

Lived Meaning: Embodiment and Art in Dilthey and Merleau-Ponty

This paper takes up the philosophy of Dilthey and Merleau-Ponty to explore the relation between meaning and lived experience as it is grounded in the body and expressed in art. Both Dilthey and Merleau-Ponty present the body as a nexus of lived meanings and the source of understanding. As our understanding of the world is grounded in the body, rather than in the mind as an isolated *res cogitans*, meaning is not simply conceptual or intellectual in nature. Meaning is embodied. For both thinkers, art takes up these embodied meanings and finds expression for them.

Dilthey describes our relation to the external world in terms of *resistance*, a tactile, bodily relation. Here Dilthey argues against Descartes' problem of the external world and the idea that external objects are "projections of sensations into an outer visual or auditory space."¹ Dilthey calls this concept of projection "superfluous" because the separation of self and world is secondary to our relation to the world and must be established through the experience of external objects resisting us. Dilthey describes this resistance through the body—"a self begins to set itself apart from the objects within this spatial reality, as a *body*, as delineated and oriented in space" (SW II 25). For Dilthey, the self is dynamically formed through one's bodily relation to the world. *Resistance*, a lived and felt relation to the world, cannot be completely theorized or articulated, but it can be explored and expressed through art.

Similarly, for Merleau-Ponty perception, understanding, and meaning are all rooted in the body: "The thing, and the world, are given to me along with the parts of my body ... in a living connection ..."² The body presents itself as a synthesis of sensations, an intersection of relations. The body "is a nexus of living meanings, not the law for certain number of covariant terms", which means that it cannot be reduced to functions and separate operations but must be seen as a meaningful whole (PoP 175). In "Eye and Mind," Merleau-Ponty calls the body an "enigma" insofar as it is the center of a "complex system of exchanges."³ For this reason, Merleau-Ponty posits that "[t]he body is to be compared, not to a physical object, but rather to a work of art" (PoP 174). Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology uses art to understand the dynamics of embodiment and the relation between the self and world.

For both thinkers, art engages in this fundamental connectivity between the body and world. Art thus embodies our existence and makes its meaning palpable and tangible.

¹ Wilhelm Dilthey, *The Origin of Our Belief in the Reality of the External World and Its Justification*, trans. Maximilian Aue, *Understanding the Human World, Wilhelm Dilthey Selected Works*, vol. II, ed. Rudolf A. Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 8 – 57. Henceforth cited as SW II.

² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith, (London and New York: Routledge, 2002) 237. Henceforth cited in the text as PoP followed by page number.

³ Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind" in *Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, trans. Michael B. Smith, ed. Galen A. Johnson (Evanston: Northwestern University, 1993), 121 – 149. 125.

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