

## BOOK REVIEWS

Wilson Edattukaran, *Dialogue with the World: The Concept of Body according to Merleau-Ponty and Ramanuja*. Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 2010, ISBN: 81-7030-928-X, pages xvi + 360.

The work, *Dialogue with the World*, is published as part of Sri Garib Das Oriental Series No. 351. The author of this book, Wilson Edattukaran, is a Catholic priest belonging to the congregation of the Carmelites of Mary Immaculate (CMI). He has a Master's in Anthropology from the University of Poona. He holds his Licentiate and doctorate in philosophy from the Gregorian University, Rome. He is on the teaching Staff of Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, Bangalore and currently serves as the Dean of Studies at Darsana Institute of Philosophy, Wardha. He is a visiting professor at many Centres of higher learning.

The book is an attempt at understanding the concept of the body in the works of two remarkable philosophers, namely, Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) from the West and Sri Ramanuja (c. 1017-1137) from the East. According to the author these thinkers representing two great philosophical traditions have made unique contributions towards a creative and convergent thinking focusing on the body as an Incarnate Consciousness. Edattukaran's reason for an interdisciplinary approach in his study of Merleau-Ponty and Ramanuja is really praiseworthy. For him cultures and religions, philosophies and theologies and all human disciplines develop in their interdisciplinary approaches (304) which adds impetus to man's healthy growth in his incarnate consciousness.

The book has an excellent foreword by Acharya Francis Vineeth followed by a brief General Introduction. The introduction explains how the author is fascinated by the convergent thinking of both Merleau-Ponty and Ramanuja which led him to make a comparative study on the concept of body in these philosophers. Edattukaran deserves congratulations on choosing such an important theme especially in the context of an emerging eco-relevant philosophy.

The work is divided into two parts. Part-I has three chapters. Chapter one focuses on the antecedents to the existential phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty. It is an analysis of the evolution of existential phenomenology from Husserlian transcendental phenomenology to the philosophy of concrete existence of the Existentialist thinkers leading to the existential phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty. Chapter two is a detailed

study of the meaning and significance of the central concept of body in Merleau-Ponty's thinking. Chapter three has a discussion on the world dimension of the 'incarnate consciousness' – man – who is in dialogue with the world according to Merleau-Ponty. In fact chapter 1 marvellously sums up almost two centuries of phenomenological evolution in the Western thought while chapters two and three contain the most fascinating explorations into the key positions of Merleau-Ponty on body.

Part II has three chapters centred on Ramanuja and the Vedanta school of Visistadvaita. In chapter four Edattukaran situates Ramanuja in the socio-cultural traditions and the philosophical milieu of the Vedantic schools within the wide spectrum of Indian Philosophy. Chapter five analyses the philosophical foundations of the concept of body and the world in the Visistadvaita. Chapter six deals with the central theme of the universe as the body of Brahman in the Visistadvaita of Ramanuja.

Part II concludes with chapter seven on the Dialogue of the incarnate consciousness in the existential phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty and the Universe as the body of Brahman in the Visistadvaita of Ramanuja. It presents the convergence and divergence of thought on body with a creative synthesis of the new and original vision of body as incarnate consciousness in the thinking of both Merleau-Ponty and Ramanuja.

Merleau-Ponty as the thinker of body takes us further into the meaning that the body unveils. Body is presented as if it is all pervading (307). Our existential roots are in corporeality. So the intersubjectivity is intercorporeality. Hence, our interrelatedness with others and nature is the central theme in Merleau-Ponty (308). Once we are aware of it we will be much more careful about dealing with other beings. Such a vision contributes to the philosophical grounding for a more existential ecology. Merleau-Ponty's thoroughly secular way of looking at the sacredness of the world is certainly a welcome step. Nevertheless Merleau-Ponty gives up faith and holds on to logic and analyses the body of man as microcosm. Ramanuja gave a philosophical justification for the path of devotion (*bhakti*) in contrast to the primacy given to the path of wisdom in Sankara. He has succeeded in defending the reality of the world against the onslaught of Sankara's *maya* theory. Ramanuja starts with faith and arrives at God having the world as his body – the macrocosm (313). In fact Ramanuja made available a tangible reality which can be experienced by any one. Edattukaran has beautifully captured the lofty ideals of the Visistadvaita system of Ramanuja in all its charm.

Western philosophical thinking generally pays more attention to the cosmos outside and man's relationship with the external world while the Indian philosophical thinking focuses more on consciousness, spirit and the world within man (295). Merleau-Ponty weaves his world of experience centred on the individualized consciousness of the ensouled body whereas Ramanuja sees the all-pervading synthesis in the absolute consciousness - Brahman which is characterized by a world-body. For both body and consciousness, human or divine exist in an intrinsic interrelationship. However Merleau-Ponty stands for a human synthesis and Ramanuja stands for a divine synthesis. Hence Edattukaran's discussions on a transcending self in Merleau-Ponty (312, 316) seem to be a limited transcendence which happens within the world. The question whether one can speak of a 'World-bound Absolute' as pointed out by the author is only a doubtful hypothesis (312, the quote from Merleau-Ponty lacks citation!). Edattukaran's observation that Merleau-Ponty remains silent about a self which is beyond time-space bounds (309) amply supports this fact. In reality both Merleau-Ponty and Ramanuja are highlighting the different aspects of wholeness at two realms within the very human and the Divine (316), seems to be a very positive approach.

Relatedness is a prominent theme in Merleau-Ponty. Our interrelatedness with others and the universe has a deeper dimension which enables man to be careful in dealing with other beings. Such an outlook paves the philosophical grounding for a more existential ecology. We readily agree with the author when he says that revival of the sacredness of the world from a thoroughly secular way of looking at is certainly a welcome step which heralds the dawn of a better and interrelated world for us to live in (308-309). The sense of interrelatedness is perhaps much more strong and evokes a greater reverence for the world and ecology as it is the world-body of Brahman in the philosophy of Ramanuja. For both Merleau-Ponty and Ramanuja the body and consciousness whether human or divine exist in an intrinsic interrelationship. Awareness of such an interrelationship inlaid with a sense of reverence will definitely serve as an antidote to the contemporary 'use' culture.

Within the context of the intrinsic interrelationship between body, world and consciousness arise the considerations of communication/language (41). According to Merleau-Ponty a human being as an embodied subject is capable of meeting other subjects and communicating with them in a language which emerges from his primordial openness to the other (307). As author observes, the philosophy of language plays a

crucial role in the whole philosophical structure of Merleau-Ponty (52). For him it is “through language I discover myself and others, in talking, listening, reading, and writing” (52, note 124). An entire section of the second chapter (87-101) is dedicated for the discussion of language and its various aspects in Merleau-Ponty giving the reader some insightful reflections. However one is disappointed as Edattukaran ignores any discussion on language when it comes to Ramanuja.

Edattukaran claims his study as a modest attempt for inculturation (305). But he makes no attempt to discuss the process of inculturation anywhere in the text. He seems to limit the whole discussion to a mere quotation from Pope John Paul II (305, note 22). However, Edattukaran is convinced that new and creative dialogue leading to meaningful inculturation is the task of the day (305). In Merleau-Ponty’s view man is constantly in dialogue with an intersubjective world. Dialogue is not mere empirical speech but intersubjectivity, a living relationship and tension among individuals (307, note 26). It expresses the total subject’s fundamental way of being in the world (308, note 29). This dialogical aspect of the incarnate consciousness in the context of the world-body of Brahman in Ramanuja perhaps needs more clarity.

This very important book could have benefited from better copyediting. There are spelling mistakes, printer’s devils and methodological inconsistencies. For example, “of the of body” in chapter title on page ix, 5.2. “Vainavism” on page ix and page 189, “thoroughly” on page 308. Chapter three footnote numbers 71 to 132 Merleau-Ponty is wrongly spelt as “Merlecu-Ponty.” There is no indication about Part II within the text though it appears in the table of contents (on page viii but not on page 153). The reader would have benefited more if the book had been supplied with a list of abbreviations and an index.

Despite these limitations, the book is stimulating and thought provoking. It invites the reader to delve deep into the depths of the very best in Merleau-Ponty and Ramanuja. The profundity of the very ideal of the incarnate consciousness and its intrinsic interrelatedness to the world is at the core of a realistic outlook in both the thinkers. The author leads the reader to the path of an environmentally sound behaviour for a sustainable ecofriendly Sacred Earth who is a mother to all. Laying open the paths of Merleau-Ponty and Ramanuja Edattukaran’s *Dialogue with the World* initiates the reader to carry on with the life of dialogue in thinking and acting.

**Sebastian Alackapally**