

Merleau-Ponty Confronts Postmodernism: A Reply to O'Loughlin

Shari Popen

Western Washington University

Marjorie O'Loughlin's paper challenges postmodernism's construction of the subject by calling upon, of all things, a foundational thinker: Merleau-Ponty. I imagine Merleau-Ponty might be surprised to find his phenomenological project called into service on behalf of feminism. Or maybe not. In either case, Merleau-Ponty seems a likely candidate to appeal to in staging a counter-movement against the excesses of postmodernism, given his central role in leading an existential counter-movement against Husserl's more transcendental phenomenology. I am in great sympathy with O'Loughlin's stated aim of rethinking the current descent into discourse of our notions of subjectivity, and correspondingly, objectivity, and the difficult position in which submerging both in postmodern discursive practices leaves feminist theory.

We should be grateful too for an opportunity to become acquainted with Australian feminist theory. O'Loughlin's paper is written well within an emerging tradition of Australian feminist thought, mostly unknown to those of us more Euro-American philosophers. I suspect that Australian feminists know more about Euro-American feminist debates than we know about non-European feminisms. At the least I welcome this paper as an intersection between those two discourses. Her paper draws heavily from the work of another Australian feminist, Elizabeth Grosz, who emerged in the 1980s into an Australian feminist movement newly altered by its contact with French post-structuralist feminist theory. Drawing from the works of Lacan, Foucault, Derrida, and French feminists Irigaray and Kristeva, these Australian feminists have been focusing attention away from a Marxist-influenced feminism and back toward the body and body difference.¹

In 1983, Moira Gatens, another Australian feminist philosopher, published an influential essay titled, "A Critique of the Sex/Gender Distinction." Gatens pointed out that in developing this distinction feminists had ended up with a conception of the body as a non-cultural ahistorical phenomenon. In a later article, she argues that, far from taking the body as a biological given, we must now ask why and how it happens that we understand it that way. It is not clear whether or not O'Loughlin draws from the distinction that Gatens offers between sex and gender, a distinction that may be critical to her recovery of an embodied subjectivity. Nevertheless, O'Loughlin draws our attention to "the realities of bodies in discursively constituted settings" in an attempt, she says, to "bring bodies back into the picture." The "picture" is, of course, the philosophical conversation about what is "real."

O'Loughlin addresses Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of "body-subject" not at its source, but further along with respect to more contemporary philosophical, moral and political issues. This pragmatic borrowing has enabled her to draw on a model of an "intersubjectively constituted life-world of immediate experience" to focus her discussion. A more careful reading of Merleau-Ponty's complex work, including an analysis of the historical problematic in which he wrote, would greatly strengthen O'Loughlin's argument, and help provide it with an important political rationale. Merleau-Ponty drew heavily from psychological theory, and traced all meaning back to the meaning-giving activity of an autonomous subject. By phenomenologically recapturing this autonomy of the subject, O'Loughlin seeks to counter the postmodernist idea of the subject as an effect of discourse. Parallel to what Merleau-Ponty saw as the descent of the Cartesian subject into

Cartesian Mind, O'Loughlin sees the "discursive submersion of the body" as a product of postmodern thought. Framing subjectivities discursively leaves feminism in an untenable political position because it denies any transformation to those internalized structures that continue to present strict and cruel images of "women" and femininity, and leaves women with no alternatives other than conserving or violent ones.

But the question still remains: "What is the historical importance of such invariant structures of the lived body?" What role do they play in the successful deployment of disciplinary techniques? Critical for feminist theory, as Gatens reminds us, is an account of the historical and cultural dimensions of being a body in a situation. In trying to make the body and its limitations the conditions of knowledge, Merleau-Ponty and O'Loughlin try to make the empirical in being human in the world stand in for the transcendental. They can give us an empirical description of actual experience, but cannot provide us, as actors, with any critical transformation of that experience. This is an impossible situation for a feminist theory that seeks to emancipate women from colonizing conditions. Paradoxically, it may be that only through releasing the category of women from a fixed referent that something like agency becomes possible.

I read Merleau-Ponty as a foundational thinker, as I think O'Loughlin does, although her paper is not entirely clear on this matter. She says, correctly I believe, that "Merleau-Ponty worked to undermine dichotomies of reason/emotion, mind/body, and the demand for epistemological foundations." But Merleau-Ponty went even further, in ways that, from our over-epistemologized philosophical standpoint, are difficult to understand. Merleau-Ponty's project was to reground philosophy, following Nietzsche, Husserl and Heidegger, on lived being. He gained from Gabriel Marcel the notion of the body as the ground of knowledge -- the *corps propre*. O'Loughlin correctly recognizes that to adopt this theme of the "body-subject" as our means of access to all that exists is to adopt a theory of consciousness that makes the idea of community comprehensible. What is at stake here, however, is perhaps an unachievable humanist imperative based on a romanticized notion that Merleau-Ponty calls "intercorporality" or, later, "flesh." Ought we to champion "community" at the expense of failing to consider the political consequences of keeping in place the very categories that have helped to secure women's subordination?

By failing to critically analyze Merleau-Ponty's project as ontologically foundational, O'Loughlin succumbs to the temptation to step outside of the "body-subject" in her analysis. She switches from the claim that bodies *are* "lived experiences" to "bodies *have* understandings of the world" -- from the ontological to the epistemological. This contributes to an ambiguity that pervades this paper around what is meant by "body." Although I know this is counter to her argument, O'Loughlin shifts us between Merleau-Ponty's body-subject, and postmodernism's textualized body-object, a Derridean "text" to be written on, etched, inscribed. Clearly this is a falling away from Merleau-Ponty. Whether this is a position from which to strategize moral and political feminisms, I do not know. I suspect not. We probably need to understand this shift dialectically, not in terms of transcendence, but as transgression within modernism, if we are to develop an adequate theory of subjective action. O'Loughlin suggests we understand it as an "encounter," but I want a concept that more powerfully captures change and possibilities for freedom.

Similarly, in asking teachers to be "transformative intellectuals," critical theorists, Giroux especially, fail to adequately consider the difficulty of transgressing these structures that confine teachers within traditional perceptions and expectations. Foucault's major achievement has been his ability to conceptualize the operations of power relations in modern society, and to show how the body has been used as an integral component of the spread and localization of modern power. For teachers to be "transformative intellectuals," they must develop the ability to perceive these structures, this "technology of the body," accurately. Both Merleau-Ponty and O'Loughlin may have adopted modes of thought that overrule the very categories needed to make political life comprehensible. Our bodies are undoubtedly our point of view on the world. But in question is a theory of consciousness that can inform political thought, and consequently, human action.

If O'Laughlin had explored this metaphor of embodied consciousness or intelligence in Merleau-Ponty alongside of Foucault's model of "technologies of the body," she might have furnished feminist theory with a politics of the body built on an empowering dialectic, an essential tension in which subjectivity is by turns produced and reproduced, presented and represented. This dialectic would move between Merleau-Ponty and Foucault, traveling perhaps through Irigaray and Grosz, and importantly capture the concept of women's "double oppression." It would open the feminist discussion to an analysis of the processes of racism and colonialism, and to a more heterogeneous feminist critique. We would then talk about the ways in which we are "differently embodied" and might entertain a real interchange between a historically white, Anglo-European feminism, and a "post-colonial" feminism that has been primarily articulated by women of color.

The jury is still out as to whether Merleau-Ponty succeeded in his revolt against Cartesian epistemology, and to what extent his answer, especially the notion of "flesh," is still in thrall to Hegelianism. The same is true, I believe of O'Laughlin's related concept of materiality, with its "ecological dimension." However, by returning us to Merleau-Ponty's foundational project for an existential politics, O'Loughlin has profoundly redirected our attention to the way in which, contrary to Descartes, our consciousness is embodied, the way we live in our world and instance its heterogeneity. Approaching Merleau-Ponty's project from this direction may allow O'Loughlin to further develop her notion of "ecological subjectivities," which on its own is a vague, but potentially powerful concept for a post-colonial feminism.

O'Loughlin has engaged one of the fundamental issues that confronts contemporary philosophy, and philosophy of education. The current philosophical problem is to find a course for the human sciences that avoids both a return to the traditional philosophical view that description and interpretation must correspond to the way things "really are," and a nihilist view, in which we lose a shared reality altogether. Following O'Loughlin's lead, can we get to a new and radical standpoint from which to view and articulate a new analytic of the subject? I would argue that this is impossible without an analysis of the socio-political body and its constitution within an external political field of embedded organizing principles of material practices and institutional arrangements; perhaps we could call it "embodied objectivity."

1. In this context, see especially *Australian Women: Contemporary Feminist Thought*, ed. Norma Grieve and Ailsa Burns (Oxford University Press: Melbourne, 1994); and *Nietzsche, Feminism and Political Theory*, ed. Paul Patton (Routledge: London, 1993).