Hermeneutics is one of the main traditions within recent and contemporary European philosophy, and yet, as a distinctive mode of philosophising, it has often received much less attention than other similar traditions such as phenomenology, deconstruction or even critical theory. This series aims to rectify this relative neglect and to reaffirm the character of hermeneutics as a cohesive, distinctive, and rigorous stream within contemporary philosophy. The series will encourage works that focus on the history of hermeneutics prior to the twentieth century, that take up figures from the classical twentieth-century hermeneutic canon (including Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricoeur, but also such as Strauss, Pareyson, Taylor and Rorty), that engage with key hermeneutic questions and themes (especially those relating to language, history, aesthetics, and truth), that explore the cross-cultural relevance and spread of hermeneutic concerns, and that also address hermeneutics in its interconnection with, and involvement in, other disciplines from architecture to theology. A key task of the series will be to bring into English the work of hermeneutic scholars working outside of the English-speaking world, while also demonstrating the relevance of hermeneutics to key contemporary debates. Since hermeneutics can itself be seen to stand between, and often to overlap with, many different contemporary philosophical traditions, the series will also aim at stimulating and supporting philosophical dialogue through hermeneutical engagement. Contributions to Hermeneutics aims to draw together the diverse field of contemporary philosophical hermeneutics through a series of volumes that will give an increased focus to hermeneutics as a discipline while also reflecting the interdisciplinary and truly international scope of hermeneutic inquiry. The series will encourage works that focus on both contemporary hermeneutics as well as its history, on specific hermeneutic themes and areas of inquiry (including theological and religious hermeneutics), and on hermeneutic dialogue across cultures and disciplines. All books to be published in this series will be fully peer-reviewed before final acceptance.

More information about this series at http://www.springer.com/series/13358
Thinking the Flesh with Paul Ricoeur

Richard Kearney

Keywords Paul Ricoeur • Phenomenology • Hermeneutics • Body • Flesh

Paul Ricoeur developed a phenomenology of flesh inspired by Husserl in the 1950s. But while this early phenomenology was developing strongly in the direction of a diagnostics of carnal signification—in tandem with Merleau-Ponty—once Ricoeur took the so-called “linguistic turn” in the 1960s he departed from this seminal phenomenology in order to concentrate more exclusively on a hermeneutics of the text. There are, however, some fascinating reflections in Ricoeur’s final writings which attempt to reanimate a dialogue between his initial phenomenology of the flesh and later hermeneutics of language. I will take a look at these by way of suggesting new directions for a carnal hermeneutics—directions which might bring together the rich insights of a philosophy of embodiment (developed with Husserl and Merleau-Ponty) and a philosophy of interpretation (deriving from Heidegger and Gadamer).

Before looking at these later reflections, however, let me say a few words about Ricoeur’s early “diagnostics” of bodily expression. As I have written on this elsewhere, I will confine my remarks here to a few summary points.

Diagnostics of the Body

Ricoeur’s main contribution here comes in the form of three important sections of his first major work in phenomenology, Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary, published in 1950, 5 years after The Phenomenology of Perception. The sections in question are entitled, “Motivation and the Corporeal Involuntary,” “Bodily Spontaneity” and “Life: Structure, Growth, Genesis, Birth.” Ricoeur sets out in this work to explore the life of the “incarnate cogito,” drawing on the phenomenological notion of the corps propre (announced by Husserl and

R. Kearney (Ed.)
Department of Philosophy, Boston College, Stokes N225, Chestnut Hill, MA 02467, USA
E-mail: rkearney@gmail.com

© Springer International Publishing Switzerland 2016
S. Davidson, M.-A. Vallette (eds.), Hermeneutics and Phenomenology in Paul Ricoeur, Contributions to Hermeneutics 2, DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-33426-4_3
Merleau-Ponty), Gabriel Marcel’s notion of incarnation, and Maurice de Biran’s analysis of the embodied cogito (as touch, effort, and resistance). From the outset Ricoeur proposes an account of the body as a dialectical rapport between the voluntary and the involuntary in direct opposition to naturalism. Starting with the phenomenon of “affectivity,” he notes that “sentir est encore penser,” understanding sentire no longer as a representation of objectivity but as a revelation of existence (Ricoeur 1950: 86). Carnal affectivity is thus seen as a mediating bridge between (i) our flesh and blood existence and (ii) the “thinking” order of interpretation, evaluation and understanding. Not if “incarnation” is the first anchor of existence, it is also a temptation of betrayal—for the affective body lends itself to reductive objectifying accounts.

Ricoeur takes up the challenge, beginning with “need” as something to be phenomenologically experienced not as a natural event from without, but as a lived experience from within. It is here, right away, that Ricoeur proclaims his diagnostics of the lived body:

The diagnostic relation which conjures objective knowledge with Cogito’s appropriation brings about a truly Copernican Revolution. No longer is consciousness a symptom of the object-body, but rather the object-body is an indication of a personal body (corpse proper) in which the Cogito shares is its very existence (Ricoeur 1950: 87–8).

Affectivity and thought are thus connected from the outset by a tie of mutual inheritance and adherence. The two bodies (inner and outer) are not separate realities but two ways of “reading” the same flesh—externally (as nature) and internally (as incarnation).

Ricoeur then goes on to show how need relates to pleasure in terms of various “motivating values and tendencies”—evaluative discriminations that are not imposed by consciousness or reason but are already operative in our most basic affective relations. Nor is need to be reduced, naturalistically, to a mere reflex sensation translating an organic defect in the form of a motor reaction. It is not a “re-acting” but a pre-action”—an “action towards...” (Ricoeur 1950: 91). Otherwise put, need reveals me not as a mechanism of stimulus—response but as a “life gaping as appetite for the other” (Ricoeur 1950: 91). To have needs does not mean being determined by them; we are continually discerning between needs and pre-reflectively evaluating when best to realize or suspend them. “It is because the impetus of need is not an automatic reflex that it can become a motive which inclines without compelling and that there are men who prefer to die of hunger than betray their friends” (Ricoeur 1950: 93). As Gandhi’s hunger-strikes or the sacrifice of countless heroes and saints attests, “man is capable of choosing between his hunger and something else” (Ricoeur 1950: 93).

Need is thus revealed as a primonial spontaneity of the body where will mixes with a “first rank of values” which I have not engendered but which mobilizes my feelings. The existing body as living flesh is the original source of carnal hermeneutics; it is what makes our first savoir a savoir-faire, a savvy of life.

Through need, values emerge without my having pointed them in my act-generating role: bread is good, wine is good. Before I will it, a value already appeals to me solely because I exist in flesh; it is already a reality in the world, a reality which reveals itself to me through the lack... The first non-detachable is the body as existing, life as value. The mark of all existents, it is what first reveals values (Ricoeur 1950: 94).

It is at this crucial point that Ricoeur addresses the role of carnal imagination at the crossroads of need and willing. He explores how we imagine a missing person or thing (which we need or desire) and the ways towards realizing it. But the corporeal imagination is not just about projecting possibilities from within; it is equally a means of reading the “affective signs” of real sensible qualities out there in the world. The carnal imagination—witnessed in need, pleasure and desire—is already a diagnostics in which primal judgments become both affective and effective. Imagining the world in the flesh is a matter of feeling, valuing, and doing. “We must not lose sight of the sensor quality of imagination,” insists Ricoeur, for it is only by our imagination mobilizing our desires and discerning between good and bad ways of realizing them that “our life can be evaluated” (Ricoeur 1950: 99). Values mean nothing unless they touch me. Pace Kant and the idealists, ethics requires the mediation of flesh. Ricoeur concludes his reading of the body as primal field of evaluation with this manifesto:

The body is not only a value among others, but in some way involved in the apprehension of all motives and through them of all values. It is the affective medium of all other value: a value can reach me only as dignifying a motive, and no motive can incline me if it does not impress my sensibility. I reach values through the vibration of an affect. To broaden out the spread of values means at the same time to deploy affectivity to its broadest span (Ricoeur 1950: 122).

Ricoeur spends the rest of his phenomenological analysis exploring this claim for affective sensibility as “medium” of evaluation. Suffice it for now to note that his initial sketch of corporal diagnostics offers what we might call a proto-hermeneutics of the flesh.

The Textual Turn

In spite of this promising early diagnostics of the body, however, Ricoeur was soon to abandon this trajectory. After the "textual turn" in the 1960s, we witness a surprising (and I believe regrettable) rift between a hermeneutics of texts, on one hand, and a phenomenology of affectivity, on the other. He now looks back on the whole emphasis on sensible experience as susceptible to the lure of "immediacy, effective-ness, intuitionism," contrasting this with the more authentic "mediation of language" (Ricoeur 1995: 39). And he even commends the later Merleau-Ponty—in an obvious homage—for moving beyond his initial phenomenology of "incarnation" towards a "second philosophy" of language as privileged medium of "distance" and
Thinking the Flesh with Paul Ricœur

Language returns to us and that other flotsam of meaning which sexuality discovers without language, organically (Ricœur 1994: 141).

On the one hand, textual reading, on the other organic feeling. Two forms of flotsam at the limits of reason. A dualism of logos and eros.

* * *

But this was not to be Ricœur’s last word on the matter. Fortunately, he returns to other possibilities of a hermeneutics of flesh in one of his last major works, Oneself as Another (1990). In a section of the final chapter, entitled, “One’s own body, or the Flesh,” Ricœur defines flesh as “the mediator between the self and a world which is taken in accordance with its various degrees of foreignness” (Ricœur 1990: 318). As such, it reveals a certain “lived passivity” where the body, in the deepest intimacy of flesh, is exposed to otherness. How to “mediate” between this intimacy and this otherness, between the immanence of Husserl’s Leib and the transcendence of Levinas’s Venger, becomes a key concern.

This dialectic of passivity-otherness signals the enigma of one’s own body. Or to put it in phenomenological terms: how can we fully experience the human body if it is not at once “a body among others” (Körper) and “my own” (Leib)? We need both, suggests Ricœur. First, we need the experience of our own lived flesh to provide us with a sense of our individual belonging. This is what gives a corporeal constancy and anchoring to the self. Flesh is the place where we exist in the world as both suffering and acting, passive and praxis, resistance and effort. Combining the pioneering work of Maurice de Biran with the phenomenologies of the corps propre in Husserl and Michel Henry, Ricœur shows how it is through active “touch, in which our effort is extended, that external things attest to their existence as much as our own.” It is the “same sense that gives the greatest certainty of one’s own existence and the greatest certainty of external existence” (Ricœur 1990: 322). In the pathos of passivity and passion, “one’s own body is revealed to be the mediator between the intimacy of the self and the externality of the world” (Ricœur 1990: 322).

Here Ricœur makes the interesting point that it is not, as we might expect, in Heidegger—who ostensibly existentialised the phenomenological subject—that we

R. Kearney

"reflection" (Ricœur 1999: 163–164). A commendation which, one suspects, is curiously applicable to himself. This tension between flesh and text is nowhere more evident than in the 1964 essay, “Wonder, Eroticism, Enigma.” Here Ricœur speaks of sexuality as contrary to language. He starkly opposes what he calls (1) the “immediacy” of the “flesh to flesh” relationship and (2) the “mediations” of language and interpretation. Simply put: “Sexuality de-mediates language; it is eros not logos” (Ricœur 1994: 141).

Eros in our contemporary culture, Ricœur argues, has lost its old cosmic force in sacred mythology and assumed the form of a “restless desire.” It becomes a “demonsion” that resists both the logos of understanding and the logic of instrumental rationality. “The enigma of sexuality,” he claims, “is that it remains irreducible to the trilogy which composes human existence: language, tool, institution” (Ricœur 1994: 141). And if at times it articulates itself, it is “an infra, para-, super-linguistic expression.” Eros “mobilizes language,” admits Ricœur, but only in so far as “it crosses it, jostles it, sublimates it, stupifies it, pulverizes it into a murrum.” Utterly de-mediitized in this manner, eros cannot be reabsorbed either in an “niche” (like marriage) or a “technique” (like pornography); it can only be “symbolically re-presented by means of whatever mythical elements remain” (Ricœur 1994: 140). Left to itself, in short, the “flesh to flesh” relationship defies the order of logos: “Ultimately, when two beings embrace, they don’t know what they are doing, they don’t know what they want, they don’t know what they are looking for, they don’t know what they are finding. What is the meaning of this desire which drives them towards each other?” (Ricœur 1994: 141). Sexual desire does not, claims Ricœur, contain its own meaning but gives the impression that it participates in a network of powers whose cosmic connections are forgotten but not totally abandoned. Eros shows us that there is more to life than life—that life is unique, universal, everything in everyone, and that sexual joy makes us participate in this mystery; that man does not become a person... unless he plunges again into the river of Life—such is the truth of sexuality” (Ricœur 1994: 141). But this River of Life has, Ricœur notes, become obscure and opaque for us today. Like a lost Atlantis sunk within us long ago, it has left sexuality as its “flotsami” (papier). Hence the enigma of eros. The meaning of this submerging, dislocated universe is no longer accessible to us in terms of immediate participation, but only indirectly “to the learned exegesis of ancient myths.” There is no straight route to eros—only hermeneutic detours.

So Ricœur concludes that the best means to interpret the enigma of sexuality is a hermeneutics of ancient texts which record and represent this forgotten world of cosmic eros. The opposition between flesh and text could not be more explicit:

It lies again only thanks to hermeneutics—an art of interpreting writings which today are mute. And a new hiatus separates the flotsam of meaning which this hermeneutics of...

*One of the aims of our carnal hermeneutics project is to bring Merleau-Ponty’s radical phenomenology of flesh (working forwards to a discursive hermeneutics with his notion of discursive perception) with Ricœur’s hermeneutics of the text (working backwards to his early phenomenology of embodiment in light of his later hermeneutic reflections on flesh as a paradigm of oneself as another).
discover the greatest ontology of the flesh. It is rather Husserl who offers the "most promising sketch of the flesh that would mark the inscription of hermeneutical phenomenology in an ontology of otherness" (Ricoeur 1990: 322). Ricoeur's hermeneutic retrieval of Husserl runs as follows. In the Cartesian Meditation—I—written 10 years after Ideas II—the founder of phenomenology had argued that in order to constitute a "foreign" subjectivity, one must formulate the idea of "ownness"—namely, flesh in its differentiation with respect to the external body (of others seen by me or of me seen by others). Flesh opens up a realm of Leibhaft (immediate embodied givenness), excluding all objective properties. It is the pole of reference of all bodies belonging to this immanent nature of ownness. And it is by pairing one flesh with another that we derive the notion of an alter-ego. But here we return to the deeper paradox: flesh as a paradigm of otherness. Flesh is what is both most mine and most other. Closest to me and farthest from me at the same time. This enigma of nearness is revealed most concretely, once again, as touch. As center of pathos, our flesh's "aptitude for feeling is revealed most characteristically in the sense of touch" (Ricoeur 1990: 324). It precedes and grounds both the "I can" and the "I want." Indeed, it even precedes the very distinction between the voluntary and the involuntary. "I as this man," explains Ricoeur, "is the foremost otherness of the flesh with respect to all initiative" (Ricoeur 1990: 324). Or to put it in more technical jargon:

Flesh is the place of all the passive synthesis on which the active synthesis are constructed, the latter alone deserving to be called works (Leisungen); the flesh is the matter (substance) in resonance with all that can be said to be hole in every object perceived, apprehended. In short, it is the origin of all "alteration of ownness" (Ricoeur 1990: 324).

Ricoeur argues that Heidegger never developed a real ontology of flesh, though he possessed all the ingredients for such a project. His notion of Beinhalt—effective state of mind expressed in our modes—was particularly promising in this regard (Ricoeur 1990: 327 and note 34). It is telling that Heidegger acknowledged Arendt's interpretation of "essen" (transcendental essence) as the "first systematic hermeneutic of the everydayness of being with one another" (Heidegger 1962: 178). But he did not, also, himself push this hermeneutic in the direction of an "ontology of flesh" open to the world of others. In spite of his investigation of Dasein as "inwardness," he did not develop a hermeneutic reading of "the properly passive modalities of our desires and our modes as the sign, the symptom, the indication of the contingent character of our insertion in the world" (Ricoeur 1990: 327, note 34). In Heidegger a temporality of disanueren Dasein (transcendental ontology) ultimately trumped a spirituality of incarnate flesh (carnal "ontics"). Ricoeur asks pointedly: Why did Heidegger not grasp this opportunity to reinterpret the Husserlian notion of flesh (Leib), which he could not have been unaware of, in terms of the analytic of Dasein? Ricoeur's answer: "If the theme of embodiment appears to be stifled, if not repressed in Being and Time, this is draftsman because it must have appeared too dependent on the inarticulate forms of care—let us say, of preoccupation—that makes us need to interpret ourselves in terms of the objects of care. We must think of the idea that it is not the unfolding of the problem of temporality, triumphs in the second section of Being and Time, that prevents an autonomous phenomenology of spirituality—and along with it, an ontology of the flesh—from being given its chance to develop" (Ricoeur 1990: 328).

See Didier Franck, Chair et Corps: Sur la phénoménologie de Husserl (Paris: Éditions du Minuit, 1981), 109–111. Ricoeur refers heavily on Franck's influential commentary for his reading of Husserl. He adds: "The kind of transfiguration of the sphere of ownness constituted by appearance is valid only within the limits of a transfer of sense: the sense of ego is transformed in another body, which, as flesh, also contains the sense of ego. Whereas the perfectly adequate expression of alter ego in the sense of a "second flesh" ("second chair proper")" (Ricoeur 1990: 334).
In correcting Husserl it is important, however, not to go to the other extreme. And this is, according to Ricoeur, where Levinas erred in traversing flesh too quickly towards alterity. Identifying the carnal coress with a play of feminine immolation, Levinas redirected the virile self in the direction of an ethics of vertical transcendence in which the Face trumps Flesh. In contrast to both Husserl and Levinas, we might say (with Ricoeur and Irigaray) that if flesh needs the other to save it from fragmentation and inner collapse, the Other needs flesh to save it from Platonistic moralism and paternalism. And here we return, finally, to the realization that we need to combine sensibility (flesh) and language (face) in a new carnal hermenes- tics. The ultimate question stands: how to make sense of sense by making flesh a body in the world.

Let us recap. In order for my flesh to engage upon an intersubjective world with others and empathize with them, I must have both an intimate body for me (Leib) and a physical natural body among other bodies (Körper). This involves a complex intertwining (Verflechtung/entrelacs) whereby I experience myself as someone in a shared world. Thus Ricoeur, challenging the Sartrean dichotomy of flesh versus body, asks: “To say that my flesh is also a body, does this not imply that it appears in just the same way to the eyes of others? Only a flesh (for me) that is a body (for the other) can play the role of first analogon in the analogical transfer from flesh to flesh” (Ricoeur 1990: 333). And this reveals in turn that intentionalities that are aimed at the other—as strange and foreign to me—go beyond the sphere of my immanent ownership in which they are rooted and given. The other is revealed to my flesh as both inscribed in my embodied relation through flesh and as always already transcendent. Or to put it in more technical terms, the other is not reducible to the “immediate givenness of the flesh to itself” in originary presentation, but only in presentation. The gap can thus never be bridged between “the presentation of my experience and the appreciation of your experience” (Ricoeur 1990: 333). An interval revealed in the fact that the pairing of your body over there as flesh with my body here as flesh always retains a certain distance. The analogizing gap between two embodied selves is never complete or adequate. Total assimilation is impossi- ble. *“Never will pairing allow us to cross the barrier that separates appreciation from intuition (immediate presentation). The notion of appreciation, therefore, combines similarity and dissimilarity in a unique manner“* (Ricoeur 1990: 334). It is this double fidelity of flesh to both near and far that is captured in Ricoeur’s felicito- tous formula, “conscil as another.” And it is precisely because of the irreplaceable distance of alterity at the very heart of our flesh that hermeneutic mediation is always operative. Where is this where phenomenology reaches its limit and calls for more. Where the analogical transfer of flesh to flesh, through an intersubjective bodies,

*In addition to Ricoeur’s critical reading of Levinas in this regard, we should note again here Lacé Irigaray’s pioneering feminist-psychanalytic critique of Levinas’s philo-centric metaphysics as well as the new feminist hermeneutics of the sensual lived body in such thinkers as Julia Kristeva, Anne O’Byrne, Shelley Rambo, and Karen McKendrick. Kristeva’s new feminization of the body is linked to her project for a new humanism inspired, in part, by a retrieval of the deep unconscious resources of the “sensible imaginary” in writers like Colette, Marguerite Duras, and Teresa of Avila.*

**Thinking the Flesh with Paul Ricoeur**

“transgresses the program of phenomenology in transgressing the experience of one’s own flesh” (Ricoeur 1990: 355).

So what does all this mean for the hermeneutic relationships between self and other? It means, first, that the other who is stranger is also my “semiable,” a counterpar who, like me, can say “I.” The transfer of sense shows how “she thinks” signifies “she says in her heart: I think”; and at the same time it reveals the inverse movement of “she thinks and feels in a way that I can never think or feel” (Ricoeur 1990: 355). I am called by the other who comes to me in a way that I cannot assimilate to my immanence. I can only respond by “reading” their transcendence in immanence, across distance and difference. Ricoeur actually speaks of a hermeneu- tic interpreting of the body by the body which precedes the work of inference through formal linguistic signs. He refers to it as a primal “relation of indication in which the interpretation is made immediately, much as the reading of symptoms.” And the “style” of continuation to which this reading of indications belongs involves, says Ricoeur, “neither primordial intuition nor discernive inference” (Ricoeur 1990: 336). It entails a special grammar of carnal hermeneutics across distance, gaps and differences. Carnal hermeneutics as diachronic hermeneutics.

With this final intuition, Ricoeur retrieves some of his most radical early insights into a diagnostics of affectivity. He charts a middle way between Husserl’s phenomenology of carnal immanence and Levinas’s ethics of radical transcendence. While the former addresses the movement of sense from me to the other (through analogy, transfer, pairing, presentation), the latter addressed the movement of the other towards me. But in Levinas, as we saw, the other goes too far in instigating a rupture of separation: the face of the Other is one of radical exteriority to the exclusion of all mediation. “The Other absolves itself from relation in the same movement by which the Infinite draws free from Totality” (Ricoeur 1990: 366). So if Husserlian phenomenology veers at times toward an excess of egoology (the haptic circle of the hand touching its hand, critiqued by Derrida in On Touching), Levinas veers toward the opposite extreme of heterology. The ultimate “reversing” of the Levinasian face, as Ricoeur notes, lies apart from “the vision of forms and even the sensuous hearing of voices” (Ricoeur 1990: 337). To the extent that a call remains, it is the voice of the Master of justice who teaches but does not touch. For Levinas there is no pri- macy of relation between the terms of flesh and face. No communication or com- munication possible. No meta. “No middle ground, no between, is secured to lessen the utter diagonality between the Same and the Other” (Ricoeur 1990: 338). Put in more affective terms, the Levinasian Other persecutes, summons, obsesses, offend, but does not love. And it is against this paroxysm of absolute separation that a

diacritical hermeneutics of dialogue proposes itself. "To mediate the opening of the
Same onto the Other and the internalization of the voice of the other in the Same,
must not language contribute its resources of communication, hence of reciprocity
as is attested by the exchange of personal pronouns (I, you, he, she, us)?" (Ricoeur
1990: 339). And must not this basic linguistic mediation call in turn for an even
more radical hermeneutic exchange—that of question and answer in which the
roles are continually reversed?" In short, surmises Ricoeur, "is it not necessary that
a dialogue superpose a relation on the supposedly absolute distance between the
separate I and the teaching Other?" (Ricoeur 1990: 399). And is it not precisely the
task of curial hermeneutics to find the just balance between the movement of same
toward other and the other toward same? A balance which would not only bridge the
divide between Husserl and Levinas, but also, by extension, between Merleau-
Ponty’s reversible chair and Derrida’s irreversible difference?

The answer, we submit, is yes and raises further on-going interrogations. For
what kind of language are we talking about? One not only of words and writing, but
also of sensing and touching. And what kind of dialogue? One not just between
speakers but also between bodies. And what kind of sense and sensibility is at issue
here? One not only of intellectual “understanding” but also of tangible “orienta-
tion.” Thus does the simplest phenomenon of touch lead to the most complex of
philosophies. Because the simplest is the most complex and remains the most enig-
matic. In posing such questions, Ricoeur opens a door where phenomenology and
hermeneutics may cross in the swing-door of the flesh. He marks a new beginning.
But the real work remains to be done.

Bibliography


Nelos and Sandra Longfellow. Louisville: John Knox Press.

Paris: Le Seuil.