

## New Books on Merleau-Ponty

*Merleau-Ponty*. By Stephen Priest. The Arguments of the Philosophers. Routledge, 1998. Pp. xi + 308. ISBN 0-415-06263-2. Hbk – £45.00.

*The Debate Between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty*. Edited by Jon Stewart. Northwestern Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy. Northwestern University Press, 1998. Pp. xlvii + 634. ISBN 0-8101-1531-X. Hbk – US\$89.95. ISBN 0-8101-1532-8. Pbk – US\$24.95.

The lives and philosophies of Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–80) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–61) intertwine and reflect each other in many ways, as Jon Stewart's collection records. Both lost their fathers at an early age, and both attended the prestigious Ecole Normale Supérieure, where they first encountered each other, and where both were taught by Léon Brunschwig (1869–1944). Both became philosophy teachers in the French *lycée* system. Both read deeply in contemporary psychology and both found themselves drawn to Husserl's phenomenology around the same time in the 1930s. In fact, Merleau-Ponty reviewed Sartre's *Psychology of the Imagination* when it first appeared. Both attended Alexandre Kojève's lectures on Hegel at the Sorbonne. Both were called up to the French army at the outbreak of the war (though Merleau-Ponty served as an officer while Sartre was a private), and both were detained by the Germans. When released, both went back to teaching; both joined the same short-lived Resistance group, Socialisme et liberté, in 1941, from which they emerged as firm allies in their pursuit of a radical phenomenological philosophy. As Sartre recalled in his moving obituary of his friend, 'Merleau-Ponty Vivant' (Stewart, ed., pp. 567–8):

Born of enthusiasm, our little group caught a fever and died a year later, of not knowing what to do. . . . As for the two of us, in spite of our failure, 'Socialism and Liberty' had at least brought us into contact with one another. . . . The key words were spoken: phenomenology, existence. We discovered our real concern. Too individualist to ever pool our research, we became reciprocal while remaining separate. Alone, each of us was too easily persuaded of having understood the idea of phenomenology. Together, we were, for each other, the incarnation of its ambiguity.

As Sartre succinctly put it, their bond and their division was Husserl and phenomenology. From 1942 onwards, the two began to co-operate closely, with Merleau-Ponty even raising funds for the production of Sartre's play *Les Mouches* (*The Flies*) in 1943. Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* appeared in 1943, but only came to public notice after 1945, when the French media,

literary circles, and the public at large became intoxicated with existentialism. Soon Merleau-Ponty, who had begun as a Christian Socialist but was, by then, a committed Marxist, found himself defending Sartre's existentialism. Meanwhile, from 1942 to 1945, Merleau-Ponty had been working on his major doctoral thesis, eventually published as the *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945). Whereas Sartre was flamboyant and public, Merleau-Ponty was cerebral and private. Flushed by his success as a novelist and dramatist, Sartre abandoned teaching to become a full-time writer and public intellectual, while the more scholarly Merleau-Ponty became a university lecturer, and then professor in Lyon and, in 1952, was elevated to the most prestigious chair of philosophy at the Collège de France, the chair formerly occupied by Henri Bergson and Louis Lavelle.

Together, on the eve of Liberation, the two philosophers had been among the founding editors of *Les Temps Modernes*, which rapidly became an extraordinarily influential intellectual journal. As Sartre wrote: 'We had dreamed of this review since 1943. . . . We would be hunters of meaning, we would speak the truth about the world and about our own lives' (Stewart, ed., p. 575). Although Merleau-Ponty was overall editor for several years, with special responsibility for the journal's attitude towards politics, he rarely allowed his name to appear on the editorial page (Sartre admitted never to have known Merleau-Ponty's reason for this reticence). In political terms, Merleau-Ponty saw his mission as reconciling dialectical materialism with fundamental individual freedom. An early indication of his commitment to Marxism is the long footnote on historical materialism in the *Phenomenology of Perception*.<sup>1</sup> When the French Communist Party became partners in a coalition government in France after the war, Merleau-Ponty wrote supportively in *Les Temps Modernes*: 'in short we must carry out the policy of the Communist Party'. Sartre had been essentially apolitical and anti-Communist, but soon, under Merleau-Ponty's guidance, Sartre also embraced the French Communist Party, and both began to defend Stalin's USSR, while supporting left-wing revolutionary causes and the struggles of Third World peoples against colonialism. The two philosophers finally came to differ over their interpretations of the Korean War. Merleau-Ponty saw it as a classic case of imperialist expansion which had nothing to do with the international struggles of the proletariat, while Sartre was reluctant to break ranks with the French Communist Party, which supported it. Merleau-Ponty wrote a bitter denunciation of Sartre, 'Sartre and Ultrabolshevism', to which *la petite Sartreuse*, Simone de Beauvoir, responded vigorously with her essay 'Merleau-Ponty and Pseudo-Sartreanism' (both essays are in Stewart). Merleau-Ponty resigned from *Les Temps Modernes* and their relationship ended. Sartre recalls that they met again at a conference in Venice in 1956, but never again collaborated.

Sartre himself broke with the Communist Party after the crushing of the Hungarian uprising in 1956. While Sartre continued to travel the world lecturing on existentialism and Marxism, Merleau-Ponty withdrew into himself and began to write the sequel to *Phenomenology of Perception*, which remained unfinished at his death in 1961. Sartre went on to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1964 (he declined the award), and to play a prominent role in the events in Paris of May 1968 in the company of Daniel Cohn-Bendt. Through the 1970s, Sartre continued to embrace radical causes, including the Maoists, the German Red Army Faction, and the French anarchist group, Action directe, though his health declined, and he died in 1980.

Sartre's star has declined steadily since the zenith of his popularity in the 1960s, and by the time of his death, his philosophy was entirely out of fashion in France. However, Merleau-Ponty too suffered an eclipse in France, as structuralism and then deconstruction and post-structuralism came on the scene. Similarly, with the demise of existentialism and Marxism, Sartre's influence has also waned in the English-speaking world to the point where, at best, he features now only in introductory courses on existentialist ethics. There is a pity. There is still considerable philosophical richness in Sartre's interesting accounts of human encounters ('the look') and emotions, and in aspects of his philosophy of consciousness and his theory of the ego, and also in his important theory of literature. In contrast with Sartre's fate, Merleau-Ponty's star is on the ascent in the English-speaking world. He is seen as offering an alternative to the dominant scientific paradigm in philosophy of mind. His anti-Cartesianism and his recognition of the importance of embodiment in the description of consciousness find favour in recent analytic philosophy in particular.

Sartre's philosophical limitations are immediately obvious. He saw himself as an old-style rationalist philosopher of the Cartesian kind. His simplistic ontology of *pour-soi* and *en-soi* preserves a version of Cartesian dualism. Even his commitment to freedom is entirely Cartesian, as he himself argued. Sartre's genius lay, not in his ontological claims (including his account of consciousness as negativity), and certainly not in his pompous philosophical rhetoric, but rather in his writer's ability to describe wonderfully the dialectical play of freedom at work in episodes of human social interaction. Sartre's writing has an intoxicating quality, and, despite his greater philosophical acumen, Merleau-Ponty in his *Phenomenology of Perception* seems unable to break free of Sartre. He more or less adopts Sartre's vision of the world as divided into *en-soi* and *pour soi*, while strongly disagreeing with Sartre's claim that the two regions did not communicate (Priest, p. 220). As Merleau-Ponty wrote of Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* in his 1945 essay 'The Battle Over Existentialism':

In our opinion the book remains too exclusively antithetic: the antithesis of my view of myself and another's view of me and the antithesis of the *for itself* and the *in itself* often seem to be alternatives instead of being described as the living bond and communication between one term and the other.<sup>2</sup>

For Merleau-Ponty the for-itself-in-itself conjunction takes place not in an impossible absolute (as for Sartre) but in 'Being in promiscuity', in the 'interworld' between embodied consciousness and the phenomenal realm.<sup>3</sup> Sartre, on the other hand, was never particularly interested in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. Indeed, he would have been less hurt by Merleau-Ponty's 1955 essay, 'Sartre and Ultra-Bolshevism', had he bothered to read Merleau-Ponty's earlier publications where the same criticisms were advanced.

In terms of their concrete phenomenological descriptions both Sartre and Merleau-Ponty discuss much of the same phenomena. Merleau-Ponty accepts Sartre's basic premise that all human action is free (see Priest, p. 151), but he strongly disagrees with Sartre's concept of absolute freedom and maintained that there are constraints placed on our freedom though we are not completely determined. When Sartre claimed 'we are condemned to be free', Merleau-Ponty countered with 'we are condemned to meaning' (*PP* xix; xiv–xv). Similarly Sartre's 'hell is other people' is challenged by Merleau-Ponty's 'history is other people'. Thus Sartre's non-psychological account of the nature of the image in imagining is constantly invoked by Merleau-Ponty. The phenomenon, already noted in classical psychology, of the body's ability to touch itself, which becomes central to Merleau-Ponty's account of the interweaving of self and world, had already been noticed by Sartre, in the chapter on the body in *Being and Nothingness*, though Sartre did not invest it with the same significance. The relation between the philosophies of these two men, then, needs to be re-examined.

Jon Stewart's collection of essays is a first attempt to address this need. Stewart includes seven primary source essays, amounting to some 300 pages of the book and including Merleau-Ponty's important 1945 essay, 'The War has Taken Place', published in *Les Temps Modernes*, where some very direct criticisms of Sartre's account of freedom are made, and Sartre's evocative, emotional tribute, written on the occasion of Merleau-Ponty's death, 'Merleau-Ponty vivant'. Stewart's introduction is informative, but his editorial sense is decidedly uneven, and the book is unnecessarily swollen by the inclusion of some twenty secondary essays on Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, most of which are uninspired, and several of which are quite dated. Only one new essay, by Joseph Catalano, is included. One regrets that new essays were not commissioned to accompany the fascinating primary texts. Furthermore, Stewart's collection seems caught in a

time-warp, with no reappraisal of Merleau-Ponty and Sartre in the light of contemporary concerns in ontology, philosophy of mind, or ethics. Stewart's contributors all write as if existential issues of freedom and political responsibility can be discussed without adverting to more recent political philosophy, or to political events such as the collapse of Communism. There is no sense that the debate has moved on. Clearly, the whole phenomenon of existential philosophy, its philosophical underpinnings and assumptions of political engagement, needs a profound rethinking, and resituating in the intellectual history of the twentieth century, but this collection fails miserably on that score. How do Merleau-Ponty's and Sartre's analysis of personal and communal identity measure up in relation to current discussions of identity in post-colonial cultures? How do their views on Marxism seem after the fall of the Soviet Union? These questions are not addressed in the collection. Nor are the essays on ontology attuned to contemporary debates.

Stephen Priest, on the other hand, has written a monograph on Merleau-Ponty. The book attempts to give a view of the whole of his philosophy, though its focus is very much on the *Phenomenology of Perception*. Merleau-Ponty's wider philosophical interests, his interest in the philosophy of history, his political engagement, are not discussed, though Priest does have chapters on Merleau-Ponty's notion of art. Priest sets out to clarify and defend Merleau-Ponty's central arguments, and even provides arguments where they are wanting in Merleau-Ponty's text. From this point of view, Priest's book is badly needed; much of the secondary literature on Merleau-Ponty is uncritical. It is exceptionally difficult to be precise about what Merleau-Ponty is actually defending. Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on the ambiguity and dialectics of our relation with the world is mirrored in the ambiguity and vagueness of his own writing. His attempt to be 'present at the birth of meaning', to reawaken the experience of perception prior to conceptual thought, leads him away from philosophy towards art and poetry as ways of making the world 'sing' to us. Priest cuts through these ambiguities with remarkable clarity while preserving the complexities of the argument. On the other hand, reading Merleau-Ponty through the prism of his 'arguments' may not necessarily do full justice to his ambiguous, evolving thought. French philosophy in general is enamoured of the provocative assertion, which is supposed to have a kind of imaginative, visionary appeal. The illusion of depth often collapses when analysed in too close detail. Furthermore, Priest's attempts to squeeze Merleau-Ponty's exuberant prose into the straitjacket of contemporary analytic philosophy often results in his supposed clarifications being rather wooden reductions; some even amount to misrepresentations. If individual sentences are abstracted from Merleau-Ponty's limpid prose and treated as categorical assertions in a chain of arguments, then much of his subtlety and ambiguity is lost. To be sure,

Priest struggles to refine Merleau-Ponty's thought to its most explicate, but often this seems to lose the essence of Merleau-Ponty's appeal.

Priest begins with a brief introductory chapter on Merleau-Ponty's life and writings (with all too brief attention to Merleau-Ponty's first book, *La Structure du comportement – The Structure of Behaviour*, 1942). This is a pity, for *Structure* offers a powerful critique of the behaviourism of Watson and the reflex theories of Pavlov, on the one hand, and the vitalism of Bergson, on the other. Merleau-Ponty criticizes the theory of sensations at work in both these psychological accounts – experience is never a synthesis of raw sensations – and instead champions the Gestalt psychology of Köhler, Koffka, Gelb, and Goldstein, and the perceptual theories of Husserl, as providing a more holistic account of behaviour. Indeed, the term 'structure' in the title is an allusion to the German concept of *Gestalt*. Already in this book, Merleau-Ponty displays his technique of analysing a situation through those cases where the circuit is broken. His discussion of El Greco is a fascinating example: in it he examines the role of the painter's eye defect (astigmatism) in producing his distinctive style.

Priest correctly portrays Merleau-Ponty as seeking to provide an account of consciousness which avoided both rationalism and empiricism, and sees his originality as lying in his attempt to understand subjectivity as physical (p. 57), as belonging to the body. Indeed, despite his espousal of Sartre's ontological categories, Merleau-Ponty was especially critical of the Cartesianism lurking in much contemporary psychology. 'Empiricism' (*empirisme*), as Merleau-Ponty uses the term, covers all kinds of empirical scientific approaches, including behaviourism. Merleau-Ponty also opposes the 'objective thought' (*la pensée objective*) and 'intellectualism' at work in the sciences and in philosophy, which involve a denial of the embodied perceptual moment in awareness, and operate with rigid concepts and categories. Both empiricism and intellectualism suffer from the same defect – missing the nature of human embodied existence. Merleau-Ponty, developing Husserl's conception of consciousness as already presupposing a world and Heidegger's *In-der-Welt-sein*, articulates in some detail the inseparability of self and world ('We choose our world and the world chooses us', *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 454). Human beings fit into the world that seems specially made for them. As opposed to Cartesianism, which uncoupled subjectivity from the world, we are, Merleau-Ponty says, 'voué au monde', 'destined to the world'. The visible world seems specially adapted for viewing by our eyes. The body is both sexualized and humanized in the world. Moreover, Merleau-Ponty acknowledged the radical contingency of our existence. Invoking a kind of Protagorean relativism, he argues that the kind of ontology we have depends on the manner of our bodily constitution in the world. If we humans had eyes on either side of our heads, we would have a different ontology of substance and accidents.

After *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty moved away from the theory of perception to attempt to develop a theory of conceptualization and communication. His project *The Prose of the World* showed a preoccupation with language inspired by Heidegger's later essays as well as by his reading of the structuralist linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. Merleau-Ponty was a close friend of Claude Lévi-Strauss, and though he does not appear in most surveys of structuralism, Priest quotes Lévi-Strauss as saying that Merleau-Ponty appropriated structuralism as a new way of seeing being (Priest, p. 11). Merleau-Ponty's last unfinished work, *The Visible and Invisible*, is an attempt to develop a new post-Cartesian language, using terms like *chiasme*, *la chair*, and *écart* for expressing the intertwining of our consciousness and body, for expressing the surface contact between skin and sensible world. Merleau-Ponty claims to be articulating the 'body of the mind' (VI, 253) rather than the more Cartesian picture of 'consciousness facing a noema' (VI 244). In these later works, Merleau-Ponty also criticizes phenomenology as too attached to the pure gaze, and fixated on an ontology of how things appear to consciousness, rather than exploring the domain of 'wild being' (*l'être sauvage*). Priest is aware of these developments but pays little attention to them, aside from a chapter on 'Language'.

While not adhering to the stages of Merleau-Ponty's development, Priest's book deals adequately with the main aspects of his philosophy. There are chapters on 'Phenomenology', 'Existentialism', 'The Body', 'Space', 'Time', 'Subjectivity', 'Freedom', 'Language', and so on. Priest gives a short account of phenomenology as eschewing metaphysical speculation, avoiding causal explanations in order to concentrate on the description of essences. However, Priest gives a rather uninformative account of what Husserl means by 'essences'. This chapter on phenomenology could have benefited by the use of examples, rather than the employment of an abstract language for discussing essences, which phenomenologists believe are discoverable everywhere. Also Priest gives a rather disappointing characterization of Merleau-Ponty's attempt to restore essences to existence. There is more to this move than the claim that knowing whether something exists affects our knowledge of its essence. Rather, as Heidegger also emphasizes, phenomenology is interested in attending to the 'how' of existing, which belongs to essence. Perhaps the greatest mistake is to say that 'phenomenology is subjective. Science is objective' (Priest, p. 230), which is surely a distortion of what Husserl and others thought about phenomenology (which they took to be a genuine *science* of subjectivity, a science which explicated the constitution of objectivity from subjectivity).

An example of the kind of woodenness which creeps in is found in Priest's account of Merleau-Ponty on perception. In his chapter on classical theories of perception, Merleau-Ponty lists an attribute which is mentioned

by classical psychology – that the body is always perceived. Priest treats this as Merleau-Ponty's own claim, whereas Merleau-Ponty is really seeking to situate this classical psychological position in the context of his own theory of the body subject. The claim that the body is always perceived (*constamment perçu*, *PP* 90) does not mean that it is always *seen* (this is isolating one sense among others), not even that it is the subject of motion, but rather that the whole world is presented to and through my body in a way which has not even been glimpsed by studies of consciousness. Priest takes the claim literally to mean that I always consciously perceive my body. But this is a misunderstanding. Merleau-Ponty means that the body is active in all perception. Without the body, there would be no perception, so speculation about 'out of body experiences' (Priest, p. 58) are beside the point. Even if one feels that one is floating in space, one is floating as someone *with a body* would float. This is not just an 'empirical truth', as Priest puts it, but part of the phenomenological essence of human perception. Hence the notion of 'necessity' here is not physical necessity or conceptual necessity, but 'eidetic necessity'.

Similarly it is part of our ordinary concept of a physical object that it is seen in profiles (Priest, p. 62), and phenomenology elevates this into a principle of the appearance of physical things as such. Priest has a good discussion of how the illusion of aperspectival objectivity (the God's-eye view) is not really a 'view from nowhere' but rather is the view from above. Merleau-Ponty himself had discussed the possibility of knowing object from no point of view, but Priest is not convincing in his claim that seeing an object from every side is in principle different from seeing it from no perspective. Priest makes the claim that Merleau-Ponty is an idealist about the existence and nature of physical objects (Priest, p. 199), but this is not clear from his writings. Priest thinks that Merleau-Ponty has a picture of a physical object as a set of properties without substrate where the properties belong to one another (Priest, p. 200). Again this is not at all clear. Priest has indeed hit on a serious weakness in Merleau-Ponty's metaphysics, but I doubt that such clear metaphysical stances can in fact be distilled from Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*. Merleau-Ponty is phenomenologically describing a world of objects appearing to consciousness, not doing ontology.

Priest's chapter on freedom is very good because he recognizes both Merleau-Ponty's dependence on, and his critique of, Sartre's conception of freedom. But Priest does tend to read Merleau-Ponty a little too literally. When he quotes Merleau-Ponty as saying in Sartrean terms that one chooses one's temperament, Priest claims that the fact that one recognizes one's temperament and values it does not mean that it is chosen (Priest, p. 157). But of course, Merleau-Ponty means that one still must choose to accept it – one could also choose to alter it. An anorexic, for example, chooses to reject the current body in favour of an ideal one.



Priest's chapter on time attempts to distil from Merleau-Ponty a metaphysical account of time and decides that he is a subjective idealist about time. But in fact, he is a Husserlian, who believes that thought is essentially temporal in its activity – as the term 'occurrent thoughts' suggests, all thoughts occur at a moment in time and have a date stamped on them as Merleau-Ponty says.<sup>4</sup> Time and thought are mutually entangled. But this does not mean that that is all there is to time, that time is really produced by thought in some sense. History is a complex weave of subjective and objective. Merleau-Ponty is not convincing in his more metaphysical claims and Priest is right to analyse them, but isolating them from their phenomenological context has the danger of distorting them into stand-alone metaphysical theses, which they are not intended to be.

In his last works Merleau-Ponty came to see art as prior to philosophy and as expressing the nature of life in a way impossible for science, which manipulates things and has given up living in them. Priest's analytic language curiously mixes with the obscure. Consider the following explication of Merleau-Ponty's views on painting: Priest says that 'Painting is revelatory of the visibility of what is, the visibility of what is is revelatory of what is is, so painting is revelatory of what is is' (Priest, p. 208). I personally have no idea what that is supposed to mean. 'What is is' is a peculiar way of expressing that painting is a way of expressing meaningfully the manner in which certain kinds of things or events possess their being. Similarly, Priest disagrees with Merleau-Ponty, who claims that imagining a mind painting a picture is impossible (Priest, p. 210), whereas Priest thinks that it is possible. Here too Priest misses the point. It is not that I can say: picture pure thoughts painting a picture (I can of course do that – I can say words and hence conjecture a meaningful situation); the point is that one cannot *imagine* a mind painting a picture in any other way than as a body doing the painting. The concept of perspective comes from body, as does the concept of painting as an action.

Overall Priest's book is a helpful, if ultimately somewhat disappointing, attempt to read Merleau-Ponty. Priest fails to communicate the sense of intellectual excitement which reading Merleau-Ponty generates. One expects a richer appreciation of phenomenology. Furthermore, the last chapter is quite strange and, in my opinion, is an unwarranted speculative intrusion, which maintains that the real answer to the meaning of being is given by the world's mystics and not by Merleau-Ponty or Heidegger. Priest also maintains in a short argument that mental states are sufficient for brain states, whereas brain states are empirically necessary for mental states. This too seems to go further than what Merleau-Ponty would hold. Curiously Priest maintains that Merleau-Ponty has neither the 'literary talent nor the political dexterity of Sartre' (Priest, p. 224). This flies in the face of what we know of Merleau-Ponty's

formative political influence on Sartre. If anything Merleau-Ponty is the more politically sophisticated while Sartre undoubtedly has the edge in literary sophistication. Finally, Priest's book could have done with better editing and proofreading to eliminate errors. Though minor, they are irritating: e.g. not 'Louis le Grande', but 'Louis le Grand' (Priest, p. 1); similarly, 'la chair', not 'le chair' (Priest, p. 10). For the historians of philosophy, some factual details need to be confirmed, since there are some conflicts between the two books. For example: was Merleau-Ponty's father killed in action in the First World War, as Priest maintains, or did he die in 1913 before the war began? Was Merleau-Ponty captured and tortured by the Germans, as Priest reports (p. 4), or treated as an officer and demobilized (Stewart, p. xix)? But, all in all, I hope that these two books mark the beginning of an attempt to reappraise the philosophy of the mid-twentieth century.

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### Notes

- 1 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), pp. 171–2 (hereafter *PP*).
- 2 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern, 1964), p. 72.
- 3 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Visible and Invisible* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern, 1968), p. 253 (hereafter *VI*).
- 4 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern, 1964), pp. 14–15.