

## A Way Out for Philosophy

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Things, good or bad, come to an end. Entire species go extinct, celestial bodies burn out, forests become just a chaotic lifeless mass, a vague shadow reminds us what activists of every sort used to be, politics gets closer and closer to its last hour by turning the back on ideology, the man itself is said to be on the brim of (self) annihilation. This are just a few entries in a far more extensive and eclectic mortuary list, one with an extremely dynamic character, that inhabit our everyday lives, that are for some just as many causes for anxiety attacks and that in the end just might make it on the lost and found list. Yes, I am alluding here to the modern day millenarianism. The 20<sup>th</sup> century is impregnated by it, perhaps even more than its forerunners. Philosophy makes no exception in this connection: Hegel gave the tone, one that was developed in the last century with an impetuous energy in many variants, more or less unitary in character, all of which having nonetheless a common ground in the end, namely the increasing dissatisfaction with any metaphysical way of doing philosophy. It just might be ill advised – hasty certainly is – to pass such a judgment on the

fiber of contemporary philosophy, to put it under the gloomy roof of millenarianism, but an oblique view on its manifestations cannot but yield the conclusion that philosophy goes through a crisis of some sort, one that has, at its center, a wide acknowledgment of all brands of historicisms: moral, esthetical, epistemological and so on. Indeed, if philosophy didn't reach some kind of terminal point, it nonetheless finds itself in embarrassment. In this connection, it suffices to mention the depriving of some of its traditional themes. No longer should philosophy try to tell us something about our lives, about the way we encounter our fellows and the surrounding world, or even about the way we know. It is being said nowadays that there are far more suitable candidates for these tasks. To name only a few: psychology, cognitive sciences, sociology.

These are just a few considerations that stir us to ask if there is a way out for philosophy or, better yet, what way out for philosophy is there. The present volume, *Merleau-Ponty at the Limits of Art, Religion, and Perception*, a collection of articles edited by Kascha Semonovitch and Neal DeRoo, and which appeared in 2010 at Continuum International Publishing Group, should provide an answer to this question, as long as it discusses Merleau-Ponty's philosophy from a specific point of view, namely one that is designed to bring to the fore the way in which the French philosopher tackled what herein is called *the other* of philosophy (p. 2). A simple way to (fore)see a path for philosophy is by asking what precisely means to do philosophy today. As long as the main reason that brought us to this investigation has to do with the uneasy relationship between philosophy and the diverse disciplines, its *other* in short, we could find it fruitful to define philosophy in contrast to what stands against it. But this is precisely what Merleau-Ponty does not do. In their introduction, the editors of this volume highlight the fact that „for him [Merleau-Ponty], all of these domains – indeed, of all of experience – arise from the same prethetic or barbarous ground as philosophy” (p. 2). But this foray in *a common ground*, one that could remind us of Husserl's *Lebenswelt* and Heidegger's *In-der-Welt-sein*, has not only the effect of eliminating the alleged uneasiness between

philosophy and its other, but also to bring to the light the true terms of this relationship, given that Merleau-Ponty “engages his various topics – from Cézanne’s painting to Marx’s politics – as *subjects*: as equal partners in an unfolding dialogue” (p. 3).

To treat something as a subject is to recognize it as your equal, to be able to enter in a dialogue with it. Now, this other subject, by standing there by you, not against you, by being sometimes in the position to surprise you, by having something to tell you and to which you are ready to hear, has the power of revealing something about yourself, namely the fact that you are not a self enclosed system. Philosophy is no longer to be an autarchic organism that dominates its surroundings through a reflexive frenzy, but rather it must envision itself as “allied with other expressive activities: artistic, poetic, spiritual and scientific creativity. Merleau-Ponty not only sees a permeability between philosophical practice and other expressive practices, but he borrows methodologically from other sciences and arts” (p. 8).

A coming to an end for philosophy means nothing less than reaching a dead end on a distinct path. According to the present volume, the path that brought us here is constituted by the different dualisms that made career in the history of philosophy, namely the Cartesian mind-body dualism and the Kantian couple of sensation-understanding. If a novel course is to be assigned to philosophy, then a fresh way of dealing with these old and respectable specters must be indicated. This is accomplished in a double-sided movement that centers on Merleau-Ponty’s theory of perception. The disconnection of mind and body is to be sublated (*aufgehoben*) through the incarnation of the perceiving subject. The one that perceives is not a tag end of the world, one that in a sense is transcendent to what perceives, but an embodied subject that endorses all kinds of relations and exchanges to its surroundings. The decision to state the subject in all its concreteness goes hand in hand with the everyday way of establishing contact with the world, namely the binocular vision. In contrast to the disconnected way of perceiving tantamount to Descartes’ perception, we have here an engaged type of perception: “Human beings exercise binocular vision in concert with certain

actions: upright posture, grasping hands, general motility. Vision and action co-develop” (p. 9). The same problematic, for instant, is expressed by Bernhard Waldenfels when he asks if “dem sinnlich Gegebenen erst sekundär eine Einwirkung auf uns zuzubilligen, oder ob nicht von Anfang an das Gegebene *für uns* in seiner Einwirkung *auf uns* erfahren werden kann in Form einer Gegebenheit des Wirksamen und einer Wirksamkeit des Gegebenen“ (Waldenfels, Bernhard. 1980. “*Der Spielraum des Verhaltens*“. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, p. 104). The interesting fact that is assessed in this connection is not that Merleau-Ponty’s project has to do with some kind of investigation of the mundane, but rather the fact that here, doing philosophy means positioning yourself on the surface of the mundane, an endeavour that is to be achieved through an adoption of the everyday vision.

That which was said in the preceding paragraphs constitutes the general framework of this book. From this point of attack, Merleau-Ponty’s various involvements with those disciplines that constitute the other of philosophy are being analyzed by prominent scholars like Günter Figal and John Sallis. The fourfold structure of this book is an expression of the different knots that are the outcome of Merleau-Ponty’s foray in those domains that traditionally are not considered to pertain to philosophy in a pregnant sense, such as: art and sacramentality. In the end, it must be stated that the book under attention is not only recommendable for its sharp and far reaching analysis of the French phenomenologist’s philosophy, but also because it is a good example of how to do philosophy at the end of philosophy.

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