



## BOOK REVIEW

*Carnal Hermeneutics*, by Richard Kearney and Brian Treanor (Eds.), New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2015, 408 pp, \$40.00

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This is the basic lesson of carnal hermeneutics: all experience, from birth to death, is mediated by our embodiment and only makes sense of sense accordingly. (Kearney & Treanor, 2015, p. 2)

Humanistic psychology has always been more of a trans-Atlantic endeavor than we often realize. For example, Maslow's work is inconceivable without his appropriation of Kurt Goldstein's gestalt-organismic principle of self-actualization. Similarly, the young Carl Rogers was deeply moved by Kierkegaardian thought. The general impact of the phenomenological thought of Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty needs no elaboration. In the same Continental phenomenological tradition, Foucault, Sartre, Fannon, Irigaray and Levinas opened our eyes to how cultural and political forces can be inseparable from our psychological assumptions and many postmodern thinkers, such as Derrida and Lacan, revealed to us the ambiguous relation between language and consciousness. Finally, it was Ricoeur and Gadamer who, building on this philosophical tradition, inspired many to see the potentialities of methodologically rigorous systems of interpretation (or hermeneutics) for a humanities oriented psychology. Certainly, over the past several decades, Humanistic psychology has benefited from its intimacy with the Continental philosophical tradition. So now, when contemporary continental thought is developing in new directions, it may well be in our interests, as Humanistic psychologists, to attend to these shifting tides. This volume, *Carnal Hermeneutics*, offers exactly such an update on these new developments.

The lead editor of this collection, Richard Kearney, holds his own place as one of the foremost continental philosophers of our time and therefore deserves special mention. While it is not possible here to review the career of such a scholar, a few broad strokes are in order to give this readership a sense of the energy behind this work (Kearney, 2017). Having originally studied under Paul Ricoeur in Paris, Kearney's many works on the phenomenology of imagination, hermeneutics, politics and religion have inspired a generation of philosophers to take philosophy out of academia into the living world of human adversity. While himself an inspiring interpreter of

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religious and literary texts (and a successful novelist), Kearney has, by his example, motivated continental scholars to not limit themselves to the mere academic exercise of engaging in textual exegesis of other philosophers. Instead, he asks academics to strike out into the social world and apply philosophical methods to unbind the social threads that ensnare us into our cycles of adversity. As a public intellectual in his native Ireland, Kearney served in his early career as a speechwriter for the Irish president, Mary Robertson; and his published editorials and consultation work influenced public opinion during the Irish troubles of the 80s and 90s. In short, he actually applied his hermeneutical training to transform the cultural narratives that divided the religious communities of Ireland into the relative peace they are now enjoying. Over the years, this culturally therapeutic renarration process, called the *Guestbook Project*, has been extended to religiously conflicted regions beyond Ireland. The *Guestbook Project* is inspired by Kearney's hermeneutic evocation of the ancient interreligious principle of "guest right" and its corollary practice of *servicing as host* by taking the risk of 'welcoming the stranger.' As victims on each side of the communal divide tell their antagonists their own stories of violent victimization, the antagonists on both sides discover that their stories are essentially the same stories—hence renarrating their positions from mutual hostility to mutual hospitality. By emphasizing this ageless interreligious ethos of taking the risk of invoking trust toward those who are estranged from us, the *Guestbook Project* is proving itself to be both an ancient and yet novel approach to communal reconciliation in strife-ridden regions such as the Balkans, India, and the Mideast. Furthermore, Transpersonal and spiritually oriented psychologists may want to avail themselves of Kearney's radical approach to religion and spirituality which he calls *anatheism* (Kearney, 2011). This asks the question: 'What is the God that is possible *after* the death of God?' Anatheism is an approach to interpreting sacred texts and contemplative spiritual experiences through new unthought imaginary possibilities. It affirms the implicit truths of what we may call the 'new age' rejection of institutionalized religion, but enhanced with the rigorous hermeneutical and descriptive phenomenological tools offered by continental thought. In short, anatheism asks us to brazenly reimagine, detoxify and resanctify our diverse yet common spiritual heritages. While agreeing with Marx, Freud and Nietzsche's denunciation of the infantilizing effect of institutionalized religiosity, Kearney (and most of the contributors to this text) see in the various religious traditions an implicit, though sadly hidden, cultural affirmation of the phenomenon of *incarnation* that empathically joins us together but yet cries for hermeneutic phenomenological elucidation (Kearney, 2017).

These essays offer one of the most representative collections of contemporary continental thought available at this time. *Carnal Hermeneutics* shows the new philosophical turn away from the overly abstract, relativist and limited emphasis on structural linguistics and deconstruction in favor of a new emphasis on the upsurge of consciousness that is the founding act of incarnation. To this new perspective, linguistics and textual exegesis may continue to be a necessary aspect of Hermeneutics—but they are not sufficient in themselves. In his introduction, Kearney describes how phenomenology's "hermeneutic turn" in the 1960s, in no small way inspired by Heidegger and Dilthey, "was a journey from Flesh to text" but one that too often "forgot a return ticket" (p. 16). Kearney writes further:

Already in Heidegger's ontological hermeneutics, Dasein was stripped of its sexed, incarnate skin in the name of a semi-transcendental discourse (*Rede*). Language as the "destiny of

Being” came to overshadow the embodied life of singular beings (relegated to the status of “ontic” particulars). The temporality of understanding trumped the spatiality of flesh and a subsequent veering from carnal experience was witnessed in the hermeneutic orientations of Gadamer and Ricoeur. (p. 17)<sup>1</sup>

It’s important to note that Kearney’s is an unambiguous criticism of this veering, and one he believes entirely necessary, but it is yet a gentle, if not inclusive, critique—never a rejecting one. He goes to great lengths to make clear that the 1960s hermeneutic “veering” from the flesh was an unintended consequence of the enthusiasm that came with the appropriation of structural linguistics by the philosophers of that time. He, in fact, bears witness to how these thinkers, many of whom were quite literally his own personal teachers, would never see themselves as having ever disavowed phenomenology’s emphasis on embodiment. What he is saying is that the phenomenology of embodied flesh took a background, or more implicit role, to structural linguistics’ explicit stress on language and symbols. Never did these thinkers, who came to be called “hermeneutic philosophers,” ever cease to understand themselves as a part of the phenomenological movement. Commenting on his own teachers from the 70’s, Kearney writes:

And a subsequent veering from carnal experience was witnessed in the hermeneutical orientations of Gadamer and Ricoeur. A veering accentuated as hermeneutics increasingly engaged with structural linguistics and deconstruction. Textuality swallowed the body and turned it into *écriture*. But this did not mean that mainstream hermeneutics ceased to be phenomenological: Heidegger, Gadamer and Ricoeur constantly reminded us that what they were doing was “hermeneutic phenomenology.” Granted. Yet there is no denying that the linguistic *turn to the text* was often construed as a turning away from the flesh—in practice if not in principle. And one of the main purposes of this volume is to suggest ways of undertaking a return journey. Ways which might help us recover the body as text and the text as body: to restore hermeneutics to phenomenology and vice versa, making explicit what was implicit all along. A step back to step forward. (p. 17)

So while any separation of hermeneutics from the continuity of the phenomenological philosophical tradition was a misapprehension of intent by their readers, the fault still falls on these thinkers for their overemphasis on linguistics and textual exegesis which opened the door to this misunderstanding and the postmodern extremes that may have followed from this misunderstanding. This collection spells out how this correction, from abstract linguistics-based hermeneutics to carnal hermeneutics, is currently taking place in European philosophy.

Most of the influential continental thinkers of our generation are represented in this text. Julia Kristeva, Jean-Luc Nancy, Michel Henry, Jean Luc Marion, Edward Casey, Dermot Moran, and the late Paul Ricoeur are all contributors to this work—to only name only seven of the 19 authors. Along with a coauthored introduction, both of the two coeditors offer coordinated initial chapters that introduce carnal hermeneutics as an

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<sup>1</sup> In fairness to Heidegger, in the 1960s Medard Boss invited him to his clinic to give philosophy seminars to psychiatrists (Heidegger, 2001). These lectures often took up embodiment-oriented themes. Churchill (2018) offered an exposition on the relevance of these rarely referenced lectures to the phenomenology of empathy—with an emphasis on embodiment. But why Heidegger did not treat embodiment more directly in his published seminal works remains an open question. One can certainly argue that such topics as *Befindlichkeit* and “handedness” implied embodiment, but it can equally be argued that these discussions did not have the same direct focus on the lived sensory body that we find in the rest the phenomenological tradition.

intellectual movement. Both chapters would be accessible to most philosophically informed psychologists. The second section is a different matter. Titled “Rethinking the Flesh” these essays are primarily devoted to more specialized philosophical discourse—in the wake of Merleau-Ponty. Of all these French philosophers, most enthralling (at least to this reader) was Michel Henry’s remarkable phenomenological descriptions of the act of incarnate life. If any thinker represents the direction Merleau-Ponty would have taken, had he lived longer, it would be Michel Henry. His influential text *Incarnation: A Philosophy of Flesh* (Henry, 2000/2015) outlines a phenomenology of preintentional affective life that, in itself, signaled the beginning of the carnal turn in continental thought that has inspired this collection. Kearney and Treanor include a key passage from this text that allows us to see Henry’s penetrating extensions of Husserl’s notions of ‘passivity’ and the ‘givenness of the flesh.’ Passive experience, often consigned by researchers to the indescribable dimensions of unconsciousness, is given full phenomenological elucidation in Henry’s groundbreaking thought. While space does not permit a full presentation of Henry’s ‘phenomenology of life’ it can only be said that, more than his influence on contemporary French philosophy, this incarnational phenomenology offers a treasure trove of insights for academic as well as clinical psychologists. The third grouping titled “matters of touch” all address the primary sense of carnal hermeneutics. Touch, as pointed out by both Aristotle and Husserl, is the sense modality that makes all other senses sensible. It is the too unacknowledged medium of all the other senses. With the exception of the esteemed yet rarely cited phenomenological psychologist David Katz (1925/1989) whose research on touch receives the attention it deserves in Dermot Moran’s essay in this collection, touch remains a primal phenomenon which, as phenomenon, is stunningly neglected in psychology.<sup>2</sup> Of course, these essays would be of primary interest to psychologically minded readers. Noteworthy is Ed Casey’s discussion of incarceration and Dermot Moran’s tracing of the theme of embodiment across the phenomenological tradition—inclusive of psychology.

Casey’s study of the lived space of solitary confinement offers a painful insight into experience of traumatized carnality. It is refreshing to have a philosopher take up the issue of torture, disempowerment and psychic violence without the reductively limiting vocabulary of mainstream psychopathology. Casey’s phenomenological descriptions offer an eye-opening explication of the kind of embodiment that is incarcerated space. One leaves this brief but haunting essay with an intuition into the incarcerated carnality that constitutes most of our institutionalized lives—not just prisons. American public schools now show little architectural difference from prisons, office spaces and the video monitored computer cubicles of ‘white collar’ professional life resemble caged space more than anything else. “Security” cameras, and “gated” communities more then embody the sieged and besieged worlds we are incarcerating ourselves into. Trump’s wall is only a gigantic metaphor for how the incarcerated and the incarcerator are mutual victims of this dehumanizing vicious circle that is the absurd project of violently sealed space. Casey’s chapter will particularly appeal to critical psychologists seeking a deepened understanding of the operative structure of domination and ecopsychologists seeking perspective on our detachment from nature and the carnally humanizing qualities of natural ‘open’ space.

The final section “divine bodies” takes a very radical turn. Here, we witness the application of Kearney’s own idea of atheism. Many psychologists may privately cringe

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<sup>2</sup> In a very accessible *New York Times* article, Kearney (2014) emphasized the dearth of attention “touch” receives in our culture as a whole.

at the word ‘Christianity’ as in America it is so often associated with regressive aspects of our culture wars. But from an atheistic perspective, Christianity receives something of an ontological restoration through a radically unexplored concept of incarnation. In a vein not unlike Jung’s academic rehabilitation of medieval alchemical and gnostic writings, the nondual nature of the matter-spirit dynamic in Christian thought is even further radicalized in *Carnal Hermeneutics*. While it is far safer to discuss the embodied aspects of tantric yoga or indigenous possession rituals from across the boundaries afforded by ‘cross cultural’ psychology, it is far more precarious an undertaking to perform a hermeneutic archeology on the core religious tradition of our dominant Western culture. But those who read these essays will see for themselves that this concluding section, far from a romantic or reactionary reading, is in fact radical beyond belief. Kristeva’s discussion of the raptures of Saint Theresa, Rambo’s illumination of the ‘wound’ in biblical scripture, Falque’s elucidation of the phenomenology of the body in the ritual of the Eucharist, Mackendrick’s placement of breath in the book of Genesis and Manoussakis’ concluding essay on Christianity’s inherent phenomenology of flesh—shocks any reader whose initial exposure to Christianity was through institutionalized and tired church dogmas. As evoked through carnal hermeneutics, one wonders how such a voluptuous Christianity could have devolved into the body-negative worldview we mostly associate with this religion. But, regardless of the regressive orthodoxies that have suppressed the body positive religious tradition revealed by these studies, an atheistic carnal hermeneutics blows open Christianity into unimagined possibilities for cultural healing and recovery.

At first glance, one associates the theme of carnality and ‘embodiment’ with the thought of Merleau-Ponty who is renowned for advancing the idea of the ontological primacy of the lived body. For Merleau-Ponty the hackneyed psychological dichotomies of thought and matter, cognition and emotion, subject and object, and even the imaginary and the real, all collapse within the standpoint of phenomenological reflection. In contrast to the absence of embodiment in Heidegger’s “being in the world,” Merleau-Ponty would say that the truth of the world is that we are a common ‘flesh of the world.’ He would even say to the skeptic and empiricist ‘problem of other minds’ that the real problem is that we *believe* this empiricist dogma of minds as *other* to ourselves. The issue of carnal intersubjectivity, while not simple, is yet a vast venue that opens up within the phenomenological suspension of our naïve physicalistic presuppositions about the real. Following Husserl’s great insight that the world adheres to consciousness in an *unmediated intuition*, we live our relations with others as we do our own bodies—with no cognitive interventions. In other words, social relations are directly intuited, that is, *carnally lived*, relations. So, it would seem fair to begin the project of carnal hermeneutics where Merleau-Ponty ends, and it is true that many of these essays build on Merleau-Ponty’s nomenclature as articulated in his final unfinished text *The Visible and the Invisible*. (Merleau-Ponty, 1968) But what may surprise many is that Merleau-Ponty is actually *not at all* the originator of the idea of the lived-body or carnal intersubjectivity. It was actually Edmund Husserl who, a generation earlier, first articulated these ideas about the radically existential nature of embodiment. Kearney and Treanor comment on this neglected historical fact in their introductory essays. But it is in Dermot Moran’s chapter where we are offered a full exposition of Merleau-Ponty’s reliance on Husserl’s writings with regard to the primacy of touch, the lived flesh, the reversibility of the ‘touched-touching’ relationship, the life-world, and carnal intersubjectivity as expressed in his posthumous articles—especially in *Ideas II* (Husserl, 1952/989). Despite the ‘new Husserl’ scholarship of the last few decades (Weldon, 2003; Zahavi, 2018), the perpetual (and frankly negligent) misrepresentations of Husserl as a Cartesian, a dualist, an idealist, a metaphysician of

presence, an absolutist, a cognitivist and so on (typically in contrast to Heidegger's existentialism) still persists in much of the secondary commentary literature. Moran makes it clear that, whereas Husserl is not the last word on embodiment, it is a cardinal feature of this entire collection to see this vindication of Husserl on this issue.

As alluded to in the previous quote from Kearney, it may also be surprising to see how contemporary continental philosophers view the relationship between phenomenology and hermeneutics very differently from the perspective presented in much of the secondary psychological literature. If one reviews the current surge of new methods that constitute qualitative research in psychology, one finds a very obvious preference for what is called 'interpretive' or sometimes even 'hermeneutical' methods for qualitative research. Interpretive methods are often positioned as a refutation of phenomenological methodology often posed through such problematic dichotomies as: Heidegger versus Husserl, hermeneutic circle versus phenomenological epoche, transcendental versus existential and interpretation versus description. Such artificial antinomies are contradicted by how hermeneutics and phenomenology are viewed by most continental philosophers as intrinsically interwoven aspects of one common intellectual tradition. It needs to be emphasized that this continuity between phenomenological and hermeneutical methodology is rarely clear within the field of qualitative research which, in contrast to contemporary philosophical hermeneutics, is still influenced by the social constructivism and the postmodernism of the previous decades which would totalize interpretation. As these perspectives are unabashedly relativist in their refusal of any ontological or epistemological foundations, they could be no further from carnal hermeneutics which, in conjunction with the tradition of Merleau-Ponty and Husserl, unequivocally declares the living presence of the body as the inescapable foundation of our very being—inclusive of any act of interpretation. In Ricouer's (1975) own words, "Phenomenology and hermeneutics remain the presuppositions of one another" (p 101). And it is in carnal hermeneutics that this inseparability is most evident. It is worth reiterating that none of these hermeneutical philosophers view themselves as spurning phenomenological methodology. Rather, they see themselves as advancing, building upon and improving the phenomenological movement through the contribution of hermeneutics, albeit carnal hermeneutics.

Embodiment is a given in humanistic psychology. The healing affirmation of the organismic core of our psychic being has been a consistent theme across nearly all versions of humanistic therapies. Yet, like an old coin whose meaning gets worn in passing, it is important to do a double-take on what we mean by this essential aspect of our human condition. Incarnation is exactly what has been lost in a cognized, linguistically abstracted, neurologized, and even a socially constructed psychology. Not the anatomical chart, not the soulless physical body, not the mechanical organ systems of our textbooks, carnal embodiment is the ground of all possible experience and the means by which we are literally in touch with all life, others, and even our very selves. Carnal embodiment is the heart and soul to a psychology that abhors the desiccating restrictions of a strictly naturalized universe in favor of a psychology of life. If humanistic psychology is to offer a critical, and theoretically rigorous, alternative to the 'neuro-mania' and reductionism that has recently only more deeply possessed mainstream psychology, then this collection could serve as a formidable resource.

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