Book Review

Merleau-Ponty and modern politics after anti-humanism

Diana Coole

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Why should political theorists read Merleau-Ponty today? In this ambitious and erudite work Diana Coole offers a case for taking up Merleau-Ponty's thought anew in the face of the ongoing crises of modernity. Although there has been a recent revival of interest in the work of Merleau-Ponty among philosophers, there has been no full-length study of his political philosophy since the 1980s. At that time, before the collapse of Soviet-style communism, several books (my own included) focused primarily on his engagements with Marxism and communism. Now, in a different global political context and after poststructuralism has claimed to displace Marxism as the site of radical political theory, it has become possible for Coole to read Merleau-Ponty in new and productive ways. Merleau-Ponty himself insists on the always-situated nature of thought, thus it is not surprising that her return to Merleau-Ponty's political thinking brings to light different facets of his work, and fruitfully engages it in new debates and conversations.

Much of the recent scholarship on Merleau-Ponty addresses his relationship to poststructuralism, pointing out that his critique of more traditional philosophies of 'the subject' anticipates its central tenets. Some even argue that Merleau-Ponty should be viewed as a poststructuralist *avant la lettre*. But the implications of such readings of Merleau-Ponty for politics have not been well explored and, in any case, Coole finds them overly simplistic. For her reading of Merleau-Ponty shows him to be a far more complex thinker than is suggested by merely aligning him with poststructuralism and with the anti-humanism that accompanies it. Much of this recent scholarship focuses on Merleau-Ponty's posthumous and incomplete work, *The Visible and The Invisible*, arguing that Merleau-Ponty made a dramatic break here from his earlier and more existential work in the phenomenology of perception, and that he came to regard his early work as still marred by a philosophy of the subject.

Against such readings Coole carefully documents the pervasive continuities in Merleau-Ponty's thinking: the later works, she shows, represent a reflexive turning back upon and deepening of insights from the earlier ones. Thus, Coole's mode of presentation echoes Merleau-Ponty's own, replicating his notions of the folded and reversible qualities of Being. She charts not only his ever-deepening questioning of theories of subjectivity but also his circuitous return, via his later ontology, to a defense of a 'thick intersubjectivity' and his concomitant journey through anti-humanism towards a 'new humanism'.

The book is divided into three parts. The first accompanies Merleau-Ponty as he diagnoses rationalism as not merely a set of abstract ideas but as 'the ontological choice that marks [modernity's] distinctive style of existence' (p. 25) and is the source of its crises. Here Coole considers, in three consecutive chapters, Merleau-Ponty's treatment of post-Cartesian philosophical rationalism that refuses to acknowledge the place of openness, ambiguity, contingency, and unreason in the world; liberal rationalism that functions ideologically to mask the violence of capitalism; and Marxist rationalism whose orientation to instrumental reason may be held accountable for much of the Soviet deformation of socialist ideals. Coole defends a non-deterministic notion of a 'provisional' totality that links these together. For 'if rationalism summarizes the unique core of modernity, it should therefore be apparent in all its diverse spheres of social interaction' (p. 25). Thus we will discover a 'replication' of philosophical rationalism in politics and other domains of life, even though the relationships among them are not causal. Poststructuralist critics will doubtless find even this non-deterministic notion of totality problematic, but what Coole finds so valuable in Merleau-Ponty is his attunement to a supple dialectics of continuity and discontinuity, of coherence and rupture, in the world. Thus, she insists, Merleau-Ponty orients us to possibilities for meaning and freedom on the further side of postructuralist critique.

The second part of the book moves from Merleau-Ponty's critique of rationalism to his 'postrationalist' (but not irrationalist) 'pursuit of an interworld', or a 'third dimension' of Being, that is anterior to such distinctions as subject/object, consciousness/materiality, or self/other. Coole argues that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological method, with its privileging of embodied experience, does not involve a naïve return to the prediscursive as a naturalistic ground of knowledge. Instead, it challenges distinctions between the prediscursive and the discursive, and it functions as a radical form of 'critical theory', demanding that we indefinitely interrogate the taken for granted. Turning more specifically to the domain of politics, Coole next explores Merleau-Ponty's practices of political phenomenology and considers their continued relevance today. Among other matters, she argues that Merleau-Ponty demonstrates how we may non-imperialistically grasp the meaningfulness of epochs and cultures different from our own, since each inheres in this 'third dimension' of Being

even as it possesses its own unique style. The final chapter of Part Two turns to Merleau-Ponty's later ontological notions (notably in *The Visible and The Invisible*) of the 'generativity of the flesh', where the 'interworld' is now seen to be 'chiasmic' and 'reversible'. This is an 'anti-humanist' ontology insofar as it asserts a fleshly Being that is both anterior to and runs through the human. Merleau-Ponty's turn to such ontology is, Coole argues, politically driven. He is seeking here for a new basis for politics, in which the recognition of the shared 'flesh of collective life' may enable the emergence of less power-ridden forms of human coexistence.

However, Merleau-Ponty died suddenly in 1961 and he did not complete his sketch for this social ontology. Thus, in Part Three, Coole moves beyond Merleau-Ponty's own texts to show the current significance of his thought. She does this by first considering some of the implications of his work for contemporary sex/gender theory. Then, in the final chapter she argues, via a creative reading of his work both with and against Foucault's, that Merleau-Ponty shows us the need to move beyond anti-humanism. He points to new ways of configuring the human and of acknowledging the significance of individuated, as well as social, agencies in politics. What Merleau-Ponty offers, Coole writes, is 'a theory of "thick" intersubjectivity that is irreducible to individuals and yet productive of degrees of reflexivity, singularity, and agency' (p. 248).

The political and ethical costs of the 'death of man' are becoming increasingly evident, and erstwhile poststructuralist thinkers (of whom Judith Butler is perhaps the most notable) are beginning to seek for ways of bringing the 'human' back in. Coole's book does us a great service in showing how Merleau-Ponty remains a vital resource for thinking – and living – the human and the non-human together.

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