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by Sabine C Koch, Thomas Fuchs, Michela Summa and Cornelia Müller (eds)
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What is This?
Book review

Sabine C Koch, Thomas Fuchs, Michela Summa and Cornelia Müller (eds)
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As the editors announce in the introduction, this volume brings together contributions from different disciplines on the phenomenon of body memory, understood as ‘the totality of the embodied subject’s dispositions, which allow the person to react to present situations and requirements on the basis of past experience’ (p. 2). The first part of the book presents contributions from phenomenology, the second part from cognitive science and the third part from ‘embodied therapies’, namely, therapeutic practices, which somehow include movement practices and different bodily techniques (such as Mindfulness, Authentic Movement, Dance/Movement Therapies, Focusing).

This division reflects the threefold aim of the book: to clarify the phenomenon of body memory, to develop empirical approaches from an embodied perspective and to discuss the implications of this embodied perspective for the field of therapy. Some of the central questions that the book seeks to address are as follows: What is body memory? Is the concept of body memory a useful one? How can body memory be measured? When and how does body memory become explicit? How can therapists access body memory in order to efficiently treat individuals? We shall review each individual book section in turn to assess whether the volume successfully answers at least some of these questions.

Review of Part I: ‘Contributions from Phenomenology’ (by Giovanna Colombetti)

The first section of the book is primarily concerned with the question of what body memory is. Thomas Fuchs characterizes it as a set of acquired bodily dispositions and skills that tacitly influence one’s present experience and behaviour (p. 9). He distinguishes between various forms of body memory, such as procedural memory, interpersonal memory, pain memory and traumatic memory. Procedural memory is the disposition spontaneously to recall sequences of movements when skilfully engaging in activities such as playing an instrument, dancing or playing tennis. Interpersonal memory refers to the disposition to interact in specific ways with other people. Pain memory refers to the disposition to relive painful experiences in certain circumstances, and can lead to psychosomatic illness; similarly for traumatic memory, which refers to the disposition to undergo particularly strong experiences (such as panic attacks) when confronted with situations that resemble former traumatic circumstances.
It is certainly important to point out that the body, in virtue of its history and accumulation of experiences, has acquired tendencies (not only sensorimotor but also affective and interpersonal ones) that enable it to respond spontaneously or tacitly – that is, without the intervention of conscious or explicit control. The body, as Fuchs and many other contributors to this first part of the volume emphasize, is a historical entity, and its past influences its present as well as its future. The notion of body memory in particular alerts us to the fact that memory is not just the recollection of the past, but a present condition that affects every moment of our existence. Every body has its own memory, which keeps changing to incorporate new activities and experiences. To use a Husserlian term that recurs frequently in this part of the book, body memory involves the sedimentation of many experiences in the course of the body’s history (incidentally, it would have been good to see the notion of sedimentation discussed in more detail in this part of the book, with more attention, for example, also to the Merleau-Pontian idea that bodies have a prehistory, and a trajectory that is not reducible to experience).

To speak only of dispositions, however, runs the risk of reducing body memory to something unconscious and purely ‘automatic’. Disposition is a quintessentially behaviouristic notion, and as such is not meant to refer to, or even imply, a conscious or lived experience. Various contributors to the volume mention this worry in response to Fuchs’ approach, and then proceed to elaborate this point in different ways. Maxine Sheets-Johnstone in particular draws on Luria’s notion of ‘kinetic melody’ (the experience of a structured kinetic event) to develop her own conception of kinaesthetic memory (note that this contribution repeats arguments already presented in Sheets-Johnstone, 2003). Kinaesthetic memory is the recollection of one’s own body moving, and of how specific movements feel. It plays an important role, Sheets-Johnstone suggests, in enabling people to remember sequences of movements when performing a choreography for example, or more generally when learning any complex movement. Sheets-Johnstone’s discussion is a useful reminder that the lived or experienced body (the Leib, rather than the Körper or the body taken as a physical object) is not just the entirely ‘transparent’ (i.e. unheeded) body that ‘forgets itself’ as it acts in the world. Rather, the lived body also includes a variety of bodily sensations – kinaesthetic sensations, and more besides (e.g. visceral sensations).

The idea that talk of dispositions does not accurately capture the phenomenology of body memory can also be developed in relation to, specifically, pain and traumatic memory. This is a point that none of the contributors to this part of the volume explicitly addresses, so I shall briefly elaborate on it. To talk of pain and traumatic memory only in terms of non-conscious dispositions overlooks the dramatic changes in consciousness and existence that pain and trauma bring about. It is profoundly misleading to talk of pain and traumatic memories as ‘non-conscious’ until a specific past pain or trauma are re-experienced. If that were the case, the difference between traumatized and non-traumatized individuals would consist only in the frequency of episodes of conscious panic, or similar (likewise for pain). Yet, it seems more appropriate to say that traumatized and non-traumatized individuals live in very different worlds. Pained and traumatized individuals do not necessarily undergo specific conscious experiences of pain and trauma all the time; however, pain and trauma affect their existence as a whole, influencing how they relate to their own body, other people and objects and situations in the world. As Heidegger ([1926] 1996) might have put it, pain and trauma are specific ways of being attuned to the world (specific ‘moods’, in his terminology). Even more aptly, we could say that pain and trauma are existential feelings (Ratcliffe, 2008), that is, ways of being bodily in the world that influence the kind of affective experiences one has and can have. Like Heideggerian moods, existential feelings are ever-present, inescapable features of human existence. Unlike moods, however, existential feelings are also clearly bodily feelings; more specifically, they are feelings in which the world is experienced in certain ways through the body. From this perspective, a pain memory is not just the disposition
to re-experience a certain pain under certain circumstances, but a broader and deeper existential condition that affects how one lives in the world, including how one experiences oneself and one’s body in it. Likewise for traumatic memory. A past trauma influences the perception of what the world affords in terms of actions and interpersonal relations; in particular, trauma often closes down and restricts the number of perceived opportunities for action and relationships. In this way, trauma can be clearly part of one’s experience even when it does not actualize itself in the form of a panic attack.

One thing that I would have liked to see in this part of the book, but did not, is an original and focused phenomenological characterization of body memory. If one has never heard of phenomenology, and would like to have a general idea of what it could contribute to the topic of body memory, then this first part of the book does the job. However, the various chapters of this part of the book tend to reproduce already existing phenomenological (primarily Husserlian) considerations about the body, without making any real effort to develop a novel contribution that pertains specifically to the phenomenon of body memory, fleshing out its uniqueness. While reading, I often had the impression that the topic of the book was just as an occasion to rehearse the contributors’ views on the body and bodily consciousness, without, however, engaging closely and distinctively with the phenomenon at stake (in some cases, it was even unclear how the discussion related at all to the theme of body memory).

Another weakness of this section is that it does not help the reader appreciate the relevance of phenomenology for other disciplines. How does this part of the book relate to the other two? Can phenomenology inform empirical research and therapy? If so, how? For example, Elizabeth Behnke in her contribution develops an account, in many respects interesting, of the experience of enduring. With this term, she refers to the reiteration of a style of coping with difficult past experiences that has become ‘one’s ongoing style of experiencing per se’ (p. 89). This style of experiencing affects not just present but also future modalities of acting in the world. In addition, Behnke describes what happens at the bodily level when a trauma is resolved; here, she emphasizes in particular that one regains a sense of kinaesthetic possibilities. But how exactly can these descriptions of experience inform therapy in productive ways? Likewise, once we acknowledge the phenomenon of kinaesthetic memory, for example, then what we do with it? What are its implications for psychology?

Review of Part II: ‘Contributions from Cognitive Sciences’ (by Dylan Trigg)

The comparatively recent pairing of phenomenology and the cognitive sciences has been regarded by some as a ‘rebirth’ of the method (Gallagher, 2012). Indeed, it is hard to doubt the contribution the cognitive sciences have made to phenomenology. Equally, the role phenomenology has played in contributing to cognitive sciences has been as vital. In each case, over the last 20 years, phenomenology and the cognitive sciences have converged in order to attest to the primacy of our embodied being-in-the-world. The realization that phenomenology (and phenomenological insights) can contribute to a scientific analysis has not only revitalized phenomenology as a method, it has also reconfigured the boundaries between philosophy and science (see, for example, Thompson, 2007).

It is against this background that the second part of Body Memory, Metaphor and Movement is situated. Indeed, many of the contributions in this section draw on the framework of embodied cognition and include such issues as implicit memory, embodied processes, emotions, movement and a final chapter considering some methodological issues at stake. These are rich themes, and in a short review, I will give a critical overview of only some of the chapters before turning to some broader issues at the end of my contribution.
The first chapter in the section contends with the question of body memory through considering the explicit and implicit measurements of body memory (p. 115). The chapter is a brief (5-page) excursion into various issues related to recent research, and while it provides a useful summary of this research, it does little to advance these debates. As we find out, the relation between cognitive psychology and body memory is something of an uneasy one, the author describing how the term would be seen as ‘something strange and maybe as an esoteric concept!’ (p. 117). The reason for this is because cognitive psychology focuses on the measurability of perception rather than memory. Indeed, the main critical focus of the chapter – albeit a tenuous one – is to ascertain whether the category of implicit memory can even be measured. The author speculates rather loosely whether ‘perceptual priming’ can be applied in such a method, but the chapter ends on an impasse in terms of querying if ‘implicit body memory’ cannot simply be a philosophical concept but also elevated to the status of an ‘empirical concept’ (p. 119).

A following chapter by Jung and Sparenberg is a focused analysis of cognition, embodiment and action. Here, the issue concerns how a human subject can respond to a given thing – a person, a situation, a glass and a sentence – such that their body acts in a particular way. The authors give an example of how ‘partners in a conversation imitate each other automatically and unconsciously’ (p. 142). How is such a mirroring possible? The authors survey various experiments that reveal some curious findings, such as when participants respond to a movement in the arm of a human being but not in the arm movement of a robot. Some of these findings are explained in terms of a requirement for predictability, ‘because it allows the selection of an appropriate response in advance of an anticipated event and is therefore more advantageous than simply reacting to upcoming events’ (pp. 144–145). In this way, action is regarded as a response to a time-lag between perception and the processing of a cognitive function (not least, memory).

In the latter part of the chapter, the authors turn to the issue of bodily intentionality via the theme of contagious phenomena such as yawning and the affectivity of facial expressions. After an excursion into various experiments, a tentative conclusion is that such ‘facial mimicry’ is due in part to ‘mirror neurons’, which were ‘presumably […] beneficial during the evolutionary process’ (p. 147). As with the other chapters, these findings are presented tentatively without really engaging with their implications. For example, the issue of evolution is employed as if it had explanatory value. To develop this relation between mimicry and evolutionary process, however, a much richer analysis of the themes in question would be needed. Indeed, while the chapter states its aim as providing a ‘snapshot’ of recent research (again, a pattern common to many of the chapters), there is an abiding lack of commitment on behalf of the authors to posit their own interpretation of the phenomena in anything other than a cursory way.

The 11th chapter is interesting, in that it returns to Fuchs’ account of body memory, which itself is an important contribution to the research, in order to ‘test’ it through interview data. Such questions include ‘Do you know the term “body memory”?’ ‘Can you give me an example from your own experience?’ and ‘What is your explanation for how “body memory” works?’ The results of these findings conform with the theories of Fuchs rather than depart from them. After a succinct summary of Fuchs’ theories (discussed in the first part of this review), Koch moves on to the various studies and results of her research. Among the results, negative and painful emotions tend to be more remembered than supposedly positive ones (a point that both Schopenhauer and Nietzsche were highly attuned to). Whereas these experiments reinforce Fuchs’ fundamental claims, some ‘minor’ suggestions are put forward in order to extend his taxonomy (p. 182). New subcategories are suggested given that a category such as ‘situational body memory’ is thought too broad to be helpful.

This is a helpful chapter in demonstrating how phenomenologically grounded research coexists alongside empirical research. However, like many of the chapters, it lacks critical attention to its
own framework. From the outset, ‘qualitative empirical testing’ is presented as ‘further validating’ theoretical work. But this very relation is not brought into question, but instead assumed as a methodological given. It is far from obvious to me (as someone working outside of empirical research) how information such as interview data plays a role as validating theoretical work.

The penultimate chapter of the section is the standout chapter for the reason that it considers a specific illustration of body memory, and thus demonstrates a thematic commitment lacking in the other chapters. The topic of the chapter is the issue of body memory in relation to the ritual practices in the Western Himalayas. The argument is made that ‘ritual performance plays an important role in creating and preserving memories, and in reinforcing social hierarchy and dealing with social suffering’ (p. 227). This thematically rich material stands in sharp contrast to the preceding chapters, and is a welcome interruption. Not only is the issue of the preservation of the past central to body memory, it would seem that body memory allows us an incisive perspective on this topic. The authors, I think, are right to approach this material by considering the body as something to be interpreted, given that the question of the pastness and the body is as much an issue of experience as it is critique.

After an engaging foray into anthropological accounts of the body, covering both figures such as Clifford Geertz and Merleau-Ponty, the reader gains a more specific sense of how the rituals are structured. At stake is a transmission of an already embodied skill through mimesis and Bourdieu’s notion of habitus (p. 230). In this way, rituals such as dance are seen as transmitting the past, in such a way that is peculiar to the body’s retention of time. The authors proceed to describe how such practices are inclusive owing to their collectivity. Such a conception allows us to critique less bodily oriented modes of memory, in terms of establishing or reinforcing boundaries between self and other, public and private. The epistemic advantage of body memory, as the authors present it, is that it blurs such distinctions through being situated in the in-between. There is much to say on this fascinating chapter that space cannot allow, but it stands out not only for engaging deeply within the phenomena in question, but for also eliciting insights from that investigation that shed light more generally on the ambiguities of body memory.

As indicated, while I found the penultimate chapter in this section to be of value, the bulk of the treatment of body memory from a cognitive perspective in this part of the book is largely problematic. My concerns are threefold, each point implicit in my comments. First, at no point did I find an interrogation of the role of data or experiments within the framework of phenomenology. This is especially problematic given that many of the entries in the section rely on data to ‘demonstrate’ their findings. The result of this is that a conceptual analysis of the role of empirical work is left untouched. With a phenomenon such as body memory – which is arguably a genuinely multifaceted phenomenon – this reduction of experience to quantifiable data risks undermining the specificity of the topic. This leads to my second concern. The chapters are marked by an overreliance on exposition, and, to echo the concerns of Colombetti, lack any kind of commitment to the production of original works of phenomenological inquiry. While there is undoubtedly a scholastic value in the review literature offered in the volume, such literature does little to advance debates, except in the most minor way. Finally, related to both these concerns, with the exception of the penultimate chapter, the characterization of the body throughout these chapters is united by a sense of uniformity and homogeneity. At no point is the body in its specificity – as anxious, happy, depressed, ecstatic, pregnant, possessed, haunted, and so forth – given attention to. Rather, what we have is the presentation of the body lacking diversity. Given the interdependent relation between affectivity, embodiment, and memory, this failure to attend to the heterogeneity of the lived experience of the body constitutes a critical oversight in this section of the book. Despite this, the fact that interdisciplinary research on body memory is thriving is a welcome prospect for attending to this oversight.
Review of Parts III and IV: ‘Contributions from Embodied Therapies’ (by Susanne Ravn)

For some years, my own research interests have centred on investigating how the practice-based insights of dancers and athletes can be explored in combination with phenomenological insights and – the other way around – how their practice-based insights can contribute to phenomenological descriptions. From the outset, I would therefore like to state that I do not work in the therapeutic field, but feel strongly connected to the methodological challenges concerning how researchers might bring practice-based insights into theoretical discussions. I find that there is huge potential in exploring how current descriptions, theories and discussions might be challenged, modified or reworked according to the cases presented from the site of practitioners. I was therefore excited to be asked to review ‘Part III: Contributions from Embodied Therapies’ in Body Memory, Metaphor and Movement.

There is no doubt that one could read the 10 chapters in Part III to gain a certain insight into which kinds of practices therapists work with and how these practices, according to the therapists, can induce changes for the client/student/patient. In this sense, the chapters show that therapists include embodied practices in different and interesting ways – and that the various therapeutic approaches draw on different definitions of body memory.

Two of the chapters in Part III stand out concerning the presentation of the methodological considerations – especially in relation to how the applied methods are presented in transparent ways. In Chapter 19, Panhofer et al. describe and discuss how body memory can be used in relation to a narrative approach. Theoretical considerations concerning the narrative as well as related concepts are presented in an informed way, and it is, accordingly, interesting to be invited into the different opinions and related discussions concerning if, or how, one’s experience has to be part of a personal ‘story-line’. The different ways of thinking about the narrative thereby form a theoretical basis for the reader to follow the authors when they indicate that further study is required in order to better understand ‘what impact processing through embodied perceptual practices such as movement, play and dance would have’ (p. 312) to narrative processes, and whether the embodied practices are to be considered a form of narration themselves. Based on convincing documentation, the authors bring awareness to how the use of metaphors becomes accentuated when the client is working with a combination of movement and narration, and how movement might present an alternative to language when telling one’s history – playing or coping with one’s memories.

In Chapter 25, Michalak et al. focus on describing the positive effects of practising Mindfulness in relation to depression. This is one of the few chapters in Part III where the actual practice is described, so that the reader can follow what has been done in the practice referred to as Mindfulness and how the empirical descriptions of these practices have been dealt with analytically. The authors bring awareness to how depression is also to be understood as possibly related to the establishment of bodily and cognitive feedback loops, which ‘lock subsystems into a self-perpetuating configuration that maintains depression’ (p. 400). The last part is, as the authors also state themselves, more speculative, but nevertheless interesting, as they present relevant questions for future studies and indicate new ways of dealing with Mindfulness in relation to the possible body memory of depression.

In the remaining eight chapters in Part III, there are serious methodological challenges, which ultimately create problems concerning how we are to understand and use the therapeutic knowledge and practice-based insight presented in the chapters. In most of these eight chapters, body memory is referred to and handled as if it can be revealed ‘on its own terms’ (e.g. Caldwell, Eberhard-Kaechele, Pylvänäinen and Shahmar-Levy, Kruithoff). It seems that body memory, implicitly or explicitly, is thought of as if the body were a lived entity storing past experiences in
its ‘inside’. For example, Caldwell in Chapter 16 states that all parts of the body form a network, and together produce the mind. Subsequently, this kind of network, named body, is to be ‘encoded’. In Chapter 18, Pylvänäinen defines body memory as ‘the name for the embodied information storage function of the body’ (p. 290). In other chapters, the authors refer to the body’s ‘natural knowledge’ (Chapter 21, Konopatsch and Payne) or state that the movers/client are requested and expected to move so that ‘one is true to oneself’ (Chapter 23, Koch and Harvey).

In the broad perspective of qualitative research, the chapters appear to present a relatively naïve methodological contradiction in how they describe body, movement and body memory in relation to the therapeutic situation. That is, on the one hand, they emphasize how, for example, traumatic events take place in relational and context-dependent settings. On the other hand, in the descriptions and references to the therapeutic practices, they appear to ignore that the therapeutic situation also includes contextual constraints and expectations concerning what to do (or not to do) – how to move and sense (or not to move and sense) being a client/patient/student (see, for example, McCormack’s (2003) critical discussion of a dance therapeutic practice). The implicit constraints and expectations related to the therapeutic situation might be beneficial for how past experiences can unfold. However, in a methodological sense, I would have liked to see a presentation of the settings and changing contexts of the therapeutic practices along with more thorough methodological considerations – such as how the actual group dynamics and the expectations of the participants influence the therapeutic process; what is the implicit request of being a ‘good client’; and how do the patients, who leave or end the therapeutic process without successful outcome, describe their experiences of the practice. Without such critical methodological considerations, there is a clear danger that descriptions and discussions end up being used in a circular argumentation. I will specify this point in the following.

Drawing on a specific kind of dance therapy, named Dancergia, Winther in Chapter 22 presents her therapeutic work and her work in teaching situations. By being a practitioner–researcher, exploring her own practice, Winther has, according to her own descriptions, access to an immediate experience of embodied memories and bodily expressions, and she is therefore able to describe ‘aspects of situations with a depth and empathic and bodily understanding that traditional forms of research would not be able to maintain’ (p. 354). However, besides the author’s statements, no further argumentation is offered for how the presented narratives should be ‘closer’ to the body (p. 355). The author does not appreciate that narration is itself a construction (as Panhofer et al. argue a few chapters before). Compared to the thorough discussion on observations and interviews, which can be found in the domain of qualitative research (e.g. ethnography, autoethnography, performance studies and action research), the author’s methodological considerations appear, at best, vague.

In Chapter 20, Shahar-Levy introduces her chapter by stating that she will present a theory, which she has developed. She emphasizes that her theory is not a scientific discourse, rather it revolves around how behavioural patterns and emotive body language develop from ‘core biological-relational prototypes’ (p. 327). Such statements, however, present, indeed, a challenging discourse of what and how the researcher can describe a phenomenon. The episodes from the therapist’s ‘diary’, which are then presented, are accompanied by the author’s reflection on the cases – according to her own theory. To be able to understand this theory, at a minimum the actual embodied practices need to be described along with some methodological reflections concerning the author’s dual role as practitioner and researcher.

In summary, it seems as if the eight chapters are focused on presenting ideas and theories which are more or less inherent to different therapeutic practices. Beyond Panhofer et al. and Michalak et al., it is difficult, however, to follow how the chapters in Part III contribute to the wider scientific descriptions and understandings of body memory. With respect to the central questions of the
whole book, the chapters in Part III in different ways show that therapists access body memory in order to efficiently treat individuals. How the therapists do this through embodied practices and how these practices might add to the descriptions and discussion of body memory is only scarcely dealt with. Furthermore, despite referring to phenomenological thinking in many of the chapters, it is very difficult to follow how phenomenological clarifications of important concepts have had any real importance for the discussions and argumentations presented in the chapters. Phenomenological descriptions are generally presented to link to a specific definition of body memory, as, for example, Fuchs’ characterization of the various forms of memory. With reference to one of the relevant questions raised by Colombetti, in her review of Part I, it is therefore difficult to see how phenomenological descriptions of experience have informed the therapeutic practices or the theories of these practices in productive ways.

The book ends with a separate concluding chapter by Summa et al., who state that body memory is a form of operative intentionality (p. 418) and that ‘it is worthwhile stressing that […] perceptual and kinaesthetic habitual memory at the same time opens up and limits our experiential possibilities, and this is the reason why it gives shape to an individual style of experiencing’ (p. 420, author’s emphasis). Along these phenomenological descriptions, I find it interesting that Summa et al. also consider how the Bergsonian concepts of ‘habit memory’ (Bergson, 1911) might correspond to the descriptions of body memory presented in the book. It seems relevant, in continuation with Summa et al.’s brief presentation, to remember that Bergson argues that body memory/habit-memory is not just ‘re-experienced’ – and nor does it work as a set of embodied dispositions, which can be recalled on ‘its own terms’. Rather, body memory/habit-memory is to be understood as a past unfolding in the present. It would, no doubt, be interesting if the researchers in the therapeutic field in the future could actively relate their practice-based insights to phenomenological related descriptions of body memory/habit-memory – and consequently include thorough methodological considerations concerning how the expectations of the therapists, the contexts of the therapeutic settings and actual culture(s) involved form part of what becomes performed and experienced as body memory in the therapeutic practices.

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