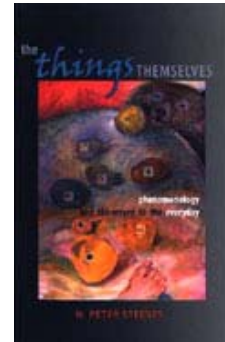


# *The Structures of Daily Experience:* *A Review of N. Peter Steeves' Things* *Themselves: Phenomenology and the Return to* *the Everyday*

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## Review

Opening Steeves' intriguingly-titled book, the reader is immediately presented with the articulate and engaging prose of a shrewd intelligence. Steeves' introduction not only invites the reader into an intimate relationship with the author, it also invokes a hermeneutic understanding of the text as "alienated speech," producing the faint "flickering in the closed circuits of historical life" (Gadamer, 1989, p. 276, 393). Steeves introduces himself as someone who has "been adrift in a sea of words for more than thirty years" (2006, p. 1). "And if you are hearing this," he says, "it is because we tread the same waters" (p. 1). He takes the metaphor further: "If you are reading this, I might be lost already. This is all that remains or will remain or could remain, a voice, a thought, a current" (p. 1).

His voice, this thought, this current opens the first chapter. From there, Steeves takes the reader through a fictional account by Ursula Le Guin ("Excerpts from the Journal of Therolinguistics") and introduces his namesake, Red Peter from Kafka's *Report to an Academy*. The reader is then guided through a discussion of human and animal, deftly, by way of the Sokal hoax of the 1990's, Searle's Chinese room, Deleuze and Guattari's *Kafka*, and a range of other interesting and topical sources. The result is a fascinating montage to be sure and in taking the reader through it, Steeves not only thematizes many important aspects of phenomenology and its "application" to the everyday, but he also performs them with no small success. As indicated above, he takes the worlds created through fiction and through narrative history as philosophically, experientially and phenomenologically significant, effectively carving out a space for reflection as he says, "outside of standard academic discourse [but] without sacrificing rigor and exactitude" (p. xvii).

Correspondingly, Steeves' book is peppered with quotes and descriptive passages; from Shakespeare; from the mythology of the Permón Indians; from an early twentieth-century account of the capture of feral children; and from anecdotes of contemporary scientists and ecologists, among other sources. These are central to the accomplishment of Steeves' wide-

ranging philosophical tasks: the dissolution of rational boundaries between human and animal; the deconstruction of Rawls' ethical diagnosis of the gambler; and analyses of the aesthetics of Cezanne and of body-building television (to give but three examples). In his consideration of the question of human and animal, titled "Lost Dog," Steeves provides an insightful description of what can be meant when we declare something, in everyday situations, to be "lost:"

When something or someone is lost, we feel the loss as a present absence. How easy it would be if "lost" meant "gone." But the lost love is with us still, achingly, emptily intended. We search her out in the way that the tongue probes the missing tooth; the pain of a lost parent is the pain of the phantom limb, here and not-here... But when one is lost to one's self, the phenomenology is different. My here becomes nameless, anchored only to my bodily presence. The nexus of "Theres" that surrounds me becomes unfamiliar, inhabited by unfamiliar Others. (p. 60)

His reversal of Rawls' analysis of the apparent irrationality of the gambler is also particularly compelling. The compulsive gambler, contra Rawls, does not suffer from a lack of rationality, but rather from an excess of it: Such a gambler, "sees order in chaos and is always ready to try a new system to exploit it. The compulsive gambler believes there is a cosmic harmony: God doesn't play dice, but He determined the rules for those of us that do" (190). Quoting the novelist Edward Allen, Steeves goes on to characterize the non-compulsive gambler as not bound by this cosmically-scaled rationality: "The healthy gambler winces, gets disgusted, and finally writes it off, knowing the universe is unfair" (p. 190). In these and many other revealing passages, Steeves fulfills the overall aim of his book and is true to its title: To achieve a return to the everyday and the things themselves and to use phenomenology to interpret "the structures of experience surrounding specific real-life objects and everyday moments" (p. xiv).

The book disappoints, however, where it strays from these purposes and pursues other goals in their stead. Steeves takes the reader, for example, to places and issues that at best are liminal to the everyday lives of the Anglo-American readership that he himself identifies: for example, to Hugo Chavez's Venezuela, to Las Vegas and Disneyland, to the world of extreme body-building, as well as to experiences of imprisonment. Where he describes places other than those his readership would recognize, his accounts dwell on facts and material conditions, rather than on the structures of the localized everyday experiential lifeworld. In Steeves' discussion of TV bodybuilding and the contemporary cult of fitness and beauty, for example, he cites Merleau-Ponty and Don Ihde, and characterizes silicone breast implants as being, "similar to eyeglasses and a blind person's cane" (70). All of these implements, he claims, at once extend the body and are incorporated into it. But in phenomenological terms, breast enhancement, of course, is not so much a prosthesis through which the body comes into contact with as the world as it is something that invokes the "other" as spectator, recasting the body as a spectral object. Steeves comes to this conclusion only after an extended foray into the world of exercise programs, body-building, and feminist theory. This realization, however, is already implicit in the eidetic variation that is provided in Steeves' examples: the breast implant presents different variant and invariant aspects when compared to a cane or to a pair of glasses. Working toward such a

conclusion by dwelling on these examples would be more explicitly phenomenological, and would return the reader from theoretical wanderings, back to "the things themselves."

The stated aim and scope of Steeves' book – phenomenology illuminating the structures of the everyday and the things within it – is profoundly admirable and topical. This book is excellent where it is true to these but less so when it strays from them.

### **References**

Gadamer H.G. (1994). *Truth and method* (2nd ed). New York: Continuum.