on Merleau-Ponty's middle works, his careful assessment of Merleau-Ponty's remotivation of a host of Husserlian concepts to his new purposes, and the insistence on the overcoming of ontological difference) seem to support this reading hypothesis.

The four chapters that constitute the bulk of the work are each well-focused in chronological, textual, and thematic terms. This, of course, leaves much unifying work for the introduction and the conclusion, in which Kaushik is careful to tie up most of the loose ends.

The first chapter goes a long way towards establishing the core of Kaushik's argument: Merleau-Ponty thinks art in terms of institution, because he refuses to distinguish between the artwork as an object and the activity of the artist. This essential unity of the objective and the subjective translates into a unity of being and becoming, for the work of art is never achieved and yet never incomplete. Kaushik's insightful and rigorous analyses of Merleau-Ponty's 'Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence' serves to establish that the mystery of art is to be found in a unique origin that constitutes both subject and object and work and spectator. As a result, Kaushik adds with remarkable philosophical flair, the lesson of this unity and the horizon of Merleau-Ponty's thinking in those texts, is the overcoming of ontological difference: beings are just a certain density of being *qua* the process of institution, and vice versa.

The second chapter develops this view further by exploring the nature of being as the process of institution. If it can truly be said to overcome ontological difference, institution must be conceived, as Merleau-Ponty says, as a 'half-thing' or an 'element.' Indeed, Kaushik suggests, institution possesses atemporal structures that make it akin to a being and yet it remains in principle incapable of any absolute determination susceptible to make it *one* being among others. Those structures include the constant production of events and objects and the constant differentiation within which the world surges for phenomenology to behold. In this sense, not only can we say that artworks reveal the nature of institution (which structures them); they also stand as an emblem for both being *qua* institution and the beings *qua* determinate things instituted, for a work of art is the only being to present itself as what it is, an ambiguous balance of institution and instituted. Institution, Kaushik notes, always projects itself towards what it is not, *viz.* determinacy. As such, it is a process structured by *desire*, that is to say, a force that structures becoming with reference to a projected object. This desire, he suggests, is reflected in the artist's 'motivation,' an impersonal impulse towards his or her work.

Chapter 3 proposes an analysis of Proust's project in his *Remembrance of Things Past* as an illustration of this description of institution in terms that are both literary and, taking its focus in Proust, temporal. For Kaushik, Proust's deepest insight was to make his project of recuperation of 'lost' time a *literary* project. Only a literary work, he suggests, is fit to render 'the belonging together of the architectonic of myth times' which 'insofar as they function on the basis of a simultaneous principle of institution, reveals for Merleau-Ponty both the original significant event as well as the way in which the event can be finally recuperated precisely as the original significant event.' (95) For Kaushik, Proust's insistence on the absurdity of Swann's longing for the factual hawthorns of the past reveals how his own search knows is a transformative and reductive search, namely the search for what doesn't stop producing events and references to lost time: institution. More than a deepening of the ontological framework established in the first two chapters, Kaushik's Proustian meditation serves to break the all-too common emphasis on painting in the scholarship on Merleau-Ponty's aesthetics, while bringing out (although this remains inexplicit throughout the book) that the structure of the process of institution is always, when all is said and done, circular. The 'original significant event,' i.e. the event of institution, 'recuperates' itself.

Chapter 4 aims at two things. Firstly, it provides some theoretical ground for the unity of treatment of all art forms on account of their unique place in the process of institution. Secondly, it clarifies further (but alas, not entirely) what this privileged status of art constitutes. Kaushik's argument relies on the idea that all forms of art, including such abstract forms as poetry (his chief example in this chapter) have a reliance on physicality that reveals the general transcendence (e.g., the transcendence between physicality and meaning) that traverses all regions of being insofar as they are constituted by the ontological principle of institution, a principle of transcendence precisely.

In spite of Kaushik's efforts throughout the book and in this last chapter in particular, the second point, which was also one of his main theses, namely that aesthetics is not just a region of being among others, remains unclear. In a sense, the success of Kaushik's deep ontological thesis—institution is being *qua* some non-polar process productive of polarity—seems to defeat his arguably less essential claim of the privileged place of aesthetics. If it is true that institution traverses all regions of being, how can we think of a certain order having any ontologically privileged place over others without introducing within being a difference that even an ontology of difference such as Merleau-Ponty's could hardly account for?

On the other hand, Kaushik is at the height of his considerable philosophical talents when he follows his ontological intuitions beyond the increasingly well-known primacy of transcendence in Merleau-Ponty to the ontological status of such transcendence and, finally, to the specific structures of this active transcendence. Although Kaushik does not explicitly thematize this key insight, his book presents a parallel discussion of two groups of concepts that contain the potential for even further insights not only in Merleau-Ponty's work, but perhaps on the mission of philosophy today. Kaushik returns to the conceptual group constituted by 'desire' (24, 88) 'energy' (119) 'motivation' (16) assertion (108) and 'love' (111) on the one hand, with that of 'distance' (37, 122) 'obscurity' (135) and 'écart' (43) on the other. This desire and this distance (which Renaud Barbaras's book of 1999 had already drawn our attention to) returns in Kaushik's work as the mutually structuring elements of a being in which desire constitutes identity on the basis of difference (a process Kaushik recognizes as Merleau-Ponty's 'hyper-dialectic' (18)). Here, Kaushik offers an invitation to bridging one further gap, after that of aesthetics and ontology: that of psychology and ontology. The Merleau-Ponty scholarship, with its concern for all questions of expression, should heed Kaushik's remarkable invitation to reading Merleau-Ponty's ontology as an ontology of constitutive desire, and so should any thinker concerned with the ontological role of creation.

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