Merleau-Ponty

Issues and Philosophers: An Exposition

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Dedication

To my students, to my friends, and to the many students and friends of Merleau-Ponty.

Foreword

This manuscript, *Merleau-Ponty: Issues and Philosophers: An Exposition*, is intended and written for upper level undergraduate students, for graduate students, for scholars unfamiliar with Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, and for Merleau-Ponty scholars interested in the particular issues presented here---with an interpretation that may well differ from those presented elsewhere.

The manuscript is in the form of a short book, with six chapters. It is primarily a detailed exposition of Merleau-Ponty’s resolution of the mind/body problem, his treatment of the relationship between perception and language, his relationship with the great Edmund Husserl, his criticism of Heidegger, his quarrel with Jean-Paul Sartre, and his criticism of both modernism and postmodernism. There are a number of excellent books that provide expositions of various aspects of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy. None, however, provide an exposition of the issues and philosophical relationships presented here, in the way they are presented here.

Obviously, books published with reputable publishers tend to be taken more seriously than those simply posted online. Yet, I’ve opted for the latter, and do so for the following reasons. First and foremost, the manuscript is posted online to make it more financially accessible to the reader, especially to students. The cost of a scholarly book frequently approaches, and now even exceeds, the one-hundred-dollar mark. Obviously, given this cost, most students find the purchase of scholarly books to be cost prohibitive, and, unfortunately, this situation steers many students away from engagement with important issues broached and scrutinized by scholarly authors. In a time when market values dominate all others, it is imperative to provide open and easy access to the consideration of other values (for example, and as Plato reminds us, truth, beauty and justice) before they disappear completely. Secondly, since I have had the good fortune to publish a number of books and scholarly essays with a number of reputable publishers and journals, and since I am now in the twilight of my career, it appears less necessary to publish with a scholarly publisher in order to confirm the value of the present work. This confirmation (or not) will be left to the reader him or herself. Overall, my hope here is to provide easy access (by way of a detailed exposition posted online) to the wonderful and compelling works of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, which deserve to be considered because of their overall value to humanity, regardless of market value.
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Introduction

To the perhaps “parlor game” question about who is the greatest philosopher of the 20th Century, the answer, usually depending upon the philosophical tradition (Anglo-American or Continental, for example) is frequently Wittgenstein or Heidegger. Certainly, the names of Husserl, Russell, Merleau-Ponty, and Quine could also be considered for this august position. Yet, I will not here enter this debate or attempt to answer this question (which in all likelihood is impossible to answer) but would like to offer the following quote of a Marjorie Grene comment about Merleau-Ponty. “Every time I read him I have, once more, the sense that his approach to philosophical problems is entirely, overwhelming right. As with no other thinker, I say, yes, so it is . . .”1 Obviously, many philosophers, throughout the ages, and from different philosophical traditions, have much of value to teach us. Yet, I must agree with the spirit of Grene’s comment: Merleau-Ponty’s works frequently make more sense than most, for they bear a sort of profound common sense that is more clarifying than other philosophical positions. It is with this in mind that I present Merleau-Ponty: Issues and Philosophers: An Exposition. Much can still be gained by reading his works and by grasping the insights that they provide.

Two issues, for philosophy but especially for phenomenology, to which Merleau-Ponty makes an especially important contribution are: the mind-body problem and the relationship between perception and language. The opening first two chapters of this book will address these issues, with Chapter 1, Mind-body Problem, addressing the first, and Chapter 2, Perception Language Relationship, addressing the second. Chapter 3, Relationship to Husserl’s Philosophy will provide a detailed exposition of Merleau-Ponty’s relationship to Husserl’s thought, with Chapter 4, Criticism of Heidegger: A Brief Note, and Chapter 5, Criticism of Sartre’s Philosophy respectively addressing Merleau-Ponty’s criticism of Heidegger and Sartre. The final chapter, Chapter 6, Merleau-Ponty, Modernism, Structure, and Postmodernism, will consider Merleau-Ponty’s embrace of structure and how this allows him to leave modernism behind without fully embracing what now generally falls under the heading of postmodernism. The book thus begins with a consideration of Merleau-Ponty’s attempt to solve two important issues for philosophy and phenomenology, moves to consider Merleau-Ponty’s relationship to his great predecessor Husserl, proceeds to consider his relationship to his well-known predecessor/contemporary Heidegger, considers his criticism of his sometime friend, sometime advisory Sartre, and ends with a consideration of his relationship to modernism, along with his likely relationship to postmodernism, if he lived long enough to encounter its proponents.

Given the importance of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, my hope here is to offer a close, careful and clarifying exposition of his thought, to bring his philosophical insights and solutions to a wider audience. Where and when it is appropriate, I will offer my own critical comments, yet my main goal here is to bring his works to a greater focus of clarity. I have focused on the issues and the philosophers just mentioned
because of the importance of each. With the advent of the postmodernists focus on the constructive power of language, to the point where our perceptual encounter with the world seems to mean little or nothing, it is important to revisit and investigate the relationship between perception and language with great care, something Merleau-Ponty has done, and has done far better than most. With respect to the intractable mind-body problem of Western philosophy (as well as Western science and medicine), Merleau-Ponty’s treatment of the issue (i.e., his life-long effort to overcome dualism) offers an abundance of valuable insights. The relationship of Merleau-Ponty to Husserl’s thought should be regarded as a relationship between two of the most important continental philosophers of the 20th Century. Understanding this relationship means understanding ourselves and our Western philosophical, intellectual, and cultural tradition at some of its deepest levels, with Husserl focusing on the isolated intellectual ego and Merleau-Ponty on our lived-through, embodied, perceptual connection to the world and others. Moreover, we should view Merleau-Ponty’s relationship to Heidegger and Sartre in a similar light, for their competing philosophical positions reveal much about ourselves and our tradition, with Heidegger leaping beings into Being, with Sartre championing the freedom of the isolated ego, and with Merleau-Ponty judiciously bringing to light the human body’s lived through connectedness with the world and others. And finally, Merleau-Ponty’s embrace of structure as a means of transcending the subject/object dualism of modernism helps us make this move ourselves, yet does so without having to move toward the more extreme philosophies typical of postmodernism.

I should mention that Chapter 4, Criticism of Heidegger: A Brief Note, is exactly that: a brief note. Since I have treated this topic elsewhere, in great detail, I offer here a brief presentation of this more extensive piece, referring the reader to the more prolonged treatment entitled “Merleau-Ponty’s Criticism of Heidegger” in Philosophy Today Volume 53, Fall 2009. Copyright issues prevent its reproduction here, and, yet, placing Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy in the context of the works of other notable continental philosophers, Husserl, Sartre, and the postmodernist who succeeded him, seemed to call for a consideration of his relationship to Heidegger, certainly one of the central figures of 20th Century continental philosophy.

I should also mention that in most cases I have followed a text by text exposition of Merleau-Ponty writings, in the order that they were produced, beginning with the early The Structure of Behavior, proceeding to the mid-career Phenomenology of Perception, then on to the writings produced in the last period of his life. My hope here is that the reader will be able to see some of how Merleau-Ponty developed his thought but also its continuity.

Finally, I should mention that Merleau-Ponty: Issues and Philosophers: An Exposition was originally composed as separate essays and not as six chapters around one central theme. The chapters can thus be read independently of one another, yet each is more comprehensible in relation to the others. Obviously, given the consistency of Merleau-Ponty’s thought, each chapter expresses the core of his embodied
phenomenological philosophy, with some repetition, yet expressed in different ways given the topic at hand. Again, my main goal here is to bring Merleau-Ponty’s thought to its clearest possible expression, yet doing so with my own voice and my own interpretation, with the hope that this interpretation provides some insights not already available.