
David Levin offers in this book an interesting synthesis of Heidegger’s dedication to Being and Merleau-Ponty’s conviction in embodiment and the corporeal. He bases his task on the engaging thesis that the nihilism, or forgetfulness of Being, of which Heidegger wrote can be detected in the modes of embodiment which have developed historically and are present in contemporary culture. Nihilism may be resulting as much in the death of the body, so to speak, as in the death of the spirit. Levin feels that this predicament calls for a response. He thus sets out to “deconstruct” this nihilism (meant in the strictly Heideggerian, rather than post-structuralist, sense) by returning to the more primordial forms of embodiment, by returning to “living tradition” as he calls it, in the context of which our more contemporary forms will become manifest in their modes of deficiency or deprivation. One could say that the text and its aim are thoroughly Heideggerian, while its vehicle is characteristically Merleau-Pontyean.

Levin characterizes his mission in the following way. In his lengthy Introduction, which sets the stage for what is to follow both historically and conceptually, he urges that:

We need to disclose the specific essence of nihilism by way of our experience of embodiment: getting in touch with the existential meaning of nihilism as it lays claim to our bodies, dimming and diminishing our vision, twisting and using our gestures, deafening our ears, seizing the very alignment of our posture (pp. 74–5).

That is, we need to reflect on nihilism as it is lived corporeally. Levin calls upon us to do so in a rather messianic way due to his faith in the redemptive possibilities of the body. He considers his analysis of embodiment in the context of the recollection of Being not only to have a “therapeutic” value (p. 75) but somewhat of a prophetic one as well. As he writes:

Embodiment is not a curse, not an affliction, but the only opportunity we shall be given to learn the poetry of mortal dwelling. If we are attentive to this poetry, I think we have reason to believe that, with the emerging of a new body of understanding, a new historical epoch could dawn on our horizon (p. 68).

This work is offered as a way out of the historical crisis precipitated by the forgetfulness of the body (in its relation to Being).
Rather than evaluating this claim or the redemptive value of Levin's book, it might be sufficient at this point merely to point out that in this way he does perpetuate the tone as well as the tenor of Heidegger's work. His main contribution to the Heideggerian legacy is his incorporation of Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the body as itself expressive and communicative of meaning. He considers this to be a deepening of Merleau-Ponty's work, as well as an extension of Heidegger's. In a paragraph which summarizes his overall intent, Levin states:

Bringing together Heidegger's ontology and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of motility, this interpretation continues the work of both and initiates further steps on the path of our experience of Being. We are giving formal ontology a moving embodiment; at the same time, we are setting Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body in a much deeper, and more primordial dimension, so that the motility he describes is introduced to existential claims and opportunities which originate in the primordial dimension of openness cleared by Being and which only come to awareness when our experience of motility is articulated in relation to our capacity for deeper ontological attunement. Briefly stated, our interpretive approach consists in pushing the hermeneutic power of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology to its most radical limits, so that we can begin to see how the prepersonal, pre-ego-logical dimension of motility, the dimension of orchestration which the Phenomenology of Perception calls "primordial" and which, in his much later work, the philosopher calls the elemental "intertwining," suddenly opens out into an even more primordial dimension — that, namely, which Heidegger calls our "attunement" by Being-as-a-whole (p. 99).

I have quoted this passage in full because I think it will give the reader a good feel for Levin's book as a whole. If one finds this passage intriguing, then one will find the remainder of the book to prove to be highly rewarding reading, for what then follows is roughly 250 pages of just what has been promised — a mutual enriching of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty through reciprocal influence. What does follow are penetrating and sensitive analyses of the body as lived in gestures and motility, in religious tradition, in morality and politics, and in the aesthetics which comes to be equated with living in general in its most primordial, or "authentic," form. Even if one disagrees with Levin's overall framework (a point to be made shortly), one will find these analyses to be rich and evocative discussions which are a credit to the hermeneutical-phenomenological method. At their best, they recall to mind both the sensitivity with which Mircea Eliade investigated religious experience and the penetration with which Merleau-Ponty, at his more poetic moments, entered into the experience of the artist. Levin, for example, discusses in detail the self-discipline and total devotion with which Jewish scribes copy by hand the