

Chouraqui, F. (2013), *Ambiguity and the Absolute : Nietzsche and Merleau Ponty on the Question of Truth*, New York, Fordham University Press, 304 p.

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This is an ambitious work that tries to locate a structural parallelism between Nietzsche's and Merleau-Ponty's ontology. According to Frank Chouraqui's phenomenological reading, both of the philosophers are seriously concerned with the question of truth and especially with explaining – instead of explaining *away* – the occurrence of errors. This task motivates them to develop a philosophy, significantly ontological, that prioritizes ambiguous relations over their absolute terms.

First, both Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty construe lived experience as where the inquiry starts instead of what it would eventually explain. A philosophy is bad if it explains experience with respect to causal links between objects, or with respect to acts of “positing” by the subject(s), because it presumes a break between self-identical terms (the mind and the world, for example) and then hopelessly attempts to retrieve a link (“transcendence”) between them, which has already been denied in the first place. A good philosophy, by contrast, prioritizes the relation (intentionality) and thus interprets the terms of the relation as derived through a process which Chouraqui calls “overdetermination”. For example, in overdetermination the resistance one encounters in experience is absolutized into a definite object, while the agency thus hindered is attributed to a subject as the substratum of the agency.

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This ontological move from the terms to the relation entails that “experience” has to be reinterpreted so that constructions of realism or idealism are disclosed and, like in Husserl, “bracketed”. According to Chouraqui, both Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty assume there to be a pre-objective sense of experience, which gives rise to the subsequent constitution of the subject and the object (both as the “falsification” of the pre-objective experience). It is equally important, though, that this falsification is not just a contingent fallacy, but the *fate* of pre-objective experience. Chouraqui even claims that self-falsification is *the* essence of pre-objective experience.

But if this pre-objective experience necessarily falsifies itself, the question arises as to how anyone can disclose it and especially its dynamism of self-falsification. Here Chouraqui seems to provide an answer that relies on a reinterpretation of phenomenological reduction. Claiming that Husserl mistakes “pure phenomena” for the target of phenomenological reduction, hence gets trapped in the pitfall of intellectualism, Chouraqui construes Merleau-Ponty as targeting rather “phenomenality”, i.e. the *way* by which phenomena show themselves. The variation of perspective, which is operated in phenomenological reduction, discovers not some self-identical “core” that may show itself in multiple ways, but the *formal* (structural) aspect of that showing, which, according to Chouraqui, belongs to the “less-than-determinate”. Phenomenality is less-than-determinate, because the possibilities of showing are not free-floating ones (as if they were carved out of a pre-existent logical space), but are inherently developed out of the process of showing.

By conflating the essence of truth with this formal phenomenality, Chouraqui ensures that Being, i.e. the truth of beings, does not determine beings up to the last detail. Rather, Being only prescribes the *way* in which beings show themselves, i.e. as overdetermination of the less-than-determinate, while at the same time allows beings to develop in countless and ever new ways.

This has further ontological implications. Chouraqui introduces Merleau-Ponty’s notion of “softer Being” (the flesh), emphasizing that Being is neither a completely actual totality nor a posited empty horizon, but the movement of sedimentation (the transformation from possibility to actuality) itself. Being, as an infinite process of sedimentation, thus necessitates a history.

The ontological prospect Chouraqui articulates is *both less and more* than traditional ontology. It is less, insofar as it does not claim any determinate particular truth, but only the fact that the essence of truth is about the less-than-determinate striving to determine (and eventually overdetermine) itself. It is more, insofar as it ventures to account for the occurrence of – and even the tendency to – untruth, which in traditional ontology is usually dismissed as contingent and chaotic. For Chouraqui, this is accomplished thanks to the characterization of Being as self-falsification. The philosophy that expresses all these, of course, is also an instance of overdetermination, and thus is subject to falsification as well.

The advantage of Chouraqui's ontology is obvious. Not only does it avoid the aporiae of dualism; it also accounts for experience with less premises. It is reflexive in that it can explain its own emergence without positing any *ad hoc* assumption. It can also easily account for philosophies that diverge from it – they involve more overdetermination without being aware thereof.

More importantly, like all good ontologies, it incorporates ontological evil (exhibited as discrepancy, self-differentiation etc.) into Being – evil is neither the lack (absence) of Being, nor some positive component of Being, but attaches to the way by which Being becomes itself. Evil is eventually to be overcome; even before that, evil is not merely negative, but rather contributes actively to its being overcome. Overdetermination is distortion, but it is also a transitional stage. This dynamic view of ontology not only allows Chouraqui to recognize a deep link between Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty; it actually puts him in the company of several great philosophers, significantly Aristotle, Hegel and Heidegger.

But then a problem arises: why does this ontology Chouraqui observes specifically belong to Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty, and not to anyone else? Of course, Chouraqui never makes such a strong claim; yet, when he tries to show the parallelism between the two philosophers, his strategy is often to contrast them to a third figure, which, in turn, is sometimes misinterpreted, or at least partially interpreted, for the sake of argument.

For example, when he establishes the claim, shared by Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty, that Being *is* self-falsification rather than the

background of it, Chouraqui seems to put Heidegger at the opposite and to interpret the latter's "ontological difference" (between Being and beings) as an apparatus for singling out a fundamental *ground* of beings, i.e. Being. However, for Heidegger Being is never a transcendent ground, and in each case it has to be accessed through beings. The term "ground" [*Grund*] signifies for Heidegger not a basis or a space, but "reason", or the way a certain being *is*. It is striking to see how properly Heidegger, thus understood, fits into Chouraqui's framework.

The same applies to his implicit criticism of Husserl. By distinguishing phenomenality from pure phenomena (the latter defined as what is immediately given and is not yet distorted by judgments), Chouraqui seems to make Husserl dangerously close to representationalists like Locke, for whom pure phenomena is another name for sensation or sense-data. In fact, however, Husserl's "phenomena" is precisely what Chouraqui calls "phenomenality", i.e. the *way* in which beings show themselves.

But if Chouraqui's ontology is actually in line with not only Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty, but also Heidegger, Husserl and even Hegel (whose name appears rarely in the book but who has a "presence in absence" all over it), one may reasonably doubt whether, instead of being something so dear to Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty, Chouraqui's ontology is not just some "commonsense" that is shared by, say, continental philosophers undisturbed by Cartesian-Bergsonism. Their subtler philosophies depend on this ontology, but arguably says something *more* than it.

This "basicness" of the ontology Chouraqui proposes can also be seen from its implicit formalism. Prioritizing 1) the relation, 2) phenomenality and 3) Being as self-falsification, it only informs us about the "how" of becoming in very coarse terms, without saying anything about the "what". If such an ontology cannot err, it is because it self-consciously avoids any circumstance under which it *may* err.

It remains true nevertheless that articulating the "how", while paying attention to the immanence of evil in Being, is *the* most important task of philosophy, especially in an age when forgetfulness reaches its extreme and overdetermination dominates almost every "worldview". Chouraqui's revival of Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty's

(and indeed many others) “secret” ontology is thus invaluable. Articulating this classical theme in contemporary philosophical terms, he elegantly makes it intelligible for people nowadays, not to mention that he has a perfect sense of problematics when he proceeds. His philosophy is a ring on the chain of becoming insofar as it is a novel determination of the less-than-determinate. As Chouraqui himself admits, his project too shall be overcome, though he does not show how.

I contend, however, that this overcoming happens not only horizontally (when a subsequent expression falsifies the current one), but also vertically (when a certain philosopher proceeds from a formal ontology to its more concrete determinations). Philosophy is hardly meaningful without some edifices, and systematic thinkers like Hegel have a point even if their systems are bound to fail eventually.

Philosophers may become so unconfident in thinking, so overwhelmed by the invasion of the absolute, that they stick to empty ambiguity, establishing its legitimacy again and again, while they are no longer able to endure their *own* productive sickness (a system!), their own absolutes. The truth is not endangered, philosophers like Chouraqui ensure it; but things would be even better if their critical lucidity were paired with some architectonic innocence – sometimes it is just worth a try.