

Bodies and Thinking in Motion

Body and World

By Samuel Todes

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Review by Tom Strong

...[t]he human body is the material subject of this world.
—Todes, 2001, p. 88

Western civilization has, for Samuel Todes, over-committed itself to the notion that body and mind are separate, seeing the latter endowed with the ultimate capacity to exert executive control over the former. Cartesian views of well being suggest potentials for God-like omniscience while demonizing the distorting senses. Whole psychotherapies and pedagogies follow from this view, that there is a world we can correctly align our thinking to and manipulate as we wish. Pesky phenomenologists have been contesting this view for some time. From Bergson through Husserl to Merleau-Ponty one finds increasingly persuasive arguments that ours is as much a felt experience as a thought of experience. Our bodies aren't enemies, they suggest, and may play key roles in helping us deal with the practicalities of life. For most of us these aren't reality-shattering perspectives but, historically, phenomenologists' accounts of experience have seemed to lack the kind of dynamism one associates with engagement in every day life. Their accounts don't reflect well how body and mind work *together* in addressing our participation in the world especially in how our participation can transform our experience and the world we interact with. This is especially the case in capturing a sense of human intentionality and need as it plays out in life's flow; instead most psychological and many phenomenological counts atomize the world in clunky perceptual frames inadvertently portraying humans in mechanical ways, like the movements of 'monsters' in 1950's horror films.

Todes' book, *Body and World*, has been an underground classic of sorts since he initially presented it for his Harvard dissertation in philosophy. Successfully defended two years after the regrettably premature death of Merleau-Ponty in 1961, Todes ambitiously took on the Cartesian view of bodily experience as it has been further objectified in Kant's idealized view of

universal experience. For the most part, the book is devoted to systematically and phenomenologically pointing out the shortcomings of this view. The book, finally published in 2001 (seven years after Todes' death), had been suggested to me by a number of colleagues and when *Janus Head's* editor (Robbins) indicated a reviewer's copy was available I took up his offer as some summer reading for my vacation. This book was anything but a relaxed read, but it offered considerable hard-earned rewards.

My reading of Todes' book was motivated by my longstanding interest in how people are capable of transcending suffering. If that sounds like I'm looping back to another variant of Cartesian mind-body mastery, this is not at all what I mean. As a therapist and therapist educator I've been quite interested in the collaborative and comfort promoting potentials of therapeutic dialogue. Todes' depictions of *intelligent bodies* transforming their experiences through interaction seemed intriguing given my therapeutic interests. But I should say from the outset that this is not a book written with therapists in mind. It is a philosophy dissertation, and the argumentation is rigorous and extremely dense. I'm a dabbler in philosophical ideas but came away percolating with ideas that Todes' dissertation and the three concluding appendices of this book (the final one written shortly before his death) stirred up.

The human perceptual experience Todes sets out to describe is anything but fixed, which is where Kant would have us. Todes' Kant saw the world as ideally knowable and that our perceptions of it were no different than the 'real' ideas we could develop in accurate alignment with it. One of Todes' major criticisms of Kant's view of perception is that it conflates experience conceptualized with experience perceived. Kant's humans, for Todes, move through the world more reliant on the cognitive maps they've made of the world than through use of perceptual checks and modifications-in-transit used in the course of making our way through it. Where Kant's world can, through initial trial and error experience, become pre-knowable and thus our map for making our way about, for Todes this is exactly where Kant begins to come up short. Missing is a way to account for the empirical nature of perception—how objects appear and then become more determinate for us or even surprises us as we approach them. Todes separates perceptual and conceptual ways of knowing. In Todes' perceptual realm we go through active processes of making things in our proximity familiar and navigable, or manipulable—or, in his word: "habit-able." That is, things change as we move toward them, interact with them, and put them behind us. Kant's

world, wrote Todes, seems static and unresponsive to human movement and interaction with it. But it is the body's part in re-dynamizing the experiences Kant rendered frozen that is Todes' focus.

Early on, he sets his challenge as follows:

In this book I seek to develop the view that we can understand the general but incomplete regularity of our experience only by understanding that it is the experience of a human subject having an entirely governable body that is, however, set in the midst of initially alien and ungovernable circumstances into which he must introduce order so that they may be livable and durably endurable. (Todes, 2001, p. 41)

Todes' initial groundwork involves a critical tour through the classic views on subjectivity articulated by Aristotle, trumpeted by (I think therefore I am) Descartes, but then 'fleshed out' in rather mechanistic and idealized ways by Leibniz (whose sense of rational-physical determinism with respect to experience is dismissed as "counterfactual" by our author) and Hume (for whom one has a 'dismembered' body).

Before pushing on to tackle Kant, Todes offers glimmers of his model of human being: as we move through experience we orient and respond to it with *poise*, ways of sensually *and* cognitively managing our affairs in our changing circumstances; we make our circumstances habit-able. Using the habits we develop in novel encounters, in later somewhat similar encounters, links what is learned in the initial encounter into further usable habits, or forms of poise. This is the stuff of conceptual knowing I described earlier, but with one key difference: the body is one with the mind in these habit or forms of poise—it is not enough to simply have an idea, the idea must be embodied in order for it to serve in the later encounters. Of course, these habits or forms of poise may be ill-suited for some seemingly familiar circumstances; Todes makes allowances for this where those of the classic view hadn't. For him, we need to constantly balance our perceptual and conceptual ways of experiencing, often adjusting the conceptual with what immediate perceptual learning can offer. We never go on to Kant's idealized auto-pilot, but more on that soon.

First, a few more words from Todes on his notion of poise: "Our poise is sensuous proof that the perceptual experience of our immediate future conforms to that of our immediate past, and without poise, no determinate perception is possible" (2001, p. 79). To make our world habit-able we

need to learn to calibrate our perceptions with how they test out for us as we move about and interact within our physical and social reality. What Todes builds to as he readied himself for Kant was a rejection of the classic view that bodies were merely material things in the world, no different from lettuce or rocks.

Where his critique of the ‘classic view’ brings readers 90 pages in to the book, there are a remaining 200 pages in store for Kant. For Todes, Kant “imaginizes” perception; that is, he places perception in a conceptual and thus empirically untestable realm. Todes takes great care in articulating the differences and linkages he sees between perceptual and conceptual knowing, ultimately painting Kant as an idealist, if not a dogmatist. His critique of Kant was largely derived from *Inaugural Dissertation* and *Critique of Pure Reason* and was quite focused on disentangling and making more distinct these two forms of knowing Kant articulated as one. One of the key experiences Todes points to as inadequately explained is people’s sense of *flow* in orientation and movement; and that gets even more complicated when one realizes that often, looking retrospectively, such flowing experiences can not be seen as pre-planned before their outset but are executed in extraordinary coordinations of perception and movement along the way. Kant’s theorizing hits a wall here; how can a pre-idealized concept of the world serve us in circumstances that change as we move about or interact within them?

Todes saw important, mind-body reasons for our ability to do such things. Our perceptual ways of knowing and moving help to satisfy needs we seek to meet in moving ourselves toward and within our circumstances. Our conceptual (or “imaginative”) ways of knowing are what we abstract from those experiences but here are Todes’ words: “By the imaginative character of the world, the human subject *represents* to himself *absent* conditions in the world. By perception of objects in the world, the human subject *presents* to himself *present* conditions in the world” (p. 135, italics Todes’).

Suppose, as is so common in life, that our idealized view of how things are supposed to pan out doesn’t fly and we have to ‘ad hoc’ (to use a Harold Garfinkel phrase) our way through the unforeseen developments? Do we impose our conceptual, categorized pre-learning on to the circumstances, thus making them so? Here is where our author both disagrees and agrees with Kant: yes, we develop categories to account for experience, but Kant’s mistake if you accept Todes argument is that there isn’t one set of correct categories. It now becomes clearer where Todes’ concerns about dogmatism fit in. But, by implication he isn’t just tackling Kant he is tackling a mindset

that is Kant's legacy of sorts, one still dominant in today's thinking.

Instead of Kant's life trajectory of discovering the world until we've got it right, and then using our past discoveries to make our way about, we retain our empiricism by turning to our perceptual ways of knowing and making our way about. That empiricism is *satisfied* through successful movements (a continuous inseparable dialectic between self and world), and in reconciliations with past forms of conceptual knowing. Put another way, our bodily felt needs-to-be-satisfied are essential to the orientations and coordinations that go with our engagement in varied circumstances. But these occur in a body inseparable from our mind. These movements are generally toward *anticipated* experiences but those yet to be determined in how we fare in them, and they are guided by our needs and sense of satisfaction—which aren't worked out like rational logarithms.

Whilst in movement we don't have the equivalent to Mission Control directing the movement of robotic arms. We don't lift our arm like we lift a stick. Our arms and legs, instead, serve us in making the many micro- and sometime not so micro adjustments that are coordinated—simultaneously—with other thought/felt-through aspects of our movement. Missing in Kant is a bodily experienced sense of the spatio-temporal dimensions of movement through life. We change the world in which we participate, too, Todes pointed out. Through perceptual knowing that makes circumstances habit-able we can also transform those circumstances, unmentioned social reality being the most blatant example. This, too, is part of our capacity for coordinated movements that may begin with particular anticipations but are very much improvised as our circumstances and we shift. Intentionality is re-fitted here into human action, but it is typically situated, responsively addressed action in meeting those intentions in circumstances that can't be controlled or fore-knowable in every detail.

The prose here, while mostly clear is very dense and written for other phenomenologically-oriented philosophers. Lovers of Kant beware; and, if you are wed to the idea that the world is ultimately knowable with foreknowledge that can be correctly applied to our circumstances you will also feel challenged or put off by Todes. Bearing in mind that this book was written in the early 1960's when Kantian idealism was so dominant in the social sciences and services, this is a remarkable book, and it is easy to understand why Xerox copies had to suffice until 38 years later an actual published version emerged. MIT Press is to be commended for the excellent introductions to Todes' work (by Hubert Dreyfus and Piotr Hoffman) and

its significance, and for the three appendices where Todes follows up on his original dissertation.

Standing back from the book (one quite different from those I usually read), a few things stand out. Todes can be seen as an interesting (albeit largely underground) contributor to the postmodern or constructionist view of 'local knowledges,' bringing a micro-experience perspective you won't find in the other mentioned perspectives. But the book bypasses entirely the fundamental human experiences of sociality and language—instead one could read Todes thinking that humans are hermits working out the meaning and efficacy of their participation in the world. The kinds of insights later hermeneuts and constructionists offer—that the categories we use to make our experience know-able and habit-able are accessible human and cultural constructions—were not available to Todes and while he doesn't go so far as to say that experience names itself in varied ways, accounting for categories that, in turn, account for our experience is not well explained here. So, it is not surprising to see Todes' deriving bootstrap implications from his analyses; people can simply change their categories, let go of their Kantian conceptions, and get more real.

Relating to this book as a therapist, I didn't gain a lot. His near-demolition job on Cartesianism makes the average Descartes-bashing one finds on self-help bookshelves look silly. And Todes, if we take him seriously, offers a very different basis for researching and intervening in the kinds of concerns one might associate with physical and occupational therapy. While neuropsychologists (not my field) burrow away into the still-exalted homunculus for that which purportedly controls everything, bodies continue to be treated as nuisances. The most useful part of this book for me was its critical attention to ideas that continue to dominate my field of psychology today. If Kant had been cryogenically frozen and we could bring him back today, he would generally be pleased to see the reigning primacy still given to a mind separated from bodily experience, and of a particular objective view of the world that denies diverse perspectives. Contrasting him with a then-contemporary Merleau-Ponty, Todes comes off as more attuned to things such as flow and coordinated movement of human experience: a movie where M-P offers great snapshots. I will close with a quote from the end of Todes' dissertation:

Our sense that all our experience presents or represents some way of meeting our needs is correlative with our sense that everything we can

think of, everything perceivable and imaginable, refers to some possibility of this world in which we have the needs we seek to meet. The unity of the world therefore lies in our sense of life, our sense of being an individual self-moved mover seeking to meet our needs. (Todes, 2001, p. 263)