Q: What is the significance of Merleau-Ponty writings to contemporary philosophy?
A: This is an important question, for Merleau-Ponty’s works mark out an important space between the more extreme positions now labeled Modernism and Postmodernism. Modernism in philosophy, which begins with Descartes in the early 1600’s and extends to about 1850, can be characterized by its focus on the isolated individual and its belief in one form of rationality, a rationality that was thought to match the very structure of one rational world. Postmodernism, which begins (in spirit if not in name) in the mid 1800’s with the works of Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky and Marx, rightfully questions the assumptions of Modernism, and it is now widely held that there are multiple forms of rationality, not just one, and that the self is formed in social interaction. This view has been extended to an extreme by 20th and 21st Century philosophers such as Jacques Derrida and Richard Rorty.

Modernism also held that thought was formed independently of language. Language was conceived as an incidental vehicle for this already formed thought. We now know that language is necessary for thought, that it helps accomplish it. This is the sort of thing that Derrida takes to the extreme. For he claims that language forms all thought and meaning. He, of course, does not deny the existence of the world or of our perceptual encounter with it, but he does say that words refer only to other words and not to the world outside of us. He also claims that language is a trace of the perceptual that erases its original connection to that trace.

Merleau-Ponty comes between these two more extreme positions. On the one hand, he, like others, has argued that there are multiple forms of rationality, not just one. Yet, on the other hand, he argues that forms of reason are not entirely arbitrary. As the philosopher of live embodiment, he argues that since human bodies are similar (not identical, for no two people are exactly the same), that they will open perceptually upon the world in similar ways. Moreover, since the world’s structures do not change radically from moment to moment, they reveal themselves to human beings in stable and predictable ways. There is certainly no definitive rational interpretation of the world, for nature is inexhaustible and open to a variety of interpretations, but since the world is relatively stable, some interpretations will tend to fit better than others. To offer one of Merleau-Ponty’s examples, if I say that a certain cliff face is climbable, whether or not this interpretation fits or works depends upon the actual structure of the cliff and its relationship to the human body. For Merleau-Ponty, then, there is a sort of perceptual logos or structure that is not arbitrary. It is concrete, open and changing, but it is not arbitrary or haphazard, for it follows the relatively stable structure of the perceived world.

In addition, Merleau-Ponty fully accepts the idea that the self is formed in social interaction, including with the help of language, but he also insists that this self awareness is rooted in the structure of the body. As I see and touch the world around me, I am aware of being seen and touched from the outside. Since consciousness is the body’s openness upon the world and since the body is reflexive, since it turns back upon itself (the hand touches from the inside because it is touched from the outside), I am aware of being in the world and that I am perceptible to others who are also within it. This means that human consciousness is intimately associated with self-consciousness and that self-consciousness necessarily involves a public dimension, which is infused with language. The sense of self thus forms in
social interaction, including with the help of language, but after all, there is something there to form, our embodied perceptual openness upon a public world.


A: I approached this task with a great deal of apprehension, for, after all, it is ultimately impossible to speak for another human being, particularly one with Merleau-Ponty's unique genius. Moreover, as Merleau-Ponty admits, we do individuate from our shared experiences and our shared bodily structures. Therefore no one can ever literally experience the experience of another. Yet since my individual life rests upon the general (and therefore shared) structures of the body, and since my consciousness is experienced primarily as opening upon a public world, my individual life crosses into life and experience in general. It is in this way that I am able to glimpse the experience of another person—that is, because our bodies are similar, because our experiences open upon a public world in similar ways, because our embodied consciousnesses meet and overlap at the objects in the world, like search lights illuminating objects where they rest, I can capture a glimpse of another person's experience. So even though I can never speak for another person in exactly the way he or she would speak for him or herself, if the other is unable to speak, I can perhaps approximate the other's intentions. We are, after all, able to understand each other, and if we can understand each other, we can to a certain extent speak for each other—for there are general structures of experience that all can understand.

More specifically, to answer your question, once I had seen that Merleau-Ponty's lecture notes from the last period of his life, the period in which he was also writing *The Visible and the Invisible*, almost exactly matched the book's outlined yet incomplete chapters, I felt an obligation to try to pull the works together. Merleau-Ponty was without a doubt one of the 20th Century's greatest philosophers. He must be placed in the company of Heidegger, Wittgenstein and Dewey. The fact that he died at the relatively young age of fifty-three was a great tragedy for the philosophical community, and since his philosophy was deeply concerned with everyday life and ordinary people, with democracy for all, it was a great tragedy for the world community as well. No one can speak exactly for Merleau-Ponty, but what I tried to do was use his own works, his lectures and late essays, to allow him to more fully speak for himself, to use his own words to bring his own rather remarkable works to a more complete expression. Since I decided to go ahead with the publication of *Merleau-Ponty's Last Vision*, I obviously think that the book makes a contribution to this end. It of course is now in the hands of readers and critics who must come to that judgment, or not, on their own.

Q: Why do you think that the question of philosophy according to Merleau-Ponty should change from “who am I” to “What is there?”

A: This relates back to your first question about Merleau-Ponty's contribution to contemporary philosophy. I think that his idea that consciousness is not a hermetically sealed entity in full possession of one rationality but a tentative embodied openness upon the world and others is an important shift away from the individualism and ethnocentrism of Western
philosophy and Western culture in general. We live in the world in a provisional way, and we live there with other people and other cultures. True, we must ground truth and values in our own experiences and reflections, but we must also, since we are social creatures who live in a shared world, check our beliefs against those held by others as we open upon the world together. It is out of this cross-checking, and hopefully out of non-coercive debate and dialogue, with other people and other cultures, including with our past, that we should form our truths and values.

Q: Merleau-Ponty focuses on the idea of the body as a thing among things, and yet he considers it as the source of knowledge. What are your comments on this?
A: Merleau-Ponty is responding to a philosophical tradition that defined nature as a thing purely in itself and consciousness or the mind as purely for itself. He believed that the human body was a third kind of thing, an amalgam of body and mind. As I have already mentioned, for him consciousness is the body’s awareness of and openness upon the world. The human body is a thing like other things, for it has thickness, weight, and opaqueness, yet it is the thing that allows us to be aware of and perceive other things and that can never itself be fully perceived as a thing, since the act of perception can never be fully captured as an object. It is the thing that holds other things in awareness around it. As Merleau-Ponty says in the posthumous The Visible and the Invisible, it is our embodiment or our flesh that gives us access to the world and its embodiment. This does not mean that the world senses us the way that we sense it, but it does mean that we are encrusted in the world through our bodies, that there is no clear distinction between where it ends and where we begin, that we belong to each other inextricably, and that our perception of nature is ultimately its perception of itself through the human body, for the human body is a development and expression of it.

Q: In his essay “Eye and Mind” [in Primacy of Perception, Evanston, Illinois, Northwestern University Press, 1964] Merleau-Ponty celebrates art, specifically painting, as the great living experience of our openness upon the world. Does that tell us that he considers painting as more illuminating than literature?
A: Yes, Merleau-Ponty does celebrate painting, and in his last text he states that vision must remain the philosopher’s model of knowledge, but he also accords a very special place to language in his later philosophy. It goes something like this. Perception already stylizes, is already a "going beyond," already organizes scattered bits of nature in a meaningful way. If, for example, I perceive the well known gestalt figure the can appear as a vase or as two faces in profile, I spontaneously organize the physical lines on the page as either a vase or as two faces. Something is clearly added by the embodied perceiver here, for the physical lines can be "stylized" or interpreted in either of these two ways. Yet this is a "going beyond" the data that remains in contact with them, the actual lines perceived, and with the embodied perceiver. In this case, then, perception is already an expression, the creation of a meaning that is still rooted in the world and our bodies. Merleau-Ponty believes that painting is a prolongation of this already oriented movement and expression of meaning. Painting stylizes. It organizes lines, colors, and the perceptual world in a meaningful way.

He also believes that speech, in turn, is a prolongation of perception, that the writer creates meaning in much the same way as the painter, that is, by taking up a meaning that is already present in events and taking it further, by organizing and stylizing it in a unique way. Language, then, is a sublation of the perceptual, for it takes it up and expresses it at a
higher level of integration. Thus even though much of the origin of meaning is in the body's perceptual encounter with the world, language is required to more fully separate meaning from its contingent structures. Language helps us escape the contingent, helps us form abstractions and more general meanings. Painting cannot paint about itself, certainly not in the way that language can speak or write about itself. Nor can painting integrate past styles in a present work, certainly not in the way that language can integrate past philosophies or literary themes in present works. Language can free us from our past and yet summarize it and integrate it with new forms of present creation. In general, then, as Merleau-Ponty says, what makes human language and linguistic culture unique is not that they form a second structure or nature above or beyond nature, but that they can continue to help us create new structures, structures that are rooted in perception yet that also sublate it, take it up and integrate it at higher levels. Painting cannot accomplish this prodigious task.

Q: What's the place of language in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy knowing that he opposes the Derridian notion of the literary text as a free play of signs in which the signifiers refer only to other signifiers.

A: As I just mentioned, language is a sublation of our perceptual encounter with the world. It takes up the open and referential patterns of the perceived and articulates them more precisely. Language gives expression to or sings our encounter with the world and others. Perception does not cause or logically require a certain expression. It suggests it, as, to use a metaphor that Rollo May uses in a completely different context, a violin string suggests the sounds of the other instruments in the orchestra by echoing and vibrating with them. By vibrating with the rhythms of the world, by echoing its rhythms, forms and patterns, as it actively helps form them, perceptual gestures and rhythms can also suggest and slip into the rhythms of speech and language. Language, in turn, helps articulate the perceived, takes it up, expresses it more fully and determinately, and yet also more openly and generally. The light of language is needed for perception to be so expressed. Yet language shines back a light that has been originally suggested by the perceived. While Derrida does not deny our perceptual contact with the world, he certainly does not attempt to do the important work of trying to integrate this contact with language. The beginning of this integration has been accomplished by Merleau-Ponty.