

Reaching for A Paradigm: Dynamic Embodiment

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For some time now in the social sciences, it has been a commonplace understanding at the frontiers of anthropology, sociology, and psychology, that human activity in everyday life is best conceived of as 'action' not 'behavior' (see Ardener 1973, Williams 1991). In addition, there is an understanding that human action is best framed in accordance with the ideas of practice, discourse, and embodiment.

In anthropology, by the 1990's this commonplace understanding was captured, but only in part, by Csordas's call for the adoption of a "paradigm of embodiment" (Csordas 1990: 5-47). The special feature of the new paradigm (that I will later refer to as the Csordas-Jackson paradigm¹) is that human action is centered in and constituted by human physical being. Physical being, here, refers explicitly to the subjective ("lived body") and not the objective (mechanical) body. The "lived body" means the body as it is perceived by human beings themselves—felt, experienced, and sensed.² The thread tying all three perceptual processes together is the *feeling of doing*. This paradigm and its special features were also embraced in sociology by Shilling (1993) and Turner (1984) and in psychology by Harré (1984, 1986, 1998; Harré and Gillet 1994) and Shotter (1993).

Note that the theoretical emphasis in both the anthropological and sociological versions of a paradigm of embodiment is on the *feeling* of the doing and not the doing itself. There is thus an omission of Harré and Secord's insight that, "If a thing...cannot move about then perhaps it is not a person" (1972: 110). Their point is realized in Merleau-Ponty's comment that "...no [human being] perceives except on condition of being a self of movement" (1968: 257). We are therefore entitled to be skeptical of the extent to which the Csordas-Jackson paradigm faithfully employs the existential-phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty. While it is certainly true that Merleau-Ponty's key idea of the perceived-body or embodied consciousness has been a major source of the somatic turn in social scientific theory, it is important to recall that the central principle which underwrites his concepts of the "lived-body," "intercorporeity," and "flesh" is the "self of movement."

Theoretical Enrichment

In this brief paper I will discuss an enrichment of the Csordas-Jackson paradigm in light of the approach to embodiment taken by Farnell and Williams. They contribute the idea that human action is best understood as a *dynamically* embodied discursive practice. The approach draws upon certain aspects of Susan K. Langer's philosophy of art as clearly seen in a brief excerpt from Langer's paper, "The Dynamic Image":

The dance is an appearance.... *It springs from what dancers do, yet it is something else.* In watching a dance, you do not see what is physically before you—people running around—*what you see is a display of interacting forces, by which the dance seems to be... driven....* [But] these powers [of the dancers]...that seem to operate in

the dance are not the physical forces of the dancer's muscles... [These human powers which] we seem to perceive most directly and convincingly *are created [by dancers] for our perception, and exist only for it* (Langer 1957:5; emphasis provided).

Farnell and Williams have constructed their theoretical standpoint by generalizing Langer's reference to the dance to all forms of *human movement*. In contrast to the theoretical approach championed by Csordas and Jackson, their interest is in the *moving* body, the doing itself, which may be felt by the performers.

The enrichment at issue here stems from the following principle: *the primacy of the signifying moving person*. Starting with the premise that all human action is the discursive practice of persons, I contend that Farnell and Williams are proposing a way of inter-connecting the three kinds of body-referenced "talk" that is found in social theory and in everyday life: "talk" *about* the body, "talk" *of* the body, and "talk" *from* the body.

I use the terms 'discourse', 'discursive', 'conversation', and 'semiotic,' interchangeably; together signifying some kind of semiosis in sociocultural life for the living and conduct of meaning. Summarily, I use the single word "talk" as a means to embrace all them. "Talk" is the most appropriate word to use here for two reasons. First, linguistics does not own the term since it has its location in everyday human life as it is ordinarily lived. Second, human life is lived from, through, for, and about meaning, and therefore it presupposes that meaning is shared, understood, and exchanged (though certainly imperfectly). "Talk" then can be used to gloss a semiosis whose medium of exchange is multi-modal.

The Csordas-Jackson paradigm presupposes that these forms of social theoretical discourse are separate and alternative approaches to embodying social scientific theory. There is even the suggestion, and at times more than that, that the discourses are incommensurable (see Farnell this issue, page 135). More specifically, in traditional disembodied social theory there is talk *about* the observed body (an objectivist intellectualist standpoint). In the predominate dissenting tradition of embodied social theory mentioned above, there is talk *of* the experienced body (a subjectivist lived standpoint). Finally, in dynamically embodied social theory there is "talk" *from* the moving body (an agentist enactment standpoint). (See also Farnell 1994, Varela 1994).

Farnell and Williams propose that we conceptualize the three forms of body-referenced "talk" as complementary moments of everyday social symbolic interaction (see Farnell 1994: 934-5). Each of the three moments can now be regarded as situated options that persons may take up in reference to themselves and/or others as they contextually see fit, according to their ordinary and/or professional interest. Central here is the idea that *the way human agency works is in terms of the signifying enactments of moving persons*. The varied discursive practices of semiosis are performatively grounded in, and conventionally a structuring of, a suitable region of the body that serves the purposes of meaning-centered socio-cultural living—such regions as the mouth and lips in speech, the hands in sign languages, and the whole body in forms of dance and such. The human actions that constitute speech-act

systems, action-sign systems, and any other forms of semiosis are the creative outcome of a primary generative act—signifying enactments from the body (Farnell 1999, Williams 2003).

The main thesis of my paper is that the paradigm proposed by Farnell and Williams is one way to realize the full significance of Merleau-Ponty's theoretical view of the human character of embodied consciousness. Another fruitful way to realize Merleau-Ponty's theoretical goals can be found in Ingold's "dwelling perspective" (Ingold 2000). I contend that it is not enough to focus on the feeling of the doing, as is the case in the Csordas-Jackson paradigm, because Merleau-Ponty himself was especially interested in the *doing* of the body. To illustrate how this might be the case, I briefly examine the concept of 'flesh' found in Merleau-Ponty's posthumous work *The Visible and Invisible* (1968: 145, 147, 157, 160-1, 208).

Flesh: Embodiment in a New Key

For Merleau-Ponty, overcoming Cartesian dualism (and its supposed philosophical heir, the Kantian transcendental ego) was the heart of the matter in the revolt against the intellectualism that gives us the objective body.³ Merleau-Ponty gave us, in effect, a post-Cartesian slogan, namely, instead of "I think therefore I am" we have "I can, therefore I am." Here is an incisive Faustian touch: in the beginning is the embodied act, not the disembodied word or mind.⁴ This dispositional concept of the 'I can' clearly refers to the idea of agency as a power, but this is not the old-fashioned power of the will. In *The Visible and the Invisible* (1968) in which the new concept of flesh is introduced, Merleau-Ponty makes a sustained effort to realize a key change in the philosophy of embodiment. Consider the following various characterizations of 'flesh.' It is, he declares,

1. "A general manner of being" [that is] (p.147)
2. "A power that is not a factual power"[thus] (p.160-1)
3. "A center" [that is] (p.145)
- 4 "A node of properties...[an] internal arrangement... extant by its own efficacy" [and so we have] (p.160-1)
5. "A pregnancy...a power of fecundity" [which is] (p.208)
6. "The formative medium of subject and object" (p.147)
7. [And by implication] the formative medium of subject and subject. (p.147)

If we are to appreciate what Merleau-Ponty was after here, we must first set aside the positivist rejection of the concept of causal relations between entities, with its preference for the concept of the mere regularity of events. We can replace it with a realist understanding of science in which causation is not merely correlation, but rather refers to causal entities as "powerful particulars" (Varela 1994:174-5). In action in the real world, causal relations are forceful particulars at work. Causation is, as Merleau-Ponty would have it, *a power of fecundity*, or as it is ordinarily expressed in the philosophy of science, *the power of production*. Efficacy is making things happen. And in nature there are different kinds of efficacious things: physical, chemical, biological, and, yes, human.

Consider two ideas in *The Visible and the Invisible* that would seem to underwrite the theme of the six quotations listed above, that "*flesh*" refers to the *primordial reality of causal powers in nature*. The first and central idea is seen in the remarkable comment by Merleau-Ponty that,

In a sense, if we were to make completely explicit the architectonics of the human body, its *ontological framework*, and how it *sees* itself and *hears* itself, we would see that the structure of its *mute world* is such that *all the possibilities of language* are already given in it (1968:155; emphasis provided).

The ontological framework is perhaps the very idea of human flesh, that *human bodies are agentic persons*. In this regard, note Merleau-Ponty's second idea.

But the actual body I call mine, [is] this sentinel *standing quietly at the command of my words and acts* (1968: 254; emphasis provided).

I believe that we have here the suggestion that the embodiment of agentic persons enables them to use their physical being (themselves)—via the acquisition of techniques, skills, rules—to move meaningfully throughout the worlds of nature and culture. Contrary to Merleau-Ponty's way of *stating* it, but in keeping with the import of what he says, we can phrase this as follows: instead of saying "the subject is his body" we could say "the subject *becomes* his/her body." Initially, "the subject is the organism," for, indeed, since the 'body' is the indexical site of the person (see Varela 1995: 279-82, Urciuoli 1995) developmentally, the organism becomes a body as the individual is becoming a person.

Concluding Remarks

It is certainly revealing and intriguing to note that in *The Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty declared that "There is no *experience* without *speech*, as the purely lived-through has no part in the discursive life of man" (1962: 337; emphasis provided). Madison, the eminent Merleau-Pontian scholar, has indeed claimed that Merleau-Ponty abandoned the primacy of perception for the primacy of language. He sums up this change by saying, "Being that can be perceived is language" (Madison 1992:244). It is therefore not the case that the Cartesian claim that 'minds intend' can be overcome by the counter-claim that it is 'bodies' which 'intend', not ethereal 'minds'. I would argue that neither minds nor bodies intend, only *people* do. And people do so because as embodied persons they are causally empowered to engage in social and reflexive commentary with the primary resources of vocal and kinetic systems of semiosis provided by their cultural way of being human.

Merleau-Ponty's last work allows us to assert with some confidence that Williams's principle of the primacy of the signifying moving person is theoretically consistent with the notion of flesh as that "*primordial pregnancy*," nature's "*hidden powers of vegetation*" (1968: 9) as summarized above. Farnell, Williams and Merleau-Ponty are all emphasizing the embodiment of the *doing* and not simply the *feeling* of that embodied doing. The upshot of this special theoretical focus is the understanding that human

physical being is *moving being* (Farnell, in progress). In it is in this precise sense that it can be said that the paradigm of dynamic embodiment stands today as one way to realize the full significance of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of embodied consciousness.

Endnotes

¹ See Varela 1995 for critical discussion of Jackson's approach to embodiment and other uses of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology.

² As Hertzfeld (2001) and Ingold (2000) are currently urging in this regard, the body sensed must presume all of the senses.

³ Note a recent commentary on this point. "Merleau-Ponty's use of the Schneider case demonstrates that.... One is always the subject-body and is never an ethereal, free-floating transcendental ego" (Primožic 2001: 22).

⁴ I refer here to the following statement from Goethe's *Faust* (cited in Duranti's *Linguistic Anthropology* 1997: 214):

It is written: "In the beginning was the Word!"
 Even now I balk. Can no one help?
 I truly cannot rate the word so high.
 I must translate otherwise.
 I believe the spirit has inspired me
 and must write: "In the beginning there was Mind."
 Think thoroughly on this first line,
 hold back your pen from undue haste!
 Is it mind that stirs and makes all things?
 The text should state: In the Beginning there was Power!"
 Yet while I am about to write this down,
 something warns me I will not adhere to this.
 The Spirit's on my side! the answer is at hand:
 I write assured, "In the beginning was the Deed."

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