

## BOOK REVIEW

# MERLEAU-PONTY AND THE ETHICS OF INTERSUBJECTIVITY

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Review of: Anya Daly, *Merleau-Ponty and the Ethics of Intersubjectivity*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, xvi + 312 pp., Hardcover ISBN 9781137527431, \$95.

Anya Daly's *Merleau-Ponty and the Ethics of Intersubjectivity* raises timely questions about the human condition, ethical motivation, and the limitations of relying on normative, ethical paradigms to improve that condition and motivation. Particularly telling is Daly's question in the "Acknowledgments" section headlining the book: "Why despite astonishing advances in knowledge and science do people persist in destructiveness?" (xi). The destructiveness to which she refers includes "the psychological and political mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion . . . set in motion" (4) with respect to "the refugee and the terrorist" (3). Daly applies recent research in psychology, neuroscience, and phenomenology to defend Merleau-Pontian intersubjectivity as an antidote to destructiveness, and as a necessary supplement to ethical norms.

In chapter one she criticizes the normative paradigms of utilitarianism, deontology, and virtue ethics as being "high altitude" in that they invoke a higher authority than the subject . . ." (2). Deontology, for example, fails to unify people with diverse "religious or metaphysical allegiances . . ." (6-7); utilitarianism struggles to discriminate benefits from harms over a lengthy, future span of time; and virtue ethics lacks "justifications" for determining which virtues should be extolled (7). While Daly acknowledges that Merleau-Ponty "never developed an ethics *per se*" (2), she finds his account of embodied perception crucial to recovering "the Other as an-other suffering fellow human being" (4). To redress the suffering of the Other, Daly prescribes an ethics of empathy, but specifically not an empathy of "cognitive apprehension" that arises reflectively or reactively within agents (31). On the contrary, Daly identifies and defends an "embodied" empathy (32) that "co-arises with access" to others (31). As I read Daly, it is the inferior, reflective sort of empathy that fosters the attitudinal latency

prone to interference from high-altitude ethical norms.

The first step toward understanding an ethics of intersubjectivity, then, is to understand how the Merleau-Pontian becomes conscious of another person. One argument that Merleau-Ponty rejects for the existence of other minds, as Daly explains in chapter two, is the argument from analogy. The reddening, scrunched face of another human being is not a sign of an angry mind-like-mine; my embodied interlocutor rather has an angry face, an anger that I (*qua* Merleau-Pontian) readily apprehend (41, 51). The existences of other people are not inferred by the Merleau-Pontian, they are remembered or re-examined after being experienced (47).

Daly cautions, however, that proposing both a self and an Other (human or object) perennially risks either a solipsistic monism that reduces the Other to a projection of the self, or a substance dualism that invites skepticism about non-mental entities (61). Hence she devotes chapters three through five to defending Merleau-Ponty's reversibility thesis, which in her words claims that "[t]he Other . . . is essential for self-awareness and vice versa" (65). The Merleau-Pontian avoids both monism and dualism, Daly claims, if "the ultimate reversibility . . . holds between the *Visible* (phenomena) and the *Invisible* (language, reflection and expression) . . ." (63). *Visible* and *Invisible* are Merleau-Ponty's terms, and in chapter three, Daly demonstrates *Visible* reversibility in Merleau-Ponty's analysis of self-touch — of a two-handed agent touching one hand with the other. As touching and being touched are perceptually reversible but non-identical experiences, so Daly argues that the Other cannot reduce to a projection of the self if the Other is experienced as manipulating the self's "familiar objects" in the world, "moving and acting in [the self's] familiar space" (78). Multiple, embodied selves reversibly experience the transgression of space in a single "world," Daly explains, just as two hands reverse the "touching/touched" experiences in a single body (79).

In chapter four, Daly examines reversibility within the *Invisible*, and switches her target from monism to mind-body dualism. She analyzes the relationships of self to language, language to world, and linguist to linguist, but before doing so, primes the intuition that agents can enter reversible relationships *qua* thinkers, rather than merely *qua* two-handed. She references Husserl for this task, observing that an agent's very act of self-reflection "splits [the agent] into the reflected and the reflecting . . . [which] provides a basis for self-alienation . . . and thereby establishes conditions for the recognition of an-Other" (96). As the *Visible* agent co-opts real estate with an-Other, so I interpret the self-reflector (*qua* self-reflector) to recognize a mutually sustained *existence* with the reflected self. Due to the *Visible* reversibility already defended by Daly, the embodied self-reflector will not project a solipsistic world into monistic existence. But could she instead ascribe substantial isolation to her generative, reflecting mind and

end up a dualist?

Daly argues no, relying in part on Merleau-Ponty's claims about the relationships of thought to language and language to concrete world. As she quotes Merleau-Ponty: "thought tends towards expression as towards its completion" (95). Paraphrasing another quote, she adds that "thought/reflection . . . has a tendency to evanesce unless articulated . . ." (94). Plainly, these claims capture Merleau-Ponty's observation that thoughts bereft of language become forgotten or stunted, but as I read Daly, this necessity of communication for the survival of thought reigns in the dualist by keeping thought in and about the world (134-135). To the objection that abstract thought such as that of a perfect triangle must be an idea substantially distinct from anything experienced, Daly counters that "ideas arise out of the instances of situated expression," and she quotes Merleau-Ponty's argument that the terms "angle" and "direction" cannot be deciphered apart from real or imagined experience of space (96). Thus Daly defends a reversibility between language and thought to secure a larger, anti-dualist reversibility between the *Visible* and *Invisible*. She uncovers additional instances of reversibility through an extensive investigation of Merleau-Pontian aesthetics.

Chapter five entertains objections to reversibility, however, from Claude Lefort and Emmanuel Levinas. By Daly's accounting, Lefort holds that the asymmetry of experience between subjects undermines the reversibility of such experience (141), and Levinas argues that the theorization of ontology in general proves too "homogenizing" to accommodate Merleau-Ponty's anti-monism (155, quoting Daly; 157). Contrary to Lefort, Daly argues that asymmetry "*guarantee[s]* the irreducibility of the Other," because selves and objects just do exhibit "contingency and opacity" (145, emphasis mine), and "are constantly changing" (144). Her reply to Levinas, on the other hand, references contemporary neuroscience. Daly claims that human agents "experience attraction, repulsion or indifference [to an-Other] before information about the cognitive significance [of the Other] is noted . . ." (164). Human "perception," in other words, "is already affectively informed . . ." (164). Hence she claims to corroborate Merleau-Pontian perception as a pre-reflective, non-monistic "engagement" with the Other (165), and proposes mirror neurons in the brain as vehicles for "direct perception" of the Other in chapter six (206).

To directly perceive the Other, however, is not yet on Daly's account to "*respon[d]*" ethically or unethically to the Other (177), and so Daly deepens her discussion of empathy in chapter seven. She identifies empathy as an "affective reversibility" between agents (225), and argues in chapter eight that empathy "underpins and motivates all particular ethical considerations and manifestations of ethical behaviour" (250). Indeed, empathy constitutes "a *necessary condition* for ethics" (264), on Daly's

account, a condition that critically supports normative “principles” such as deontological universalism and utilitarian’s “*everyone considered*” principle (267). She concludes the book with chapter nine, summarizing her claims and relating several Merleau-Pontian themes to Buddhist teachings.

In sum, Daly presents an extraordinarily balanced, accessible, and illuminating text. I complain only that its breadth leaves some contentious problems unresolved. Daly claims, for example, that we do “not feel moral responsibility . . . towards God, who presumably is beyond the harms of ethical failures” (266). Why shuffle out of the deck those ethicists who identify a virtue of gratitude toward the divine and a responsibility to nourish such gratitude as a habit? Could not such a virtue comprise one principle supportable by an empathic telos? Secondly, I wonder if a Turing Test objection befits one of Daly’s quotations of Merleau-Ponty, namely: “through speech I am ‘brought into the presence of another myself [...]’” (107). For the sake of argument, I assume it to be less than obvious how to program *empathy* into a robot. Hence even a conversational robot would on Daly’s account be a moral embarrassment: an-Other who only follows high-altitude normativities (e.g. expected value, tit-for-tat, Isamov laws). Would dialogue remain a reversibility even if the experience of dialogue was not reversible? The relationship between empathy and language remains mysterious in Daly’s book. On the other hand, perhaps such are the relationships that she wants us to investigate.

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