

Revolutionary Modality in Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Ambiguity: A Phenomenological Basis for Critical Politics

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In his essay "Situation and Suspicion in the Thought of Merleau-Ponty: The Question of Phenomenology and Politics," Merold Westphal argues that Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of ambiguity necessitates political complacency: "Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception, which in both its early and later forms is a powerful synthesis of method and ontology, has a minimal significance for his political writings" (160). According to this argument, Merleau-Ponty is unable to deduce a critical politics from his phenomenology of perception, because the latter is a philosophy of ambiguity. For Merleau-Ponty, the structure of perception requires inexhaustible horizons of meaning. Due to the situated-ness of perception within these horizons, ambiguity is required at the expense of absolute meaning.¹ Yet counter to Westphal, Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of ambiguity not only rejects political complacency but also justifies critical philosophy.

Through his rejection of epistemological foundationalism, Merleau-Ponty can achieve a politics that minimizes the terrorism implicit in dogmatic political philosophy. When politics is dominated by a vanguard group's monopoly on abstract Truth, at the expense of the masses' lived experience, the progressive politics of revolution become reactive terrorism. Vanguard politics occurs with both liberalism's call for pure principled rationality and also Hegelian-Marxist dialectics that posit reason in history. Only when political activity returns to the concrete level of existence can grounds be opened for the critical politics of revolution. Thus the philosophy of ambiguity not only provides a powerful critique of the terrorism implicit in foundationalism, it also creates new possibilities for revolutionary modality.

Westphal locates the disjunction between Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of ambiguity and political theory around the latter's hermeneutics of suspicion. In the spirit of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, a hermeneutics of suspicion aims to uncover, unmask, or demystify the 'forgetfulness' of self-deception. Yet Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of ambiguity fails to demystify the

horizons as is required for a hermeneutics of suspicion. Westphal asks: "Is the philosophy of ambiguity, in either its earlier or later version, a critical philosophy in any meaningful sense?" (167). He answers: "only minimally." According to Westphal, a philosophy of ambiguity fails to show why dogmatism is a viable part of political life. In deconstructing the foundational tradition of absolute meaning, Merleau-Ponty loses the grounds needed for critique. All meaning is within the shifting horizons of Being.

The situational character of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of ambiguity necessitates the existence of latent horizons of meaning. Yet any hermeneutics of suspicion requires that the repressed latency be made available given proper analysis. For Freud, psychoanalysis can uncover the repressed unconscious. Similarly for Marx, the proletariat gains class-consciousness of their once-latent condition. In contrast, for Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, we never overcome the ambiguity of situatedness. The latent horizons of experience are the invisible, which make the visible possible, and yet are always on the fleeting corners of our experience.

By characterizing Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of ambiguity as complacency, Westphal misinterprets the very essence of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. Instead of seeking a hermeneutics of suspicion to justify his critical politics, Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of ambiguity is necessary for a critical politics. By grounding his politics in a hermeneutics of suspicion, as Westphal requires, Merleau-Ponty would negate the ambiguity required for critical politics. Westphal has failed to acknowledge the dynamic nature of the horizons of Being, and thus the critical element therein.

This connection between a philosophy of ambiguity and a critical politics is contained in *Phenomenology of Perception*, and is only intensified in later works.² Merleau-Ponty's early political writings must be interpreted as a continuation of this common theme, and not a hermeneutics of suspicion lacking proper philosophical grounding. This is especially important in reading *Humanism and Terror*, which seems most likely to flirt with the absolute role of the proletariat. Concerning Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of ambiguity, Westphal states "the philosophy that moves from being-in-the-world to Being as its ground (and abyss), first in Heidegger and then in Merleau-Ponty, is esthetically but not politically fruitful" (178). This last clause, contrast-

ing politics with aesthetics, tips us off in the right direction.

I will demonstrate first that Merleau-Ponty's critique of political dogmatism stems from his larger rejection of epistemological foundationalism (I). Secondly, I will argue that through such a critique, Merleau-Ponty makes possible radical politics of revolution, not complacency (II). By redefining political engagement in terms of philosophy of ambiguity (I), Merleau-Ponty creates new possibilities for revolutionary modality (II). Only when his political theory is understood in conjunction with his philosophy of ambiguity are radical politics possible.

I.

An understanding of the critical nature of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of ambiguity requires a preliminary sketch of his rejection of epistemological foundationalism, and its political counterpart of dogmatism. Westphal had argued that the most Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of ambiguity could achieve was a critique of political dogmatism, and yet could not even show why such dogmatism was a viable part of political life.³ To the contrary, Merleau-Ponty's critique of dogmatism not only shows that it gains a viable role through its connection with epistemological foundationalism, but also that such a critique is a necessary prerequisite for a critical politics of revolution. This latter claim is true because Merleau-Ponty's critique breaks the status quo terrorism of vanguard party politics (based on foundational epistemology) and reopens the horizons for the dialectic to solicit revolutionary activity.

For Merleau-Ponty, political action, like perception, is situated and thus does not lend itself to absolute judgments. In his philosophy of ambiguity, Merleau-Ponty seeks to reject such foundationalism's attempt to transcend the situated character of socio-natural *eksistence*, and make absolute judgments. The goal of foundationalism's transcendence is to gain access to the pure *eidos* of reality, because only therein *apodicticity* can be achieved. Yet in such a process, concrete lived experience is negated in favor of rational reflection. Situation is forgotten, and abstract forms are posited as 'absolute.' In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty rejects a long tradition of epistemological foundationalism, which seeks to subordinate lived-experience to rational reflection. Husserl sought to perform an *epoché* to bracket lived-experience. The act of bracketing through rational reflec-

tion is to recover the essential structure of experience. Husserl's *apodicticity* requires forfeiting the body, other selves, and the world of lived-experience. In his *Cartesian Meditations*, Husserl describes his method as uncovering "an all-embracing essentially necessary structural form belonging to all transcendental subjectivity" (57). It is exactly this transcendental phenomenology, which Merleau-Ponty rejects in *Phenomenology of Perception*.

Political dogmatism is a natural outgrowth of foundationalism because relativity threatens to contaminate the pure *eidōs*. In *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty states "with *cogito* begins that struggle between consciousnesses each of which, as Hegel says, seeks the death of the other" (355). Stalin's view of a vanguard party functions using the same foundationalist paradigm as Kant, Hegel, and Husserl. Existential modality is insufficient to bind individuals together. The only 'true' connection is reflective and thus exclusive. Rational consciousnesses of the privileged few (a vanguard/master) impose abstract truths upon the concrete experiences of the masses, disguising the situational nature of the former. Such an act is terrorism.

Terrorism can be defined as the introduction of absolute forms into the content of inter-subjective lived-experience. Terrorism arises when the experiences of the masses are subjugated to the absolute forms dictated by a vanguard party. One example is writing history from a white male perspective, and characterizing it as "natural" history. Such is an act of terrorism against females and non-whites, whose history is considered secondary and accessory. Such "natural" history terrorizes the lived-experience of the subordinate group.

In *Sense and Nonsense* Merleau-Ponty writes, "the man with the most exact awareness of the human situation is not the master (since the master pretends ignorance of the foundations of being and communication underlying the play of his despair and pride) but the slave" (68). The master imposes a situational perspective as absolute, rendering the lived-experience of the slave irrational. Yet the slave is more firmly rooted in the world, and possesses greater awareness of the horizons. The slave possesses the "double consciousness" of DuBois, allowing for an understanding of the interdependency of both the master and slave. The slave understands his or her role both from the "slave" perspective, and also from the perspective of the master. As the master imposes his or her forms as absolute, in a corresponding

act the forgotten horizons become charged. A tension grows as the master moves further away from the horizons.

According to Merleau-Ponty, problems arise when the dictatorship of the proletariat becomes a vanguard-for-itself. In *Humanism and Terror* he states "the dictatorship of the proletariat is not the will of a few officials who are the only ones initiated into the secret of history, as in Hegel; it follows the spontaneous movement of the proletariat in every country and relies upon the instinct of the masses" (xix). Counter to Westphal's claims, dogmatism is a viable part of political life because it is an outgrowth of epistemological foundationalism. A vanguard party in possession of the logic of history will inevitably subject the life of the masses to its will. Only through foundational legitimization can such an act of terrorism be justified.

The critique of foundationalism, both epistemological and political, is the cornerstone of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of ambiguity. The phenomenon of foundationalism is not as mysterious as Westphal suggests. He requires that the self-deception of foundationalism stem from a retrievable unconscious or a Will to Power. However, foundationalism is simply an attempt to transform situated perspective into absolute law. By such a transformation, a group can feel justified in political action due to *apodicticity*. Such an act is reactive in nature because it seeks to mold an atemporal logic to history and is unable to account for the diverse, the ambiguous, and the "irrational."

Political dogmatism leads to reactive politics and alienates the concrete experiences of the masses. By revealing the situated nature of foundational epistemology, Merleau-Ponty breaks the status quo terrorism of the vanguard party and reopens the horizons of change. Because I am situated, and thus incomplete, I can have being-for-others. The moment I posit myself as essential, as cogito, or as a monad, I am cut off from others, from my world, and from my body. Only in the absence of *apodicticity* is reciprocity possible. My situation is within the hermeneutics of Being, and thus foundationalism is an impossible venture. Merleau-Ponty states "universality is only conceived, it is not lived" (*H. T.*, 116). The only means to minimize terror is to embrace the horizons of situated-ness, and keep the dialogue open. The vanguard cannot empathize with the proletariat's experience because it seeks to dominate it. The vanguard seeks divinity but in the process forgets its humanity. Thus we

must not conceive of Merleau-Ponty's politics as separate from his phenomenology, as both share a common ambiguity. His political theory furthers the attack on foundationalism, because application of foundational principles to politics leads to conservatism. Only upon return to the ambiguity of the concrete can a radical politics of revolution form without the conservative terrorism of vanguard foundationalism.

II.

Westphal had argued that Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of ambiguity justifies situation instead of denouncing it, and thus cannot maintain a critical politics. To the contrary, the absence of ambiguity, sought by foundationalism, denies critical politics in favor of dogmatism. However, philosophy of ambiguity goes beyond mere critique by offering a critical politics of revolution.

By rejecting the inherent terrorism of foundationalism, Merleau-Ponty reopens the ground for critical activity. Being, not logic, compels us to adopt revolution, and ambiguity saves it from terrorism. Only through solicitation from situation, from flesh, and from Being, can the individual gain the critical perspective necessary for revolutionary modality. As will be demonstrated, Westphal's statement that Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of ambiguity is "esthetically but not politically fruitful" contains the deepest element of truth. Only when politics has been redefined aesthetically, can we overcome the terrorism of foundationalism and achieve a critical politics of revolution.

In *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty states, "what I understand never quite tallies with my living experience, in short I am never quite at one with myself" (347). The horizons, which Westphal calls 'self-deception,' shape meaning. The invisible allows us to see the visible. We do not see the invisible, but see *because* of it. Counter to Westphal's claim, the positing of non-thetic horizons is not an act of bad faith, but a necessary part of experience. Merleau-Ponty's rejection of foundationalism's I = I redefines the I as being-in-the-world. As a being-in-the-world, I encounter a world molded by humanity and a world containing traces of "other selves." By placing the first inter-subjective contact in the perceptual world of lived-experience, Merleau-Ponty avoids foundationalism's exclusionist tactics of positing others on a transcendental level. All meaning is given within the world, and abstract principles of the Kantian-Husserlian sort are contin-

gent and immanently plagued by lived-experience. Merleau-Ponty states "between my consciousness and my body as I experience it, between this phenomenal body of mine and that of another as I see it from the outside, there exists an internal relation which causes the other to appear as the completion of the system" (*PhP*, 352). Other selves are a pre-given part of my lived-experience, and not the bracketed objects of reflection in Husserl's transcendentalism. Thus, such a phenomenology of perception does not encounter the problems plaguing foundational inter-subjectivity and its inherent terrorism of exclusion.

Meaning is based on the primacy of perception, as Merleau-Ponty states "the social is already there when we come to know it and judge it" (*PhP*, 362). As in Gestalt psychology, the forms are not absolute but derived from the horizons. Meaning can be stabilized but never formalized. Applying Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception to politics, the forms of political activity (the abstract principles) are inseparable from the matter of political activity (the concrete lived-experiences). As Merleau-Ponty states, the matter is pregnant with form. Yet the vanguard (the form) is inseparable from the proletariat's embodied experience in the world (matter). The proletariat's experience has its own meaning (form), although such is deemed insufficient in the vanguard's quest for the *eidōs*.

Like perceptual meaning, political meaning forms within our experience. In *Sense and Nonsense*, Merleau-Ponty states "all several men need to do is live together and be associated with the same task for some rudimentary rules and a beginning of law to emerge from their life in common" (118). Meaning takes place within experience, and not on some transcendental level outside of experience. We encounter forms within lived-experience, yet not the absolute forms sought after by the *epoché*. The above passage illustrates the connection between Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of ambiguity and his critical politics. Within the horizons of ambiguity political meaning is inescapable, even if it is not the *apodicticity* of dogmatic foundationalism.

For both the perceptual and the political, meaning is derived from the ambiguity of situation. Sense is derived from Nonsense, as is the Visible from the Invisible. Meaning is given in a world surrounded by horizons, as Merleau-Ponty states in *Humanism and Terror*, "one does not become a revolutionary through science, but out of indignation" (11). Yet how can we

undertake a critical politics if all action relies on situation, and situated perspective is contingent? Does this ambiguity not condemn us to inactivity due to limited perspective?

Due to Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of ambiguity, inter-subjectivity is derived from situated being-in-the-world and not transcendental Egoology. The problem with the latter's inter-subjectivity is its *a priori* definition of legitimate subjectivity, and thereby its exclusion of 'irrational' subjects. Vanguard leadership is derived from such exclusionist inter-subjectivity. Merleau-Ponty's dismissal of vanguard leadership, due to his rejection of foundationalism, makes true responsibility possible. Also, revolutionary modality is no longer an act of transcendental will, but a process that requires other selves and Being. And therein critical politics of revolution is possible. The mistaken dilemma is that Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of ambiguity leads to either political complacency or the amorality of Nietzsche's unprincipled *Übermensch*. Yet, just because history has not been won in Heaven or in a primordial battle of the gods, this need not condemn us to the dilemma between amorality and complacency.

The revolution gives no 'pure' motives, our commitment is never absolute. It is always an activity counter-balanced by doubts, by fears, and by uninviting material conditions. In effect, the workers have more to lose than their chains. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty states "although I can will myself to adopt a course of conduct and act the part of a warrior or a seducer, it is not within my power to be a warrior or a seducer with ease and in a way that 'comes naturally'; really to be one that is" (436). My project is more than my will alone; it requires my situation. Without an inviting situation, we become Don Quixote willing himself a Knight in a world without chivalry. Thus I am not Sartre's monad of freedom; I am bound by my past, by the present, and by others around me in my world.

Freedom is freedom-in-a-situation, and thus it is difficult to become a revolutionary in a time of peace and prosperity. Concerning the arrival of meaning within experience, Merleau-Ponty states "as Gestalt psychology has shown, there are for me certain shapes which are particularly favorable, as they are for other men..." (*PhP*, 440). Like perceptual gestalts, the revolutionary shape forms for the oppressed. It is "natural" for them to "see" revolution as viable activity; their horizons of Being present

a revolution to-be-achieved.

To state 'the oppressed masses will eventually revolt' means neither pure reflective will nor mechanical necessity. To prove that revolution should be undertaken is not like proving a mathematical equation. I-the-oppressed exist in a situation that "naturally" lends itself to revolutionary consciousness. What I make of such natural inclinations is up to me, yet they are there-to-be-intended. Even if I deny them, I still take up a position in response to them; in this case, that of denial. Through external persuasion I can learn to see the gestalt shapes differently, but never as pure free will. Even this process of learning requires my pre-existing situation.

The revolution is not something to be entered into lightly, because my horizons must be inviting. Far from Westphal's notion of static horizons of ambiguity, the horizons are the necessary source of revolutionary persuasion. As the master forgets the horizons in favor of abstract *eidos*, the neglected horizons become charged. The slave cannot forget his or her material existence, as can the master. Despite the ambiguous horizons of the slave's experience, the slave remembers situation. And as the master moves further away from situation, the slave's horizons become ever more charged with forms of revolution.

Only through the horizons of Being can revolutionary modality be made possible. My status as a revolutionary requires reciprocity by my fellow revolutionaries and my world. Much like Kierkegaard's Knight of Faith, who requires an invitation from God, my situation and my fellow persons must elect me as a revolutionary. I must be able to "play their language game" through a common reservoir of lived experience and a common situation. I must have the ability to view the world as "naturally" ripe-for-revolution. Being solicits me to become part of the revolution, serving as the background for my activity. In effect, I must believe in the revolution.

Westphal's problem with the ambiguity of situated-ness has not been resolved because no source of judgment has been established. However, it is absolutely essential that such ambiguity persists, and that the *epoché* is rendered impossible. Without ambiguity, dogmatic terrorism is inevitable. Only when the concrete experience of the non-vanguard element is embraced with its ambiguity can terrorism be minimized. Unlike the vanguard, embodiment always contains traces of doubt, fear, and uncer-

tainty, and such are necessary to avoid terrorism. True responsibility requires an openness to change, to ambiguity, and to pluralism. In *Humanism and Terror*, Merleau-Ponty states "the point is that we are not spectators of a closed history; we are actors in an open history, our praxis introduces the element of construction rather than knowledge as an ingredient in the world"(92). Only when an embodied revolutionary group acts without presumptuous notions of foundational *apodicticity*, can they open themselves to new horizons and thus achieve genuine responsibility.

The meaning of history is phenomenological, not logical. We enter the revolution through the gradual solicitation of our situation, and not through an all-encompassing willful act nor a predetermined material position. We begin with vague expectations, such as change or better living conditions. Most do not enter the revolution seeking to kill the king or following a step-by-step blueprint for building utopia. We see ourselves in terms of our immediate concrete lived-experience, not as the representative of the world proletariat class. Yet as we become more involved, we begin to see the bigger picture. We learn the names and lives of others who share our misfortune. In this initial unreflective openness with others, the reciprocity of empathy presents itself. We *ek-sist* with others upon a common horizon of Being.

The transformation into a revolutionary remains gradual, and is always dependent upon this openness to the horizons of Being. In absence of such openness, vanguard mentality is introduced, and becomes a conservative force within the revolutionary bloc. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty states "the revolutionary movement, like the world of the artist, is an intention which itself creates its instruments and its means of expression" (445). The process of revolutionary modality is gradual. Much like the artist, one begins with vague notions, and never a detailed formula. As we move along, we become further enticed and further engaged. We begin to see our own struggle within a larger movement, which is made possible through a common horizon of Being. As in the work of art, every stroke defines the whole, and the whole every stroke.

Like the artist, it is important that we are open to the horizons of Being at every moment, which might take us in an unexpected direction. We must follow the feeling of inspiration,

and not subject free movement to the confines of rationality. Political activity, like aesthetics, must be defined for what it is: concrete lived-experience, not an exact science. Thus Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of ambiguity, in its perpetual openness to Being, supports a radical and critical politics. Vanguard politics, on the contrary, dogmatically clings to history's *eidōs*, and becomes reactive and conservative in its complacency.

Counter to Westphal's notion of the invisible horizons of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of ambiguity, meaning is necessary and radical change is possible. Despite the inherent impossibility of exhausting the meaning of our horizons, such an act of recovery is impossible not because of deception, but because of the *thetic/non-thetic* relationship. The *thetic* interweaves with the *non-thetic* to form an irreducible system of lived experience. History has a *gestalt-seeking* equilibrium, which embraces this relationship. If the vanguard distances its forms from the lived-experience of the oppressed (with whom it forms a necessary system), the tension will erupt into revolution. One example is the American Civil Rights movement, which was the result of a long-standing forgetfulness by the White population in America. This "master/vanguard" group neglected the lived-experience of a large segment of American life. Thus this abstraction of forms charged the horizons of Black America, soliciting them to radical politics.

Like all forms of expert behavior,⁴ revolutionary modality is more a matter of knowing-how than of knowing-that. My *knowing-that* revolution is a possibility is derived from my *knowing-how* the fields of oppression are presented through lived-experience. The truth of the revolution can never be verified. Yet only once we break ourselves of foundationalism's quest for *apodicticity*, and instead view revolutionary involvement like the work of the artist, can we achieve the openness necessary for responsible revolutionary modality. Like judging aesthetic interpretations, we can still judge interpretations of revolutionary situations as "better" or "worse." Some calls for revolution may be deemed "unripe" or "superficial." We are able to avoid the dilemma between complacency and nihilism, even without an absolute measuring stick of history. History's *gestalt* seeks a point of equilibrium that uses revolutionary politics to counter-balance foundationalism's forgetfulness.

Even if the proletariat or any other revolutionary group is

not ordained by the divine logic of history, nevertheless they are solicited by their embodied humanity. Revolution can minimize terrorism through openness to the horizons of Being. Such openness allows for the perpetual movement of the dialectic and also for the dismissal of vanguard politics. The revolutionaries must keep an openness amongst themselves in order not to create a universal revolutionary category. Such a category would negate racial, ethnic, gender, and religious differences, and limit the movement of history.

As has been demonstrated, Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of ambiguity warrants critical politics. Reciprocity of the flesh is made possible only once human relations are re-grounded from their abstract position allotted by traditional philosophy. Thereby, exclusive categories of the "irrational" (i.e., women, non-Whites, non-Christians) are ended. Politics becomes a matter of shared situational perspective and openness to the horizons of Being, not a search for historical *apodicticity*.

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NOTES

¹ The ambiguity of situated-ness results from three interrelated factors. The subject does not constitute the object prior to perception (i.e., as an ego). The subject derives meaning from a pre-existing socio-natural world. And the subject lacks an I=I relationship to itself, because only as being-in-the-world does it relate to itself.

² I will concentrate on his philosophy of ambiguity as offered in his early works (1945-1947). These will include *Phenomenology of Perception*, *Sense and Nonsense*, and *Humanism and Terror*. I believe the themes of ambiguity, made most explicit in his later writings, are implicit in the earlier writings and can be derived from them. The later works intensify his earlier project. *Humanism and Terror* comes closest to supporting vanguard politics when read apart from Merleau-Ponty's larger phenomenological project.

³ Without the unconscious of Freud or the Will to Power of Nietzsche, Westphal argued that Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of ambiguity lacked a source of such repressive activity other than the vagueness of "Being."

⁴ See Hubert Dreyfus. *What Computers Still Can't Do: A Critique of Artificial Reason*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999.

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