

Book Review

Richard Kearney, *Touch: Recovering our most vital sense*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2021.

From the sharpness of pain, through which we learn to avoid harm, to the pleasure that convulses lovers when their ‘senses and soul’ mingle in ecstasy (Diderot), touch, as Richard Kearney argues, holds a strong claim to the title of being ‘our most vital sense.’ Dualist that he was, René Descartes did not hesitate to reduce the ‘noble’ sense of sight to tactility, comparing sight to a blind man’s stick probing the environment in order to avoid stumbling (*La Dioptrique*). Puritan that he was, the New England divine John Cotton praised the supreme sweetness of the nuptial bed (*Marriage sermon*, 1696), much like Diderot, who considered erotic touch to yield ‘the greatest happiness imaginable’ (*Le rêve de d’Alembert*). And like Diderot, Cotton rejected chastity along with forced marriages as contrary to God’s plan. Descartes, Cotton, and Diderot all agreed that ‘our most vital sense’ is a radiant wellspring of innocent and necessary pleasure. What has changed? A key question raised by Richard Kearney as he probes touch philosophically is to identify contemporary threats to sensorial wellbeing: what novel, modern forms of dualism and puritanism have emerged to exile us into a cruel wasteland of ‘excarnation’?

Kearney’s powerful meditation aims at initiating a new vital wisdom of sensorial groundedness based on tact and savvy, flair and insight. The book unfolds through three distinct phases. First, Kearney patiently deploys the methods of classical phenomenology to provide us with an exquisite *description* of the rich manifold of tactile experiences forming the general groundwork of his subject. In a second phase, Kearney welcomes a wide array of exploratory efforts, ranging from psychoanalysis to empirical studies, in order to focus on the therapeutic capacities of touch. Kearney’s third and culminating phase calls for a new philosophy of dynamic engagement and tactile recovery. As we shall see, by moving us through these three consecutive phases, Kearney initiates a veritable ‘turn’ within phenomenology, to be numbered alongside the many other ‘turns’ that have marked the adventurous career of this branch of continental philosophy: from the turns within the founder Edmund Husserl’s own development, to the ontological turn of his disciple Martin Heidegger, the existential turn of Jean-Paul Sartre, the turn to the lived body in Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the ethical turn to the other in Emmanuel Levinas, the hermeneutical turn of Paul Ricoeur, the turn to the self-apprehension of Life in Michel Henry, and the ‘theological turn’ of Jean-Luc Marion and others.

Let us look at some of the key points in each phase of Kearney’s argument. As he himself explains, the book opens with a descriptive appreciation of touch that is rooted in Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of perception* (1944): ‘Merleau-Ponty is arguably the most important of these thinkers for our

purposes, as he explicitly focuses on the phenomenon of touch. For him, there is no dichotomy between subject and object, such that human beings would be either wholly active, at a safe distance from things, or passively powerless at the mercy of the world' (47-8). The key to Kearney's elegant and effortless description of tactility is that he applies the classic methods of phenomenology—Husserlian *epoche* and Heideggerian mining of *die Sprache*—for the purpose of unveiling the reciprocal character of touch. Whatever we touch 'touches us back' in a more immediate way than we experience in the case of the 'higher' senses. Enlisting Diderot, who wrote that 'sensations are all a diversity of touch' (*Le rêve de d'Alembert*), Kearney goes on to show that the reciprocity of touch belongs to taste, smell, hearing, and sight as well. As our 'most vital sense,' touch thus yields a general notion of 'tact,' Kearney argues, which we call 'savvy' in the case of taste, 'flair' in the case of smell, 'resonance' in the case of sound, and 'insight' in the case of vision. 'Tactful perception—across all the senses—ensures a proper relation of mutuality between perceiver and perceived' (16-17).

Citing Merleau-Monty's 'novel step of applying the phenomenology of touch to the question of healing,' (48), Kearney now transitions to the rich *problématique* of touch and trauma. Kearney's method, here, is one of subtle *hospitality*: ancient myths of 'the wounded healer,' psychoanalytic anecdotes, and a wide variety of empirical studies are promiscuously welcomed and addressed with a loving host's 'light touch' that keeps us from being 'bogged down' into any one perspective. The temptation to evaluate these various approaches critically is deliberately eschewed. No tedious linear argument is developed. Instead, we play with 'data' by 'handling' possibilities lyrically rather than subjecting scientific claims to rigorous examination. The point is that the *phenomenon* of human interest in touch and trauma reveals a place of existential *malaise* but also an unquenchable human hope. Kearney's 'hospitable' method coaxes us gently into becoming newly aware of our bodily presence to the flesh of the world. The reader undergoes a subtle but very real shift—away from an anxiously cerebral concern over judging what is 'true' to a bodily comfort with pain and healing. Kearney's eclectic second phase does not 'instruct us' about biochemistry so much as stimulate us to let go of our addiction to cerebral mastery by inviting us to plunge deliciously into a lake or frolic in the forest.

Throughout, Kearney draws dichotomies for the sake of discussion. In the opening section, Platonic/Neoplatonic rationalism, which sets sight above touch and logical ideality above physical tokens, is contrasted to Aristotelian empiricism, which celebrates hylemorphism as the very doorway to eternity. In the section on touch and trauma, in turn, Kearney contrasts 'Hippocratic' medicine to 'Asclepian' medicine. The Hippocratic model privileges analytics and tends by its rational momentum to isolate symptoms from their context and to treat them through chemotherapy. The Asclepian model adopts instead a holistic approach to living organisms that are immersed symbiotically in a wider vital environment—so that lakes and forests, dogs and horses, are

immediately therapeutic. Implicitly, Hippocratic medicine has 'lost touch' with the healing power of human touch, replacing it with pills and technology. Does this point us to the emergence of a new, Victorian-era 'puritanism,' born of a distinctly industrial and modern *prudery/prurience*? Although Kearney does not mention it, the invention of the stethoscope in 1819 by the French doctor René Laennec (1781-1826) supports his argument. Out of prudery, Laennec ended the practice of bringing his ear close to the patient's chest in order to listen to her heartbeat. Prosthetic technologies, driven mainly by modernist prestige and markets, have bred a new 'dualism' and 'puritanism.' The more 'advanced' a society is, the more it relies on technology, developing a rhetoric of scientific 'measurement.' And the more crowded our cities grow, the more we avoid rubbing shoulders with 'strangers,' developing a rhetoric of 'hygiene' and 'privacy.'

After exploring the loss of human-to-human touch in medicine, Kearney turns to the pressing question of human-to-robot interaction. How rapidly is human-to-human touch becoming marginalized, replaced by digit-to-screen sensations? In this final section, Kearney invokes the dialogical character of an inter-generational seminar in order to pioneer a new kind of phenomenology based on dynamic engagement. In enabling students to articulate their daily experiences of avatars and cyborgs, shimmering screens and 'social' media, Kearney teaches us to hear the voice of entirely new languages. This goes deeper than sociology or cultural studies, for he draws imaginatively on ancient religious forms of 'witnessing' and also on the methods of Pragmatism, as developed over a century ago by William James (1842-1910) and John Dewey (1859-1952). Recognizing James and Dewey to have been phenomenologists *avant la lettre*, and to have diverged from Charles Sanders Peirce's 'Pragmaticism' in a way that resembles Husserl's divergence from his own first approach, Kearney reinvests phenomenology with the distinctive resilience of Pragmatism.

Thus without relinquishing the refinement of classical phenomenology, Kearney empowers phenomenology to step beyond description and to assume a freshly active, creative role in prescribing new venues of healing and recovery. Rather than a 'theological' turn such as was initiated decades ago (and to which Kearney made remarkable contributions), Kearney now initiates what we might term a 'hospitable' turn in phenomenology. Will 'hospitable' phenomenology step away from contemplation and put an active shoulder to the wheel? Will it help us to recover 'tact,' and shape a more humane future in which daily wellbeing is vigilantly appreciated and cultivated and in which warmer relationships transform the workplace and our institutions? Nothing less is at stake in Kearney's deceptively modest and deeply radical manifesto.

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