

**“Merleau-Ponty and the Foundations of Multiculturalism”**  
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**I.**

The issue of multiculturalism, particularly on college campuses, can perhaps best be introduced by considering its major combatants, the traditionalists and the relativists. Traditionalists argue that universities should only use the classical texts of Western culture (written almost exclusively by white males), for they are based on reason and represent the highest level of intellectual and artistic achievement.<sup>1</sup> Relativists argue that the university curriculum should be based on texts from all groups, cultures, and subcultures, for, they argue, there is no one reason, only individuals and groups expressing their interests, and agreement among language users with similar interests.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, a third, more balanced, position exists as well. This view supports a multicultural approach by challenging the Western tradition to broaden (not eliminate) its notion of rationality, a broadening that would include other approaches and other non-Western views.<sup>3</sup> How this is to be done, however, has remained problematic. The recent anthology *After Philosophy* brings together, along with the relativists who wish to break completely with the rational tradition, such disparate thinkers as Habermas, Gadamer, Ricoeur, Davidson and Putnam as attempting in various ways to broaden the notion of reason and loosen the means of establishing universal agreement.<sup>4</sup> This is precisely where I think Merleau-Ponty's work can make a contribution. Not only does he add another voice to the attempt to find alternative forms of reason and universality, but his original and detailed theory of the human body also provides the basis on which many of these other voices may rest. Merleau-Ponty incorporates the body

into philosophical theory in a way no one else has done in the history of philosophy, in a way that grounds an open rationality and the possibility of agreement among interlocutors.

In this paper, I will show not only that Merleau-Ponty takes a multiculturalist approach, but that he also provides a philosophical foundation for multiculturalism. I will also attempt to show that he provides this foundation without falling into the skepticism of the relativist's position or the absolutism of the traditionalist. Merleau-Ponty does this by abandoning the West's presumption of a preestablished reason that is absolutely certain, and by accepting a rationality that is partial, provisional, and continually unfolding.<sup>5</sup> I will first state his view of multiculturalism. I will then discuss in depth the foundations of Merleau-Ponty's position, and how that position allows him to take the political view that he does, a view that opens the West to other cultures in a genuine way without totally abandoning the Western attempt at rational justification. Finally, I will complete this essay with a brief comparison of Merleau-Ponty's philosophical position with others currently being employed, and with a brief defense of his philosophy against some unwarranted interpretations and criticisms. I wish to emphasize, however, that the main concern of this paper remains the exposition of Merleau-Ponty's often overlooked philosophical position. My intention here is to bring Merleau-Ponty's position to light, not to enter into a detailed polemic with competing positions.

## II.

Merleau-Ponty's commitment to a multicultural approach is clearly expressed in "Everywhere and Nowhere".<sup>6</sup> In this brief article, Merleau-Ponty argues that Hegel was wrong to assume that the Occident is already in possession of the truth and absolute knowledge, for this clearly is not the case. Furthermore, Hegel's assumption allows him to see all other cultures as either simply irrational or as immature variations of the West (EN, pp. 135-137). If the West can

no longer adhere to an absolute truth, then, Merleau-Ponty insists, the West can no longer assume Hegel's condescending attitude toward cultures other than its own (EN, pp. 135-137).

In fact, Merleau-Ponty turns to Husserl as a Western philosopher whose works eventually make some movement toward a more representative notion of rationality, even though they did not begin that way (EN, pp. 137-139).<sup>7</sup> Husserl's early use of his eidetic reduction allows him, Husserl thinks, to discover the rational core or essence of a thing, event or experience. The intuition of essences here begins with the concrete experience of a particular object, say, for example, the experience of a lamp. He then freely varies its structure in the imagination until he can determine what its essential features are, the features it *must have* to be a lamp. An exhaustive determination of these features finally determines this thing's rational core or essence. Husserl will use this method to discover the essence of any aspect of human experience. He will, for example, attempt to discover the essence of language, of the experience of time, and so on. Once this essence is determined, once the essence of language is fixed, then all languages are to be seen as variations of or a deviation from this essential rational core.

Merleau-Ponty states that Husserl's approach as it is expressed here falls under the Hegelian assumption of the superiority of Western rationality, a rationality that is then used to dominate all other cultures. However, it is Merleau-Ponty's belief that Husserl himself begins to realize the limitations of his approach. After reading Levi-Bruhl's *Primitive Mythology* and the author's detailed descriptions of another culture, Husserl admits that he would never have freely arrived at this variation in the imagination (PS, p. 107; PSM, p. 90-91). He therefore seems to admit the necessity of staying closer to empirical experience, of concretely investigating other cultures to make those of us in the West realize our own presuppositions. Yet Husserl does not abandon Western rationality: he abandons its illusion of absolute certainty, but he does not abandon Western attempts to understand itself and other cultures, and to understand those cultures together in a single system.

Following the later Husserl and to a certain extent Hegel, Merleau-Ponty finds that this is what distinguishes the West: it vigorously attempts to fully understand both itself and its relationship to others and to nature, and it attempts to have each new philosophical system (at least as an ideal) account for the shortcomings of all previous systems and embody their truths. This is what distinguishes the West, but only by degree, for these characteristics are found in other cultures, and they are found in what the Greeks (as the founders of Western culture) assimilated from others as well (EN, p. 138).

Merleau-Ponty also agrees with Husserl that the West must continually prove the worth of its attempts at clarification of its own and other cultures, the worth of its rational methods, for the West itself is now seen as simply one historical attempt at self-clarification, and not as a direct access to an absolutely certain and preestablished reason. Investigating other cultures can assist the West in evaluating and re-evaluating its own rational methods not necessarily to get rid of them, but to continue to re-evaluate their worth. Investigating other cultures can increase the awareness of that full range of being-in-the-world from which the West began, and perhaps help the West regain what has been lost along the way (EN, pp. 138-139).

The way, then, to arrive at "the unity of the human spirit," says Merleau-Ponty, the way to arrive at a rational moral/political universal, is not to make other so-called less developed cultures submit to an already preestablished and absolutely certain Western rationality, but to articulate the relationships that already exists between cultures, groups and individuals - that is, to express points of contact and similarities as a lateral or oblique universal (to be elaborated below) (EN, p. 139).<sup>8</sup>

It is in other writings<sup>9</sup> that Merleau-Ponty develops the means to establish this lateral universal, and one way that he attempts to do so is by continuing the alteration of Husserl's eidetic reduction. For Merleau-Ponty, we must start our pursuit of knowledge with a concrete, lived-through bodily perception of a particular object or event. Instead of varying the object

freely in the imagination as the early Husserl does, Merleau-Ponty insists on staying closely connected to concrete experience. Yet the investigator can still reflect on this experience and throw it in and out of focus. The investigator can compare it to other experiences and the experiences of others in order to try to form a clear understanding of its style (VI, p. 116).<sup>10</sup>

When studying another culture, Merleau-Ponty insists, we must proceed in the same way, by using the same modified form of Husserl's eidetic reduction. We must first observe another culture through our own concrete, lived-through perception. We then reflect on this culture, throw it in and out of focus by comparing it to our own experience and our own culture, in order to understand it, in order to try to get a glimpse of its truth and its style. At first we see it as a variation of our own experience. But then we see ours as a variation of its experience. And finally, we see both as a variation of the human being's being-in-the-world (PS, pp. 109-110; VI, p. 116).

For Merleau-Ponty, the most we can hope for here is a lateral universal, for here we find some shared experience and sympathetic understanding. Yet there is also difference and uniqueness: experience is similar in different individuals, not identical. In addition, he insists on abandoning the idea of an unchanging, eternal reason or essence, either preexistent in a realm of ideas or in nature in itself. Universality is not based on reason in the sense of preexistent, eternal categories that are the same for all rational beings, as some proponents of liberal democracy claim (in particular, Kant). It is based rather on the body, and on the human body's openness upon one sole world. Human beings can have similar experiences because they have similar bodies, because they are members of the same species, and because these experiences open to a common world. Yet, again, there is no eternal, abstract essence of human nature that is predetermined by reason and self identical in all of us. There are certainly biological norms, and statistical averages. Thus, we are similar, yet we are also individual and unique.

With these thoughts, formed somewhat remarkably in the 1940's and 50's, Merleau-Ponty is well on his way to establishing what is now referred to, some forty to fifty years later, as a multicultural approach. Merleau-Ponty has abandoned Hegel's assumption of the West's possession of an already established and necessary truth. He has moved through and beyond Husserl to recognize the need for a concrete, contingent search for rational structure, the need to constantly compare one's own experience to the experiences of others, and the need to compare the experiences of one's own culture to the experiences of other cultures. This is a multicultural approach because it does not assume the absolute truth of one form of rationality and because it insists on listening to *all* voices. Yet Merleau-Ponty's approach does not completely abandon Western rationality and subsequently avoids falling into relativism and skepticism. For his approach bases agreement on the similar experiences of similar bodies opening upon one sole world.

### **III.**

I would like now to look more closely at Merleau-Ponty's theory of the human body, for it is here the foundation for his concept of reason and for his multiculturalism can be found.

Merleau-Ponty's work can be characterized as an attempt to come between the radical bifurcation of Western dualism, particularly the separation of mind and matter. The mind, especially since Descartes, has typically been taken as that which is in direct contact with itself, that which can be defined as a private awareness of its own contents. Matter, on the other hand, is typically taken to be some sort of basic substance or "stuff" that is extended in space and observable by the senses. Within this dualistic framework ideas can be related internally according to their meaning, while discrete bits of matter, including those of the body, are related only externally according to the laws of mechanical cause and effect.

In response to this dualism, Merleau-Ponty redefines both consciousness and the human body by arguing that the human body must be considered to be a third kind of thing combining elements of both mind and matter. The human body is like material things because it has thickness and substance, yet it is also different from them because it is that by which there are things, that by which human beings are able to experience things. The human body is our own access to the world, our openness upon the world (VI, pp. 133-134).

The human body is thus conscious, but this consciousness is radically different from Descartes'. Consciousness is not a pure for-itself, given only to itself. Consciousness, for Merleau-Ponty, is the body's awareness of the world. The human body has special structures that allow it to be conscious. It is the human body that has a special form of reflexivity that allows it to see itself and touch itself, to be aware of itself as it sees and touches the world. This special structure of the body allows the body to maintain an internal relationship to its parts and to the world (VI, pp. 130-138). The body is not just a sum of the external relationships of its parts but a gestalt whole that hold its parts together in meaningful relationships (Ph.P., pp. 98-99, 150-151). For Merleau-Ponty, this consciousness incarnate, this aware body projects or aims itself into the world. It is not therefore Descartes' isolated, purely intellectual consciousness aiming at a representation but a bodily awareness aiming at the world with its whole being (Ph.P., p. 78-79). As a consequence, the parts of the perceptual field are taken over by the aware body and related meaningfully, that is, brought under the perceptual idea, a perceptual form or gestalt. (VI, pp. 149ff)<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, because it is the body that is conscious, there is a prepersonal, general aspect to experience. There are aspects of experience that I do not choose or create, that are dependent on the general structure of my body, on a body that is similar to others' bodies. I am not therefore surprised when I find meaningful patterns in my experience that are shared by others. My prepersonal bodily experience opens to a world, to a visibility that runs beyond me and includes others as well, to a perceptual field that includes stable perceptual forms that can be

shared by me and others. (Ph.P., p. 440-441) These perceptual forms can then be sublimated into more abstract ideas by the use of language, which Merleau-Ponty refers to as a less heavy body that is able to support this field of sublimated meanings. Meanings can take on a life of their own, yet they travel, Merleau-Ponty says, along pathways already established at the level of the aesthesiological body (VI, pp. 152-155, 213-214). These shared linguistic meanings have their origin in the shared structures of the human body and the shared world upon which they open.

From this brief exposition of some of the main themes of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of the body, it is clear that he does not start with an isolated individual who must be linked to others by means of an abstract reason that is pre-given, eternal and exactly the same for all - as the supporters of liberal democracy purpose (again, especially Kant). Merleau-Ponty begins with a prepersonal, bodily experience that opens to a shared visible field that runs beyond it and includes both it and others. For Merleau-Ponty, this transcendental phenomenal field is the ground upon which self, world, and others meet and intersect (VI, p. 142). I am able to unify my experiences and unify (or at least partially blend) my experiences with the experiences of others because of the unity of the phenomenal field (VI, p. 11), a field to which both the world and my lived body contribute. Thus, for Merleau-Ponty, rational agreement is possible for human beings because their experiences open to and intersect in a shared phenomenal field. In fact, rationality is nothing other than this blending of lived bodily profiles, of mine within me as I actively open upon the world, and of mine with those of others as we actively open upon the world together (Ph.P., xix-xx). The possibility of rational agreement ultimately rests, then, on the structure of the human body, on the fact that it is similar in all members of the human species and that these bodies open upon one sole world in a similar way. This accounts for how human beings can have shared experiences, accounts for the possibility of rational agreement and universality, and it does so without appeal to a preestablished reason either in nature or in a

realm of ideas. Also for Merleau-Ponty, the fact that there is no preestablished reason or abstract, identical essence in each human being, the fact that there are individual differences and unique experiences, accounts for the fact that there is no identical experience. Since each human being is his or her own body, a body that is similar to others but that is also to a certain degree unique, we can begin to understand the individuality, the uniqueness and the difference in human experience. In addition, individuality is formed by a reflection, by a contact with others that allows the individual to see his or her own perceptual experiences as an example of the perceptible in general. Thus, the explicit awareness of the separateness of my own experience is assisted by the presence of other human observers, other observers who perceive me. But the presence of other could not bring about my own self-awareness if it were not prefigured in my own body, by the special structure of the human body, by the reflexivity of the human body (VI, p. 145). The body can touch itself touching. This reflexivity is made more explicit through the presence of the other. Thus my own sense of self is intimately tied to the other's perception of me, yet the perception of the other is just as intimately tied to the body's experience of itself, for the body experiences itself as the original other, as aiming at that which is outside of itself (VI, pp. 136, 154). Thus the self and the other conflate or fold together. I am defined by my relationship to others, yet they are also defined by their relationship to me.<sup>12</sup>

With its exclusive categories (expressed most extremely by Sartre) of the for-itself and for-another, and of the for-itself and in-itself, the West has difficulty developing a framework for shared experience and shared social goals without appealing to a preestablished rationality that is the same for all. It is Merleau-Ponty's concept of the body, whose reflexivity is already halfway toward the recognition of others, whose awareness is out of itself at the thing, that allows him to develop an interworld, a place where consciousness and the world intersect (Ph.P., p. 448).<sup>13</sup>

Merleau-Ponty's recognition of the other is not Descartes' isolated, private consciousness recognizing another person by the so-called argument from analogy, i.e., the projecting of one's

own consciousness into another body that appears similar from the outside. If consciousness is so private, so isolated, there is great difficulty in establishing a link between consciousnesses, in establishing commonality and community, without appealing to a preestablished, universal reason. For this reason, Merleau-Ponty does not start with an isolated consciousness but with an anonymous field of visibility from which one's individual consciousness is cut. He begins with a shared, not a private, consciousness. In addition, since consciousness is the aware body actively being-in-the-world, since consciousness is the body actively gesturing in the world, and since the body is experienced as having certain general or anonymous functions, bodily gestures of different individuals can overlap and interpenetrate. This makes the recognition of the other much easier. For consciousness is not hidden behind or inside the body. It is a relationship to the world. It is a gesturing in and toward the world. The gestures of different individuals can slip into one another, can overlap with one another as they open upon one sole world. Consciousness meet at the world, overlap at the thing upon which their gestures open. Thus there is a lateral universal - a slippage of my experience into the other's and the other's into mine - that is established by the body's anonymous openness upon the world - not by a preexistent reason.

And yet there is no complete overlapping of experience because our bodies, though similar, are not identical. Each of us has individual characteristics that makes us unique and special, and, in addition, each of us perceives the world from the specific spatial/temporal position that our own body occupies. True, I am a species being, a general being, a social being. I share experiences with others. Yet I am also an individual. My individual life is cut out of, or is an individuation from, a shared world with which I remain in constant contact.<sup>14</sup>

This chiasm (this crossing or partial blending) between self and others provides Merleau-Ponty with a theory of social/political relations and also provides him with the basis for a multicultural approach. Politics is an intersubjective phenomenon. It is (or should be) a gestalt

of free individuals in relationship, each seeking *recognition* in the context of established institutions and material conditions. Recognition for Merleau-Ponty involves really seeing other human beings as human like one-self, really listening to, really hearing the voice of the other, and taking all voices into account equally. This involves recognizing others as being like oneself. It involves the body's sympathetic understanding of and coupling with others. Yet it also involves recognizing others as different from oneself, as unique, as having an autonomous body and will. The recognition of the other as both similar to oneself and as different from oneself is based on the experiences of the human body. It is the special structure of the body that allows humans beings to share experiences and also allows them to individuate. Thus, for Merleau Ponty the political recognition of others, the intersection or chiasm of individuals that both brings them together and sets them apart, that recognizes both sameness and difference, is based on his theory of the body.<sup>15</sup>

Merleau-Ponty's theory of the body, therefore, allows him to provide a philosophical basis for multiculturalism generally, since it attempts to listen to all voices in the move toward sameness while, at the same time, respecting uniqueness and difference, and since the body opens to a shared world from which it nevertheless individuates. Merleau-Ponty's theory manages to provide this basis without appeal to an absolute and preestablished reason and without falling into relativism and skepticism.

The question remains, however, whether Merleau-Ponty's theory of the body provides a philosophical foundation for the more specific details of the multicultural approach that have arisen in the last several years. Let us approach this question by considering Charles Taylor's recent first-rate essay on multiculturalism.<sup>16</sup> In this essay, Taylor argues that Western liberal democracies have developed what he refers to as a politics of equality and universality (MC, pp. 37ff). Within this political framework *all* people are to be treated *equally*. This framework does not wish to make distinctions among individuals or groups, because distinctions by their very

nature discriminate, favoring one individual or group over another. When confronted with the reality of differences and the need to grant special privileges, as occurs for example in affirmative action programs, the most this framework will consider is a temporary suspension of equality, but only in order to redress past discrimination, to reestablish equality and provide a level playing field (MC, p. 40). The basic premises of this position are that *each* person has the capacity to calculate the maximum fulfillment of his or her own desires by using (usually already established) principles of rationality, and that the government should *equally* support *each* person's right to do so.

Recently, Taylor reports, a new framework has emerged, one that he refers to approximately as the politics of difference and uniqueness (MC, pp. 38ff). This view claims that we must recognize each person's uniqueness, and even the uniqueness of various forms of reason, for cultures exist that do not accept all the moves and modes of Western rationality. Some even claim that Western rationality is simply the rationalization of certain interest groups and that it is not universal at all. In spite of these claims, Taylor recognizes that the politics of difference itself stems from the Western politics of equality (MC, p. 39), that *each* individual has rights, but also that the politics of difference does go beyond the politics of equality. It necessarily does so because the politics of equality cannot handle difference, cannot handle treating certain individuals and groups differently. For example, granting women special privileges in the work place - such as pregnancy leave - because of their unique biological role is something the politics of equality has great difficulty accommodating. The politics of difference argues, in opposition to the politics of equality, that uniqueness is to be supported and maintained, and not just temporarily, but as a moral good in itself. Each of us has a right to develop as an individual, and this individuality and uniqueness should be respected. In addition, it is claimed that the development of this individuality often requires interaction within unique cultural or subcultural groups. Therefore, maintaining a diversity of subcultures is also a good in

itself. That is to say, subcultures provide ways of life and value systems that should be supported. Each subculture provides a positive reference point or value system for those within the group, for those who may disagree with the mainstream culture (MC, pp. 56-61).

Taylor is willing to grant the rights sought by multiculturalism and the politics of difference, especially the right to protect the uniqueness of the individual and various subcultures, but only as long as those rights and privileges do not violate the basic rights of other groups or individuals in the society. Taylor thus appeals to both the politics of equality and the politics of difference: he is willing to grant special privileges to some groups because they represent a moral good, and yet he wishes to treat all equally with respect to *basic rights* - such as the supposedly universal rights expressed in the U.S. Bill of Rights. Both the politics of equality and the politics of difference should operate in a just society. A just society should allow and even support differences as long as these differences do not interfere with the basic rights of others, basic rights that are universal, that all rational individuals could agree to (MC, pp. 61-73).

Based on the Merleau-Ponty writings mentioned above, I believe his work lends support even to Taylor's more detailed expression of the multicultural perspective. For his work supports a move toward moral universals (politics of equality and universality), yet because these universals are based on the contingent body and its openness upon a contingent world, and not on a priori structures of abstract reason, he also supports the maintenance of differences and uniqueness (politics of difference and uniqueness). In fact, Merleau-Ponty's phrase "lateral universal" captures both the principle of equality and the principle of difference. For the lateral universal confirms an overlapping of the individual's experience with that of others but also maintains the uniqueness and specificity of each individual's experience. I think, in addition, that Merleau-Ponty would emphasize the proviso that debate must be allowed not only in the politics of difference - which explicitly allows for differences of opinion - but also in the politics of

equality, since the politics of equality traditionally assumes that differences of opinion can be mitigated by an appeal to already established and universally accepted principles of rationality. For Merleau-Ponty, however, debate must encompass the very principles of rationality themselves. As was observed above, for Merleau-Ponty, rationality is not something that is already established but that remains to be established, that is built on the agreements found in contingent experience. We must therefore allow debate over basic rights and principles of rationality as well. We must listen to all voices here as well and not assume a preestablished reason, as has typically been done in the West. For Merleau-Ponty, one of the West's greatest contributions to world culture has been the development of rational methods and criteria. (EN, p. 138) Yet he refuses to treat these methods and criteria as absolute and already established. Since reason is grounded in lived bodily perception, and the blending of perspectives (of mine as I open upon the world and of mine with others as we open the world together), reason is contingent, always remaining to be established. Yet this notion of reason is not arbitrary, for it is based on the stable structures of experience, to which both the stable structures of the world and the body contribute. Since we are similar biologically, we can strive toward some universal rules and values for human behavior (politics of equality and universality), yet since we are also unique, we must respect differences (politics of difference and uniqueness). Thus, Merleau-Ponty's work not only provides a philosophical foundation for certain general claims of multiculturalism but accommodates its details as well.

#### IV

I would like to conclude with a brief discussion of how I think Merleau-Ponty's philosophical position compares to other positions now on the philosophical horizon, how it avoids some of their shortcomings, and how it may be defended against some of the criticism that have been brought against it. My intention here is to provide only general comments and not

detailed comparisons or polemics. The general outline and arguments that I provide will certainly need to be developed and carefully elaborated. Yet, I believe it is important to offer them here, even in general form, because Merleau-Ponty's position has so often been misunderstood, misrepresented, and hastily left behind by other positions and for other positions that correctives are desperately called for. It is my hope that these general comments (as well as those made above) will at least begin to clarify his position, highlight its difference from other contemporary positions, and cast some light on how its explanatory power exceeds that of the alternatives.

First of all, Merleau-Ponty would certainly agree with some of what is on the current horizon with respect to attempts to establish universal agreement in the context of a pluralism of views and cultures. He would agree, I believe, with Gadamer that through open dialogue with others and other cultures, human beings can get closer to one another, that they can at least partially understand one another.<sup>17</sup> And he is certainly in agreement with Taylor, who claims that the conditions for the possibility of human knowledge must be found not in the detached mind of a disinterested subject but in the embodied subject interested in the world.<sup>18</sup> He would therefore agree with much of recent philosophy's rejection of Descartes' and Kant's completely detached and autonomous subject who is in possession of a preestablished and absolutely certain reason. Yet it is Merleau-Ponty alone who has fully developed a theory of the embodied subject and an embodied rationality, a theory that allows him to reject the traditional concept of a preestablished and absolutely certain reason and to support a multicultural perspective without falling into relativism.

Ironically, Merleau-Ponty's philosophy has been associated with both the traditionalists and the relativists. The structuralists and the deconstructionists of the post war period in France tended to associate Merleau-Ponty's work with certain themes common to traditional philosophers. Foucault, for example, claims that Merleau-Ponty is a foundationalist, that he

seeks a firm foundation upon which knowledge can rest.<sup>19</sup> Derrida likewise associates Merleau-Ponty with traditional philosophy when he claims that Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is a philosophy of presence,<sup>20</sup> which again seeks a firm and even indubitable starting point for knowledge claims. And, finally, Vincent Descombes reports that Merleau-Ponty's own attacks on Sartre's Cartesianism (on Sartre's philosophy of the isolated ego) came to be applied to Merleau-Ponty's own work after his death.<sup>21</sup>

At the other end of the spectrum, we find that Merleau-Ponty's work has recently been associated with the deconstructionists and the abandonment of the traditional view.<sup>22</sup> It is claimed that Merleau-Ponty's posthumously published *The Visible and the Invisible* abandons perceptual foundations, the Cartesian subject, and the concept of perceptual presence for a constantly deferring language that has no positive terms.

Merleau-Ponty's philosophy actually comes between these more extreme interpretations, and it allows him to escape the excesses of both of the traditionalist and the deconstructionist positions.

Contrary to Foucault's interpretation, Merleau-Ponty is certainly not a foundationalist, at least in the traditional sense of seeking an absolutely certain starting point for knowledge and values, either as coincidence of consciousness with itself or of consciousness with the thing and its sense data. Admittedly, he does ground knowledge, language and values in the body's lived openness upon a shared world, but this foundation is far from the traditionalists' claim of absolute certainty. We have seen above that Merleau-Ponty's "foundation" is contingent, open, and evolving. It grounds knowledge, and therefore avoids the possibly devastating consequences of relativism and skepticism, yet it does so in a way that is inclusive and avoids the untenable claims of absolute certainty.

Contrary to Derrida's claims, Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, at least as expressed in his later works, does not fall under the heading of a philosophy of presence. For Merleau-Ponty,

presence is not the traditional presence of consciousness with itself or its sense data. Presence is only given in a context of difference. Presence is a gestalt figure on a background, a temporal as well as spatial background. A present moment of experience is closer to awareness than the past and future, which shade into it and help articulate it, yet the present is never fully coincident with awareness. (VI, pp. 190-191) Thus, Merleau-Ponty's presence is not the traditional full presence of consciousness that is absolutely certain, but neither is it simply a product of a deferring language. Rather, his presence has its roots in a perceptual gestalt, in a perceptual field of differences, a field that is then sublimated in a diacritical language. This position escapes the shortcomings of the traditional position because, again, it does not claim absolute certainty, and it escapes the shortcomings of the deconstructionists' position because it provides a basis for knowledge, language, and value and therefore does not fall into relativism and skepticism.

Contrary to the post-war claim that existentialism is a philosophy of the Cartesian subject, Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is a philosophy of the flesh, of a bodily subject that is nothing other than its relations to the world. In *The Visible and Invisible* (pp. 170-176), Merleau-Ponty explicitly states that he wants to overcome the Cartesian elements of his earlier *Phenomenology of Perception*. In *The Visible and Invisible*, the detached, private, rational subject is redefined as a bodily openness upon a shared field of differences. The body is characterized as being in a chiasmatic relationship with its surrounding. It can touch because it is touched. It can see because it is seen. The body subject is therefore differential, is formed at the intersection of this hinging back and forth, is capable of being aware of itself because it is aware of that which is outside of itself. This bodily self opens to a phenomenal field that includes it and others, and the self is formed in this field. This is definitely not Cartesian or Kantian Modern liberalism - where an autonomous subject in full possession of his or her own thoughts can calculate the fulfillment of needs with a preestablished universal reason. It is true that Merleau-Ponty does not totally abandon of the subject, yet it is certainly true that he

radically redefines it. He makes it a bodily, social, structural subject, not detached and isolated. His view of the subject thus escapes some of the shortcomings of Modernism's detached subject.

In addition, he does not get rid of the subject the way some of the structuralists and post-modernists do. They make the subject a more or less blind result of social (Levi-Strauss) or linguistic (Derrida) structures. Merleau-Ponty escapes the shortcomings of these views because rather than eliminating human consciousness or making it negligible, he accounts for it, and he does so by recognizing its structural qualities. Bodily consciousness is formed in a chiasmatic relationship with the material, social and linguistic dimensions of experience. Individual human beings intersect with these structures, take them up, and use them to consciously express their own lives.

It is because Merleau-Ponty's position is so balanced that it is able to escape the shortcomings of many of these more extreme positions. It is because his position always tries to understand and integrate all elements of human experience and not reduce human experience to one element or another that it remains one of the most plausible on the philosophical horizon.

## ENDNOTES

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1. See for example, William Bennett, *The De-Valuing of America* (New York: Summit Books, 1992), pp. 173-4.
  2. Foucault and Derrida are often cited as providing the theoretical background for the relativist position. See for example Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism and "The Politics of Recognition"* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 70.
  3. Charles Taylor's *Multiculturalism*, op. cit., represents this more balanced approach.
  4. K. Baynes, T. Bohman, T. McCarthy, editors, *After Philosophy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987).
  5. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, C. Smith, trans. (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), pp. xix-xx. Hereafter cited as Ph.P.  
  
Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Everywhere and Nowhere" in *Signs*, R. McCleary, trans. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), pp. 126-159, especially pp. 135-137.  
  
See also Kerry Whiteside, "Universality and Violence, Merleau-Ponty, Malraux, and the Moral Logic of Liberalism", in *Philosophy Today*, Winter, 1991, pp. 372-388, especially pp. 372-376.
  6. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Everywhere and Nowhere" in *Signs*, op. cit. Hereafter cited as EN.
  7. See also Merleau-Ponty, "The Philosopher and Sociology" in *Signs*, op. cit., pp. 98-114, especially pp. 102ff. Hereafter cited as PS. See also Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Phenomenology and the Science of Man" in *The Primacy of Perception* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), pp. 43-96, especially pp. 53ff. Hereafter cited as PSM.
  8. See also Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, A. Lingus, trans. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 143. Hereafter cited as VI.
  9. See for example Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The Philosopher and Sociology" and "Phenomenology and the Science of Man" in *Signs*, op. cit.

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10. This style is what others have called an essence, yet there is a stark difference between Merleau-Ponty's style and the traditional essence. For Merleau-Ponty, a style is one of Beings particular ways of manifesting itself. It is form and content given together in a concrete perceptual gestalt. It is grasped by reflection on a concrete bodily encounter with the world. It is stable but also shifting, changing and unfolding. The traditional essence on the other hand is abstract and grasped by an intellectual reflection often separated from the empirical. It is often taken to be eternal, whether existing in a realm of ideas or in the world in-itself, and therefore incapable of evolving.
  11. See also Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior*, A. Fisher, trans. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), pp. 143-44. Hereafter cited as SB.
  12. See Douglas Low, "Merleau-Ponty's Intertwined Notions of Subjectivity and Intersubjectivity" in *International Studies in Philosophy* xxiv/3, 1992, pp. 45-64. See especially pp. 51-55.
  13. See also Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Adventures of the Dialectic*, J. Bien, trans. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press), 1973, pp. 124, 142.
  14. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The Child's Relations with Others" in *The Primacy of Perception*, op. cit. pp. 96-159.
  15. See Douglas Low, "The Foundations of Merleau-Ponty's Ethical Theory," to appear in a forthcoming issue of *Human Studies*.
  16. Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism*, op. cit. I here summarize some of the main themes of this excellent work. Hereafter cited as MC.
  17. Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Hermeneutics as Political Philosophy" in *After Philosophy*, op. cit., pp. 325-338. See in particular p. 336.
  18. Charles Taylor, "Overcoming Epistemology" in *After Philosophy*, op. cit., pp. 464-488, in particular p. 476.
  19. Richard Cohen, "Merleau-Ponty, The Flesh and Foucault" in *Philosophy Today*, Winter, 1984, pp.329-338, especially p. 335.
  20. Nancy Holland, "Merleau-Ponty on Presence: A Derridian Reading" in *Research in Phenomenology* Volume XVI, 1986, pp. 111-120, especially p. 111. Holland here records Derrida's comments to a class of graduate students. For a general discussion of the concept of presence see Jacques Derrida, "Difference" in *Speech and Phenomena*, Allison, trans. (Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1973), pp. 152-155.

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21. Vincent Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy*, L. Scott-Fox and J. Harding, trans. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp. 71-72.
  22. Gary Madison, "Did Merleau-Ponty have a Theory of Perception?" in *Merleau-Ponty, Hermeneutics and Postmodernism*, T. Busch and T. Gallagher, editors, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), pp. 83-106.