Thinking of the Body — The Body as Unthinkable
Affect, Touch, and Vulnerability of the Body as a Challenge to Religion, Politics, and Understanding

Workshop Series at Ruhr-University Bochum
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Organized by Rebekka A. Klein and Calvin D. Ullrich

In our unprecedented times, the body as a phenomenon has issued its own *cri de cœur* for the fragility and vulnerability of life. No longer is the body a *topos* for thought within the confines of the academy only; not least, our pandemic age has created a fissure, impressing itself with a force of an opening in a continuous line from nature to politics, the religious, and onto our very own bodies. Indeed, we have grown accustomed over the last two years to projections of sickly bodies in hospital beds or body-bags and have read the numbered bodies and the body-counts. Many have encountered what seems like an infinite loneliness, cut-off in longing for the touch of bodily intimacy. The symptoms of other viruses have rendered the body politic transparent to the spectres of racism and homophobia but also of the governmentality over bodies, unprecedented since the early parts of the previous century. For the devout, the digitalization of the body has confounded attempts to obediently share and participate in the fleshly body. And although thinking the communal as a social body is rightly contested, it has become equally clear that community is not possible without the being-with of bodies; without their ‘inter-passion’ (Waldenfels) as that which moves beyond the mere calculability of physical coexistence. Moreover, the continual worsening of the ecological crisis also raises an awareness of the extent to which connectedness with our natural environment and all living things on this earth is a *condition humaine*. In order to perceive this earth again as a common and shared living world, one has to develop an attentiveness to what it means to live as a bodily creature. In this respect, the phenomenological study of the body as a phenomenon of lived experience, in its being of ownness as well as alterity, appears as an essential issue for our present moment. The corporeality of human existence has therefore to be depicted in an ambivalent phenomenality: metaphorically speaking, the body can be portrayed as an open window and at the same time as a terminus for a culture of fluidity and dispersal of life’s fundamental sense.

These provocations require, therefore, a yet more urgent thinking of the body as well as a thinking of its unthinkability and alienness. Indeed, to respond in our times to the body’s presence and absence means to answer *again*, which is to say, to answer from a distance and in a (miss-)recognition of the thing itself. It is to admit the tensity of what has been, and what still needs to be (un)said; for it is not only the case that much Christian theology, continental philosophy, feminist, psychoanalytic, and political philosophy, have concerned their insights with the conditions which make thinking the body possible, but also in their various iterations, have delivered intuitions from which the body seems epiphenomenal, ‘senseless’, and foreign — moving in resistance to the purview of thought or succumbing to a logic of marginalization. As Jean-Luc Nancy has shown, the body is always present in Christian metaphysics only as a body of meaning. It is a body that is always already sacrificed and “crossed-out”/“crucified” in the quest for its meaning, in order to constitute the mystical body for consecration and sharing. The thinking of the body can only be renewed by overcoming this fear of the meaningless—body inscribed into the hermeneutics of the flesh, which paves the way for modern culture. Therefore, what is calling is a body not only exceeding thought or escaping its confines, but also a body which presents an impossibility or even a monstrous gravity for thought: an unthinkable body that
might open alternative ways to articulate its relation to religion, politics, and understanding. It is to this tensity between “thinking of the body and the body as unthinkable” that this workshop is addressed.

The workshop proposes the foregrounding approaches to the body that emphasize its ‘material’, affective, and vulnerable dimensions. The contestation of these designations might be seen as the first arena to be investigated: i.e., on the one hand, the relation between the body’s biological being-there without a reduction to determinist essentialism, and on the other, the discursive production of forms which produce and sediment bodies in particular ways. Beyond furnishing debates between nature/nurture, materiality/culture, or epistemological versus ontological primacies, the workshop intends to explore how the cultural and biological are mutually implicated, shaping and forming one another. In this direction the recent work of neo- or new materialist ontologies (coined already in the 90’s by Braidotti and DeLanda) is instructive; seeking to overcome these dualities particularly, though not exclusively, as an extension and internal critique of feminist theory and practice. Though differing in their proposals — from the stronger ontologization of bodies and matter in Deleuzian neo-vitalism (Bennett, Manning, Massumi), to the co-constitution of matter and thought in so-called performative materialism (Kirby, Barad) — new materialist feminist ontologies share in their radical critique of anthropocentrism, humanism, idealist metaphysics, and constructivist approaches, while offering a ‘new’ philosophical orientation to matter that is dynamic, ‘agentive’, and ‘vital.’ These feminist materialist ontologies and a concomitant turn to theories of ‘affect’ thus produce powerful theoretical resources for the body that pose a serious challenge to both religious and philosophical ‘matriphobia’/‘materiphobia’ (Keller, Rubenstein). How is this challenge to be conceived and received? Might it not expand the still relatively unexplored terrain of a ‘materialist’ theology and politics? How should bodies inflected by complex processual ontology, develop the material sites of divine unfolding or place into question categories of political theory or the nature of the political itself?

However, an unwanted consequence of emphases that elevate the materiality of the body as such, could be that the thinking of the body recedes into the background. While the incredulity of post-Kantian philosophy is well-known from the perspective of new materialism (with its citational cues taken from Deleuze et al.), consigning the former to supposedly subjectivist, correlationist epistemologies, or the intersubjective practices of rational communication serving only to re-centre the human subject, it is still a question insofar as the body is concerned, whether a hard demarcation-line should be drawn here. Indeed, on the one hand, there is an emerging cross-fertilization with the recent ‘neo-Romantic turn’ in critical theory and new materialist approaches (Rosa, Henning, Bueno), and on the other, phenomenological contributions in dialogue with hermeneutics which, in the wake of Heidegger and especially Merleau-Pontian revisions and recoveries of Husserl himself, have sought ‘orientations’ of the body in space and time, and dovetail with the ‘materialist’ and ‘affective’ developments aforementioned (Ahmed, Schaeffer). Furthermore, despite a justifiable discomfort of a reduction of the world to our conscious experience, such a position need not preclude the fact that the world still nonetheless relates to us. Thus, on phenomenological and hermeneutic grounds, the growing emphasis in recent literature on the body, its corporeality, and the medium of touch, is a welcomed invitation to not only ‘think’ the body but also to come to terms with its unthinkability, alterity, and passivity. The recent interests of Richard Kearney’s “carnal hermeneutics”, as well as the theologically inflected phenomenology of Michel Henry and Emmanuel Falque, building on the former generation of thinkers including Merleau-Ponty, Levinas, and Waldenfels, are representative of a critical correction to theological
phenomenology’s excesses of transcendence and raise further questions about the potentials for theological and phenomenological dialogue.

Finally, one could also push this radical unthinkability further in an especially psychoanalytic direction, as recent scholarship from the Ljubljana school has demonstrated (Komel, Aumiller). In the Lacanian account of language, the Symbolic is never simply given but constituted through that which eludes and exceeds it. This non-linguistic materiality (the Real) which precedes the Symbolic, functions as an incontestable limit from which we derive our biological bodies, and as such its wholeness and plenitude come to be only in virtue of its absence or lack of meaning. Seen in this way, the body or matter as an absent but enabling condition for discourse formation, vulnerable yet powerful, asks whether a turn to a certain “haptic scepticism” (in the both the philosophical and theological traditions) becomes generative for revisable possibilities for religious and political formations. This radical unthinkable body as a challenge for the religious or political desire for disembodied truth, also recalls other more traditional deconstructive approaches, for which the body becomes a figure beyond understanding and thus inaugurates an ethics of difference (Nancy, Derrida, Stoellger).

The organizers thus invite participants situated within these philosophical-theological trajectories and concerned with the constellation of questions that are raised for the body in its affective, vulnerable, and touching dimensions, to an intensive two-day workshop held at the Ruhr-University Bochum, Germany, in order to engage in-person (but also with the contingency of the virtual) and thus in all the ambivalence of the body as a challenge for thought, religion, and politics.

Rebekka A. Klein and Calvin D. Ullrich