Actualization and Realization


Bryan Smyth’s book, Merleau-Ponty’s Existential Phenomenology and the Realization of Philosophy, is a provocative work. Smyth offers a significant and original reframing of Merleau-Ponty’s early work that shows how the account of perception is intertwined with his political philosophy. Smyth offers a new line through Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology of Perception that calls close attention to two often-neglected quoted passages at the beginning and the end of the text by Eugen Fink and Antoine de Saint Exupéry. Smyth argues that these are not incidental passages, but indicate the central problem of the text, and indeed of phenomenology. Smyth carefully constructs his case that Merleau-Ponty is addressing a methodological problem in phenomenology as a response to Fink, and that the methodological response is praxial, informed by the personalists and Marxists. This leads Merleau-Ponty to use Saint Exupéry to articulate the role of non-sacrificial heroism in this praxial response. It is a valuable contribution to Merleau-Ponty scholarship—thoroughly researched, well organized, and forcefully argued throughout. Smyth’s erudition is simply astounding. This book is a fine example of research at the highest level. His reading of Merleau-Ponty’s work carefully reveals the context in which Merleau-Ponty was writing. He thoughtfully calls the reader’s attention to the conspicuous absence of attention to Merleau-Ponty’s political philosophy in most of the secondary literature. Through meticulous research in movements of Merleau-Ponty’s day (especially phenomenology, western Marxism, and personalism), Smyth effectively demonstrates how any account of Merleau-Ponty’s work that lacks attention to his political work offers, at best, an abstraction of his thought—one which falls into the caricature offered by Sartre of Merleau-Ponty as an ivory-tower theorist. Worse, this misrepresentation of Merleau-Ponty lends support to uniformed dismissals of some of the next generation, who disdainfully describe “a certain soft, moist, weeping prophesying: Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Les Temps Modernes, the functionaries of
‘freedom’ and of ‘meaning’...”\(^1\) As I have argued elsewhere, such an abstraction of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy results not merely in the benign neglect of a vast amount of his published and unpublished work, but a fundamental distortion of his ontology.\(^2\) Smyth correctly directs the reader’s attention to the centrality of engagement for any fair reading on Merleau-Ponty’s work—and for any valuable philosophical account whatsoever.

Smyth addresses the intertwining of Merleau-Ponty’s account of perception and his political thought in his early work by framing it in terms of methodology. Smyth points out that many Merleau-Ponty scholars are a bit too sanguine as we stand for the anthemic refrain: “the most important lesson of the reduction is the impossibility of a complete reduction” (PhP viii / lxxvii). However, what justification is there for employing phenomenological methodology just by the acknowledgement that it cannot be completed? This observation alone simply articulates a crucial problem in phenomenology and provides no solution.

According to Smyth, Merleau-Ponty poses the problem in terms of Eugen Fink’s response to Husserl in the sixth Cartesian Meditation. Fink describes two senses of enworlding as a response to phenomenology’s problem of transcendental illusion. Merleau-Ponty differs from Fink on the issue that we must be engaged within the world we interpret while we interpret it. As Smyth puts it, Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology “involves an intensification of constitutive participation” (xxix). That is, phenomenology must remain transcendental but assume an “existential attitude.”

Smyth links the early influences of phenomenology, personalism, and Marxism in his interesting account of Merleau-Ponty’s militant “incarnational Marxism,” which has its own unique style of engagement within the world. The ideas of embodiment and totality from each of these traditions inform

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