

Richard Kearney & Brian Treanor (Eds.) (2015). *Carnal Hermeneutics*. Fordham University Press. Hardback, 392 pp. ISBN: 9780823265886, US\$125.00. Paperback, ISBN: 9780823265893, US\$40.00. eBook, ISBN: 9780823265909, US\$27.99.

What is carnal hermeneutics? If anyone who regularly reads this Journal came across the expression for the first time and had to venture an opinion, he or she would likely think in terms of Heidegger. *Being and Time* famously distinguishes the “hermeneutical as” from the “apophantic as” (1927, p. 158). Consider a tool, for example a hammer. Heidegger recognizes two ways to interpret the hammer as a tool, a use-object. One way is to reach out a hand, pick up the hammer, and drive nails with it. The other way is to formulate a proposition: “The hammer is for driving nails.” The first interpretation, the existential-hermeneutical as, is for Heidegger the more primordial disclosure of the tool. The other, apophantic, intellectual, theoretical interpretation is secondary. The “hermeneutical as” is bodily and practical, and so here Heidegger could conceivably be advocating a carnal hermeneutics. That would be a mode of interpretation which is *carried out* by the body or in which the body at least leads the way.

Yet this book on carnal hermeneutics for the most part disparages Heidegger. The final paper in the collection even calls Heidegger’s analysis of Dasein “one of the most disembodied philosophical constructions out there” (p. 309). I believe the readers of the Journal will all recognize the superficiality of this common aspersion. The analysis of Dasein is an account of disclosedness. What is utterly original and phenomenological about Heidegger is his claim that disclosedness is *not* a matter of disembodied rationality; it is primarily a matter of moods, the bodily attunement to things. For Heidegger, the world is disclosed (a) primarily through moods, (b) secondarily through discourse (language for Heidegger, despite what he says about the apophantic as, is revelatory and is not just given to us so we can communicate things already revealed), and (c) thirdly, I emphasize thirdly and lastly, through rational understanding, which for the most part only makes explicit what has already been disclosed at lower levels.

Thus Heidegger’s position in *Being and Time* is entirely in line with Merleau-Ponty’s doctrine of the primacy of perception over thought. Only the terms are somewhat different, since Heidegger uses “perception” in the pejorative sense of Merleau-Ponty’s “analytic perception.” Merleau-Ponty states explicitly that the body is the subject of perception. Heidegger is not so explicit that the body is the subject of disclosedness, but, to consider the most general structure of the world as disclosed by Dasein, the priority of the ready-to-hand over

the present-at-hand obviously corresponds to a priority of the body and praxis over reason and theory.

As understood in the book under review, carnal hermeneutics is not so much an interpretation carried out *by* the body but is an interpretation *of* (objective genitive) the body. I received the impression that the contributors, by no means outsiders to phenomenology, believe the body has been neglected—even by Merleau-Ponty! So carnal hermeneutics is an attempt to restore the balance and give the body its due. For instance, instead of concentrating on the effect of solitary confinement on the psyche, let us describe its effect on the body.

There is no denying that hermeneutics has historically been taken as a matter of interpreting the meaning of texts and only texts. Yet there is meaning also in embodiment, and carnal hermeneutics stakes out this realm for interpretative research. In the formulation of the editors of the volume, the theme is “the surplus of meaning arising from our carnal embodiment, its role in our experience and understanding, and its engagement in the wider world” (p. 1). The general intention is certainly to be applauded by phenomenological psychology, and the various papers, written by what practically amounts to a who’s who of contemporary continental philosophy (including Edward Casey, Jean-Louis Chrétien, Michel Henry, Julia Kristeva, Jean-Luc Marion, Dermot Moran, Jean-Luc Nancy, and David Wood), are of course original and insightful. Also, the topics taken up are of as wide a scope as can be imagined, from human bodily disability to divine incarnation in the Eucharist. The papers are concrete, the writing is clear, and the scholarship impressive. Readers of the *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology* will learn a great deal from the volume. I am left with a lingering doubt, however, as to whether they will find here the same descriptive power as that already achieved in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of the body. But that is hardly cause for surprise, for in this regard who can hold a candle to Merleau-Ponty?

All of the papers are relevant to phenomenological psychology, some more so than others, but one is of special significance. It is the paper by Dermot Moran, “Between Vision and Touch: From Husserl to Merleau-Ponty” (pp. 214–234). What Moran does is to trace the path from the Second Book of Husserl’s *Ideas* to the later Merleau-Ponty with respect to the notion of the reversibility of the senses. It is clear that the analyses in *Ideas II* of the “double sensations” of touch are foundational for Merleau-Ponty’s own doctrine of the incipient reflection that occurs at the sensory level: touch (almost) touching itself, vision (almost) seeing itself. Moran’s original contribution is to bring out the role of the psychologist David Katz in this path from Husserl to Merleau-Ponty.

Katz (1884–1953) was in a sense the first phenomenological psychologist. He took seriously Husserl's phenomenological reduction and attempted to apply it to psychology. The result was a non-empiricist analysis of perception, focusing on color vision and touch. Katz showed that pure color qualities, that is, color sensations, are products of an artificial attitude and are not part of normal free perception. He thereby prefigured Merleau-Ponty's own radical critique of the concept of sensation. Moran (pp. 227–28) indicates many instances of Merleau-Ponty's indebtedness to Katz in the *Phenomenology of Perception*.

Merleau-Ponty's development of Husserl's analysis of touch basically amounts to the extension of the idea of reversibility from touch (the only reversibility recognized by the founder of phenomenology) to vision and indeed to all the senses. If I understand Moran correctly, it was this extension that Katz adumbrated in his explorations of the similarities between the world of color and the world of touch. Moran does not answer all questions regarding Katz's role but does offer a thread of Ariadne for anyone wishing to work through the complexities of this issue in detail.

A central tenet of carnal hermeneutics, as presented here, is the valuation of touch over sight and the other senses. That is a common theme, elaborated in several of the nineteen offerings. So the carnality of carnal hermeneutics is precisely flesh, skin, the organ of touch.

I do wonder about this privilege accorded to touch. Merleau-Ponty contends that vision is privileged over hearing, since a world cannot be made entirely out of sounds. Can a world be made entirely out of tactile properties? Or, in the same vein, could there be such a thing as a purely tactile artform? But what is most strange to me is that several of these papers on carnal hermeneutics appeal to Aristotle's doctrine of touch. It is true that the Stagirite does in some passages consider touch the paradigmatic sense, but his account of touch (as of all the other senses) is one of the most disembodied philosophical constructions there is. It is utterly un-phenomenological, and the evidence is that for Aristotle the flesh, the skin, is only the medium of touch, not the organ. The true organ of touch lies "further inward." The papers in this volume take "medium" as a commendation of the flesh; I think it is a denigration.

In *De Anima* 423a2–423b26, Aristotle reasons along the following lines. Suppose a membrane ($\acute{\upsilon}\mu\acute{\nu}\eta\nu$) is stretched over the skin. If the membrane is thin enough, the sensations of touch are not affected. But—and this is of utmost importance—the sense of touch is obviously not in the membrane. Therefore it is not in the flesh either, and the organ of touch must lie further inward, presumably in the soul. Aristotle, as is very typical of him, also argues that if the flesh were the organ of touch, the analogy with the other senses would be broken. All the others require a medium. If something is placed directly on

the eye, it cannot be seen. But if something is placed directly on the skin, it is indeed felt. Consequently, again, the skin must be the medium, not the organ. Although Aristotle stops here, it is obvious that even the flesh below the skin can feel pain if the skin is pierced, so that the deeper flesh is also a medium. The organ of touch must keep receding—all the way to the soul.

Carnal hermeneutics does of course not follow Aristotle in this depreciation of the flesh. No phenomenology could. It would take back everything phenomenology has established about the body, and not the soul, as the perceiving subject. Then why the appeal to Aristotle? If the appeal were a negative one, it would be more understandable. The way to a phenomenology of touch (or of perception in general) would be by diametrical opposition to Aristotle. For instance, the Stagirite maintains that the hand is the first tool, the tool of tools, the tool that uses other tools (*De Anima*, 432a1–2). By calling the hand a tool, Aristotle is placing the hand on the side of the object; the subject, the user of the tool, is further inward, the soul. The soul uses the hand as a tool. For both Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, the tool can be incorporated into the body. Not only the hand, but even the tool is on the side of the subject and can be called the outermost hand. The hand is not the first tool; the tool is the last hand. For example, the blind man feels *with* the end of his stick; the stick is not simply a medium. According to Merleau-Ponty:

The blind man's stick has ceased to be an object for him; it is no longer perceived for itself, and its tip has been transformed into a sensory zone. The stick expands the capacity and range of action of the sense of touch. Otherwise put, the stick is the blind man's gaze. In the exploration of objects, the length of the stick does not expressly intervene and is not a middle term: the blind man knows the length of the stick in virtue of the position of the objects, rather than the position of the objects from the length of the stick. (1945, p. 167)

Here we have, in my view, the epitome of a carnal hermeneutics. It is an exemplary answer to the astute question posed by Richard Kearney in the first words of the first essay in the collection: what is the sense of sense? (p. 15). It is astute to realize that the senses themselves have a sense. As in the case of the sleepwalking Lady Macbeth, the eyes may be open but their sense shut. What then opens the sense of a sense? It is the body, provided the body is taken as truly human flesh and not just a material mass. The human body is that *with* which we perceive, not merely a mass that transfers excitations to the soul, not that *through* which the *soul* perceives. The use of tools makes this perception with the body more evident. If the end of a stick can be a sensory zone, if we

can perceive with a stick, then a fortiori we can perceive with our hands, provided those hands are understood in the proper sense, the sense that a carnal hermeneutics would set out to describe.

Merleau-Ponty says that the theory of the body is already a theory of the perceived world (1945, pp. 239, 529). To know the body is already to know something about the world it perceives. That expresses, in my view, one way to understand the stated theme of this volume of collected essays. As already mentioned, the theme is the “surplus of meaning” arising from our embodiment. The surplus is precisely a matter of the meaningfulness of the perceived world. It is to the credit of *Carnal Hermeneutics* to bring out so much of the richness of that surplus meaning.

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