

**Thinking, Feeling, Being: Critical Perspectives and Creative
Engagement in Psychosocial Health**

10-13 September 2007

<http://www.dcu.ie/health4life/conferences/2007/>

The Body in Process

by John Keane

Postgraduate Student, DCU, School of Nursing

Embodiment.

In this paper I want to establish a conceptual framework that will facilitate us to understand the lived experience of those with chronic illness – in this I will investigate the situational body rather than the physiological body.

There are many theories and concepts relating to the body and concerning embodiment. What I am trying to argue for in this work is a notion of the body that includes its experiential connections. We must not forget that the body existed before any theory. Much of what is said about the body almost seems to suggest that the body is somehow dependent on the theory – that the theory is the basis of the body. To reverse this tendency and return to the processes that give rise to the concept is my concern.

The Interactive Perspective:

Eugene Gendlin asserts that western thought has a particular problem because of the primacy it lends to perception. Stephen Priest in *Merleau-Ponty: Arguments of the Philosophers* contends that Hegel, Sartre, Strawson and Wittgenstein all draw a distinction between being a person and an observing being.¹ Perception leads to an observational perspective that compares and contrasts what is regarded. Interaction from this perspective seems to involve two separate entities. Gendlin is reversing this tendency in his work.

In order to see the body as a process, Gendlin begins with interaction rather than perception. The body that physiology defines is something that is “for”, “before” or present “to” somebody – it is the body as perceived. Gendlin is not negating the power and importance of this kind of concept of the body. This perspective of the body has led to great advances in the field of medical treatment. But, there is a different kind of definition or concept of the body that is able to embrace our living body as it interacts with its environments. Gendlin tells us;

The scientific construction of the universe consists of precepts and precept-like patterns presented before us. It renders humans and animals as something presented – in a space before us (or before someone). But we are not the presented; we are the to-whom of the presented. The to-whom that is inherent in anything presented cannot be a presented datum. So we humans cannot find ourselves within the scientific picture, since it consists of presenteds. We seem to be only

¹ Priest, S., *Merleau-Ponty: Arguments of the Philosophers*, (Routledge: London, 1998), 248.

The Body in Process - by John Keane

the perceivers-of or constructors-of the picture, as if we were outside the universe, the perceiver that does not appear in the precept.²

The Inexpressibility of the Body; Merleau-Ponty and Cavell:

In *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry talks of the inexpressibility of physical pain. Arthur Frank also talks of this kind of inexpressibility. He tells of how his doctor spoke of his heart condition in a manner similar to a mechanic speaking about fixing his car, he continues: “My body is the means and medium of my life; I live not only in my body but also through it. No one should be asked to detach his mind from his body and then talk about this body as a thing out there... I must add that *I did not know what I wanted to say* or what I wanted the physician to say.... I’m not sure that what I wanted to say could be put into words.”³ Can we assist ourselves and others to find their own words? Gendlin tells us;

Merleau-Ponty rescued the body from being considered merely as one sensed thing among other sensed things (as it still is in physiology). For him the body, sensing from inside, is an internal-external orienting center of perception, not just perceived but perceiving.

That was a very big step in philosophy. Now let us move a step further. We have noticed that the body is not just an oriented center of perceiving, nor only a center of motions, but also of acting and speaking in situations.⁴

What might this possibility mean for the ill person, or for those charged with their care? If the ill person can begin to speak from his/her situatedness then this could empower them to speak with greater precision about how their illness is impacting upon their life. But, this is a very large step; let me first return to Merleau-Ponty.

While Merleau-Ponty rescued the body and its place in philosophy, he resisted all attempts to categorise or define its functioning. “Paradoxically, while celebrating the body’s role in expression, Merleau-Ponty typically characterizes it in terms of silence”.⁵ In the *Phenomenology of Perception*, he refers to the body as the tacit, silent and unspoken cogito. The body is the ground of all expression – it silently provides the context of our actions. Merleau-Ponty advocates silence as the means of addressing the expressive body. There is almost a Wittgenstenian quality in this ad vocation to silence.

² Gendlin, E., *The primacy of the body, not the primacy of perception: How the body knows the situation and philosophy*, from *Man and the World* 25, 1992.

³ Frank, A., *At the Will of the Body: Reflections on Illness*, (Mariner Books: New York, 2002), 10, 11.

⁴ Gendlin, E., *The primacy of the body, not the primacy of perception: How the body knows the situation and philosophy*, from *Man and the World* 25, 1992.

⁵ Shusterman, R., *The Silent, Limping Body of Philosophy*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, 151.

The Body in Process - by John Keane

Shusterman wonders about the motivation⁶ for Merleau-Ponty to develop this position and summarises it as follows; “In short, body consciousness effectively guides us in perceiving and navigating the world only when it is a tacit, unthematized, and unreflective sense of bodily self in the world, but not when it is a focused, self-conscious awareness of what is being felt *in* rather than *with* our bodily self”.⁷ The pre-reflective dimension of body consciousness is therefore emphasised and Merleau-Ponty warns against any reflective concretisation of this level of consciousness. His enterprise is “to return that world which precedes knowledge, of which knowledge always speak.” ... it aims at “relearning to look at the world” with this direct, prereflective perception and to act in it accordingly.”⁸

In order to speak meaningfully about such immediacy Merleau-Ponty speaks metaphorically, in doing so he is careful not to impose representations upon this realm of being. “To highlight the astounding powers of this unreflective level of perception, action, and speech, Merleau-Ponty describes it in terms of the marvellous, miraculous, and even the magical.”⁹

So where does this leave us? It returns to the “body” its philosophic significance. It allows us to think of the world beyond the separations of subject and object – beyond many of the traditional splits or dualisms of philosophy. But, it also returns us to a kind of experience of the world before rational categorisation.¹⁰ Merleau-Ponty has returned the realm of lived experience to centre stage.

In his work Cavell examines the question of scepticism by exploring the work of Descartes and Wittgenstein among others. Donata Schoeller says: “By emphasising an “experience” behind certain philosophical questions, which complex creatures like human beings are capable of having, he moves the topic into a very different context. Whereas the sceptical question is fixed on the objects, Cavell subtly turns the perspective of scepticism 180 degrees back to the subjects asking the question.”¹¹ Cavell argues that the sceptic’s context or perspective is one which must be exposed and one; ‘Which I describe as being sealed off from the world, within the round of one’s own experiences, and as one of looking at the world as one “object”’.¹² This deprivation of the ordinary forms of life or “isolation” is a constant theme throughout Cavell’s work. Already we can see a tension between the sceptic and Merleau-Ponty, who wished to return us to our preconceptual “lived experience”.

⁶ Shusterman contends that this position arises out of Merleau-Ponty’s idealized childhood. A stance that I find troublesome.

⁷ Ibid, 153.

⁸ Ibid., 159.

⁹ Ibid, 161.

¹⁰ I must stress again here that this work is not a polemic concerning the failings of rationality or of science – rather it is an investigation of alternative ways of experiencing or ordering our world.

¹¹ Donata Schoeller-Reisch, “Thinking Changes – Stanley Cavell and Eugene Gendlin” delivered 14th July 2007 at the “Process Model Colloquium”, University of East Anglia.

¹² Cavell, S., *The Claim of Reason*, 238.

The Body in Process - by John Keane

This objectification of the world by the sceptic is one that emerges from a particular perspective. A perspective that philosophers and many others have fallen into without even noticing. This perspective lends to the tendency to treat the world as an observed object. We have seen that Merleau-Ponty warned against such representations of our immediate experience.

Cavell argues that any question is asked within a context and that this context forms a part of the question. To ask a question in this kind of “isolation” (outside of its context) is a denial of the human condition. Schoeller puts it as follows; “The claim of conclusiveness, the autonomy of concepts so much celebrated in philosophy (and science) overlooks this experiential embeddedness of our behaviour and thought and thereby creates an isolation, which is also experientable.”¹³ This isolation has led to us being isolated not just towards the world but also towards language and its function.

Cavell is careful not to fall into the isolation of language. He is not willing to impose forms or conceptual frameworks upon the world he experiences. Cavell uses metaphorical language to avoid this kind of “isolation”. But he denies that his language is metaphorical, if by metaphor we mean to go beyond human agreement. Schoeller argues that Cavell can only reach towards this agreement in language by means of metaphor. Again we see a reoccurrence of the inexpressibility of our situatedness. Merleau-Ponty and Cavell point towards it metaphorically. Was Wittgenstein right? Should we remain silent about that which we cannot speak?

More than Forms; a return to lived experience:

So we have two eminent philosophers arguing for a return to “lived experience”, now I want to introduce Gendlin back into the equation. He tells us; “Today a thinking with more than forms is gaining ground. Although it is still widely considered impossible, more and more thinkers are calling for such a project. (See for example, Williams’ “thicker thinking,” Putnam, and Cavell.)”¹⁴

Can this thinking with more than forms assist us to define the body in such a way that the definition includes the body? How can we define the body so that the body can actually function in the definition? Gendlin holds that we can think with more than the traditional generalities i.e. from more than categories, conceptual patterns, universals, distinctions, abstractions, forms etc. In order to examine this kind of thinking, I will first explore some of Gendlin’s basic terms.

It is important to highlight that when Gendlin uses the word “experience”, he does so in a manner that differs from how the western intellectual tradition has¹⁵. Gendlin is distancing himself from a mode of

¹³ Donata Schoeller-Reisch, “Thinking Changes – Stanley Cavell and Eugene Gendlin” delivered 14th July 2007 at the “Process Model Colloquium”, University of East Anglia.

¹⁴ Gendlin, E., *Thinking Beyond Patterns: Body, Language, and Situations*, 23.

¹⁵ Gendlin would argue that the traditional view of experience gives us a subjectivised picture that carries with it an exaggerated sense of the power of rationality and conceptualization. This

The Body in Process - by John Keane

thinking that suggests that all intelligibility is obtained by the imposition of conceptual operations on sensation and sense perception. This is why he rejects the primacy of perception. Gendlin argues that this interpretation of experience is inconsistent by the fact that this interpretation always requires some kind of interaction between reason and experiencing which would be impossible if every kind of meaning or order emerged from the imposition of forms, and fixed patterns, and concepts, by reason on experience. Gendlin is arguing for a reversal of this philosophical tendency. We know however that experience does interact with our theories and concepts¹⁶. Experiencing possesses what Gendlin refers to as a “responsive order” – by this he means that experience is ordered so intricately that no amount of conceptualisation will ever exhaust its meaningfulness. It is also responsive in that it enables us to speak from this intricacy.

Gendlin is also referring to a mode of experiencing that facilitates us to operate in situations in such a way that we act, think and speak etc., in that situation in a manner that is relevant and appropriate to that situation. Experiencing is how we sense ourselves in the world – how we find ourselves “already-with” whatever we encounter in an implicitly understood way.

Some cognitive sciences ignore this kind of embodied meaning, a meaning that exceeds concepts, distinctions and symbolic forms. Gendlin enables us to recover this source of situational intricacy. This allows us to feel and think our way back into the immediate intricacy of our experience – this is a return to the situations out of which our structured forms and patterns arise.

When Gendlin speaks of situation, he is speaking of how we find ourselves in the world in such a way that the situation itself can function in our thinking. It has been traditionally thought that we can only speak of situations in the kind of generalities that Gendlin is trying to escape from. He tells us that; “When we think a situation, its whole past history functions in how we think it... We need not think the past details each separately. They function implicitly in how we think the situation.”¹⁷ We sense an entire multiplicity that informs and contextualises our situational sense. Now I want to investigate the theme of stoppages.

Stoppages:

Arthur Frank tells us; “The only way I could get my surgeon, a seasoned professional, to talk to me about the details of and alternatives to the operation he was planning (which was never carried out and would have been unnecessary) was to refuse to sign the consent form. In effect I denied his denial.”¹⁸ In focusing¹⁹ circles the word “revolutionary pause” is often used.

Gendlin says: ‘Today, in the West, society no longer gives the

exaggeration distances us from viewing how life is actually lived i.e. life as it is lived and breathed.

¹⁶ See *Experiencing and the Creation of Meaning*.

¹⁷ Gendlin, E, *Thinking Beyond Patterns: Body, Language, and Situations*, 88.

¹⁸ Frank, A., *At the Will of the Body: Reflections on Illness*, 102.

¹⁹ Focusing is the practice that Gendlin developed out of his philosophy.

The Body in Process - by John Keane

individual any one scheme or set of forms with which to interpret experience. The individual is aware of many different, contradictory, and unrelated forms and schemes. Thus he has come to confront life and experiencing directly.²⁰ Frank was confronted by a conventional system, with its own rules and language. He was clearly uncomfortable with this system and stopped how it impacted on him in the only way possible i.e. he refused his consent. This stoppage allowed him to enter into the intricacy of his lived experience. He was assisted in this by the doctor who was now able to relate to him at a more profound level. Frank tells us; "His knowledge and experience helped me, but this help came only after I had hit him with the only two-by-four a patient has. Or perhaps, in the inverted world of hospitals, my not signing permitted him to have the kind of contact he would like to have with patients but cannot justify."²¹ Frank was lucky that his understanding was carried forward with the assistance of his experienced doctor. His earlier experience when he had a heart attack was different. This doctor reduced his experience to pure mechanics. What does the ill person do in such circumstances? What I am pointing towards here is the possibility of a stoppage that can assist us in negotiating great intricacies and assist us in acting and speaking from that intricacy.

Illness confronts the individual with a greater level of intricacy. Existing schemes and concepts may do little to carry forward the experience of the chronically ill. As Gendlin puts it – they are forced to confront experience directly. The stoppage can assist in returning the chronically ill person to the immediacy of their experience and in finding novel and creative ways of carrying that experience forward.

A Process Model: A Body that can carry its own ongoingness:

In *Thinking Beyond Patterns*, Gendlin argues that language, situations and the body are all implicit in each other. I contend that stoppages can enable us to enter into our interactional intricacy in such a way that we can sense the intermeshing of these seemingly separable entities.

Stoppages are an expression of the problems that we face as human beings – they are events that occur in situations that confront us with a problem.

So let me now introduce an aspect of Gendlin's theory and explore whether it can assist us in opening this intricacy further. In *A Process Model*, Gendlin forwards a concept of the body that is not a machine. "The body (when a process stops) is what continues; it is the other process."²² In stoppages certain processes stop – the body is what continues – it is the ongoing process. This allows us to think from the body in such a way that body and situation and environment are not separate entities but are interaffecting processes. The environment and situation affect the body and

²⁰ Gendlin, E., *Experiencing and the Creation of Meaning*, 4.

²¹ Frank, A., *At the Will of the Body*, 102.

²² Gendlin, E., *A Process Model*, 18.

The Body in Process - by John Keane

the body in turn affects the situation and environment. Change is implicit in this kind of stoppage in that what continues (i.e. the body) is different than if there were no stoppages. Frank's stoppage altered the course of his medical treatment. This stoppage, however, simply doesn't fall away.

For Gendlin there is no clear cut-off between the body and environment or situation, he tells us that the processes and subprocesses of the body occur in a much larger system than in the materially extended observable body. "The body is not only what is inside the skin-envelope."²³ The body is in process with its environment and these processes are not restricted to the materially concrete; "the body is not just a structure in space and time"²⁴, he tells us. The body generates itself in the environment and out of environment – Gendlin asserts that it is in some way artificial to distinguish between body and environment. For Gendlin, living things are not made from separable parts – he is trying to develop a kind of concept for living things where the living thing not only "is" but also "implies-forward". This implying is always of something that has not yet happened but is a possibility within the living being's environment or situation.

What Gendlin is alluding to is a different sense of bodily processes than what is derived from the perception or spectator models. "The spectator could formulate complete and distinct strings of separate processes, for example, digestive, respiratory, reproductive etc. These are not separate all along their way, nor are their subprocesses at the microscopic level."²⁵ Gendlin is arguing that these processes are "originally and inherently coordinated". When a process is stopped – the body lives without it, if the process resumes – it does so with the body and not separate from it. The processes may seem separate but they are separate only in the phases of their stoppages. "When one defines separated processes or bodily "systems", their interactions may be puzzling. They are often much more coordinated and affect each other mutually in more ways than one can account for."²⁶

If we look at Frank and his two experiences of illness we can see some of what this means. Frank's heart attack impacted on his life and caused a stoppage to some of his body processes. These stoppages were short lived however and the unchanged implying was soon restored to the ongoing process (the body). His cancer however caused some more profound process stoppages and the ongoing process (the body or organism) had great difficulty in continuing with these unchanged implying. Indeed Frank says; "I may have bounced back from a heart attack, but with cancer I was going to have to sink all the way through and discover a life on the other side. Cancer was not going to be an incident; I would have to experience it."²⁷ If the stoppage resumes – it resumes in a changed organism and the resumed

²³ Gendlin, E., *A Process Model*, 26.

²⁴ Gendlin, E., *A Process Model*, 27.

²⁵ Gendlin, E., *A Process Model*, 21.

²⁶ Gendlin, E., *A Process Model*, 21.

²⁷ Frank, A., *At the Will of the Body*, 28.

The Body in Process - by John Keane

process won't be as before either.

Gendlin is contending that in developing a theory based on living beings rather than the observation of living beings, language can begin to speak in situations in such a way that it is not “merely clothing” or an indecipherable private language but that language can indeed begin to speak from the situation itself. I like to see the body in this role as a kind of mediator – it forms the bridge between language and the situation (in saying this I am not instancing a distinction between body, language and situation but I am contending that the body can facilitate the emergence of language in situations).

Language as such does not arrive from nowhere, nor is it imposed upon behaviour; rather the interaction of language, body and situation enables us to speak from a relevance that fits our different forms of life. ‘The body implies, and comes up with, our words and actions. It knows (senses, feels, is ...) the language and the situation. All day long, it is as a bodily sense that we know what we do and say, what situation we say it in, and how it makes sense’.²⁸ This becomes clearer when our words don't fit – when this happens we pause and attempt to rediscover the body sense or situational sense of what we are attempting to say.

There is a reflexivity implicit in Gendlin's interactional sense of body, language and situation. ‘Body, situation, and language imply each other, but that means we cannot do with less than all three. The functions of the human body are not reducible to those of a separated language and a separated situation. The body provides the focal implying, without which there would be not be situations or language’.²⁹ I believe that this kind of reflexivity satisfies Cavell's call for us to always hold the context when we ask a question or define an element of the human condition. By including the situation and facilitating language to speak from that situation we can see that language can actually begin to speak from the situation and in a manner reminiscent of Wittgenstein i.e. words are not imposed but mean how they are used in the situation.

We are also left with the question of what Merleau-Ponty would think of this kind of corporeal intentionality. Would he still advocate silence or would the reflexivity implicit in the non-representational, pre-conceptual notion of corporeal intentionality that Gendlin describes satisfy his concerns?

Shusterman holds that one of Merleau-Ponty's main concerns was that in knowing or observing the body's intentionality we are prone to change it or impose representations on it that alters our relation to our body. In Gendlin's model, change is not imposed but emerges from the intricate (responsive) order of the body itself.

Now I invite you to stop and to sense if this concept of the body might be

²⁸ Gendlin, E., *Thinking Beyond Patterns: Body Language and Situations*, 104.

²⁹ Gendlin, E., *Thinking Beyond Patterns: Body Language and Situations*, 104.

The Body in Process - by John Keane

useful in your life and in your work?

This may be a good place for me to stop. Thank you for your attention.