

COMMENTS ON PROFESSORS JOHNSON'S AND WEISS'S PAPERS

In my comments on Professor Johnson paper, "Painting, Nostalgia and Metaphysics: Merleau-Ponty's Line," I'm going to take the issue of whether Merleau-Ponty favors representative or figurative painting over abstract art as closed. I think Professor Johnson shows Merleau-Ponty not to be guilty of that particular vice. Professor Johnson does so in different ways, but most obviously in point of fact by recounting Merleau-Ponty's actual citations of paintings in "The Eye and the Mind" particularly in the earlier Art de France edition.

I will instead address Professor Johnson's defense of Merleau-Ponty's nostalgia. To my mind, there are two very revealing statements made by Jean-François Lyotard in one of the essays which is key to the Merleau-Ponty/Lyotard debate. The two statements are both quoted by Professor Johnson, but they are worth returning to. The first statement is, quoting Lyotard, in "Philosophy and Painting in the Age of their Experimentation: Contribution to an Idea of Post modernity:"

The arrogance of philosophers is metaphysics. This arrogance, Lyotard extends to Merleau-Ponty even in his writings on painting since, as Lyotard would have it, Merleau-Ponty's semiological deck contains cards that exhibit metaphysical suits. According to Lyotard, we get a peek at Merleau-Ponty's cards even in "The Eye and the Mind" because Merleau-Ponty favors Cezanne and Giacometti over Duchamp, Marey and the cubists. The hidden premise here is that Cezanne and Giacometti would give us a representation or at least a figuration of how things really are. They privilege the being of things, of "Mt. Sainte Victoire," of "The Blue Vase" or for that matter of "The Cardplayers," for example in the case of Cezanne. But Professor Lyotard also says of Merleau-Ponty: "[he is] one of the least arrogant of philosophers," (ibid). Professor Johnson addresses these incompatible statements of Lyotard by telling us--and I think he does so very instructively--that in "The Eye

and the Mind" and also in the late work, posthumously entitled "The Visible and the Invisible," that Merleau-Ponty gives us the germs of a "postmodern metaphysic." I think this intriguing encapsulation is worth developing, even in only these few minutes of comments.

We can thank Lyotard, along with others--with Derrida and Kristeva to mention only some of the most influential--for exposing semiologically the many transgressions of metaphysicalizing. Let me cite a very partial roll call of some of the deadlier transgressions of metaphysicalizing:

First, metaphysicalizing tends to position one category of Being over another. Thus schools of philosophy from Existentialism to Pragmatism, for example, all secretly promote subjectivity to a prominence which aids and abets everything from hyper-individualism to cultural autism, fostered by the mass media, so it's been argued.

Second, metaphysicalizing leads one to seek after essences. One misguidely seeks to establish what something is as such, and, consequently one engenders beliefs about what is normal and proper in a persons or things. This, so it is argued, can promote biases of many sorts, which include everything from Eurocentricism to a justification for the vivisection of animals.

Third, it's been argued that metaphysicalizing can privilege a single language, most scandalously Greek, or German, or perhaps Sanskrit, over and above other languages because, for whatever reasons other languages, so it's claimed, don't accommodate themselves to the evocation of Being.

Fourth, metaphysicalizing can promote a particular profession or calling. For better or worse, it can promote perhaps poets, perhaps set-theoreticians, or perhaps artificial intelligence computer software hackers. (In the case of the poets at least, it doesn't seem that the National Endowment for the Humanities has got the message. Yet, maybe that's changing.)

The deconstruction of metaphysics by Derrida and Lyotard among others, even as this short list would indicate, has provided an invaluable service. However, as Professor Johnson points out,

at least in relation to Merleau-Ponty one may speak of "the germ of a postmodern metaphysic," and I would add a clearly non-arrogant one.

A think Professor Johnson is fundamentally right about this "germ of postmodern metaphysic," Let me itemize in somewhat different terms from his, why, in the case of Merleau-Ponty, metaphysicalizing does not seem to amount to metaphysical arrogance.

First, Merleau-Ponty does not privilege a particular category of being over another. As early as the *Phenomenology of Perception*, where Merleau-Ponty speaks of the body-world system as neither *in-itself* nor *for-itself* but as a *for-itself-for-us* (*Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 372 Fr. ed., p. 322 Eng. eg.), Merleau-Ponty is dedicated to promoting neither subjectivity over objectivity nor the converse. Rather he sets out to propose a coupling, or pact (*s'accoupler*) from which they both emerge. In the writings he was occupied with at his death, this project of promoting neither subject nor object, essence nor fact, becomes even more focal. The description of the self-world interrelation, what he refers to as "the chiasma or intertwining," leads to metaphysical positions only through introducing various partite and distorting revisions. There is nothing here of the privileging of one metaphysical category over another.

Second, I think it is a misreading of the later Merleau-Ponty to hold his notion of Flesh to be a return to essentialism. Flesh enables Merleau-Ponty to describe *how* beings offer themselves in fullness; it is not a conceptualization of *what* beings are. Flesh, it can be shown, is a way of designating the way in which the visible and the invisible, the actual and the imaginary are co-present in something which we hold be fully there.

And last, I think one can go quite a way to show that Merleau-Ponty avoids privileging a particular language, or for that matter an idiolect, because his concern is often a pre-verbal world. To return to the late essay on painting again, in the "The Eye and the Mind," Merleau-Ponty holds that the painter recaptures an ante-predicative world. As such metaphysics must be, at least, retrospective. "The impalpable source of sensations" which

engages the painter is neither real nor ideal, private or public, neither party to Sameness nor party to Otherness. To be sure, a description of this world which Merleau-Ponty sometimes refers to as Brute Being, (*l'Être sauvage*), may allow metaphysical bias to enter in. However, since the world of the painter is ante-metaphysical, descriptions involving metaphysical predicates would self-referentially cancel themselves out, becoming at best heuristic and finally irrelevant.

Time permitting, if I may, I'd also like to make a short comment on Professor Weiss instructive paper. "Ambiguity, Absurdity and Reversibility: Indeterminacy in de Beauvoir, Camus and Merleau-Ponty." Professor Weiss's paper shows us the manner in which Camus, de Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty, in fact, expand upon the *equivocation* of the notion of indeterminacy. The universe is indifferent to the Camus of *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Indeterminacy for the early Camus means a confrontation with what is irrepressibly, and implacably, non-human. Indeterminacy for de Beauvoir of the Ethics of Ambiguity means the good ambiguity that leads us to make indistinct subject and object. It is a moral indistinction. Finally with Merleau-Ponty, indeterminacy, at least that which concerns the reversibility of the body, the hand which touches, readies itself to be touched, etc., counts as a rhythm or oscillation between subject and object. If nothing else certainly these appropriations, even distortions, of the notion of indeterminacy *a la* Husserl, suggests how the ambiguity--or perhaps better, how the the *multivocality* of a term--would seem to antedate thought, even as it prepares it and makes it possible.

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