

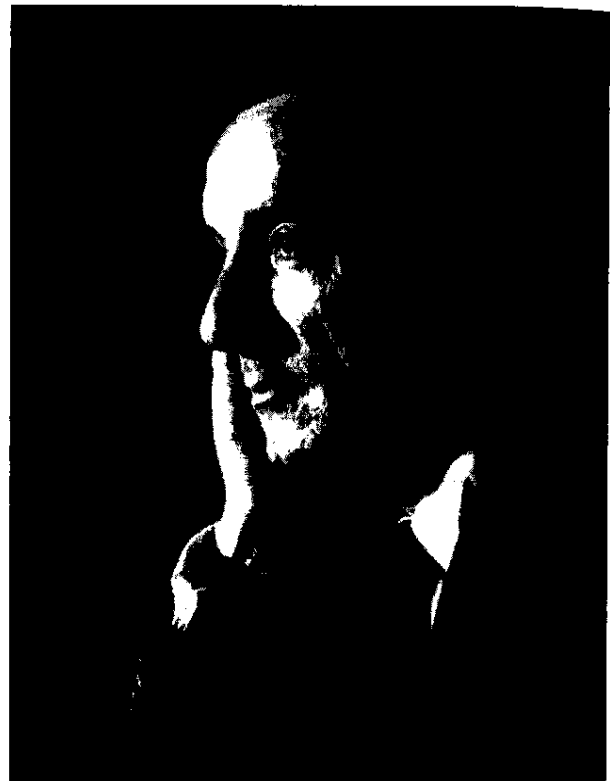
Maurice Merleau-Ponty

(14 March 1908 - 3 May 1961)

Stuart J. Murray

University of California at Berkeley

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Maurice Merleau-Ponty (from <m-pc.binghamton.edu>)

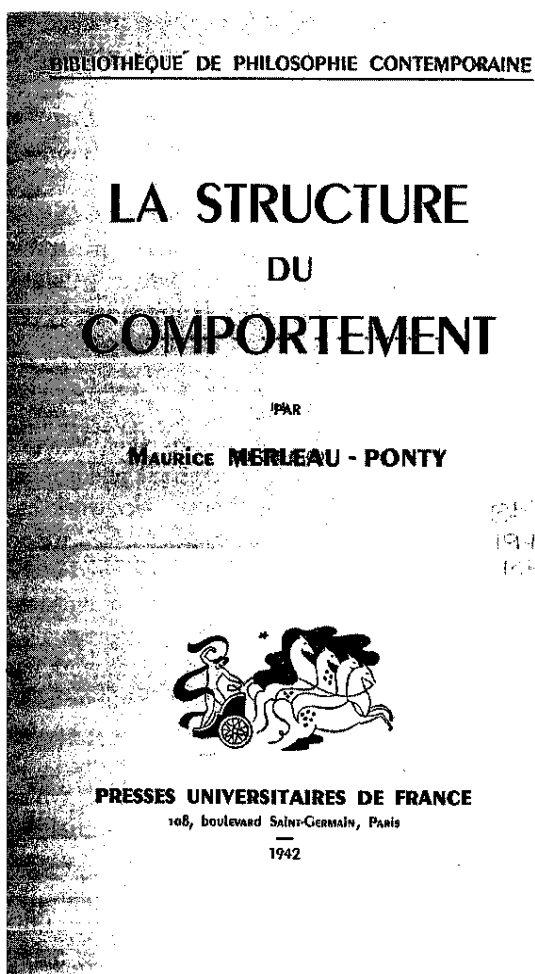
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In a special memorial edition of *Les Temps Modernes* (Modern Times), published only months after Maurice Merleau-Ponty's death in 1961, the French philosopher Jean Hyppolite wrote of Merleau-Ponty: "His work has become as familiar to us as those landscapes which we no longer see because they are always there, implicated in the way we see . . . presupposed by our research, sedimented in our thought." Philosophers and cultural theorists alike continue to owe a debt to Merleau-Ponty, whose work has informed disciplines across the humanities. Famous as an "existential phenomenologist," he is arguably best known as the philosopher of the body who sought to dismantle the Cartesian legacy in philosophy, a legacy in which mind and body are posited as two distinct substances whose causal interrelation, consequently, proved vexing to philosophers. He worked tirelessly to undermine the binary logic that had come to define philosophy since the ancients, including such presumed dichotomies as mind/body, subject/object, self/world, reason/unreason, thought/language, visible/invisible, and inner/outer. As he remarks in his best-known work, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (1945; translated as *Phenomenology of Perception*, 1962), "Truth does not 'inhabit the inner man,' or more accurately, there is no inner man, man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself."

Born on 14 March 1908 at Rochefort-sur-Mer, in southwestern France, Merleau-Ponty grew up in a bourgeois family in Paris, where he completed his primary and secondary education at two well-known Paris lycées, Lycée Janson-de-Sailly and Lycée Louis-le-Grand. Along with his brother and sister, he was raised by his mother following the death of his father, an artillery officer, in 1913. Jean-Paul Sartre writes in *Situations IV: Portraits* (1964) that Merleau-Ponty recalled he had "an incomparable childhood": "He had known that private world of happiness from which only age drives us." He studied philosophy at the Ecole Normale Supérieure from 1926 to 1930, graduating with the *agrégation de philosophie*. There he received a solid but conservative education in philosophy, studying René Descartes and Immanuel Kant under the tutelage of the rational idealist Léon Brunschvicg, but his interests soon expanded to include Georg Wilhelm



Title page for Merleau-Ponty's first book (translated as The Structure of Behavior, 1963), a critique of behaviorist psychology (Thomas Cooper Library, University of South Carolina)

Friedrich Hegel, Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, and Edmund Husserl, whose 1929 Paris lectures, published as *Méditations cartésiennes* (1931; translated as *Cartesian Meditations*, 1960), he attended. At the Ecole Normale he made the acquaintance of Sartre, who, in later years, influenced Merleau-Ponty's philosophy and politics throughout their friendship and eventual estrangement. In 1930–1931 Merleau-Ponty completed his brief state military service, after which he taught at the Lycée de Beauvais from 1931 to 1933. After a one-year fellowship from the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, he once again taught philosophy, this time at the Lycée de Chartres (1934–1935), before returning to the Ecole Normale in 1935 to teach and to pursue graduate studies. Here he wrote his *thèse complémentaire* (partial fulfillment of the *doctorat d'état*), which became his first book, *La Structure du com-*

portement (1942; translated as *The Structure of Behavior*, 1963).

During these years, between 1933 and 1939, Merleau-Ponty attended Alexandre Kojève's lectures on Hegel. These lectures, essentially a humanistic reflection on Hegel's *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (1807; translated as *The Phenomenology of Mind*, 1910), were also attended by Raymond Aron, André Breton, Georges Bataille, and Jacques Lacan. This vibrant French intellectual milieu of Surrealism, psychoanalysis, humanism, and nascent existentialism undoubtedly had a profound influence on Merleau-Ponty's later work. World War II brought an end to this Left Bank culture, however. Merleau-Ponty served briefly as a lieutenant in the infantry in 1939–1940 before taking a post at the Lycée Carnot in Paris during the German occupation. Here, he was active, with Sartre, in the Resistance group "Socialisme et Liberté" (Socialism and Liberty); this experience formed the basis of the influential postwar avant-garde political, philosophical, and literary journal *Les Temps Modernes*. During this period he wrote his major work, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, the *thèse principale* that, submitted along with *La Structure du comportement*, earned him his doctorate. After the war he taught for four years at the Université de Lyon. In 1949 he was appointed to the chair of psychology and pedagogy at the Sorbonne, where he remained until 1952, when he was appointed to the chair of philosophy at the prestigious Collège de France. Details about his life are sparse; according to Alden L. Fisher in *The Essential Writings of Merleau-Ponty*, "only a little was written about Merleau-Ponty the man while he was alive, for he led a quiet and discreet life, in marked contrast to his sometime friend and collaborator Jean Paul Sartre." His wife, Suzanne, was a physician and psychiatrist, and they had one daughter.

Throughout his career Merleau-Ponty was influenced by Gestalt psychology. From the early 1930s he turned to Gestalt psychology to repudiate the French intellectualist tradition in philosophy, in particular, through the central claim of Gestalt psychology, that perception is structured as a "figure on a ground." In the structure of "figure on a ground," perception of an object is seen as organized against a background or within a "perceptual field" whereby the object is not merely the result of abstract cognitive forces (as in intellectualism) but rather must be grasped as standing out against the necessary context of a lived world. In other words, the Gestaltists demonstrated that perception is not reducible to mental acts of thinking or judging; truth does not "inhabit the inner man." Merleau-Ponty's work develops this basic insight and describes the body and its intersubjective world, which together compose the perceptual field. While phenomenology can fruitfully describe perception as organized through Gestalt forces, Merleau-Ponty nevertheless eschews the hard-line Gestaltist belief that these fields have

particular mechanistic brain correlates that are causal and, thus, in theory fully determinable. He criticizes such a position as naive realism. For Merleau-Ponty, the perceptual field—the world—is suffused with ambiguity, never fully determinate; instead, it is only loosely “determined” by human “motivation,” informed by intersubjective and intercorporeal (between bodies) forces within social, cultural, and historical contexts.

Merleau-Ponty's first book, *La Structure du comportement*, deploys Gestalt theory to critique the positivist and reductive approach of psychological “behaviorism” or, in French, *comportement*. By “structure,” Merleau-Ponty means nothing like what came to be known as structuralism; for him at this early date, “structure” refers to the holism of Gestalt—or formalist—psychology. He argues that Pavlovian models of stimulus and response are reductionistic and hence an incomplete account of behavior because stimuli and reflex responses are only artificially separated from mental events. Arguments that seek to displace consciousness in favor of a materialist science ultimately fail, Merleau-Ponty claims, because they must presume the consciousness they are seeking to explicate. There is for him something irreducible in consciousness that is the starting point for every investigation, including the scientific. *La Structure du comportement* focuses almost exclusively on the scientific attitude, clearing the way for his next work, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, which performs a similar critique, this time on the natural experience of the perceiving subject—a phenomenology, rather than a discussion of science. In both texts Merleau-Ponty's critique finds its point of departure in the body, since the body is both an object in the world and the conscious subject of one's experience of that world—exactly why consciousness cannot be reduced to either one term or the other, neither a “materialism” nor a “mentalism.”

Phénoménologie de la perception steers between these two extremes or schools of thought, which go by various names. Materialism is otherwise known as “empiricism,” and its chief proponents are David Hume and behaviorist American psychologist John B. Watson. Mentalism is called “intellectualism” and is better known in the philosophical tradition as rationalism and idealism; its main proponents are Descartes, Kant, and especially Husserl in his early writings. Merleau-Ponty steers between the pillars of objectivism and subjectivism, or, respectively, in Sartre's terminology, between *en soi* (in-itself) and *pour soi* (for-itself). In the simplest terms, for Merleau-Ponty, the focus of empiricism on discrete sensations and causality leaves it unable to account for human intentionality—in effect, the way in which perception is motivated in a thick and complicated manner by the appearance of a preconstituted object against a phenomenal field, and not by a group of so-called pure sensations. Similarly, intellectualism fails because it privileges reason and representational

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Phénoménologie de la perception

par

M. MERLEAU-PONTY

PARIS **RFI** 1945
5, rue Sébastien-Bottin
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Title page for the book (translated as Phenomenology of Perception, 1962) in which Merleau-Ponty develops a philosophical position distinct from the metaphysical extremes of “materialism” and “mentalism” (Thomas Cooper Library, University of South Carolina)

consciousness over experience, ignoring human situatedness, or “being-in-the-world.” One holds that truth is available through experience; the other, that truth is available through thought—and both presume that such “truth” is objective or independent of the embodied subject who either experiences or thinks it, which amounts to the illusion of objective thinking. In sum, both accounts fail to adequately take account of the body, which plays a key role: “Consciousness is being-towards-the-thing through the intermediary of the body.” Here the hyphenation, a practice borrowed from Heidegger, is meant to underscore the inseparability of embodied conscious being and the thing it grasps intentionally—in the world.

Merleau-Ponty develops his concept of “world” in *Phénoménologie de la perception* from Heidegger and from

Husserl's later philosophy of the *Lebenswelt* (life-world). This world, for Merleau-Ponty, is figured perceptually and quasi-anthropomorphically: "To see is to enter a universe of beings which *display themselves* . . . to look at an object is to inhabit it. . . . When I look at the lamp on my table, I attribute to it not only the qualities visible from where I am, but also those which the chimney, the walls, the table can 'see'; the back of my lamp is nothing but the face which it 'shows' to the chimney." If this passage strikes the reader as odd, it is because strict subject-object binaries have come to inform a theoretical attitude that is now second nature, arguably eclipsing a more primordial mode of perception. Merleau-Ponty posits a body that understands its primordial involvement with the world, however, "always already" perceptually given over to a world he describes as "pregnant" with meaning. "The theory of the body," Merleau-Ponty writes, "is already a theory of perception"; perception and the body are coterminous. The body is "geared into" the world, characterized by a corporeal intentionality that remains unthematized or unreflected throughout daily life—"perception hides itself from itself"; people cannot see themselves seeing or touch themselves touching, because there is always an indefinite moment in which the seeing becomes the seen or the touching crosses over to the touched.

The Gestaltists' "figure on a ground" structure provides a means for understanding the intimate and indeterminate relation of the body with the world: "one's own body is the third term, always tacitly understood, in the figure-background structure, and every figure stands out against the double horizon of external space and bodily space." In other words, the body acts as the ground of all perception, invisible to thought and yet presupposed by it, that without which thought would not occur. "My body is the fabric into which all objects are woven, and it is, at least in relation to the perceived world, the general instrument of my 'comprehension.'" The notion of a *schéma corporel* (body schema, misleadingly translated as "body image" in English) is Merleau-Ponty's "third term," comprehensible neither to empiricism nor to intellectualism. What Merleau-Ponty has in mind with *schéma corporel* is a kinaesthetic body, a body actively "polarized by its tasks." Through the body schema, Merleau-Ponty shows that the body does not end at its skin but rather extends into the world. Bodily interactions are neither a question of motor-reflex responses, as empiricism teaches, nor a series of conscious and intentional representations, as intellectualism would have it. The body schema captures the in-between of the body engaged in its world, what Merleau-Ponty calls the body's "motor intentionality."

For example, the amputee's lost limb may still figure in his or her body schema as a "phantom limb"; it can retain an existential validity for that body, neither explicable by reflex responses nor by mere mental representa-

tions. "Consciousness is in the first place not a matter of 'I think that' but of 'I can'"—not abstract thought, but the body-subject's prereflective coping skills. The phantom limb is taken by the body in some sense as still real, still there; it figures in the body schema and in the world of living possibilities that the schema projects by the body's engaged "I can"—a world within the reach of someone who has not lost a limb. Similarly, a blind person's cane cannot be considered a tool; when it is taken up it "has ceased to be an object . . . and is no longer perceived for itself." In the blind person's hand, the cane becomes part of the body, a sensory extension, figuring as part of the body schema always in relation to a world "pregnant with meaning," a perceived world. In a reversal of "common-sense" objective thought, Merleau-Ponty says: "In the exploration of things, the length of the stick does not enter expressly as a middle term: the blind man is rather aware of it through the position of objects than of the position of objects through it."

The body schema concerns concrete involvement in a world that offers both tacit and explicit possibilities to orient a body-subject's intentional behavior. Merleau-Ponty calls this orientation *habitude*, again misleadingly translated as "habit": *habitude* is an ability or tacit knowledge associated with the body schema's motor intentionality, rather than a "habit" performed routinely or customarily. *Habitude* is neither reducible to reflex reactions (empiricism) nor mental representations (intellectualism); it is what the body schema carries with it, much in the way that the body quickly adapts to driving a different car or driving in an unfamiliar city without reflectively taking into account the infinite number of small differences and consciously adapting to each accordingly. So while there are indeed reflex responses, as empiricism maintains, they are inseparable from the representations that intellectualism posits; together, along with the "original text" of the world, Merleau-Ponty conceives of the perceiving body-subject in a life-world replete with significance.

Humanisme et terreur: Essai sur le problème communiste (1947; translated as *Humanism and Terror: An Essay on the Communist Problem*, 1969) comprises a group of essays describing the "inextricable situation" facing postwar France, one that amounted to a virtual political impasse. Merleau-Ponty writes of this impasse: "It is impossible to be an anti-Communist and it is not possible to be a Communist." The impossible alternative seemed set between an American brand of capitalism (anticommunism), whose poignancy in Western Europe was underscored by the introduction of the Marshall Plan in 1947, and a Soviet style of communism, a dogmatic Marxism that was fast proving impracticable in the postwar political landscape of Europe. These two extremes were equally untenable to Merleau-Ponty. The hopes for a revolutionary communism in the Soviet Union had begun to fade because, as

Merleau-Ponty says, "Terror no longer seeks to advance itself as revolutionary terror." What are the conditions of "revolution," if any, under which violence is acceptable or even necessary? What is the relationship between revolution and violence? What is the nature of freedom? If freedom must be purchased, at what cost? *Humanisme et terreur* addresses these questions, directly engaging Sartre's treatment of inescapable freedom in *L'Être et le néant* (1943; translated as *Being and Nothingness*, 1956). Merleau-Ponty argues that freedom cannot be taken as the original and absolute ground of an individuated subject, as it is for Sartre; similar to his critique of science, Merleau-Ponty demands that freedom presuppose a world that carries significance and lends necessary context. Against Sartre, who contends that humankind is "condemned to freedom," Merleau-Ponty replies instead that "we are *condemned to meaning*." In other words, the political subject should not be conceived as an abstract, transcendental spectator but rather as an historically and materially situated being whose world is necessarily meaningful. Marx's socio-economic critique is Merleau-Ponty's starting point.

Humanisme et terreur opens with what Merleau-Ponty depicts as the facile characterization of communism—"deception, cunning violence, propaganda"—in contradistinction to the supposed "respect for truth, law, and individual consciousness" represented by democracy. Merleau-Ponty's text deconstructs this abstract opposition, however. Democracies also employ cunning violence and propaganda, often "in the guise of liberal principles." "Respect for law and liberty," he remarks with some irony, "has served to justify police suppression of strikes in America"; moreover, "respect" for law and liberty, and the pursuit of these purportedly pure ideals, is often the justification for violence, such as with American "military suppression in Indochina or in Palestine and the development of an American empire in the Middle East." A Marxist position allows Merleau-Ponty to levy a political critique that is phenomenological, steadfastly refusing to be swayed by idealist arguments—be they in the name of liberalism or communism. "The value of a society," Merleau-Ponty writes, "is the value it places upon man's relations to man." The reference in the subtitle of *Humanisme et terreur* to "the communist problem" does not so much announce the problem with communism as "the problem rightly raised by communism, namely, to establish among men relations that are human."

In this early political work, humanism and terror are not conceived as mutually exclusive. To some extent, a humanistic end justifies the political means—because, as Merleau-Ponty asserts, politics is not ethics, despite claims by democracy of the moral high road. Merleau-Ponty hoped that terror would be employed in the service of a genuine humanism, although the danger was, as Marx indicated, that terror in the name of humanism would

HUMANISME ET TERREUR

ESSAI SUR LE PROBLÈME COMMUNISTE
PAR M. MERLEAU-PONTY



LES ESSAIS XXVII

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Cover for Merleau-Ponty's 1947 book (translated as *Humanism and Terror: An Essay on the Communist Problem*, 1969), in which he describes postwar France as caught between American-style capitalism and Soviet communism (Thomas Cooper Library, University of South Carolina)

quickly prove as absolute and as oppressive as that which fomented a revolution in the first place—the "dark side" of communism. To be certain that revolution is not an underhanded and new form of imperialism requires constant vigilance and "critique," in other words, "concrete thinking" as opposed to an abstract "speculative philosophy" or "rigid ethics." Merleau-Ponty still expresses hope that humanity will achieve the Marxist transition from formal liberty to actual liberty, though this faith in a political implementation of Marxism was shaken by the 1950s. Nevertheless, in his adherence to phenomenological principles, Merleau-Ponty postulates the emergence of a "new," critical Left in his critique of American liberalism:

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Title page for Merleau-Ponty's 1948 book (translated as *Sense and Non-Sense*, 1964), in which he claims that Marxism has "lost confidence in its own daring" and become no more than "hierarchy, obedience, myth, inequality, diplomacy, and police" (Thomas Cooper Library, University of South Carolina)

"An aggressive liberalism exists which is a dogma and already an ideology of war. It can be recognized by its love of the empyrean of principles, its failure ever to mention the geographical and historical circumstances to which it owes its birth, and its abstract judgments of political systems without regard for the specific conditions under which they develop." The relation of man to man embodies a struggle for recognition, as Hegel argued; but according to Merleau-Ponty, that recognition has, until now, remained implicit "in conflict and the race for power." The alternative—presumably an "explicit recognition"—is not discussed specifically. Merleau-Ponty refrains from offering a prescriptive politics, lest he reduplicate the power structures of which he is critical. His intervention in politics remains marginal, intellectual, without political mobili-

zation, and often utopian: "to recall to Marxists their humanist inspiration, to remind the democracies of their fundamental hypocrisy, and to keep intact against propaganda the chances that might still be left for history to become enlightened once again."

Even as early as 1948, however, Merleau-Ponty expressed doubt about the Marxist vision, claiming in the preface to *Sens et non-sens* (1948; translated as *Sense and Non-Sense*, 1964) that Marxism had "lost confidence in its own daring" and, following brief postwar hopes for a Marxist revival, that Marxism had once again become no more than "hierarchy, obedience, myth, inequality, diplomacy, and police." By the time of the Korean War (1950–1953), Merleau-Ponty had undergone a radical crisis of faith in Marxism—a crisis that precipitated his break with Sartre and his resignation from *Les Temps Modernes* in 1952. Although he then wrote editorials for the socialist weekly *L'Express*, Merleau-Ponty's full reappraisal of Marxism came in 1955 with the publication of *Les Aventures de la dialectique* (1955; translated as *Adventures of the Dialectic*, 1973). In this text he maintains that in a class-structured society, freedom is an empty bourgeois ideal, essentially agreeing with the communists that social change is exigent. This change must not come at any price, however: there must be a limit to violence. As well as being a polemic directed at Sartre, this text reframes a Marxist engagement: "We now know that subject and object, conscience and history, present and future, judgment and discipline, all these opposites decay without one another, that the attempt at a revolutionary resolution destroys one of the two series, and that we must look for something else." Western Marxism, culminating for Merleau-Ponty in György Lukács's *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein* (1923; translated as *History and Class Consciousness*, 1971), had by the 1950s proved to be an ineffective political model for anything more than theoretical critique. He writes, pessimistically: "a revolution is proletarian only before it succeeds, in the movement which precedes the taking of power, in its 'ardor,' not in its technique."

The answer is not a "permanent revolution" but a modernization of Marxism in the direction of a "noncommunist left," beyond the alternation of communism and anticommunism, in which the best that can be hoped for is an ever-renewed clash of ideologies (at the time, the Soviet Union and American democratic capitalism). He called his own position "a-communism," a philosophical vigilance through engaged free critique and discussion. Merleau-Ponty had not become apolitical; instead, he had become less certain of the humanistic basis of politics and philosophy. In the early 1950s his philosophy had begun to undergo a shift away from philosophical certainty and perhaps also away from the emphasis on the phenomenological subject. This period was one of personal change and upheaval—including his resignation from *Les Temps Mod-*

ernes; his break with Sartre; a new appointment to the chair of philosophy at the most prestigious educational institution in France, the Collège de France; and the death of his mother, with whom he had remained extremely close, in 1952. The essays included in *Signes* (1960; translated as *Signs*, 1964), many of which were written in the early 1950s, chronicle the change in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy and political convictions. Merleau-Ponty writes in the introduction to *Signes* that Marxism "is certainly no longer true in the sense it was believed to be true"; rather, its value is now secondary: "it can inspire and orient analyses and retain a real heuristic value." He asks: "Is it not an incredible misunderstanding that all, or almost all, philosophers have felt obliged to have a politics, whereas politics arises from the 'practice of life' and escapes understanding?" If one acts politically, one does not therefore "have" a politics; instead, one finds politics imbricated with the "practice of life"—an interdependence that frustrates rationalistic modes of comprehension. In other words, politics involves a form of reason that "escapes understanding," as Merleau-Ponty says, "in the exact opposite of a philosophy of God-like survey."

In 1955, toward the end of *Les Aventures de la dialectique*, Merleau-Ponty asks the question that inspired his later philosophy: "The question is to know whether, as Sartre says, there are only *men* and *things* or whether there is also the interworld, which we call history, symbolism, truth-to-be-made." Neither persons nor things can provide the basis of certain knowledge; instead, life takes place in the *inter-monde*, or interworld, where the human subject must search for meaning—between persons, between things. Merleau-Ponty's later philosophy is preoccupied with intersubjectivity and communication, themes he claims are wholly absent in Sartre. For traditional, dualistic philosophies this intersubjective "interworld" spells a crisis of reason, since traditional philosophy is unsure how to conceive "history, symbolism, truth-to-be-made" in either intellectual or empirical terms. It is a marvel, Merleau-Ponty writes in the essay "Einstein et la crise de la raison" (*Einstein and the Crisis of Reason*) *Signes*, that humans can calculate and speak at all—that algorithms and language put, as he writes in the introduction, "a common domain of thought between us and a third party." Indeed, although meaning relies on this intervening middle term, Merleau-Ponty calls it a "ruse," since it never closes the distance between the self, the other, and things; there is a certain failure to symbolize, to define concretely, without some ambiguity, and it is here in the interworld that the subject finds itself in what he calls the "prose of the world," or, similarly, the universal "flesh of the world." Merleau-Ponty is suggesting a fundamental ontology of the sensible upon which meaning will be founded.

Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of language ultimately relies on his notion of an interworld and intersubjectivity.

He refuses to conceive of language as a code, which, paradoxically, would be "to break it," he says. While common sense suggests that breaking a code will usher in meaning, language itself does not operate through such one-to-one codifications; instead, linguistic meaning inheres in ambiguities and relies on the context, such as with the ambiguous word *break*, which here does not mean to yield meaning (as with a code) but rather to destroy meaningful language. Merleau-Ponty demonstrates in the introduction to *Signes* that there is not a one-to-one correspondence of thought and speech or thought and language. "Thought and speech anticipate one another. They continually take one another's place. They are way-points, stimuli for one another." Speaking is not an act of consciousness: again, there is no place for the interiority of a Cartesian subject. Merleau-Ponty conceives speech along the lines of the operation of the body in the world—it is a capacity, occupied with its tasks, momentarily unreflective in the act of doing, an "I can." Language "promotes its own oblivion," much in the way that when one reads, the words fade from the page and seamlessly usher in a meaning. Language is expressed "Not by a mind to a mind," he says in the introduction to *Signes*, "but by a being who has a body and language." In the essay "Sur la phénoménologie du langage" (*On the Phenomenology of Language*), he states that language is, as Husserl had suggested, "thought's body." And, indeed, there is the peculiar "anonymity" of the flesh operating here: "things are said and are thought by a Speech and by a Thought which we do not have but which has us."

The theme of intersubjectivity and the concept of the flesh are developed at greater length in Merleau-Ponty's best-known posthumous work, *Le Visible et l'invisible* (1964; translated as *The Visible and the Invisible*, 1968). The manuscript was left incomplete at Merleau-Ponty's death, on 3 May 1961 at age fifty-three. Whether this text represents a significant departure from *Phénoménologie de la perception* is still debated. Some critics argue that this late work merely elaborates on themes already discussed in 1945: the critique of Sartre, Gestalt psychology, freedom, language, and the body. While an astute reader of *Phénoménologie de la perception* can find there a thread of anonymity and even a collective consciousness or "universal 'We'" that will later gain expression as "flesh," in *Le Visible et l'invisible* Merleau-Ponty is critical of his earlier work, saying that it remains confined within a "philosophy of consciousness"—still too Cartesian. By this time he had moved away from the subjectivism of early French existentialism toward ontological problems. While his early philosophy was concerned with recapturing the prereflective "original text" of perception, he claims that his later philosophy deals with intersubjectivity and communication, precisely insofar as these "take up and go beyond the realm of perception." Merleau-Ponty's final philosophy is

MAURICE MERLEAU-PONTY

LES AVENTURES " DE LA DIALECTIQUE



GALLIMARD
5, rue Sébastien-Bottin, Paris VII^e

Title page for Merleau-Ponty's 1955 book (translated as Adventures of the Dialectic, 1973), in which he criticizes orthodox Marxism and elaborates a position he calls "a-communism" (William F. Ekstrom Library, University of Louisville)

concerned with the interworld; it is a metaphysics of the flesh. The body still plays an important role, but it is no longer the subject's body, as it was in *Phénoménologie de la perception*; but rather a radically anonymous being that is not just "pre-personal" but "a-personal." In *Le Visible et l'invisible*, he relates, "it is not *I* who sees, not *he* who sees, because an anonymous visibility inhabits both of us, a vision in general, in virtue of that primordial property that belongs to the flesh."

Merleau-Ponty returns to his example of two hands touching. In *Phénoménologie de la perception* the touching hand takes up the position of "subject," and the touched hand, that of "object." In *Le Visible et l'invisible*, however, the body cedes to the flesh: "my body does not perceive, but it is as if it were built around the perception that dawns through it." Revisiting the two hands touching, he writes: "If my left hand is touching my right hand, and if I should sud-

denly wish to apprehend with my right hand the work of my left hand as it touches, this reflection of the body upon itself always miscarries at the last moment." This divergence—or "dehiscence"—between the sentient and the sensible is not that between subject and object; Merleau-Ponty does not duplicate a Cartesian dualism. While the "I" cannot perceive itself perceiving, there is a reversibility of the touched and touching at work, an "overlapping or encroachment, so that we must say that the things pass into us as well as we into the things." The relation is "chiasmatic," from the Greek letter *chi*, representing a crossing that paradoxically converges and yet maintains distinctness. Hence, the subject's flesh is the flesh of the world, and the subject is as much its possession as it is his or hers; subject and object, activity and passivity, are rendered thoroughly ambiguous.

The two hands touching provide a model for vision, in terms of the dialectic between the visible and the invisible but also more radically, because there is an "encroachment" and "infringement" between the visible and the tangible and between the other senses, for sensibility in general and even for an intersubjectivity in which the self is chiasmatically related to the other. Merleau-Ponty's striking example of intersubjective communication is in the perception of a landscape, already alluded to by Hypolite in his memorial essay. "For me to have not an idea, an image, nor a representation, but as it were the imminent experience of them," writes Merleau-Ponty in *Le Visible et l'invisible*, "it suffices that I look at a landscape, that I speak of it with someone." Communication is not of particulars, however; it is neither through an intellectualism nor an empiricism but between the self and its interlocutor: "through the concordant operation of his body and my own, what I see passes into him, this individual green of the meadow under my eyes invades his vision without quitting my own, I recognize in my green his green."

Merleau-Ponty sought to overcome these dichotomies—not just mind/body, but also subject/object, self/world, reason/unreason, thought/language, visible/invisible, and inner/outer—from the start. Instead of a dialectical struggle between these binaries, Merleau-Ponty conceives of them as chiasmatically interrelated, not wholly contradictory. In *Le Visible et l'invisible* he explains these chiasmatic pairs as examples of a "good dialectic," in which each term is understood as an abstraction from the whole: "the good dialectic is that which is conscious of the fact that every *thesis* is an idealization, that Being is not made up of idealizations or of things said, as the old logic believed, but of bound wholes where signification never is except in tendency." In such statements, with reference to signification and "bound wholes," the reader can begin to appreciate the structuralist influence in Merleau-Ponty's late work. His philosophy of language is influenced by the linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure as well as by the structuralist

anthropology of his friend Claude Lévi-Strauss. Saussure conceived of language as a bound whole or totality, in which meaning is generated within context, through the interrelation of a chain of signifiers, each of which taken in isolation is meaningless. Merleau-Ponty writes in *Eloge de la philosophie* (1953; translated as *In Praise of Philosophy*, 1963): "Just as language is a system of signs which have meaning only in relation to one another, and each of which has its own usage throughout the whole language, so each institution is a symbolic system that the subject takes over and incorporates as a style of functioning, as a global configuration, without having any need to conceive it at all." Merleau-Ponty takes Saussure's linguistics as a model not just for linguistic meaning, but also for those cultural and intersubjective institutions by virtue of whose symbolic system one understands signification directly, tacitly, nonconceptually. There is a marked departure here from the phenomenological subject in favor of structuralism, because that subject cannot be conceived of as the creator of meaning. Meaning does not happen within a subject's mind, but for a body-subject in its larger intersubjective, historical involvement, in the interworld, which is a world of language—not in individuals, but in and between individuals and things. Merleau-Ponty defers to the wisdom of the poets: "In a sense, as Valéry said, language is everything, since it is the voice of no one, since it is the very voice of the things, the waves, and the forests."

Maurice Merleau-Ponty bequeaths to philosophy a manner of rethinking the human subject and its embodiment, its relations with others, the world, and the language through which meaning is conveyed. In such a world, the things, the waves, and the forests are said to "speak," purposely frustrating the attempts of traditional philosophy to impose its abstract reason onto things. Instead, Merleau-Ponty argues that the life-world has a primordial significance of which the human body-subject is an inextricable part, effectively overturning the pretenses of Cartesian mind-body dualism. Merleau-Ponty's philosophy stands as a corrective to the denigration of the body—traditionally conceived in contradistinction to a loftier mind or spirit—in the history of Western thought.

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