
Book in Review

Drew Leder, *The Absent Body*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990. Pp. x + 218. Hb: \$34.95 ISBN 0-226-46999-9. Pb: \$14.95 ISBN 0-226-47000-8.

Reviewed by Walter Gulick

The notion of embodiment is an essential ingredient in Michael Polanyi's philosophy. Personal knowledge is necessarily grounded in a body and shaped by a culture. "To ask how I would think if I were brought up outside any particular society, is as meaningless as to ask how I would think if I were born in no particular body, relying on no particular sensory and nervous organs. . . . I am called upon to live and die in this body, struggling to satisfy its desires, recording my impressions by the aid of such sense organs as it is equipped with, and acting through the funny machinery of my brain, my nerves and my muscles. . ." (*PK*, 323).

Although embodiment is essential to Polanyi's world view, in fact he does not go into much detail about specific bodily contributions to living and knowing. In light of his medical background, it may seem surprising he does not do more with physiological themes. Perhaps his relative neglect of the body is best understood as resulting from the central role of the from-to structure of consciousness in his later thought. Polanyi is not much concerned with exploring the body as a focal object, that to which we attend. His unique contribution is in highlighting the "from" dimension of existence, our embodied tacit knowledge. Because his concern is to emphasize the central place in knowing of the from-to structure--illuminating the relation of body to mind, for instance--Polanyi neglects to explore the many ways the "from" dimension is embodied.

Drew Leder makes this very point in discussing Polanyi's thought in his thoughtful and incisive book on embodiment, *The Absent Body*. "One of the deficiencies in Polanyi's account is his failure to elaborate upon the important functional and experiential differences between different elements in the 'from' structure. For example, the role played in perception by extrinsic perceptual particulars is quite different from that of our body's kinesthesias or fully tacit operations of our nervous system" (fn 20, p. 176). We may dwell simultaneously in numerous "from" structures.

Leder's work should be exciting to Polanyians because he accepts Polanyi's from-to structure as fundamental to embodiment insofar as bodies engage the world. Like Polanyi possessed of a medical background, Leder draws much more heavily than Polanyi on physiological information. Yet these medical references are never allowed to obscure Leder's resolve to trace back all evidence to experiences of one's lived body. His approach can appropriately be called phenomenological in its dispassionate attention to how experience arises so long as one understands that his broadly conceived version of phenomenology does not imply a naively conceived objective descriptivism or a rigid methodology. He takes his lead from Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on "flesh" rather than from Merleau-Ponty's earlier "primacy of perception." But he expands Merleau-Ponty's notion to speak of the embodied self as "flesh and blood" (pp. 65-66). That is, Leder's phenomenology is subtle because he understands that the body is subtle. "Far from being a homogeneous thing, the body is a complex harmony of different regions, each operating according to indigenous principles and incorporating different parts of the world into its space" (p. 2).

Leder's distinctive approach to the body highlights the way it contributes anonymously to experience. Our body is absent from conscious attention in a number of different ways. He notes, for instance, two complemen-

tary forms of self-concealment characteristic of the surface of our body as it engages the world: “focal disappearance” and “background disappearance.” Many parts of our body are put out of play in a given experience and suffer “background disappearance.” The way Leder speaks of “focal disappearance” is a bit troubling to this Polanyian, however. “This [term] refers to the self-effacement of bodily organs when they form the focal origin of a perceptual or actional field. An example is the invisibility of the eye within the visual field it generates” (p. 26). The example is clear enough, but why does Leder describe the eye as a “focal origin” rather than as a subsidiary contributor to what is focused upon in perception? A more accurate phrase than “focal disappearance” would be “tacit disappearance.”

This and a few other possible quibbles about terminology should not obscure the multiple accomplishments of *The Absent Body*. For instance, I find Leder’s analysis of tacit knowledge to be clearer than the fourfold analysis Polanyi provides in *The Tacit Dimension*. Leder describes “a threefold telos of motility wherein the body plays a subsidiary role. Physically, we act from a surface organ that itself is a lacuna in its actional field. In attentional terms, we ordinarily focus upon the goal of activity, upon a set of abilities we cannot fully thematize. . . . For example, in seeing, we physically act from the eye; we attend from it to the objects of its gaze; and this vision rests upon an unknown but unproblematic ‘I can’” (p. 20).

Leder resists Polanyi’s tendency to postulate a parallelism between epistemological structures and ontological domains. His approach to the placement of bodies in the world is ecological in spirit and emphasizes the porousness of the boundaries between inner and outer (p. 165). Through compassion, absorption and communion, we may become absent from the body in a positive sense, one supporting an ethic of embodiment. Drawing on the Neo-Confucian tradition, he affirms ways in which selves form one body with all things.

The body surface tends to engage the world directly; what Leder calls “the recessive body” supports

our active engagement in an anonymous and absent manner. Our viscera, which are largely unavailable to our conscious attention and direction, should be included in any complete theory of embodiment (although as Leder points out, they are usually ignored). Leder shows how our experience of our inner organs is marked by qualitative reduction, spatial ambiguity, and spatio-temporal discontinuity. A person’s viscera are not helpfully understood through the from-to paradigm. “I do not perceive *from* these organs; hence they can hide beneath the body surface such that I do not perceive *to* them either” (p. 44). The recessive body functions more like an “it” than part of a responsible “I.” We can say, with Heidegger, not only that we are thrown into this world, but that we are thrown into this body with its mysterious prenatal origins.

For Leder, the body is never simply the container for a self-conscious ego, as it tends to be in the Cartesian tradition. We are neither as fully at home in our bodies nor as foreign to our surrounding as conventionally conceived. “I cannot even claim my own cells fully as my own. In all probability, they evolved out of symbiotic relations between different prokaryotic cells, one living inside another. My body everywhere bears the imprint of Otherness” (p. 66).

When we experience pain or disease, the body and its functions are no longer taken for granted. Rather we are confronted with a hermeneutical and a pragmatic moment: we need to find the meaning of the dysfunction and act upon our body pragmatically to restore it to dependable normalcy. We thematize the “from” when we experience various sorts of negative “dys-appearance,” and our relation to the world is radically called into question.

The forms of bodily dys-appearance and disappearance not only can be interpreted phenomenologically in the present; they have provided the basis for several historically significant ways of construing the body, ways which can not be seen to be problematic. Leder’s leading example is the philosophy of Descartes. “Because the body is a tacit and self-concealing structure, the rational mind can come to seem disembodied. . . . The body is seen not only

as Other to the self, but as a definite threat to knowledge, virtue, or continued life. Dualism thus reifies the absences and divergences that always haunt our embodied being” (p. 108).

The Absent Body follows Derrida and others who reject the ontological priority of presence. Leder goes beyond Heidegger’s portentous but obscure pronouncements about truth as an unconcealment which combines presence and absence, and he shows concretely how various modes of the body’s absence contribute as much as presence to lived experience. His use of the *from-to* structure of consciousness contributes to a beautiful written and carefully nuanced study of embodiment. This is a work which advances Polanyian thought as well as philosophy in general.

Submissions for Publication

Articles, meeting notices and notes likely to be of interest to persons interested in the thought of Michael Polanyi are welcomed. Review suggestions and book reviews should be sent to Walter Gulick (see addresses listed below). Manuscripts, notices and notes should be sent to Phil Mullins. All materials from U.K. contributors should first be sent to John Puddefoot. Manuscripts should be double-spaced type with notes at the end; writers are encouraged to employ simple citations within the text when possible. Use MLA or APA style. Abbreviate frequently cited book titles, particularly books by Polanyi (e.g., *Personal Knowledge* becomes *PK*). Shorter articles (10-15 pages) are preferred, although longer manuscripts (20-24 pages) will be considered.

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