

Mariana Larison, *L'être en forme. Dialectique et phénoménologie dans la dernière philosophie de Merleau-Ponty*. Éditions Mimésis, 2016.

There are already plenty of books on Merleau-Ponty's philosophy that centre either on his so-called first phase, marked by the *Phenomenology of Perception*, or on his later thought, mostly expressed in his final, unfinished work, *The Visible and Invisible*. There are also works that deal with Merleau-Ponty's thought as a whole and with its development from the *Phenomenology of Perception* through to *The Visible and Invisible*.¹ Even the genesis of *Phenomenology of Perception* has already been given adequate treatment in the now classic study by Théodore Geraets.² Nonetheless, there is work to be done with regards to: 1) the development of Merleau-Ponty's thought and the nature of his final philosophical proposal in the light of his still unpublished lectures especially those given at the *Collège de France* and 2) the complex topic of the relation of Merleau-Ponty's thought to his sources. Mariana Larison's most recent book succeeds precisely in filling these gaps and for this reason is well placed to become an important text in the field of Merleau-Ponty studies.

Mariana Larison has studied at the Universities of Buenos Aires, Paris and São Paulo, under the supervision of Roberto Walton, Renaud Barbaras and Marilena Chauí. She was awarded her PhD at the University Paris I-Sorbonne. The present book is the author's first major work. Although she is currently a researcher in Argentina, the book is written from a French background and seems to be addressed almost exclusively to French philosophers. Although this brings undeniable benefits to the work, the greatest of which is the author's extensive knowledge and command of Merleau-Ponty's unpublished writings, it has the downside of blocking engagement with Anglo-Saxon studies of Merleau-Ponty. Some decades ago, this kind of approach was altogether legitimate. At a moment when there are excellent studies of Merleau-Ponty's work in English, however, such as those from the likes of Lawrence Hass³, Ted Toadvine⁴, and M.C. Dillon,⁵ among others, and when Merleau-Ponty's thought is being given a central place in current debates in the philosophy of mind by such authors as Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi, it is perhaps high time that this divide came to an end. To be fair, the problem is not exclusive to this book; this failure to engage with other traditions works both ways, and many Anglo-Saxon studies are for the most part still silent on some of the most important contributions to Merleau-Ponty scholarship from the French tradition. This lack of dialogue is damaging to both traditions and perhaps to the present book as well, to the extent that it merits engagement and discussion by scholars who do not belong to the relevant French circles.

Renaud Barbaras wrote a foreword to the book, and the author indeed engages most with his interpretation. The book's main strength lies not in its dialogue with other

¹ The most notable of which is, of course, Renaud Barbaras's *L'être de le phénomène* (Grenoble: Jérôme Millon, 1991).

² Theodore Geraets, *Vers une nouvelle philosophie transcendantale: La Genèse de la philosophie de Maurice Merleau-Ponty jusqu' à la Phénoménologie de la perception* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971).

³ Lawrence Hass, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2008).

⁴ Ted Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature* (Evanston: Northern University Press, 2009).

⁵ M. C. Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1997, 2nd ed).

commentators, however, but rather in the author's vast and thorough knowledge of both Merleau-Ponty's published and unpublished writings and, in particular, his sometimes hidden sources.

The book's main hypothesis can be summarized, in the author's own words, by the idea that Merleau-Ponty's late ontology arises from the problem of conceiving of being in such a way that it includes negativity in itself. In addition to characterizing Merleau-Ponty's ontology as it can be gleaned from *The Visible and the Invisible*, however, the author reveals what drove Merleau-Ponty to that ontology in the first place. For this reason, the book can also be taken as an account of the genesis of Merleau-Ponty's later thought, although its impressive philosophical scope makes it much more than this. Its main focus is on texts from 1955 up to Merleau-Ponty's last writings. It is in this period that the author locates Merleau-Ponty's later thought. The division of Merleau-Ponty's philosophical career into two phases, with the 1955-56 lectures working as a turning point, is a premise of the whole work (a premise which the author tries to justify throughout the course of the book). It should also be pointed out that, although the book takes its departure from Merleau-Ponty's critique of the concept of dialectics in his 1955-56 lectures, this criticism is shown to be merely the starting point of the turn (*tournant*) in Merleau-Ponty's thought. From here we are led by the author to how Merleau-Ponty's rethinking of dialectics led him to his thoughts on nature, and from there to his later ontology, centred on the notion of 'flesh'. A caveat should be made here. Although the author argues for the existence of a turn in Merleau-Ponty's thought by the year 1955, the book is far from blind to Merleau-Ponty's first period. Whenever necessary, the author follows the thread of one idea down to Merleau-Ponty's very first work, *The Structure of Comportment*. This taking into account of Merleau-Ponty's thought prior to 1955 is only fitting; one of the book's main theses is that Merleau-Ponty's final work, *The Visible and the Invisible*, should be read as a phenomenological work and not as a departure from phenomenology. Without questioning the legitimacy of the division of Merleau-Ponty's work into periods, I remain convinced, after reading Mariana Larison's work, that there is a deep unity in Merleau-Ponty's thought as a whole, and that this unity lies precisely in Merleau-Ponty's life-long attempt to come to terms with Husserl's phenomenology. In the foreword, Renaud Barbaras himself stresses the fact that the author, perhaps against her explicit intentions, ends up reinforcing the idea that there is a deep continuity in all of Merleau-Ponty's work.

In the book's first chapter, the author begins by arguing that the turning-point of Merleau-Ponty's thought can be found in his still unpublished lectures on dialectics from the years 1955-56. According to the author, it was precisely by radicalizing his thought on dialectics (and thus also on history), that Merleau-Ponty managed to put into question the implicit ontology of his earlier works and to make headway towards a new ontology (which would receive its philosophical expression in Merleau-Ponty's final, unfinished work, *The Visible and the Invisible*). In order to show this, the author starts by returning to the years 1952-3 and the polemic surrounding the war in Korea. It was this event that led Merleau-Ponty to question his Marxist conception of dialectics and to distance himself from the French Communist Party. This questioning bore its first fruits in 1955, not only in the aforementioned lecture course, but also through the publication of *The Adventures of Dialectics*.

In short, according to the author, Merleau-Ponty's criticism of Hegelian and Marxist dialectical accounts of history hinges on two closely related points: 1) the course of events in world history is not thoroughly determined; 2) history does not have a final sense, an ultimate aim that would put an end to all dialectical contradiction. What Merleau-Ponty opposes to the Hegelian-Marxist dialectical view of history in order to reveal its ontological presuppositions is not a new dialectic of history, but rather a history of dialectic. The author gives an account of the development of Merleau-Ponty's reading of Hegel, showing how his acquaintance with the critique by the Vietnamese philosopher Tran-Duc-Thao of Kojève's interpretation of Hegel was crucial in shaping Merleau-Ponty's own position on dialectics. In particular, Tran-Duc-Thao's criticism of Kojève motivated Merleau-Ponty to start questioning the status of nature in Hegel's dialectics. It became questionable for him that nature should be conceived as something fully positive, as a reality in-itself outside of the dialectical movement of subjectivity, history and spirit. However, against Tran-Duc-Thao, Merleau-Ponty holds that dialectical movement does not resolve itself in an ultimate synthesis.

It is precisely to the problematic of nature that the author turns in the book's second chapter. Here, the main text is, of course, Merleau-Ponty's lectures on nature⁶ (and to a lesser extent Merleau-Ponty's lectures on Husserl).

For those familiar with Merleau-Ponty's lectures on nature, it is well known that it is here that Merleau-Ponty traces the history of the concept of nature to its ancient and modern roots. The author takes us precisely along this path in an attempt to discover both the essence of modern philosophy's account of nature as it can be found in Descartes and Leibniz and the true nature of the break with the latter that Merleau-Ponty detects in Schelling, Husserl and Bergson. It should be added that the author does not limit herself to a commentary on Merleau-Ponty's lectures on nature. As mentioned above, one of the defining traits of this book is her extraordinary command of Merleau-Ponty's sources. As a result, she compares Merleau-Ponty's original text for the lecture with his preparatory notes and informs us on the particular sources he relied on when devising them. (For instance, we come to know that Merleau-Ponty's knowledge of Schelling was almost entirely second-hand.)

The author shows that in the history of the concept of nature, Descartes represents a turning point for Merleau-Ponty. It is Descartes who for the first time introduced a positive concept of infinity, then also adopted by Leibniz. However, Cartesian philosophy is also profoundly ambiguous when it comes to the analysis of the body. On the one hand, there is the body as it is considered by the understanding, as pure extension, and then there is the living body, the body as it really exists, in which the union of body and soul is manifested. Descartes discovers in the human being a nature that cannot be reduced to an object. Although the author does not mention this, this reading of Descartes, along with the idea that there is an ambiguity in his conception of the body, was already in place in the *Phenomenology of Perception* and cannot be said to be a distinguishing feature of Merleau-Ponty's later philosophy.

⁶ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *La Nature: Notes, cours du Collège de France*, ed. Dominique Seglard (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1995). This was translated in English by Robert Vallier as *Nature: course notes from the Collège de France* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2000).

According to Merleau-Ponty's lectures on nature, Schelling, Bergson and Husserl were the first to question the idea of a positive infinity. Concerning this, the author gives voice to the question that every reader of Merleau-Ponty's lectures on nature certainly asks herself: what can possibly bind thinkers as diverse as Schelling, on the one hand, and Bergson and Husserl, on the other. As is perhaps now apparent, the answer is that these were the thinkers who, in one way or the other, introduced a negative conception of infinity. Schelling is particularly relevant in this regard, since he was the first to put into question Descartes's conception of nature. Instead of thinking of being (or God) as an actual infinity and the ultimate cause (*Grund*) of nature, he introduces what he calls an abyss, a lack of Being, into God. The second major idea that, according to the author, Merleau-Ponty finds in Schelling is the idea of philosophy as an exercise in seeing. Nature, according to Schelling, is originally discovered in intuition or perception. This of course runs against the conception of nature as an object of the understanding, as we find in Descartes. Here I cannot help but point out once again that the idea of an original phenomenon of nature accessible via perception and opposed to both intellectualist-idealist and materialist conceptions was already laid out in the *Phenomenology of Perception*.

According to the author's reading of Merleau-Ponty's lectures, what Bergson shares with Schelling is precisely the idea of a primordial unity of nature to which we have access through intuition. To this idea Bergson adds a critique of the idea of absolute nothing, to which he opposes the thesis that the concept of nothing is always relative, always a negation of something. For Bergson, both the idea of radical contingency and the idea of pure necessity are two sides of the same coin in that both entail that being and nothing are absolute. To them Bergson opposes the idea of a "there is" (*il y a*) as the ultimate fact with which we are faced. However, according to the author, even though Merleau-Ponty shares Bergson's critiques of absolute nothing, he rejects Bergson's identification of being with present being (*actualité*) since it entails an ahistorical ontology.

After dealing with Merleau-Ponty's reading of Bergson, the author goes in detail into Merleau-Ponty's late reading of Husserl. In this context, the texts that support her interpretation are not only the lectures on nature but also Merleau-Ponty's seminars on Husserl from the years 1959-1960.⁷ Regarding Husserl's conception of nature, the author points out that there is an ambiguity that corresponds to Husserl's ambiguity concerning the phenomenological reduction. On the one hand, the reduction should pull us out from a state of ignorance and give us access to another world, a world of truth. On the other hand, the reduction does no more than make explicit what is implicit in our usual dealings with the world in the natural attitude. According to the latter interpretation of the reduction, nature is discovered as a dimension that is prior to reflection. Following a detour through Merleau-Ponty's views on contemporary science and Whitehead's philosophy, the author resumes Merleau-Ponty's reading of Husserl. According to her, what is characteristic of the latter is the fact that Merleau-Ponty does not merely detect opposite tendencies in Husserl. What he discovers in some of Husserl's late essays such as 'The Origin of Geometry' and 'The Earth Does

⁷ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *Notes de cours sur L 'Origine de la geometrie de Husserl suivi de Recherches sur la phenomenologie de Merleau-Ponty*, ed. R. Barbaras (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1998). These seminars were published in English as *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology*, ed. and trans. by Leonard Lawlor, Bertina Bergo (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2012).

Not Move Itself' is a way towards a new form of ontology, which, according to the author, Merleau-Ponty took upon himself to fully develop.

To make a long argument short, the author points out that in Merleau-Ponty's view the late Husserl's main philosophical accomplishments revolve around the notions of sense and horizon. Regarding the former, Husserl's late essays reveal that, rather than being atemporal, sense only comes to fruition in time and history. Regarding the notion of horizon, it represents for Merleau-Ponty the discovery of an 'invisible' dimension that structures and shapes what appears. This notwithstanding, the author points out that Merleau-Ponty maintains a fundamental disagreement with the way Husserl conceives of the notion of horizon. Whereas Husserl thinks of horizon as something capable of being made totally explicit, Merleau-Ponty, for his part, maintains that horizons always remain opaque to us, something that we can never fully disentangle.

The second chapter closes with the preliminary conclusion that Merleau-Ponty's reflections on nature point the way towards a new ontology that would fully bloom in *The Visible and the Invisible*. According to the author, this new ontology intends to tread a middle path between the ontology of the object and the ontology of the existent, and for that reason it can be called an ontology of mediation between these two models. For my part, it remains doubtful whether the path towards this ontology was not already laid out by Merleau-Ponty in *The Phenomenology of Perception*.

It is precisely to this 'new ontology' that the author turns in the book's third chapter. Surprisingly or not, the chapter begins with a discussion of Merleau-Ponty's thought on the nature of the human body compared to the animal body. It is also in this chapter that the author relies more on Merleau-Ponty's early work. The author starts by focusing on the idea that the animal body is a form, and this form is life itself. She then proceeds to the nature of the human body in particular. Here, she introduces the important idea that the human body constitutes a symbolic relation to the world. Her study of symbolism is very interesting and reveals once again the amazing scope of her command of Merleau-Ponty's explicit and more hidden sources. In order to clarify Merleau-Ponty's understanding of symbolism, the reader is led by the author into a study of Sartre's *The Imaginary* and is introduced to psychoanalytic notions that helped shape Merleau-Ponty's views on symbolism. Here she shows that, in his first period, Merleau-Ponty held to the view that it was not possible to make a clear-cut distinction between perception and imagination, both of them being rooted in the lived body's transcendence. Later, in the lectures on Institution and Passivity from 1954-55⁸, Merleau-Ponty no longer located this common element in the body-subject, locating it instead, under the influence of Freud and Melanie Klein, in a primary symbolism of the living body.

At the end of the chapter, the author delves into the core of Merleau-Ponty's later ontology: his notion of 'flesh'. That she manages to give a very original interpretation of such a difficult and controversial notion must be counted as one of the book's greatest achievements. In summary, the author argues, tracing the roots of the notion in his lectures on nature, that

⁸ *La Institution, la Passivité. Cours au Collège de France 1954-1955* (Paris: Belin, 2003). These lectures were published in English as *Institution and Passivity: Course Notes from the College de France (1954-1955)*, trans. Leonard Lawlor, Heath Massey (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2010).

'flesh' is the name Merleau-Ponty gives to the reflexivity of the human body. As a 'reflexive form', the 'flesh' comes to take the place of the old philosophical notion of subjectivity. Next, the author asks what it means to extend the 'flesh', conceived in this way, to the whole world, as Merleau-Ponty does in *The Visible and Invisible* when he speaks of a 'flesh of the world'. Here, the author refrains from mythical interpretations of the notion of 'flesh of the world' that attribute reflexivity to all things. In order to accommodate the idea of a 'flesh of the world', she distinguishes between a notion of flesh in a strict and a figurative sense. Whereas flesh in the strict sense points to the human body's reflexivity, the 'flesh of the world' is flesh only in a figurative sense. The sensible is flesh because it is bound up with the reflexivity of the human body. There is no reflexivity of sense without an opening to the sensible as such. In the end, the author argues that there is no reason to restrict the notion of flesh to the human body only. The reflexivity of the human body is the reflexivity of the whole of nature through the body. In this sense, much as the organs of the individual body must be seen as a part of the latter, the individual body forms part of a larger system that comprises the whole human world. It is this human world that the flesh designates, according to the author.

The fourth and final chapter (the longest in the book, comprising over 100 pages) constitutes without doubt the centrepiece of the book. The author starts by putting forward two hypotheses. The first consists in the idea that Merleau-Ponty's work after 1956 is the realization of the research plan laid out by him in the seminar on dialectics from 1955-6. This hypothesis leads to the conclusion that Merleau-Ponty's later ontology was thought out as an ontology of mediation, centred around the idea of being as perceived form. The second hypothesis is that Merleau-Ponty's later ontology is still phenomenological in character.

The author starts by investigating the notion of dialectics on the basis of his still unpublished seminars on the subject from 1955-6. The outcome of this analysis leads to the idea that ontology must be in some sense dialectical. According to this new ontology, things are not determined by themselves alone and are not coincident with themselves. This ontology is obviously opposed to object ontology, where things are what they are and are determined as such. That things lack coincidence with themselves can be translated by the idea that things are what they are by means of a relation to what surpasses them. Here the notion of background originated in Gestalt psychology and the Husserlian notion of horizon occupy centre stage. A thing is always a figure against a background and in that sense is always surrounded by a horizon.

Since the notion of form (*Gestalt*) is from the beginning so vital to Merleau-Ponty's thought, the author proceeds to analyse it more closely, not only in his earlier writings but also in its historical inception. In this context, the author argues that, although Merleau-Ponty has never relinquished the notion of *Gestalt*, we can trace a development in the way he understood it and in its systematic function in his thought. Whereas by the time of the *Phenomenology of Perception* the *Gestalt* has essentially a subjective function to the extent that it was mostly tied to the body schema, which constituted the most primary form (the one that conditioned all the others), in his later ontology *Gestalt* comes to be acknowledged as a self-regulating phenomenal structure.

The first part of the last chapter concludes with the idea that Merleau-Ponty's later ontology is an ontology of perceptible forms. These forms take the place of Husserl's essences. They constitute the meaning of sensible being, but they cannot be thought apart from the compound of visible and invisible that constitutes it.

In the last chapter's second part, the author presents the thesis that Merleau-Ponty's new ontology constitutes a radicalization of Husserl's phenomenology. In order to argue for this bold and original thesis, the author revises Merleau-Ponty's lasting relation with phenomenology since its beginnings. For those acquainted with Merleau-Ponty's work, it will come as no surprise that, besides Husserl himself, the author discusses at length the influence of such figures as Eugen Fink, Gurwitsch and Heidegger on Merleau-Ponty's understanding of phenomenology.

As is self-evident, the characterization of a thought as being phenomenological depends on the way one understands phenomenology. In this regard, the author seeks support from the side of Brentano. She shows that, contrary to Husserl, Brentano did not identify being with being an object. It fell to Husserl to accomplish this identification and, according to the author, Merleau-Ponty's new ontology springs from a critique of it. As a result, Merleau-Ponty came to disregard Husserl's meanings and essences and the possibility of having a 'categorical intuition' of them – that is, the possibility of 'seeing' ideal entities apart from their particular instances. Husserl's ideal meanings and essences become for Merleau-Ponty what he calls 'the invisible', which shapes the visible and together with it makes up the sensible. According to the author, Merleau-Ponty's entire effort consists in conceiving a form of intentionality aimed at pre-objective being without thereby setting up a division between an immanent and a transcendent sphere, a sensible and an ideal sphere. It is in terms of this purpose that the notion of *Gestalt* becomes especially fertile. Intentionality should be seen as inherent in the form (*Gestalt*) of the body as 'flesh'.

In the conclusion, the author summarizes once again the book's main theses and tries to gather any loose ends. It must be said that, given the book's myriad references and themes, it is not always easy to follow and at certain points seems to lose focus. But this is perhaps an unavoidable problem for such an ambitious endeavour. For the same reason, it could be also argued that some of the topics could have received more extensive treatment, but this would be unjust, for to fully develop one of them would have necessitated writing a different book. It should be mentioned that one of the work's greatest virtues is precisely the extent to which it is likely to inspire further research on many of its themes.

In sum, I believe this book will establish itself as a key text in the field of Merleau-Ponty studies. Although it is not meant for the uninitiated, its originality, tremendous breadth of reference and erudition make it essential reading for anyone interested in Merleau-Ponty and the history and development of phenomenology in general.

