

Between the Body and the World: Merleau-Ponty and the Rehabilitation of the Sensible

A Review of Scott L. Marratto, *The Intercorporeal Self: Merleau-Ponty on Subjectivity*.

**Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2012, 242 pages,
16.32 £. ISBN: 978-1-4384-4231-0.**

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What fresh perspectives does Merleau-Ponty's thought bring to discussions of subjectivity in the 21st century—*after* the linguistic turn and the provocative notion of the “death of the subject” articulated by Foucault? Scott Marratto opens his book with a reference to the 1991 essay collection “*Who Comes After the Subject*,” edited by Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor and Jean-Luc Nancy, to underscore the importance of rethinking subjectivity now that the “modern” subject, theorized by Descartes, Locke and Kant, has been radically questioned. This unsettling of the subject of perception, so to speak, comes not only from European continental philosophy, Marratto points out, but also from Anglo-American “analytic” philosophers as well as from developments in the fields of cognitive neuroscience and psychology (1). In order to theorize subjectivity in our contemporary moment, Marratto suggests we turn to a thinker whose work predates and anticipates the radical questioning of subjectivity. Merleau-Ponty is perhaps one of the most important philosophers in 20th-century France, not least because of his manner of revolutionizing Cartesian intellectualism by situating subjectivity in the body (via his theory of the body subject). But because of the non-systematic character of his philosophy (in the tradition of Bergson and Nietzsche), his literary, allusive style and his early death, he is not as well known as his contemporaries (Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir) or his successors (Derrida, Foucault). *The Intercorporeal Self* successfully mobilizes Merleau-Pontian phenomenology as a response, *avant la lettre*, to the unsettling of the “modern” subject that has shaped 20th-century thought. Marratto's book also demonstrates the relevance of Merleau-Ponty's work to traditions outside continental, European thought—for instance, cognitive science, psychology and analytic philosophy—thus troubling, in a useful way, the analytic-continental divide.

Marratto begins by claiming that the body-subject, perhaps the best-known feature of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, successfully navigates the Scylla and Charybdis of intellectualism and naturalism by insisting on the embodied nature of perception. The subject, for Merleau-Ponty, is neither a Cartesian, *thinking* self (pure mind), nor can it be reduced to biological, mechanistic or *natural* processes. Subjectivity or self-hood is not fixed but emerges as a relation between the body, which is a “matrix of intelligence and meaning,” and its world (2). Thus Marratto shows that, in Merleau-Ponty's

thinking, the emergence of meaning is linked to both subjectivity and to bodily movement.¹ The fact that the French word for “meaning”—*sens*—also designates “direction” is used to support his reading of *sensation* as a spatial phenomenon, as a way of “making space.” Few commentators would contest the fact that Merleau-Ponty views subjectivity as an expressive movement that emerges from interactions between the body and world. But Marratto’s reading emphasizes an aspect of Merleau-Ponty’s thought that has been lost on many of his interpreters: the notion of a constitutive otherness or opacity that makes perception and self-reflection possible.

Marratto explains that most readers of Merleau-Ponty, from Jacques Derrida to contemporary philosophers of mind such as Alva Nöe, neglect one of the most important aspects of his thinking, what Marratto calls “intercorporeity.” Marratto defines intercorporeity as a “dimension of anonymity” that characterizes bodily experience and as an “involvement with otherness” that constitutes an “archaeological pre-history subtending our present experience” (9).

This idea, which Marratto argues is implicit throughout the *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), assures the inter-subjective nature of self-consciousness (8). Marratto thus claims that subjectivity and meaning evolve from “the expressive movement of intercorporeal bodies [...] always already intertwined with, and, so to speak, committed to, otherness” (10).

Marratto’s insistence that, for Merleau-Ponty, there exists an “otherness” at the heart of self-presence is important because it gives Marratto the tools he needs to defend Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy against Derrida’s critique of phenomenology. In the chapter, “Auto-affection and Alterity,” Marratto lays out the major tenets of Derrida’s critique of phenomenology and shows how Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy resists them. In *Speech and Phenomena* (1967), Derrida claims that there is a tension at the heart of Husserl’s phenomenology that leads Husserl to occlude the dependency of consciousness on language “by affirming a primordially of silent self-presence” (131). In addition to laying out how this critique might apply to Merleau-Ponty’s thinking as well as to Husserl’s, Marratto examines Derrida’s explicit discussion of Merleau-Ponty—he targets the latter’s notion of “le corps propre” (Husserl’s *Leib*)—in *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy* (2000). If, in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, there is a constitutive otherness at the heart of self-presence and if language precedes and enables self-reflection, then Merleau-Ponty’s thinking isn’t compromised by Derrida’s critique.

Instead of being made obsolete by deconstruction, Merleau-Ponty’s thought anticipates much of what is to come in the second half of the 20th century. Marratto’s attention to the undercurrents that drive Merleau-Ponty’s thought—which, Marratto admits, are sometimes obscured by a problematic choice of vocabulary—rehabilitates one of the last century’s most important thinkers of subjectivity. In tracing how, according to Merleau-Ponty, the body’s dynamic interaction with its environment leads to the emergence of meaning, Marratto’s work makes a case for the importance of phenomenology to 21st-century conversations about subjectivity and perception.

Marratto describes the manner in which the 20th century witnessed the decline of the Kantian, Cartesian “modern” subject—a version of subjectivity characterized by

¹ On this point see Johnson and Lakoff’s *Philosophy in the Flesh* (New York: Basic Books, 1999). Marratto glosses their argument: “Advocates of situated cognition note that even our most sophisticated cognitive achievements, having to do with concept-formation and language, reflect a fundamental concern with the milieu of our bodies,” 20.

interiority. According to Marratto, this version of subjectivity involves a series of binary oppositions—oppositions between autonomy and heteronomy, activity and passivity, mind and body, self and other—that showed themselves to be unstable.

After the dissolution of the “modern” subject, it becomes urgent to find a new way of thinking about subjectivity. What or *who* comes after the subject? Marratto is right to suggest that Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy is a promising place to look. Although it precedes theories about the subject-as-construct, it marries a humanist-inflected version of subjectivity, oriented around the body, with the structuralist notion that the subject is constituted from a texture of differences.

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Specifically, Marratto is careful to show how Merleau-Ponty’s description of perception as *situated* and *embodied* replaces the representationalism associated with the modern subject. Instead of creating internal maps or representations of the world it encounters, the subject is shown to *enact* itself and the world it perceives in a living movement that generates sense (198). The idea that the subject and the world are co-constituting (and open to change) presents a different way of thinking about subjectivity.

Marratto’s first chapter pairs Merleau-Ponty with two accounts of “situated cognition” in contemporary Anglophone philosophy and psychology. These accounts, the “sensorimotor approach” and the “ecological approach,” are similar in that they argue against prevailing tendencies in cognitive science to model cognition on computational processes. They insist, like Merleau-Ponty, that cognition arises from a body’s interaction with its world. The “sensorimotor approach,” developed by Kevin O’Regan and Alva Noë, rejects the idea of sensations as discrete, dot-like impressions and describes perception as a sensorimotor “know-how.” “Vision,” for example, “is produced by exploratory activity rather than passive receptivity” (22-25), and the meaning of what we perceive depends upon the motor powers of the perceiver. In a similar spirit, the “ecological approach,” developed by J.J. Gibson, proposes a theory of “affordances.” We see our environment in terms of the possibilities it “affords” our bodies, in terms of what it allows us to do. We might perceive things, for instance, as edible, graspable or safely traversable. What these approaches have in common with Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology is that they view subjectivity not as an “I think” but as an embodied “I can” (20). Unlike the epistemological modern subject, the contemporary subject must be situated and embodied. By drawing out the similarities between Merleau-Ponty and these approaches Marratto shows how relevant and applicable Merleau-Ponty’s thought is to contemporary accounts of situated cognition.

Marratto then begins to outline why he thinks that the sensorimotor and ecological approaches do not adequately respond to the radical challenges posed by Merleau-Ponty’s thought. Despite their effective critique of intellectualism, these sensorimotor approaches are shown to be guilty of “naturalizing” phenomenology, insofar as they suggest that sensorimotor know-how is governed by a set of *laws*. Marratto makes the point that, in different ways, both approaches view sets of laws as necessary to govern perception. But for Merleau-Ponty, there can be no such laws because the perceived world is generated, in part, in the act of perceiving. *Laws* imply a fixed and “ready-

made” world, where for Merleau-Ponty, the environment that we perceive must be mutable; it is shaped and transformed in the act of perception (98). Marratto contends that, in Merleau-Ponty’s thinking, perception *enacts* rather than *discovers* reality (84); in place of *laws* governing sensorimotor know-how, we find *style* as that which lends unity and coherence to our perceptions. Marratto distinguishes between “know-how” as O’Regan and Noë use it, “as a knowledge (of rules, or laws) [...] and know-how in the sense that Merleau-Ponty has in mind when he indicates a form of behavior, a manner of making sense, that is open to its *own* transformation from within” (97). *Style*, therefore, “is to be opposed to the concept of ‘law’ that is employed in the sensorimotor and ecological accounts of perception” (103).

Marratto’s original reading of Merleau-Ponty is laid out in the chapter “Making Space,” which engages the *Phenomenology of Perception* to demonstrate the importance of spatiality to sensation. Marratto justifies his focus on the *Phenomenology* because of its emphasis on space, which for Marratto is key to Merleau-Ponty’s view of subjectivity. Marratto also reads the *Phenomenology* as *ontological*. This is important, given his view that no challenge to the epistemology of representation can be complete without an “investigation of the modes of being of environments and selves” (80). The sensorimotor and ecological approaches, according to Marratto, admit epistemological prejudices because they lack ontology. By claiming that the *Phenomenology* is an ontological work, Marratto opposes Renaud Barbaras’s suggestion that Merleau-Ponty “turns” to ontology only after the 1950’s, and he reads Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy as continuous. Marratto shows the way in which, in the *Phenomenology*, sensation is described as a way of “making space” such that moving and perceiving bodies creatively shape and bring into being their environments and subjectivities.

Marratto describes the subject of perception as an “originary passivity,” insofar as it must respond to what exceeds it or to what *is not it*. Marratto analyzes Merleau-Ponty’s descriptions of a “haunting” within the realm of the sensible and his mention of a “past that never was present” by articulating two versions of *depth* at work in the *Phenomenology*: *affordance depth* “manifests itself as an arena that is subject to the powers of my body” (48), while *spectral depth*, “includes a sense of the limits of the powers of my body” (48). *Spectral depth* is characterized by contingency and instability; it is “haunted” by “other possibilities for being spatial.” This second sense of depth, which Merleau-Ponty describes as a “past that has never been present,” enables the first (49). Accordingly, he divides the subject’s experience of space into two realms: the space of the “I can,” which depends on the space of the “I cannot.”

Later, Marratto makes a useful link between *spectral depth* and the notion of *institution*, the subject of Merleau-Ponty’s 1954 lecture course at the *Collège de France*. As subjects, we are in the position of taking up and carrying forward a history that *is not ours* but in which we are situated. Put otherwise, the sensible world involves “an element of alterity that ceaselessly haunts its conscious life” (6). Marratto outlines how discussions of dreams, myths, and psychopathology in the *Phenomenology* are designed to show that such spectral phenomena are not foreign to the world of ordinary perception (50), and that the reliance of ordinary spatiality on a more profound sense of depth makes the mutability of space possible. Marratto argues that “the lability of depth points to a certain constitutive disability of the ‘I can’—to an ‘I cannot’ that expresses a dependence of the subject, a constitutive openness to its own transformation” (53). The possibility of “learning,” for Merleau-Ponty, “presupposes [...] that our self-consciousness (the sense of the ‘I can’) is haunted by the specters of this contingency”

(77). Having claimed that the sensible reveals itself via *expressive movement*, Marratto is then in a position to say that the “manifestation of the sensible is at the same time the opening-up of the sphere of language” and that the subject lives out its life “in a responsive activity that is at once both sentience and speech” (6).

Marratto’s reading of Merleau-Ponty subtends the arguments he makes in his next three chapters: “Subjectivity and the ‘Style’ of the World,” “Autoaffection and Alterity,” and “Ipseity and Language,” which concern *style*, the dependence of *auto-affection* on otherness, and the importance of *language* respectively. In the chapter, “Auto-affection and Alterity,” Marratto switches the playing field to French continental thought (Derrida and Levinas) rather than psychology and philosophy of mind. Marratto mobilizes his elucidation of intercorporeity as an anonymous dimension of experience—as a “past that never was present”—to respond to Derrida’s claim that phenomenology remains within the logic of the “metaphysics of presence.”

In *Speech and Phenomena*, Derrida argues that by elaborating an originary self-presence, Husserl neglects the alterity at the heart of being—an otherness that is, for Derrida, linguistic. In short, Husserl overlooks the fact that language is necessary to and prior to self-reflection. Marratto suggests that Derrida’s critique of Merleau-Ponty would take much the same form in his analysis of Derrida’s later text, *On Touching*, where Derrida discusses Merleau-Ponty’s idea of *le corps propre*. According to Marratto, Derrida misses the constitutive otherness at the core of *le corps propre*. Marratto points out that readers of Merleau-Ponty cannot help but notice descriptors, such as “originary presence” or “tacit cogito,” that might lead us to think Merleau-Ponty does in fact privilege presence, as Derrida suggests. In the “Temporality” chapter of the *Phenomenology*, Merleau-Ponty speaks explicitly of *presence*. Marratto attends less to the words themselves than to Merleau-Ponty’s descriptions of his concepts, and he argues that we must understand this “presence” as containing opacity or heterogeneity within it.² But by attending Merleau-Ponty’s *descriptions* rather than to the names he attaches to what he describes, Marratto revives the subtle complexity of Merleau-Ponty’s thought and gives us a thinker ahead of his time, whose phenomenology not only survives, but might also be said to anticipate, deconstructive critique.

The most salient implication of Marratto’s reading becomes evident in his final chapter, which emphasizes the importance of expressivity and language to the possibility of perception and to subjectivity. Marratto begins by laying out a familiar criticism of Merleau-Ponty: that he privileges perception over expression, or that he suggests that perception is *prior* to language. Again, Marratto suggests that it is chiefly a problem of vocabulary that gives rise to such readings and looks beyond terms such as “primordial silence” and “tacit cogito” in order to elucidate what Merleau-Ponty is seeking to describe. Marratto identifies a tension in Merleau-Ponty: on the one hand, there is a vocabulary of consciousness and of presence-to-self that might lead us to imagine a “transcendental ego” that underlies perception. But on the other hand, we find in Merleau-Ponty’s description of an “original past” a certain unknowable opacity. Marratto concludes: “the ultimate concern of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology is not consciousness, but the emergence of sense in movement and thus the dependence of consciousness on the pre-history of the event of expression” (167). Far from relying on a foundational presence of self-to-self, Merleau-Ponty’s thought entails the idea that

² Marratto refers to a similar observation made by Renaud Barbaras about Merleau-Ponty’s problematic vocabulary. Barbaras claims that the *Phenomenology of Perception* remains within intellectualism because it uses the *vocabulary* of subjective consciousness, 166.

sense begins with a constitutive non-sense or opacity. And insofar as sensation and subjectivity are fundamentally *expressive*, they are already within the order of language. Marratto then goes on to discuss the extent to which language is gestural (184). How, he asks, does gesture become a sign? Drawing on the work of George Herbert Mead, Marratto suggests that when bodily gestures become reliable indicators of subsequent movements—when we recognize another’s gesture as a sequel to an earlier phase of our own gesture—then expressive gestures become “lexicalized,” or incorporated into languages as signs. “Lexicalization” occurs when gestures differentiate themselves and become reliable means of provoking further behavior.

If, as Marratto claims, the *Phenomenology of Perception* is an “ontological rehabilitation of the sensible,” then surely Marratto’s own work is a rehabilitation of Merleau-Ponty’s thought—an analysis that highlights its relevance to 21st-century conversations about the nature of subjectivity. Marratto’s reading of Merleau-Ponty develops a version of subjectivity that involves neither interiority nor representationalist theories of perception. Even before structuralism and post-structuralism, there existed a response to the dilemma of the modern subject’s obsolescence: this response inheres in the *body*’s capacity to respond dynamically to what exceeds it and to make worlds appear via its exploratory and expressive movements.