Maurice Merleau-Ponty
(14 March 1908 – 3 May 1961)

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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 interaction, 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 bourgeos 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 hap-
piness from which only age drives us.” He studied
philosophy at the École 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
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 École 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 École 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 comportement (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 Phénoménologie 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

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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 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
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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 untheorized or unreflected throughout daily life—"perception hides itself from itself"; people cannot see themselves seeing or touching 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-
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’Étre 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 quickly prove as absolute and as oppressive as that which fostered 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:
"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 Klassebewusstsein (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 Modernes.
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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 Signs 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 Signs, "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
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-
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 _Elogie 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 cre-
ator of meaning. Meaning does not happen within a
subject’s mind, but for a body-subject in its larger intersub-
jective, 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 wis-
dom 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 embo-
diment, 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 signifi-
cance 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 lofier mind or spirit—in
the history of Western thought.

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