

# Guest Foreword



by **Manu Bazzano**

This issue of *Self & Society* pays tribute to 'the best phenomenologist' (in the words of Paul Ricoeur). Embarrassingly overdue, this tribute to Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961) is not a 'commemoration'. To commemorate someone implies that he has been understood and his teachings implemented. But we are only beginning to catch up with Merleau-Ponty's work and just about fathoming its far-reaching implications. Beguiled by Heidegger, many phenomenological psychotherapists have neglected Merleau-Ponty, failing to notice that *being-in-the-world* is *being-in-the-social-world*. A few have opted for the certainties proffered by self-help Heideggerianism, paying no heed to Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on ambiguity. This resulted in a rebranding of the therapist's role from co-disciple (alongside the client) of *psyché* to its sole executive, one who 'unveils' truth rather than negotiating its contours through the risk of communication.

Being open to Merleau-Ponty's writing means forswearing the easy option. Is this why his work has not gained the wide appeal it so richly deserves? Given the chance, perhaps most of us will go for the easy option. Some are cueing up for admission to the Madame Tussauds of professionalization, at pains to show to the powers that be that they can do left-brain talk better than full-time bureaucrats. A few favour a *political* (in the narrow sense of the word) rather than *social* version of humanistic values: power over co-operation, personal influence over solidarity.

To these conservative tendencies, Merleau-Ponty, humanist Marxist and unorthodox Christian – committed to, as well as critical of, both – provides a priceless antidote. He reminds us that social and political engagement is not an optional add-on but a necessary part of being-in-the-world. With much of contemporary phenomenology increasingly becoming a philosophical rebranding of unreconstructed Christianity, Merleau-Ponty's unwavering commitment to social justice, and to the suspension of judgement about claims beyond present or possible immediate experiences, maintains a radical edge.

His work reinstates *epoché* (bracketing') to its original purpose: having another look at the world – looking again,

the etymological meaning of *re-spect*.

I am honoured to introduce a host of excellent, diverse and international contributions to this issue of the journal.

Partly drawing on Merleau-Ponty's notion of *the flesh*, in her moving paper **Natasha Synesiou** invites us to reconsider embodied expressions of boundary and its ambiguity. Focusing on Merleau-Ponty's often overlooked early book *The Structure of Behaviour*, where he takes up experimental and empirical research, **Talia Welsh** highlights the unique link between science, psychology and philosophy that will not appear in later texts, emphasizing the integral role of science that is absent in other phenomenological works. **Jeff Harrison** explores key Merleau-Pontian notions and their applications for therapy, particularly *embodied consciousness*, with its refusal to commit to either objectivism or subjectivism.

**Des Kennedy's** insightful and inspiring piece reminds us of the miracle that is *perception*. He brilliantly reinstates Merleau-Ponty's immanentist and awe-inspiring claim that perception is in itself *transcendence*. Based on what she boldly refers to as Merleau-Ponty's *mundane* phenomenology, **Virginia Moreira** sketches a reading of anxiety as part of an existential style rooted in the client's *Lebenswelt* and beyond notions of health vs pathology.

Merleau-Ponty's work is crucial to contemporary Humanistic Psychology for many reasons. By straddling science and the humanities, materialism and spiritualism, without giving in to the siren call of one-sided interpretations of reality, it invites us to be *perpetual beginners*. His appeal is geared towards the difficult middle-ground of 'hyper-reflection': stretching the boundaries of reason and scientific methodology, rather than either limiting its domain or giving in to mysticism. This stance admirably synthesizes the best of the Western philosophical tradition, giving reason its dues without giving in to its dogmas. It echoes Pascal, for whom there is nothing more akin to reason than the forswearing of reason. ⑤

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