

Thinking between Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

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A DIFFICULT UNDERTAKING

Those familiar with the work of Gilles Deleuze probably know of Michel Foucault's claim that Deleuze's *Logic of Sense* "can be read as the most alien book imaginable from *Phenomenology of Perception*" (1994, 79). If Foucault is right, then the philosophies of Deleuze and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, at least as expressed in those two books, are radically opposed. This book sets out to question that thesis by looking for and at the resonances between both thinkers. The task is far from self-evident, not least because it goes not only against Foucault's interpretation, but also against how Deleuze himself has characterized his relationship to Merleau-Ponty in particular, and to phenomenology in general. Indeed, he rarely discusses Merleau-Ponty: in all of his books, there are about a dozen, mostly negative, references. This may suggest that Deleuze has no (positive) interest in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. What is more, despite the fact that Deleuze published his first text on Bergson in *Les philosophes célèbres*, edited by Merleau-Ponty, there never was, as far as anyone knows, any other significant contact or exchange of ideas between the two thinkers.

Another issue often raised against any possible resonance between their work is the different backgrounds against which they developed their theories. Deleuze belongs to a generation of thinkers who were inspired by Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud. Merleau-Ponty's frame of reference, on the other hand, was Hegel's dialectics and Husserl's phenomenology. Which is not to say that Deleuze was unfamiliar with Hegel or Husserl. Quite the contrary; while he was a student, between 1943 and 1948, the study of the "three Hs" (Hegel, Heidegger, and Husserl) was the dominant focus of philosophical instruction at French universities (Descombes 1979, 13, 21; Dosse 2007, 137). Deleuze's supervisors were Jean Hyppolite and Jean Beaufret, Hegel and Heidegger specialists, respectively.¹ But Deleuze did not find in these thinkers his main source of inspiration, as did the

thinkers at the center of the philosophical stage in France around 1945, namely, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre. Merleau-Ponty explicitly presents himself as a Husserl disciple, and the title of one of Sartre's books, *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960), is an explicit reference to Hegel and Kant.

A PROMISING UNDERTAKING

Still, it is possible to invoke another philosophical authority to suggest that there is a resonance between both thinkers. In one of the interviews in *A Winter's Journey*, Paul Virilio (1997, 42) comments that Deleuze greatly appreciated Merleau-Ponty's last book, *The Visible and the Invisible*. And there is also a counterargument for the different backgrounds thesis: it is true that Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud were a great inspiration to those who in the Anglophone world are called the "critical thinkers," Deleuze, Derrida, and Foucault. But they looked to Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud in their efforts to find answers to problems raised, among others, by phenomenologists. As such, these critical thinkers can be said to have been inspired by phenomenology. I would not go as far as Alain Beaulieu (2004, 11), who claims that phenomenology is the background against which all Deleuzian concepts are intelligible. It seems to me that this background is more diverse than that, and includes Neoplatonism, Leibniz, and Kant at least—but phenomenology is most certainly a part of it.

The most important argument in favor of the resonance between both thinkers must be philosophical. What would such an argument be? In general, I believe both thinkers can be brought together around the same shared transcendental project. Both thinkers examine the conditions of thought, which is to say that they are not motivated by a strictly epistemological question. Moreover, their primary interests are not the empirical causes of thought: they do not spend much time discussing, for example, the rules according to which thought functions, or should function, if it is to attain truth. To the extent that the question is raised at all, it is as part and parcel of the examination of the implications of their transcendental projects. Their central question turns on what must be presupposed in order for such a phenomenon as thinking to be possible.

These two transcendental projects share the fact that they situate the condition of thought in the empirical: their transcendental projects are both guided by immanence. One ontological consequence of this is that

if the condition is to be situated within the conditioned, the condition cannot belong to a being that is fundamentally different from the being of the conditioned. Thus, Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty reject the classical conception of the transcendental condition and the dualism inherent to it: the condition can no longer be associated with the perfect, the infinite, the unchangeable, or the original; nor can it continue to be pitted against the imperfect, finite, changeable, and secondary character of the conditioned. Both thinkers exchange this dualism in favor of one immanent being, a being without hierarchy and fundamental differences, that is, differences in being.

Moreover, both understand the relation between the condition and the conditioned as a relation of expression: the essence, which is how the condition is often understood, is expressed by or in the conditioned. As we will see, this suggests that the ontological primacy of the condition is complemented by the epistemological primacy of the conditioned, and also that the ontological power is distributed over the condition and the conditioned.

Neither Deleuze nor Merleau-Ponty sees this immanence of being as entailing the annihilation of difference. This is well-known in Deleuze's case—he is, after all, *the* thinker of difference—but it applies just as much, I hope to show, to Merleau-Ponty. Much of this book is in fact devoted to an examination of how Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty each try to explain how this immanence is not in contradiction with difference. That examination will take us through their differential understanding of the condition as well as through their descriptions of how differently conditioned things are generated from the condition.

A NECESSARY UNDERTAKING

I am very aware that investigating the resonances between two different systems of thought can be risky. One might be all too quickly tempted to see analogies that, on a deeper level, do not necessarily hold. I have tried to avoid this trap by being especially careful not to describe the theories of the one philosopher in the idiom of the other, as that would evidently suggest a false analogy. In addition, I pay particular attention to the irreconcilable elements in their systems. There is no denying, for example, that Merleau-Ponty's ontology focuses more on immanence than, as is the case with Deleuze, on difference. Their styles are also quite different: Merleau-Ponty's writing is soft and poetic, especially when compared to

Deleuze's more dry and polemical prose. It remains to be seen, though, whether such differences in focus and style encompass also a more substantive difference. Last, I try to avoid the trap set by the superficial analogies by comparing the problems to which Deleuze's and Merleau-Ponty's philosophies are an answer.

Risky as the examination of how these two theories communicate may be, the undertaking is nevertheless necessary, for this is the only way to shed new light on the reach and scope of these theories. How does a reading of Merleau-Ponty through a Deleuzian lens, and vice versa, offer new perspectives on both theories? If we take Deleuze's requirements for a good transcendental philosophy, namely, immanence and difference, as a starting point for a reading of Merleau-Ponty, we are immediately led away from the standard presentation of Merleau-Ponty as the phenomenologist of the body. Merleau-Ponty's account of perception and of the central role of the body therein can, in this way, be seen as propaedeutic for the theory he will develop toward the end of his life. The subject, decentralized in *Phenomenology of Perception*, is dissolved in *The Visible and the Invisible*. That is one reason why the late Merleau-Ponty must be situated at the limits of phenomenology (see Barbaras 1999), and why that period of his work is better described as being concerned with ontology.

By the same token, by approaching Deleuze through the similarities that can be discovered between his account of the conditions of thought and Merleau-Ponty's, we can formulate an alternative to the characterization of his philosophy as the "Nietzschean anarcho-desiring machine fighting reactive forces of *ressentiment* and bad conscience" (Bryant 2008, xi). More specifically, it can show us that—and here I side with Levi Bryant—the labels usually associated with Deleuze's work (antiestablishment, amoral, aphiloosophical, etc.) can reveal their full meaning only if they are understood through the transcendental and ontological project from which they issue. It is a partial and superficial understanding to reduce Deleuze's work to a collection of anarchic statements about politics, ethics, thought, the subject, and so on. Deleuze is primarily a metaphysician.

The challenge ahead is to find the proper balance between the respect for the singularity of Deleuze's thought and Merleau-Ponty's thought, and the approximation necessary to open up their theories and the shared lines running through them. If we are successful, then we will be in a position to offer a new image of the history of philosophy to which these theories belong. An age-old metaphysical problem dealt with in this book is that of

the relation between thinking and being. And that problem brings with it a host of related problems: How are we to understand the difference between abstract being and concrete being? Between determined being and indeterminate being? Between conceptual thinking and artistic thinking? And so on. By grounding my search for resonances on a comparison between the ways Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty have read authors such as Kant, Husserl, Bergson, Saussure, Maldiney, Sartre, and Simondon, I am not only compensating for the lack of direct references to Merleau-Ponty in the work of Deleuze, I am also anchoring the resonances in their work to the history of philosophy. More specifically, I give an alternative image of the philosophical alliances in French academia over the last two centuries.

In other words, this book is not addressed only to the Merleau-Ponty scholars who would like to know how far ahead of his time Merleau-Ponty was, or only to the Deleuze scholars interested in learning about his predecessors. Its value extends beyond these specialized interests because it illustrates how every (good) philosopher develops concepts as answers to the problems, and answers to these problems, posed by other philosophers.

STRUCTURE

In the first two chapters, I present the resonances and divergences that stand out when one juxtaposes those texts by Deleuze and by Merleau-Ponty that deal with the question of the nature, and the condition, of original thought (chapter 1), as well as with the ontology that underlies the two accounts of thought (chapter 2). In what concerns the first chapter, I can already mention that both Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty refuse to conceive original thinking—which is to be distinguished from merely repeating or continuing what one has learned—in representational terms, which of course does not mean that they deny representational thinking! I will explain Merleau-Ponty's position by referring to his theory of perception and to his reversal of Cartesianism, and Deleuze's by combining an analysis of the famous "Image of Thought" chapter in *Difference and Repetition* with a reading of *Proust and Signs*.

The question of the nature, and the condition, of original thought requires an examination of its subject and object, and this in turn obliges us to delve into Merleau-Ponty's and Deleuze's ontologies. The second chapter looks at how their refusal to account for original thought through the thinking subject and the thought object goes hand in hand with (1) a conception of being as

fundamentally one, even if constituted by differences; and (2) a conception of being as indetermination, as built around an emptiness that cannot be filled up, because the emptiness is constitutive.

In chapter 3, we will examine the general philosophical problem at the root of the “epistemological” and ontological arguments examined in the first two chapters. While the latter compile an extensive list of similar or kindred philosophical concepts and ideas, the third chapter indicates why Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty found it necessary to create these concepts in the first place. The answer to this question has to do with a general view of what philosophy is, or what it should do. Both thinkers, in fact, believe that philosophy should tackle the problem of the condition of phenomena, which is, moreover, to be situated within the empirical. In order to reveal what is specific to the approaches favored by Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty, we will examine how they differ from Kant and Husserl.

If we are to get a handle on what this transcendental empiricism entails for both thinkers, and if we are to know whether they can really be paired, we need to push our investigation of their unorthodox account of the relation between the condition and the conditioned still further. And so, in chapter 4, I concentrate on what Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty both call the “simultaneity” of the condition and the conditioned. My goal there is to determine the degree of resonance in their accounts of this simultaneity by examining how they treat the thinker who was their direct source of inspiration in this respect: Henri Bergson. We will pay particular attention to how Bergson figures in their accounts of depth.

Chapters 5 and 6 focus on the notion of “expression,” which, as already mentioned, is central to Deleuze’s and Merleau-Ponty’s descriptions of the relation between the condition and the conditioned. In chapter 5, I set out to detect the specificity of this ontological notion by zooming in on literary expressions, and more specifically on the relation between literary expressions and what they express. Since both Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty have extensively written about Marcel Proust, their references to the latter offer an ideal place for examining the correspondences between their accounts of literary expression. The fact that Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty both give a special place in their thought for Paul Cézanne, whose paintings can be described as visual expressions, was a reason for dedicating chapter 6 to their discussions of Cézanne. These two chapters reveal that expression names a relation grounded on a paradox: the actual (literary or visual) expressions ground the expressed, from which they nevertheless issue forth.

While chapters 4, 5, and 6 explore how Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty try to ensure the immanence or unity of the condition and the conditioned, the last chapter examines how Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty explain the differentiability of the condition and the difference between the condition and the conditioned. More specifically, I claim that a solid immanence requires a differential theory of how the condition generates the conditioned (which nevertheless determines it). Since structuralism represents one of the first attempts at working out a differential account of the condition and of the process of individuation, and since both Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty discuss Ferdinand de Saussure's structural linguistics extensively, I base the comparison of this differential aspect in their systems on their treatment of Saussure.

The figures that link Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty are not restricted to Husserl, Bergson, Proust, Cézanne, and Saussure. I refer also to Jean-Paul Sartre, Henri Maldiney, and Gilbert Simondon. However, as the common references to these thinkers were not extensive enough to justify a separate chapter, my discussion of them is incorporated into chapters 3, 6, and the conclusion, respectively.

The conclusion brings together all the resonances and divergences discovered and discussed in the body of the book to see whether we should consider Merleau-Ponty a Deleuzian *avant la lettre*, or whether there are elements that attest to some fundamental differences between the two theories. In this context, I linger on Deleuze's criticism of Merleau-Ponty in *What Is Philosophy?* and *Foucault*. Is Deleuze right in claiming that Merleau-Ponty corrupts immanence (*What Is Philosophy?*) and annihilates differences (*Foucault*)? How should we understand this charge?

WHAT I HAVE NOT DONE

It is perhaps prudent to say a few words about what I have not done here. I do not deal extensively with the books Deleuze wrote in collaboration with Félix Guattari. Rather, my focus is almost exclusively on the early Deleuze. The reason for this is that Deleuze's transcendental project is clearest in his early writings. When I discuss concepts or theories by Deleuze and Guattari, I do so primarily in order to investigate whether or not we can find seeds of the pragmatic dimension of the coauthored works in the early Deleuze and, if so, if there is an equivalent in Merleau-Ponty.

My reasons for concentrating on the late Merleau-Ponty are similar. Since Merleau-Ponty's project becomes a fully fledged transcendental project only

at the end of his life, *The Visible and the Invisible* is my primary source for the argument of this book. As already mentioned, I also discuss *Phenomenology of Perception*, but as propaedeutic for the ontology Merleau-Ponty will develop in *The Visible and the Invisible*.

That explains why I do not examine the resonances and divergences between Merleau-Ponty's and Deleuze's theories of perception. Unlike Merleau-Ponty's, Deleuze's theory of perception (developed in *The Fold* and *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*) is directly situated not against an "epistemological" or ontological horizon, but against a pragmatic or "ethical" horizon, as Deleuze puts it. Its frame is the question not of being but of the affective power of machinations and how to increase it. Deleuze's theory of perception and of the body is an experimentation with intensities and forces. Hence, it is more meaningful to compare Merleau-Ponty's theory of perception not with Deleuze's theory of perception, but with the "epistemological" and ontological claims of the early Deleuze.