embodies the anatheistic ethos through “challenging the tendency to oppose inner and outer…” (165) Here, Day is specially recognized for welcoming the oppressed urban poor, Vanier the disabled and wounded, and Gandhi the colonized and oppressed of India. (165) Furthermore, Kearney expounds that these exemplars “refigure our understanding of faith by encountering the sacred at the heart of the secular world of action and suffering…” (5) In sum, Kearney calls for recognition of the “embodiment of infinity in the finite, of transcendence in immanence, and of eschatology in the now.” (166) These appeals, it is important to note, all promote a reduction of strong oppositions by welcoming contradiction.

Not unlike his previous books, Kearney’s new book provides a thought-provoking exchange between the religious and contemporary continental philosophy. The general disposition and groundwork from The God Who May Be (2001) are still evident in the anatheistic project, but here Kearney has taken a greater focus upon the lived experience of sacramental being. Additionally, there is a larger poetically prescriptive mood emanating from the text, which seems more concerned with enacting cathartic writing and offering exemplars than his past, somewhat more theoretically charged, books. As such, this book is Kearney’s most intimate to date, and we seem to get a sense of what he is ultimately demanding from religion and humanity. While the book is most inevitably going to fail to gain approval from strong theology and from strong atheistic philosophers, Kearney nevertheless continues herein to contribute thought-provoking questions about the role of narrative in cultural formation.


Review by Martin Goldstein, St-Paul University.

This volume in Acumen’s Key Concepts series makes a significant contribution to the growing appreciation of Merleau-Ponty’s body of work. The editors, Rosalyn Diprose and Jack Reynolds, have assembled a remarkably concise volume that is of interest to both those seeking an
introduction to Merleau-Ponty’s thought, as well as those whose understanding is more advanced. This book can appeal to both kinds of reader because it presents the key aspects of Merleau-Ponty’s thought in a straightforward and succinct manner, without sacrificing any of its characteristic novelty, nuance, and rigour.

Merleau-Ponty: Key Concepts is divided into four parts. The first consists of a general discussion by Reynolds of Merleau-Ponty’s life and work, as well as Diprose’s introduction to the themes and essays that comprise this volume. The second part, “Interventions,” situates Merleau-Ponty’s thought in relation to the philosophical concerns and currents of his time and connects his work to the disciplines other than philosophy from which he drew inspiration. Ted Toadvine’s essay carefully examines Merleau-Ponty’s relationship to, and revision of, Husserl’s phenomenology and clarifies Merleau-Ponty’s recognition of the limits of phenomenology through a consideration of his late understanding of “hyper-reflection.” Thomas Busch reflects upon Merleau-Ponty’s debt to existentialism and clarifies his major contributions to an existential understanding of embodied subjectivity, meaning, intersubjectivity, and freedom. Taylor Carmen explicates Merleau-Ponty’s critique of empiricism and intellectualism and points to the way in which Merleau-Ponty’s original contribution to our understanding of the body and perception follows largely from this critique. Beata Stawarska investigates Merleau-Ponty’s complex relationship with psychoanalysis, concluding that Merleau-Ponty’s thought takes up both “philosophical reflection and psychoanalytic theory in a critical as well as illuminating reciprocal relation” which, she posits, leads to the possible transformation of both. (69)

Sonia Kruks considers Merleau-Ponty’s reflections upon the philosophy of history (specifically his engagements with G.W.F. Hegel and Karl Marx) and meticulously clarifies the way in which his thought avoids both relativism and determinism. Furthermore, she highlights the political relevance of his philosophy of history through a careful explication of his belief that there are “justifiable choices to be made in any situation” and that we, therefore, can never completely avoid our political responsibilities. (78) Kruks’ discussion of political responsibility is complemented by Diana Coole’s extraordinary discussion of Merleau-Ponty’s engagement with politics and the political. Coole highlights his recognition that the task of the political
actor is “to seek signs of potentially transgressive and transformative capacities within the ambiguities and complexities of [the force field of collective life].” (91) Coole’s essay contributes immensely to our understanding of Merleau-Ponty’s political ontology and phenomenology of political practice and makes sense of his novel relationship with the thought of Marx and Machiavelli. Coole’s discussion is additionally noteworthy for her convincing argument against Barry F. Cooper’s contention that Merleau-Ponty’s politics “became more conservative over time” (86), demonstrating instead that he consistently “wrote as a man of the left.” (82) Closing this section, Hugh J. Silverman eruditely discusses the importance of art to Merleau-Ponty’s reflections, and elucidates the fundamental characteristics of his aesthetics.

Part three, titled “Inventions,” considers the key concepts that form the core of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy. David Morris’ exceptional essay, “Body,” is laudable for its thorough captures of the essential aspects of Merleau-Ponty’s reflections on this topic. For Morris, understanding the role of the body in Merleau-Ponty’s thought requires understanding his “distinctive philosophical gesture,” which he identifies as the “effort to locate the openness and source of being’s meaning in something precedent to and exceeding the philosopher in the body, nature, flesh...and to do so via a radical reflection that begins with this openness.” (119) Morris’ essay could easily stand on its own as an introduction to Merleau-Ponty’s reflections on embodiment and corporeality, specifically as it is discussed in Phenomenology of Perception. David R. Cerbone explicates Merleau-Ponty’s unique contributions to the philosophical understanding of perception, particularly as it follows from his critique of empiricism and intellectualism. Gail Weiss successfully undertakes the daunting task of explicating the multiple meanings of the term “ambiguity” in Merleau-Ponty’s thought.

Michael Sanders’ essay takes up Merleau-Ponty’s significant contribution to the understanding of intersubjectivity and alterity. Sanders considers Merleau-Ponty’s position in light of Husserl’s influence, as well as Levinas’ criticisms. It is with regard to the latter that Sanders’ essay really stands out. Levinas claims that Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of intersubjectivity is “determined by a relationship of knowledge between self and other.” (147) On this basis,
he argues that Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology fails to account for the absolute otherness of human beings, which is essential to Levinas’ own understanding of intersubjectivity. Responding to Levinas’ criticisms, Sanders shows that Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of intersubjectivity evolved significantly from his early engagement with Husserl. He accepts Levinas’ understanding of intersubjectivity as involving a dimension that is absolutely other and epistemically inaccessible, but rejects the claim that such an understanding is lacking in Merleau-Ponty’s work. To support his contention, Sanders points to Merleau-Ponty’s acknowledgement, in The Visible and the Invisible, that, just as there can only ever be a partial coincidence between two hands touching, there can be only a partial coincidence between two or more subjects. In Sanders’ estimation, Merleau-Ponty’s recognition that one’s knowledge of another is at best only partial calls into question the extent to which the relationship between self and other is founded upon adequate knowledge. (147)

Harry Adams carefully outlines Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of expression as creative, fundamentally dependent upon corporeality, and enacted between “decentred subjects who call and respond to messages whose origins and meanings are never altogether clear and whose truth is never absolute.” (160) Adams makes clear that the task of expression, for Merleau-Ponty, is not to impose meaning on the world but instead to “let the world and its ‘wild meaning’ speak through us.” (160) Susan L. Cataldi’s essay is devoted to Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of affect and sensibility. Her essay is an original contribution to the understanding of Merleau-Ponty’s thought in that it provides important insight into a dimension, which is not often explicitly discussed, but which in her view is “interfused with sense perception in the living experience Merleau-Ponty tries philosophically to capture.” (163) In light of the fairly recent English translation of Merleau-Ponty’s course notes, titled Nature, Scott Churchill thoughtfully outlines the direction of Merleau-Ponty’s thought regarding nature and animality. Churchill’s essay will be of particular interest to anyone interested in Merleau-Ponty’s engagement with the thought of Jakob von Uexküll and his belief that it could serve as the basis of a phenomenology of nature. (182) Fred Evans closes section three with an instructive discussion of Merleau-Ponty’s notions of chiasm and flesh. He concludes that Merleau-Ponty’s sense of the latter preserves the difference between the
sentient and the sensible in order to draw our attention to the “unity we share with other beings” with whom we share this planet.

The essays of the fourth part, “Extensions,” survey some of the ways in which Merleau-Ponty’s thought has been used in other disciplines. Ann Murphy discusses Merleau-Ponty’s work in relation to feminism and race theory. She demonstrates that, while Merleau-Ponty’s work is open to some criticism from feminists, it has informed feminist ideas such as “gender performativity.” (200) In addition, she indicates how it can contribute to race theory insofar as it can help to “account for the ways in which racism does much of its damage at the pre-reflective, unconscious level, thus undermining the naive belief that all racism is explicit and easily recognized.” (206) Shaun Gallagher explores the resonance Merleau-Ponty’s thought continues to have for cognitive science. Specifically, he considers the ways in which Merleau-Ponty’s work figures in the debate surrounding the possibility of “naturalizing phenomenology” (212), as well as his influence on what Gallagher calls “cognitive social neuroscience.” (214) Philipa Rothfield’s essay takes stock of Merleau-Ponty’s contribution to health studies and our understanding of living well. She focuses on the surprising ways in which his thought “paves the way for an understanding of medical ethics that is sensitive to the perceptual and situational specificities intrinsic to healthcare practice.” (227) In the final essay, Nick Crossley surveys Merleau-Ponty’s considerable influence upon sociology, particularly the work of Pierre Bourdieu. In doing so, he brings to the fore Merleau-Ponty’s indebtedness to Max Weber, as well as his belief that “sociology should become more phenomenological” and that phenomenology should engage with sociology. (235)

*Merleau-Ponty: Key Concepts* is an invaluable volume because of the highly rigorous and informative nature of the essays it comprises. While concise, the volume provides a nuanced survey of the important elements in Merleau-Ponty’s thought. The goal of this volume is to encourage others to read the *oeuvre* of Merleau-Ponty; hopefully, with its clear and innovative contributions, it will fulfill its task.