

Frank Chouraqui, *Ambiguity and the Absolute: Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty on the Question of Truth*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2014, xvii + 304 pp. ISBN978-0-0232-5411-8. \$ 55.00

Reviewed by Nicholas Birns

Frank Chouraqui's invigorating book on Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty is necessarily written in the style of the latter. Merleau-Ponty was a professional philosopher training in the high French tradition, although thoroughly repudiating the Cartesian and rational emphasis of French thought and incorporating copious amounts of Hegel and other German idealists, who, like Marx but in a very different way, he inverted and materialized. Nietzsche, as we too often forget, was not a professional philosopher, but a professional *philologist*, and although he knew the Greek tradition thoroughly he knew it as a lover of words, not as someone who, however rigorously, uses words to delineate concepts. The later Nietzsche ardently, if a tad hyperbolically, put the French on a pedestal, as if to tweak German nationalism by that but Merleau-Ponty is no one's lapidary aphorist, and, because of the influences mentioned above, often has a dense, turgid, Teutonic feel to him. One also feels personal differences (Nietzsche's sex life was both untheorized and unrealized, Merleau-Ponty's, perhaps too theorized, and almost certainly too realized) and divergences of background (Nietzsche a lapsed Lutheran, Merleau-Ponty a never-too-lapsed Catholic) obtrude to make the two thinkers different enough that one has to; 'host' the book even if both are equally its subjects. Chouraqui has quite evidently placed Merleau-Ponty in the position of; 'host'.

Nonetheless he convinces his reader that the two philosophers share an agenda, in opposition to absolute truth-claims and to truth as apprehension in favor of truth as "incorporation" (73). As Chouraqui nimbly explains, incorporation may seem like a seamless transference of the soul's properties to the body, but in fact can have more discontinuous and even violent aspects, as in the act of being ingested consumed eaten. Inspiration is at, once a form of consumption and of appropriation; and it is the philosopher's task, since we

ingest so many ideas anyway, to emphasize that which is good 'food', that is to say truth: and that which is not, which is to say "error." This is complicated in that obviously once one is within either of these thinkers there is no categorical way to divide truth from error; it becomes, at best, a gut feeling.

Nietzsche relies on an alert "self-becoming" (98) to produce a "strong human" capable of exercising thus gut feeling. Importantly, Chouraqui places just the right sort of rhetorical checks on a potentially vulgar voluntarism here, not only using the female pronoun to designate the putative strong human, as if to ward off vulgar-Nietzschean machismo, but stating that she is a "means responsible for an adequate management of the energy available in the world" (102

0This is far more of a bureaucratic than charismatic description fitting more to a moderate Labor government than an ecstatic affirmation of Carl Schmitt-style decisionism, and this sort of social democratic *haine* is just what Nietzsche needs, the strong human must also be sick, precisely because that vulnerability give she the prudence and discretion to separate, from all the accumulated detritus we incorporate, the good from the bad.

What Nietzsche does not give us is just how to process this incorporation, and this is just what, for Chouraqui, Merleau-Ponty supplies. How he supplies it is via Husserl, the phenomenological reduction, or bracketing, or *epoche*. The phenomenological tradition has stressed what happens after the reduction, or how the reduction is presupposed the reduction really is a sort of thought-experiment; as if we were to bracket this way of apprehension and forgetting the rest." Merleau-Ponty actually examined the term of the reduction. Which implies a softening of being into presence" and a 'sedimentation' (204) of time into history. A satisfactory reduction for Merleau-Ponty is precisely what would be a "failed" (156) one for Husserl, one that does not manage to make the phenomena pure. For Merleau-Ponty failing in the attempt to purify acknowledges the messiness, the sheer plurality, of how we feel things.

Merleau-Ponty's general aim as a philosopher was to privilege the body over the mind. Yet it is in many ways an idealized-body, a spirit-body, as opposed to Agamben's 'bare life,' it has an organic unity, as opposed to a Deleuzian 'body without organs,' it has a shape and a focus. Though Chouraqui does not cite Agamben, he copiously cites both Bergson and Deleuze, who not only came before and after Merleau-Ponty in a chain of French phenomenological (anti-) idealism but, through Deleuze's appropriation of Bergson, constitute Merleau-Ponty's chief rival, now that he is three generations back of the most vital thinkers working today. Whereas Bergson is much more idealistic (to put it overly but necessarily simply) Deleuze is much more radically skeptical, not affirming the human, incarnate body the way Merleau-Ponty, for all his utilization of the rhetoric of ruptures and crossing, nonetheless does. As Renaud Barbaras, cited by Chouraqui in a footnote, indicates, a Deleuzian Bergson would posit a virtual body where Merleau-Ponty would posit a material one, as reflexive and specular as that materiality might be in its constitution. But the human that is affirmed is torqued, contingent; as Chouraqui notes, whereas most phenomenologists reduce the subjective to get to the objective, Merleau-Ponty takes the objective as his target, shows that any attempt to reduce it must fail, and out of that failure, as a kind of castoff yet fertile byproduct, claims the revelation of materiality.

The very fact that Merleau-Ponty opposes "the dualistic premises of objective thought" (197) so ardently means he must affirm something in return, and here, even though Merleau-Ponty seems so much more systematically anti-idealistic than Nietzsche, so free of Nietzsche's motivational speaker-like exhortations and inspirations, it may well be that Nietzsche, who was willing to debunk without claiming any new ground, is more radical here. Whereas Nietzsche's solution to the problem of the inadequacy of either general or specific truths is a "health" which flits between possible truths even while avoiding a nihilistic skepticism, for Merleau-Ponty, according to Chouraqui, the equivalent of Nietzsche's health is "a reduction one can achieve through activity: (232). Though Chouraqui, somewhat covering his deconstructive basis here, insists that this activity is only metaphorical, one suspects that for the French thinker it was not just metaphorical, that there was intended for there to be existential authenticity in it.

This book, rightly, leaves the two thinkers and its reader uncertain about whether, if absolute truth is to be jettisoned, the ambiguities (one thinks here of the subtitle of Melville's *Pierre*, or the *Ambiguities*) that replace it are gossamer or substantive. The bravura ending of Chouraqui's provocative book leaves us with this catalyzing quandary. To renounce absolute truth is to see the self-definition of absolute truth as a deceiver, not just a Cartesian malign génie but also a monster-God, a deceiver-demiurge, a truth that shall "objectify, and thereby falsify"(233). It is only by knowing this truth as false that we can find truth. Yet we cannot fall in with the deceiver, as falling in with the deceiver would mean we would blind ourselves into thinking there is objective truth. The deceiver must be proclaimed as supreme, but also as a supreme falsehood. There is no truth outside the great deceiver, and thus truth is many-sided and subjective, not just monolithic and objective. But to truly experience the plurality of truth is not just to celebrate the falsehood of the deceiver but to dissent from it, to rebel against the hegemony of a truth whose arrant falsehood is a necessary prelude to wisdom. Saying that modern thinkers are displaced Gnostics is the most weary of intellectual-historical bromides, but one has to think Gnosticism, with its rhetoric that we are trapped in a material world, yet through knowing ourselves in a trap can see through to the spirit, is pertinent here. We must acknowledge the great deceiver, but by no means "limit ourselves to great deceptions" (234), However critical of the truth of truth, the falsehood of truth here faces an incipient challenge from another falsehood, one with no illusions to being truth, yet which can challenge, against the odds, the hegemony of a false truthfulness. We must first acknowledge the deceiver. But, because we know him as a deceiver, his stranglehold will not persist. Here, we get to a truly Nietzschean sense of paradox, and a refreshing, genuine, idiosyncratic optimism that makes this book's dense and complicated arguments well worth exploring.