

gendered core self is able to provisionally choose what gender narrative to ratify. With recourse to Butler's performative conception of the self and empirical data from developmental psychology, Allen argues that the construction of identity, from the outset, is contingent on gender norms. For instance, it has been shown that parents tend to interact differently with their child according to the child's initially attributed gender. This "rationalist residue" (153) echoes Allen's critique of Habermas.

The book offers a stimulating, highly evocative discussion of two major philosophers. Teasing out their similarities and the way in which autonomy can be negotiated with power is no small feat. One might think that Benhabib and Butler have sufficiently refined the positions of their intellectual heirs, but Allen's critical engagement reveals important flaws. As a helpful corrective to unjust interpretations still prevalent in the literature, I heartily recommend it. Yet, for someone who offers such textured interpretations, one remains unconvinced by the distinction between radical contextualists of the Rortyan sort and Allen's proposal of a principled contextualism. Given Rorty's rejection of truth as a goal of inquiry (a rejection Allen explicitly cites), it is simply incorrect to later state that we ought not "accept a radically contextualist form of *relativism*." (180, emphasis added) The difference between the two, if there is one, needs to be more fully explicated. This is a missed opportunity on Allen's part and affects the persuasiveness and focus of her conclusion.

Aaron James Landry, York University

Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology: The Problem of Ideal Objects

Kirk M. Besmer

London and New York: Continuum, 2007; 160 pages.

Merleau-Ponty and Modern Politics After Anti-Humanism

Diana Coole

Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007; 271 pages.

2008 marks the centenary of Merleau-Ponty's birth, and we are in the midst of a surge of new English-language books dealing with his work. Larry Hass' *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy* has impressively inaugurated a

new generation of general surveys of Merleau-Ponty's thought, a tradition to which Taylor Carman's forthcoming *Merleau-Ponty* will also contribute. In addition, there are many new resource texts, such as George Marshall's *A Guide to Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception*, along with contributions to various series, including Eric Matthews' *A Guide for the Perplexed*, and Rosalyn Diprose and Jack Reynolds' edition of a *Key Concepts* volume.

In terms of scholarly activity, then, at least in the anglophone world, things are certainly alive and well with Merleau-Ponty studies. The field is maturing, and even burgeoning to the point where one might be tempted to speak of an "industry." Nevertheless, it remains the case that the fundamental questioning that has perennially guided philosophical interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's work—*How, if at all, is the Merleau-Pontian corpus unified? How, if at all, did Merleau-Ponty overcome dualism?*—seems as intractable or ambiguous as ever. It may be that this situation itself is somehow part of the allure of Merleau-Ponty's work. But it also potentially jeopardises the status that he is increasingly being accorded as one of the most important philosophers of the twentieth century.

Considered together, new books by Kirk Besmer and Diana Coole provide telling insight into the state of Merleau-Ponty scholarship. These books might initially appear to be as distant from one another as they could possibly be, focusing, respectively, on ideality and politics. It is the case, however, that both address the problem of the unity of Merleau-Ponty's project—in particular, the question of the longitudinal continuity between *Phenomenology of Perception* and *The Visible and the Invisible*—and attempt to articulate its basic sense. Although Coole's study is more extensive and ambitious, both make valuable contributions. Yet what is striking is how these books reflect the division within Merleau-Ponty scholarship between (i) straight-up philosophical (or "theoretical") readings of his work and (ii) readings which foreground its political (or "practical") dimensions—a division that itself expresses the very sort of dualism that Merleau-Ponty sought to overcome with phenomenology.

In *Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology*, Besmer takes the first sort of approach. That is, in seeking to understand what exactly Merleau-Ponty meant by "phenomenology"—and how this relates to Husserl, the only significant point of external reference throughout the analysis—he

takes it as a primarily theoretical enterprise. The aim is to establish the “*theoretical* content” of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, and to evaluate its “*theoretical* significance.” (2, my italics)

Besmer’s study involves two main aspects. First, it is developed on the basis of a genetic account of Merleau-Ponty’s overall “itinerary.” (2) Besmer is interested in Merleau-Ponty’s “final view of phenomenology,” whether this in fact remains phenomenological, and whether it exhibits a longitudinal continuity with the earlier work. Owing to the incomplete nature of *The Visible and the Invisible*, he lays out a *tripartite* view of Merleau-Ponty’s career, paying special attention to its “middle period” (1947–1957) as the crucial—yet often overlooked—“conceptual bridge” linking the early and late periods.

The second aspect of Besmer’s approach is that he takes as his principal focus “the problem of ideal objects,” that is, “the status and givenness of ideal objects in our experience.” (2) This is, as Besmer notes, an understudied theme in Merleau-Ponty scholarship, and any effort to redress this neglect is entirely salutary, inasmuch as it is precisely this problem that tests any phenomenological position most demandingly. Besmer’s central contention is that the specific approach Merleau-Ponty adopted vis-à-vis the problem of ideal objects in his middle period provides the means of understanding his final position. As it turns out, the latter represents not a break with the earlier formulation, but rather “an internal re-working of a central phenomenological problem” (6), namely, how, paraphrasing Husserl, to bring mute experience to the pure expression of its own sense.

The analysis unfolds across six chapters. The first sets the stage with a discussion of the problem of ideal objects in Husserl. Geared to the task at hand, this discussion focuses on the *Crisis*-texts that were crucial for Merleau-Ponty’s reading of Husserl. Although some may feel that this oversimplifies Husserl’s views, the chapter is well-crafted in its concision. Besmer identifies the ambiguity in Husserl’s notion of the *Lebenswelt* between antepredicative perceptual experience and the historical-cultural horizons of such experience—conceived by Husserl in terms of “institution” [*Stiftung*]*—as the interpretive key to Merleau-Ponty’s uptake of phenomenology, in particular with regard to ideal objects. The claim is that in Phenomenology of Perception Merleau-Ponty overemphasised the sense of the Lebenswelt as a perceptual world, a move that stranded him within the confines of egology, and that it was*

only in the middle period that the methodological inadequacies of this position pushed him to address the intersubjective historicity of the *Lebenswelt* as a cultural world.

The early work is dealt with in Chapter 2. Here we see Merleau-Ponty laying out a new “transcendental aesthetic,” hence, trying to account for ideal objects in terms of a non-reductive founding/founded relationship, i.e., Husserl’s *Fundierung*, with perception. Besmer argues, however, that even when it is developed with the gestural theory of language that Merleau-Ponty sketches out in *Phenomenology of Perception*, the intracorporeal orientation of this position still prevents it from providing a convincing account of ideal objects—witness the pitfalls of Merleau-Ponty’s account of the “tacit cogito.” What the *Fundierung* approach cannot grasp is the historical temporality of ideal objects, something which Merleau-Ponty came to see could only be addressed in terms of the “institutionality of language.” (45)

It is this turn to the intersubjective sense of the *Lebenswelt*—the *intermonde*—that Besmer considers in the next three chapters as he looks in some detail at Merleau-Ponty’s middle period. Here we are shown the shift of focus from an *intracorporeal* logos of the aesthetic world to an *intercorporeal* logos of the cultural world—from the primacy of perception to what Besmer refers to as “cultural primordially” (52), where language, not embodiment, occupies centre stage. Ideal objects are considered in terms of an historical account of rationality in which the distinction between the eidetic and the factual—as between philosophy and science—is fundamentally blurred. The idea is that Merleau-Ponty pushed the Husserlian notion of a “crisis of rationality” toward a resolution based intrinsically on intersubjective communication. (65)

Besmer’s argument methodically tracks the movement in Merleau-Ponty’s thought concerning ideal objects away from perception and the “perceiving body,” via language and the “speaking subject,” toward dialogue and the “instituting subject.” Anchored on a Saussure-inspired understanding of “novel expression” (the phenomenon formerly known as “authentic speech”)—which Besmer presents as a response to the problematisation of transcendental language in Fink’s *Sixth Cartesian Meditation*—this rethinking displaces the gestural account of language, rooted in the *Fundierung* story, with a “lateral” theory based in Merleau-Ponty’s reworking of Husserl’s *Stiftung* notion. The dialogical movement in and through which novel expression is successfully communicated is

now taken as paradigmatic of the *intermonde*, and it is on this historical institution of meaning, Besmer contends, that Merleau-Ponty's final view of ideal objects is modeled.

The last chapter offers detailed discussions of *The Visible and the Invisible* with the aim of showing both that the innovative ideas at work here are addressed to the same underlying phenomenological task—expressing mute experience—as the earlier work, but also that they cannot be fully understood and appreciated without clearly grasping how the middle period served to ratchet up the methodological rigour with which Merleau-Ponty discharged this task. Besmer also attends to Merleau-Ponty's re-reading of "The Origin of Geometry," and given his analysis it comes as no surprise that he characterises Merleau-Ponty's late thought, in particular with regard to the historical nature of rationality, as an "implicit rewriting" of Husserl's *Crisis*. (6, 135)

According to Besmer, then, Merleau-Ponty wrests Husserlian phenomenology from its vestigial foundationalism and renders it radically intersubjective. He thus makes numerous points that portray the problem of ideal objects as a "*generative*" matter of "*living participation* in a concrete historical world"—as "instituting subjects," we are "*practically engaged* in bringing the world to articulation." (32, 53, 124, my italics) These are well-motivated claims. Yet they are in some tension with the overarching theoretical orientation—Besmer declines any direct consideration of Merleau-Ponty's political writing (52)—and one may wonder if the consideration of ideal objects hasn't been skewed in the direction of scientific idealisation, rather than a broader field of normativity.

It is not the case, for instance, that Merleau-Ponty ignored history and culture in his early work. It is rather that he saw them through the lens of the young Marx, whom he credited with a "phenomenology of the cultural world," noting that "the introduction of the notion of the *human object*," the incarnation of ideas and values, "which phenomenology has taken up and developed, was reserved for Marx." He expressed the same idea in the middle of his middle period in referring to Marx's "original insight" concerning "a historical rationality immanent in the life of men."

Merleau-Ponty's view of Marxism did become considerably less uncritical. But as Besmer shows, the historically engaged orientation that it imparted to Merleau-Ponty's reading of Husserl remained. This leads

one to wonder whether the conceptual bridge crossed by Merleau-Ponty in developing his later thought is indeed as Besmer has characterised it. For example, as Besmer emphasises, the account of novel expression at the heart of his story amounts to “a re-writing of the transcendental moment” in response to the need for a “transcendentally appropriate language.” (79, 70) Yet, this is a problem that confronted Fink’s “*unbeteiligte Zuschauer*,” the “*non-participating* spectator,” for whom communicative dialogue is a non-issue. It is similarly unclear whether the synchronic-diachronic distinction drawn from Saussurian linguistics can underwrite the dialectical rhythm of generativity in general. It is well-known that Merleau-Ponty’s reading of Saussure is quite free. Yet, it may be that the same considerations that led Saussure to insist on the strict singularity of linguistic structures were also what ultimately led Merleau-Ponty to leave *The Prose of the World*—a text on which Besmer’s account relies—unpublished.

Such questions notwithstanding, Besmer’s book is an important contribution to Merleau-Ponty scholarship, in particular concerning the phenomenology of language. Still, his polemical critique of what he dubs “the standard view” of the middle period—perspectives that gloss over the significant methodological shifts in Merleau-Ponty’s thought during these years—does have some purchase on his own position. Most notably, the absence of any treatment of Merleau-Ponty’s courses on nature—a theme no less (and arguably *more*) important than language in the middle period—is conspicuous. This is all the more glaring given the morphing of “the things themselves” into the “brute Being” of Merleau-Ponty’s late thought. For how would “cultural primordially” understood linguistically leave any scope for such mute and non-anthropocentric existence?

Besmer suggests that the answer lies in the way Merleau-Ponty transcended culture’s dichotomy with corporeality. (141) But the dichotomy that needs to be overcome is more accurately described as that involving *nature* and culture. Nor will it do any good, especially in the context of ideality, to appeal to a “persistent,” albeit “obliquely implied,” “phenomenological realism” in Merleau-Ponty’s work. (108) If phenomenology is indeed “an active participation in the advent of sense” (134), if it is generative all the way down, then to pursue it as if it were a project of theoretical discovery will only serve to dissemble the

normative horizons that ultimately determine how the sense of history's mute intentionalities *should* be articulated and instituted.

This is, after all, the incisive edge of Husserl's critique of the "crisis of rationality." It is not just that the dualistic standpoint of mainstream post-Cartesian thought engenders theoretical difficulties. Rather, the deeper issue concerns what Coole referred to as the "positivist suppression of the normative dimension" of modern reason (31), the disarticulation of modernity's "critical reflexivity" with regard to *how reason ought to be practised*—or: how human coexistence ought to be organised, i.e., *politics*. As Coole sees it, the "crisis of rationality" amounts to a structural crisis in modern society itself, a depoliticisation that can only be remedied through progressive social transformation. But because this crisis is, in her view, pivotally a function of ideology—modern rationalism mystifies reason by dogmatically occluding "the internal relationship between ideas and experience," hence sowing "ontological confusion about the status of ideas" (46)—it can be effectively combated with philosophy. Such is how Coole reads Merleau-Ponty. The "interrogative ethos" (2) of his phenomenology is geared precisely to the reopening of those areas of lived experience—contingencies, ambiguities, and negativities—that are denied by modern rationalism, but which are the dynamic lifeblood of reason and politics alike. Ultimately, it is for trying to overcome the "ontological confusion" caused by modern rationalism that Coole regards Merleau-Ponty as a "profoundly political" thinker. (1)

Like Besmer, Coole rejects the early/late division of Merleau-Ponty's thought, and she also affirms its longitudinal continuity. Rather than to the middle period, she turns to Merleau-Ponty's often-overlooked political writing. She thus sees the continuity in terms of his basic practical commitments to critical reflexivity and dialectical agency, and it is this intellectual style that Coole wants to recover as having an enduring relevance.

It is principally in this way that her book differs from Kerry Whiteside's *Merleau-Ponty and the Foundations of an Existential Politics* (1988), the best existing text on Merleau-Ponty's politics. Whereas Whiteside offered detailed discussions of Merleau-Ponty's political ideas, and ultimately rejected his later work as a failure, Coole steps back from the historical detail and tries to articulate the sense of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology as itself an inherently political means

of critically interrogating the concrete realities of collective life. Cast in this light, the later work appears no less—and potentially *more*—politically engaged than the earlier existential Marxism.

Coole's study is premised on a negative assessment of the current state of contemporary political thought. She holds that rationalistic ideology still prevails here, too, maintaining the field in an on-going oscillation between abstract poles of realism and idealism. As with Besmer, it is precisely to the "interworld"—to its "thick intersubjectivity," "the very flesh of the political"—that we need to return. Although she does not pursue it with equal rigour, by locating the horizons of communication within a broader political context, one involving power relations and other social forces, Coole is in effect one-upping the sort of methodological move described by Besmer. Her own treatment of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the interworld thus unfolds in the second of the book's three parts, after first laying out the parameters of his critique of rationalism in Part 1.

Here Coole develops Merleau-Ponty's view of modern rationalism and discusses its connection with the theme of the crisis of modernity. We see Merleau-Ponty picking up on the Husserlian view, but pushing it more decisively beyond "the Cartesian legacy" in ways that Coole likens to Critical Theory. This is essentially a matter of interrogating the fundamental "ontological prejudices" of modern rationalism and demonstrating the need for a new ontology to provide a non-dualist basis for political thought. Coole discusses Merleau-Ponty's critiques of liberalism and Marxism, showing how neither can bring about a unity of the ideal and the material. Coole pays more attention to Marxism, both on account of Merleau-Ponty's earlier investment in it as well as the fact that its dialectical and engaged orientation remained a fixture of his thought. Coole contends that it was primarily Merleau-Ponty's own Marxist self-critique that brought him to see that dialectical philosophy requires an anti-humanist ontology. Coole thus portrays Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology as at once a critical renewal of the Marxist transformative paradigm, but also as anticipating the post-structuralist critique of humanism. The idea is that this approach can support a recovery of humanistic values in ways consistent with that critique.

In Part 2, "In Pursuit of the Interworld," Coole fills in the account of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological approach, both in general

and with respect to politics in particular, and shows how his “return to ontology” was motivated by “explicitly political concerns.” (93) Overall, this is not a highly technical discussion of phenomenology—the parts dealing with Husserl are at times vague, and even parts of the discussion on Merleau-Ponty, including his links with Kant and Hegel, are not as philosophically sharp as one might wish. But Coole paints a rich and gripping picture, and once again it is centrally a matter of generativity: the interworld is “a self-generative existential field” (106), the site of the “immanent generative process” of historical transformation; and phenomenology is an on-going “*practice*” of critical interrogation that emulates the intertwining of thought and being in reflecting (on) this negativity.

This can sound like the merely verbal expression of dialectical desiderata, rather than their actual achievement. Some of the most intriguing passages are thus those in which Coole shows how, for both the political theorist and the political actor, this would work in practice. Subtle differences aside, we see that in both cases praxis is ultimately a sort of “dialectical art” (146) which, although it aspires to Machiavellian *virtù*, has significant affinities with Kantian aesthetic judgment (Coole explored the epistemology of this in an important article published in *Political Theory* almost twenty-five years ago). Coole draws many insightful contrasts—including with Habermas, Foucault, and an extended rejoinder to Judith Butler (Chapter 7), but it is surprising that she doesn’t consider Arendt, who also found political inspiration in Kant’s third *Critique*.

Coole ultimately argues that Merleau-Ponty’s ontological account of “flesh” is best understood—in ways that anticipate both Foucault and Deleuze—as a non-anthropocentric “field of forces” (233), but one that still supplies the basis for an account of transformative historical agency. It involves a “new materialism,” a “generative materiality” (163) that carries the immanent “criteria of [political] progress” (254) that it was Merleau-Ponty’s “abiding aim ... to reinstate.” (160)

This is where the really hard questions arise, and Coole defers until the very end to unpack them. As it turns out, there is not too much to say. Basically, social practices, structures, regimes, etc. are to be evaluated according to whether they enrich or impoverish corporeal life—whether they “paralyze or vitalise lived relationships.” (255) The

specific criteria Coole mentions—openness, differentiation, complexity—are clearly reminiscent of *perceptual* norms, and she does emphasise the continued centrality of embodiment in Merleau-Ponty's views. Especially when she refers to the enrichment of life as an “evolutionary norm” (254), though, it is not clear how or even *if* this could be distinguished from an *apolitical* vitalism. There is an overemphasis on intracorporeality here, precisely that to which Besmer's discussion of dialogue supplies a partial corrective. Here, too, though, there is a conspicuous and problematic absence of any discussion of Merleau-Ponty's return to the question of nature. An examination of this—in conjunction with the communicative angle explored by Besmer, and against the background of embodied perception—would be essential to give a more precisely nuanced articulation of the anti-humanist orientation of Merleau-Ponty's final work.

Coole has produced a major contribution to Merleau-Ponty scholarship, and no review can do complete justice to its wide-ranging analyses. Her account of Merleau-Pontian phenomenology as a project of practical reason can offer a methodological corrective to theoretical approaches. At the same time, this needs to be developed with the degree of internal rigour marshalled, for example, by Besmer. The two approaches are ultimately consonant, even mutually dependent: pure ideality implicates larger practical horizons, whose normativity points back into the “thickness” of intersubjective coexistence. The key point of contention that arises—Do we discover or create the *intermonde*?—thus calls into question the distinction between idealism and materialism in ways that attest to the extraordinary fecundity or utterly hopeless ambiguity of Merleau-Ponty's thought. If they can be brought together on a common generative basis, then the works considered here reaffirm hope that the former is the case.

Bryan Smyth, University of Memphis