

## Book Reviews / Comptes rendus

### ***Imagining Bodies: Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Imagination***

JAMES STEEVES

Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2004; 220 pages.

James Steeves' book offers a review of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy that is valuable to newcomers while offering novel insights that will interest the advanced scholar. According to Steeves, the book sets out to "explore the role of the imagining body in the various kinds of imagination ... perception, aesthetics and fanciful" (6). Further, "Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of the imagination will be applied to many different types of imagining and will be shown to provide a solution to many of the problems posed by philosophers concerning the imagination, including its relation to perception, the nature of the mental image, and the role of the imagination in psychopathology" (6). The real value of Steeves' book, however, is its ability to provide a thoroughgoing articulation of Merleau-Ponty's treatment of imagination in a way that illustrates a clear development in Merleau-Ponty's thought from his earlier works like *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) to his later works such as *Eye and Mind* (1964).

*Imagining Bodies* includes an introduction and eight chapters. The introductory text introduces the recurring motif of the work: a discussion of the mime and the distinctively embodied expressiveness of the mime's art. This has the effect at times of suggesting that the issue at hand, that which is encapsulated in the term "embodiment," is no more than the expressiveness of gesture. Steeves' own verbiage occasionally pushes the reader into this superficial understanding of the mime motif. However, it is clear from the text as a whole that the book seeks to elucidate a greater issue, namely, embodiment as the precondition of experience and the centrality of the body in Merleau-Ponty's ontology.

Steeves' account of Merleau-Ponty's theory of the imagination unfolds cumulatively. The first chapter provides the groundwork for further discussion by illustrating how the early work of Merleau-Ponty suggests that perception is distributed throughout and saturates the whole of the body, rather than being contained within a single sense organ like the eye or ear. In this discussion we are introduced to one of the principal concepts of *Imagining Bodies*: the virtual body. Steeves tells us that "the virtual body is an imaginative ability to consider alternative uses of the body and to assume different perspectives from which to observe a situation. The original habits of the body can be extended and combined on the basis of an imaginative level of embodied experience" (22). In the

following chapters Steeves explains the role of the virtual body in the exercise of the imagination.

In Chapter 2, "Perceptual Imagining," Steeves elaborates upon Merleau-Ponty's theory of perception as a wholly embodied function through which our sense data are incorporated into both the physical and cognitive behavior of the subject. The distinction between the physical and cognitive gradually dissipates as Steeves' analysis proceeds. This progressive dissipation is seen in the following four chapters. First, in "Aesthetic Imagining," Steeves articulates a synthesis of Merleau-Ponty's analysis of perception (the cognitive act) with the subject's interaction and reaction (i.e., one's behavior understood in a broad sense) with works of art. This yields an analysis of aesthetics that is wholly effectual to the lived experience of the subject. This is elaborated upon in Chapter 3, "Fanciful Imagining," to the extent that the activity of the imagining body comes to be understood as the sole existential influence upon the subject. It is responsible for her pathology, as is described in Chapter 4, "Pathological Imagining," as well as her own self-understanding, as described in Chapter 5, "Self-Imagining."

In his concluding two chapters Steeves returns to the motif of the mime in order to introduce a novel analysis of the ontology of the self. Although it seems overdone at times, Steeves' motif of the mime serves as an exemplar of the ideas he seeks to elucidate.

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***Interrogating Ethics: Embodying the Good in Merleau-Ponty***

JAMES HATLEY, JANICE MCLANE, CHRISTIAN DIEHM, Editors  
Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2006; 386 pages.

Merleau-Ponty nowhere gives us an explicit ethics. Yet everywhere, from his studies of perception and the body through his investigations of the political, ontology, nature, and institutions, his philosophy grapples with the web of relationships through which we stand to one another as expressive and responsible agents. An implicit ethics haunts his work, and the essays in this volume seek to reveal it. But as James Hatley points out in his introductory essay, this will not be an "ethics as usual." If ethics is rooted in the webwork through which we become responsible to ethical imperatives then ethics cannot simply be the affirmation of an already or easily established good; instead it must be an inquiry into how our becoming responsible through this webwork complicates the very notion of the good.

Merleau-Ponty's philosophy has the means to cater for this stability though. His analysis of the body's tendency to seek an equilibrium through skilful coping, or what he somewhat problematically terms "habituality," affirms how perception is learnt, primarily through imitation, in an embodied and communal environment. On the other hand, it might also be claimed that not only can Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of situation accommodate rationality, it also consigns it to its proper place. While in many ways his philosophy does affirm the primacy of perception (broadly construed to incorporate the practical action that it cannot be distinguished from), this doesn't simply come at the cost of sacrificing the validity of rational processes.

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Imagining Bodies Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Imagination. << Previous Article. >> Next Article. Access to this document requires a subscription or membership. This document can not be purchased. This Item is Part of your Subscriptions. show document. Usage and Metrics. Merleau-Ponty's thought has continued to inspire contemporary research beyond the usual intellectual history and interpretive scholarship, especially in the areas of feminist philosophy, philosophy of mind and cognitive science, environmental philosophy and philosophy of nature, political philosophy, philosophy of art, philosophy of language, and phenomenological ontology.

1. Life and Works. Merleau-Ponty was born in Rochefort-sur-Mer, in the province of Charente-Maritime, on March 14, 1908.[1] After the death in 1913 of his father, a colonial artillery captain and a knight of the Legion of Honor, he moved with his family to Paris. He would later describe his childhood as incomparably happy, and he remained very close to his mother until her death in 1953.

@inproceedings{Steeves2004ImaginingBM, title={Imagining Bodies: Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Imagination}, author={James B. Steeves}, year={2004} }. James B. Steeves. Published 2004. Psychology. The book demonstrates how Maurice Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the body has broad implications for philosophy, aesthetics and the social sciences. By examining Merleau-Ponty's analysis of the body as a dialectic of habituation and creativity, Steeves unveils a deeper relation between self and the world that is mediated by images of embodiment. This creative embodiment forms the basis of Imagining Bodies demonstrates how Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the body has broad implications for philosophy, aesthetics and the social sciences. By examining Merleau-Ponty's analysis of the body as a dialectic of habituation and creativity, Steeves unveils a deeper relation between self and world that is mediated by images of embodiment. Imagining Bodies is a testament to the importance of the body and the imagination in our perception of reality at a time when the philosophy of the body is associated with metaphysical presence. The book also amends traditional theories of imagination.