This is a very timely collection of thirteen articles of intriguing philosophical encounters that cross boundaries of time and traditional frameworks: Merleau-Ponty and various Buddhist philosophers, classical and contemporary ones. The comparative themes and methods running through the volume are neither philosophically haphazard nor simply of historical interest, as is aptly emphasized by the editors in their introduction chapter entitled “Philosophy, Nonphilosophy, and Comparative Philosophy”: “This volume inherits Merleau-Ponty’s legacy of challenging the border that compartmentalizes philosophy and groups it into different camps of philosophy and nonphilosophy, Eastern and Western philosophies…. To think ‘about’ philosophy and its outside, then, as Merleau-Ponty proves, is not one topic of philosophy but directly related to philosophizing itself” (2).

The volume is divided into three parts: Part I “Body: Self in the Flesh of the World,” Part II “Space: Thinking and Being in the Chiasm of Visibility,” and Part III “The World: Ethics of Emptiness, Ethics of the Flesh.” Most of the contributions agree that there are seminal similarities between Merleau-Ponty’s body-centered philosophy as epitomized by the notion of the flesh of the world and the Buddhist understanding of “dependent co-arising.”

Jin Y. Park sheds light on another significant point of encounter between Merleau-Ponty and the Zen Buddhist strand of thought represented by the twelfth-century Korean Zen Master Pojo Chinul (1158-1210). Park argues that “the familiarity of commonsense logic, in which Chinul included the logical articulation of Buddhism as represented by Huayan Buddhism, disables the subject’s capacity to see the cacophony of existence…. Questioning, or interrogation, in this sense, is not just one method for Merleau-Ponty and Chinul’s huatou meditation. It is the way one engages with the world” (111).

Regarding the ethical implications of the Merleau-Pontyan notion of the flesh of the world and the Buddhist notion of “emptiness,” Glen A. Mazis states emphatically,
“Both Merleau-Ponty and Buddhist thought rely on reclaiming embodiment’s access to the heart—the heart of compassion—which is the deepest source of the sense of the ethical and entails breaking the claim of the intellect to master the world according to its categories and dictates” (197). YUASA Yasuo argues for a similar conclusion in his paper “Merleau-Ponty’s Theory of the Body and the Doctrine of the Five Skandhas”: “Merleau-Ponty inquires into the structure of the ‘silent cogito’ that supports the ‘bright cogito.’ His inquiry is not complete but it indicates a direction where we can find a common ground shared by phenomenology and the philosophical elaborations of early Buddhist thinkers” (59). In a similar vein, Gerald Cipriani argues in his contribution “Merleau-Ponty, Cézanne, and the Basho of the Visible” that “Nishida’s philosophy... was grounded in the Zen Buddhist tradition of nothingness, where a ‘being’ does not constitute a standpoint, as well as in the nonhierarchical conception of reality made of contradictory relationships between entities” (153).

However, there are some clear and significant differences as well in the ways the contributors understand and evaluate the basic thrusts of Merleau-Ponty and Buddhist thought. For example, in his paper “Merleau-Pontyan ‘Flesh’ and Its Buddhist Interpretation,” KIM Hyong-hyo states: “Given that Buddhism and Buddhist practitioners have a strong desire to transcend this world of suffering, Buddhist thought is, in a word, a soteriology. Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, on the other hand, does not have a sense of saving this world from suffering” (17). He further articulates this difference by saying that “Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy does not go beyond the realm of phenomenological existentialism, but his philosophy is already at the door that opens to the space beyond existential phenomenology. However, his philosophy never leaves phenomenology of body. As a result, the liberation of the ultimate truth is not part of it, even though he gets through the logic of dependent co-arising” (43).

Furthermore, Carl Olson and Bernard Stevens make a similar overall evaluation. Olson’s paper is a comparative study of Merleau-Ponty and Dogen (1200-1253), the Zen thinker of medieval Japan, who left his thorough-going texts under such headings as “being-time” and “flowers of emptiness.” Olson argues that “the methods of both thinkers are radically different, although their methods share an experiential emphasis and foundation. The method of Merleau-Ponty enables him to elucidate a bodily scheme that operates within its own field of existence. In a more radical way, Dogen’s method, which leads to a state of nonthinking, involves somatic transformation of one’s body, enabling one to achieve a true human body, which is an expression of Buddha-nature” (92). Bernard Stevens’ paper is entitled “Self in Space: Nishida Philosophy and Phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty.” He brings into light a significant difference between Merleau-Ponty and Kitaro Nishida (1870-1945), the leading philosopher of the Kyoto School. This is how he articulates the difference: “Nishida does not stress that the vision is mine, as Merleau-Ponty does, but rather emphasizes its neutral thingness: I see my body as others can see it, that is, as an object of the exteriority of worldly space.... Nishida’s inversion of the self goes further. To Nishida, the body becomes the site of the self-appearance of the world itself to itself.... The self-awakening of the world takes place in human consciousness, and consciousness marks the advent of the world” (139).

In general, several contributors seem to find the Buddhist orientations, at least in some critical regards, more radical or thorough-going than Merleau-Ponty’s thinking, which is centered around the notion of the flesh of the world. However, other