

Feminist Interpretations of Merleau-Ponty

DOROTHEA OLKOWSKI and GAIL WEISS, Editors

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The feminine body has remained a consistent focus of feminist philosophy. Certainly, feminist philosophers have disagreed about the ontological and material status of this body and the implications of its difference, but feminist philosophy would make little sense without it.

Such rapt attention to the question of embodiment is almost unheard of in the traditional (read: androcentric) Western philosophical canon—except, of course, in the case of Merleau-Ponty. For Merleau-Ponty, foundational philosophical questions such as being, consciousness, freedom, and language are inseparable from a theory of embodiment, whose elaboration he made his life work. Yet despite this major contribution to a theory of the body, Merleau-Ponty remained (as earlier feminist commentary on his oeuvre has pointed out) largely inattentive to the sexed difference of bodies. This is why Merleau-Ponty makes for such an intriguing bedfellow for feminism: here is the body-positive guy who whispers all the right sweet nothings in your ear, but is still incapable of finding your clitoris.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, feminist embraces of Merleau-Ponty have until recently remained few and furtive, despite notable Merleau-Ponty-inspired work by thinkers such as Iris Marion Young, Gail Weiss, Dorothea Olkowski, and Vicki Kirby, who laid the groundwork for this collection. This hesitance was undoubtedly fuelled by the widespread influence of Luce Irigaray's critical essay in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (trans. 1993) on Merleau-Ponty's concept of chiasm, where she claims that Merleau-Ponty usurps maternal embodiment and erases sexual difference. A renewed interest in materialism and phenomenology, however, has set the stage for this new collection of twelve essays (some previously published) by mostly well-established feminist philosophers. After the long, largely fleshless years of feminist discursive post-structuralism, the time seems to be ripe for revitalized attention to questions of embodiment and sexual difference. Merleau-Ponty, despite his androcentric oversights, proves a remarkably fecund source for breathing new life into these debates.

A good number of essays in the collection suggest that the time may also be ripe for a nuanced reconsideration of Irigaray's criticisms of Merleau-Ponty. Judith Butler's essay "Sexual Difference as a Question of Ethics" challenges Irigaray's keystone critique most directly. Butler in fact reveals a primary and necessary complicity between Irigaray and Merleau-Ponty, as she argues that Irigaray's criticism "enacts the theory of flesh that it also interrogates" (108). Butler presents a crucial departure

from Irigaray's ethical question ("How to treat the Other well?") and rather asks: "How to treat the Other well, when the Other is never fully Other?" (116). Her refutations of the criticisms against Merleau-Ponty's supposed solipsism and reduction of the other to the same are astute and convincing. Perhaps the only jarring thing about the essay is its perpetual return to the question of language in a way that seems dismissive of the body's materiality. However, this could be explained by the fact that the essay was written in 1990, when discourse and language certainly outweighed fleshy materiality as the focus of feminist investigations into embodiment.

In a similar vein, Vicki Kirby's "Culpability and the Double-Cross: Irigaray with Merleau-Ponty" reads Irigaray as being guilty of the same things that she criticizes in Merleau-Ponty (here, a "desire for self-presence"). Kirby also addresses the question of language. But most scintillating is Kirby's sophisticated and nuanced reading of Merleau-Ponty's chiasm and the flesh. Here, in the most significant departure from Irigaray's position, Kirby locates the feminine and the maternal-gestational *within* Merleau-Ponty's theory of the flesh. She thus crucially finds room within this (never symmetrical) intertwining for difference. For those feminist theorists looking for a way to accommodate both the difference of feminine bodies and the interconnection of all bodies, Kirby's essay is the jewel in the crown.

Other essays remain more loyal to the Irigarayan position. In her essay "From the Body Proper to the Flesh," Beata Stawarska purports that her critical reading of intersubjectivity in Merleau-Ponty in fact "completes" Irigaray's critique. Yet the aforementioned essay by Butler convincingly refutes many of the criticisms Stawarska puts forward. Similarly, co-editor Olkowski's essay "'Only Nature is Mother to the Child'" provides an interesting criticism of Merleau-Ponty's elision of the maternal that inaugurates intersubjectivity. Again, however, this essay seems less convincing in light of Kirby's strong arguments to the contrary. Olkowski's piece would also be strengthened with more attention to the actual phenomenology of gestation-as-intersubjectivity. Nonetheless, both Stawarska and Olkowski's essays add promising angles to debates on the nature of sexually different bodies.

But Merleau-Ponty certainly has much to contribute to feminist debates beyond the (albeit crucial) issue of ontological sexual difference that Irigaray brings to the fore. Readers will be happy to see this collection pursue additional questions that sustain feminist philosophy's broader political, ethical, and cultural relevance. An astute introduction to addressing these broader concerns is the first essay in the collection, Sonia Kruks's "Merleau-Ponty and the Problem of Difference in Feminism." Here, Kruks uses Merleau-Ponty's thought to map the potentiality

of a shared affective and embodied ground among women. Yet, as Kruks stresses, the body is only *potentially* (and never *necessarily*) a path to commonality. This analysis provides a convincing answer to the question of how the illusory group "women" can find a ground for unified feminism across difference, but one that also side-steps the regressively fracturing "epistemology of provenance" (26) prominent in group-based identity politics. In her criticism of politically debilitating "group solipsism" (27), Kruks breaks new ground for thought on anti-oppression politics and activism more generally.

Next, Helen Fielding's innovative essay "White Logic and the Constancy of Color" locates a significant political and ethical dimension in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of color perception. Fielding deploys this to tackle the questions of racism and "skin color." She provides an excellent analysis here of the "paradox of phenomenal perception" as acting both as a filter that will "color" what we see, but also as that which can open us up to the possibility of otherness. Fielding's essay also makes an important contribution to visual culture studies. Such a contribution is also offered by Jorella Andrews's essay "Vision, Violence and the Other: A Merleau-Pontian Ethics." Here Andrews defends perception against postphenomenological anti-ocularist positions that equate the "gaze" with the objectification of women. She points out that for Merleau-Ponty, vision does not fix things, but is rather always open to a perceptual future. Importantly, however, Andrews also examines Merleau-Ponty's theory of perception in light of increasingly non-reciprocal acts of contemporary visual consumption. Like Kruks, Andrews locates the possibility, but not the inevitability, of community through embodied existence.

Laura Doyle's "Bodies Inside/Out" is another strong contribution to a politics that extends beyond feminist concerns of sexual difference, as she uses Merleau-Ponty's concept of chiasm to develop a theory of the body's potentiality for resistance. With this essay Doyle also continues Merleau-Ponty's project of developing a phenomenology of lived embodiment, as she explores the vulnerability and possibilities of the body's interior spaces, particularly in contexts of violence and domination. Co-editor Gail Weiss's own essay, "Urban Flesh" should be included in this category of essays, as she expands feminism's core concerns to the promising question of urban embodiment and violence. Unfortunately, despite some of the individual morsels of keen insight it offers, Weiss's piece suffers from an overall lack of focus, and a dilution of analysis through inclusion of too many disparate interlocutors (Irigaray, Arendt, Casey, Iris Marion Young, in addition to Merleau-Ponty).

Ann V. Murphy's essay on "Lanaguge in the Flesh" is a sort of middle ground between those essays that take up the Irigarayan question of

sexual difference and those that expand the territory of feminist criticism. Here, Murphy too asks whether Merleau-Ponty's philosophy can accommodate radical alterity, but brings Levinas' critique of Merleau-Ponty into the Merleau-Ponty/Irigaray discussion. This contribution indeed displays a relevance beyond the borders of feminist philosophy, but it seems to offer less in terms of new insights into these debates.

The essays in this collection are for the most part strong, fresh and convincing; weaknesses in a few of them have already been noted. To these criticisms we might add aspects of Johanna Oksala's essay on "Female Freedom" that suggests a rather radically poststructuralist reading of Merleau-Ponty. In many ways this essay is exciting, as it situates feminist Merleau-Ponty scholarship in a decidedly contemporary theoretical context. Strangely, however, despite the essay's argument for the radical openness of the lived body, Oksala ends the essay by coming back to a body that does not "do" (and is therefore insufficient for) politics. In this off-handed move, Oksala unexpectedly veers too far away from the core of Merleau-Ponty's teachings, which would never posit any sort of acting subjectivity that was not ultimately embodied. Finally, the only sore thumb of the lot is David Brubaker's essay in defense of Carol Gilligan's ethics of care. Not only does this essay seem out of sync with the others in its (somewhat ironically) distanced and disembodied tone, but also in its goal of locating a "universal moralist principle." While gendered experience is certainly relevant to this quest, the quest itself is framed in rather objective and disembodied terms, and seems to lack the sense of ethical and political urgency shared by the other essays. Moreover, Brubaker's reading of Merleau-Ponty's concept of flesh is at times too literal, while his use of figure perception relies too heavily on analogy. As a result, an appreciation of the nuanced concept of materiality that Merleau-Ponty develops seems missing.

But in spite of these few miscalculated gasps, the collection as a whole is a breath of fresh air into Merleau-Pontian and feminist scholarship alike, and certainly has much to offer theorists dedicated to re-thinking embodiment in terms of generativity, fecundity, and openness to difference.

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