

A Response to My Critics

Don Ihde
SUNY Stony Brook

‘Bodies, bodies, everywhere, one, two, three and more...’ *Bodies in Technology* is my 13th book and by now I think I have learned a few things about books and audiences. And I hope I can apply some of the lessons I think I have learned to my two very fine and different critics here. But first some context: This fall SPEP (The Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy) sponsored a symposium on publication in philosophy and three philosophy editors, one each from Routledge, Blackwell’s and Indiana University Press, presented their thoughts upon publication and current trends and problems. I found that meeting very enlightening on a number of issues.

One small section of the symposium was devoted to how an author could best persuade a press, in today’s hard situations, to get interested in publishing one’s book. All three of the editors emphasized strongly that *defining one’s audience* was an essential ingredient for selling one’s manuscript to a publisher. I blanched inside because one of the strongest lessons I have learned in publishing 13 books is that *I have never known whom my audience or audiences would be!* Beyond the confines of the once small ‘continental philosophy’ audience, the other audiences have repeatedly proven surprises. I did not know, for example, that *Listening and Voice* would end up having audiences amongst musicologists, communications and media people, and ethnomethodologists. Even worse, I aimed my *Instrumental Realism* at an audience which I hoped would include both Anglo-American, analytic philosophers of science and those few Euro-American ones who were my design audiences beyond the usual continentals. Instead, I got science studies, cultural studies, and history and philosophy of science interdisciplinary audiences and more in Europe than North America. Mine was a ‘designer fallacy’ when it came to results, not unlike a pattern I have so often detected in the history of technology. Many technologies end up being used for purposes and in contexts very far from the designer’s intent.

I cite this history because I already knew from past experience that I would not be able to predict who the audiences for *Bodies* might be. My critics here are already pointing in directions which exceed or differ from my design intentions. But one of my earliest subjects of study, Paul Ricoeur, taught me a lesson—he once told me in a discussion that once he had written a book, it ‘belongs to the

world' and is no longer simply his, it becomes another's. It is in that spirit that I shall respond to my critics.

Feenberg begins his critique with a comment that my account of the body is "one-sided"...[tilted] toward...activity..." which he finds as only one dimension of the body. He then goes on with a counter-balance pointing out, phenomenologically, the roles of *dependency* and *extendibility*. And while I am initially happy to have provoked this very nice Feenbergian phenomenology, with none of which I deeply disagree, there remains an initial strangeness which comes from precisely what escapes my designer intent. What surprised me was that Feenberg blames my action-bias upon my focus upon scientific instrumentation and its interrelation to human sensory capacities. He is perfectly correct that what I am emphasizing in the development of scientific instrumentation is its actional trajectory. Scientific instrumentation is part of the material culture of science and allows its praxis to probe and intervene [a la Hacking] its domain. Instruments are also, in my terms, embodied instrumental phenomenological variations, again used actively by the investigators. Science, in other words, is technologically embodied in a specific kind of action, an action which reflexively *implies our human bodies*. And, I thought this was pretty radical since most early and some late modern epistemology—and a lot of analytic philosophy of science—is still cast in a copy-representationalist-statics mode, often still Cartesian in rhetorical form. My claim is that science-in-action does not fit this mold and that a *praxis phenomenology* does a better job of describing this activity. So, what surprises me is not the association of science instrumentation with actional emphases, in my sense, but the ease with which the implied deconstruction of the modernist epistemological framework can be taken for granted by Feenberg. I, along with Hacking, Pickering, Haraway and Latour, try to highlight the process and tuning situation which obtains in the use of instruments, rather than turn to final results often portrayed as if not hard won and sometimes not even related to instrument-bodily engagements. Maybe Feenberg simply thinks the battle has been won? I shall return to this same result in another form below.

As I have indicated, the simplest response to Feenberg's supplementary phenomenologies of passive bodies, would be to accept them as enrichments upon my activist one-sidedness—and I do. But, to do justice to him, to take him seriously, I need to also indicate that my acceptance does carry some reservations. So I will comment briefly upon the phenomenologies of dependent and extended bodies he offers.

The strength of these phenomenologies is that they strongly show the interactive and intersubjective modes embodiment entails. Of course, I do detect a slight tendency here to build into these phenomenologies a slight ‘critical theory’ cast: Feenberg talks about *instrumentalizing* our bodies, being the *object* of instruments, “from user of tools...to become the object of tools.” (All right so long as this does not lead us back into the disenchantment stance still detectable in much critical theory but from which Feenberg often distances himself). Nor do I object to the reversibility which Feenberg draws from his examples: the blind man’s cane, he points out, not only makes the mediated world of tactile and motile experience available at a distance to the blind person, but this use of a cane, Feenberg contends, also constitutes the blind person as *blind*. And he makes the same point with a less poignant example: the kid wearing glasses is both able to ‘see the world’ through the normalization of correcting lenses, but is constituted as a ‘glasses wearer’ with whatever social meanings this may have for the wearer. Both these examples are good variations upon what Melissa Clarke takes to be my combining of a Merleau-Pontean ‘Body One’ and a Foucaultian ‘Body Two’ into what she calls my “Body Three.’ This seems to fit neatly into what Clarke points out in her critique, i.e., that phenomenologies are interactive, interrelational and that both dimensions are detected within experience—and I am grateful that she recognizes this interactive process in my, as well as Merleau-Ponty’s, versions of phenomenology.

However, my synthesized sensory-motile and social-cultural body is also different from either of my Godfathers in that I am placing both perception and signification within body experience. Here Clarke’s recognition that both Merleau-Ponty and Foucault in their own contexts have limitations from my perspective.

If Feenberg gives part of his analysis a slight critical theory twist, his second move is to give his phenomenologies somewhat of a Sartrean twist as well. Sartre was the master of portraying ‘the gaze’ as a kind of Hegel master-slave relation in which one could gaze upon another, if unseen, and ‘objectify’ the other, but if reversed, the other whom I become aware of seeing me, then ‘objectifies’ me. This conflict of the objectifying gaze is basic for Sartre—but I reject this account since it is at best partial and probably not basic. Not all gazes are objectifying and as both Marcel and Merleau-Ponty have pointed out, the mutual recognition of the other as a ‘subject’ is a primary *participatory*

recognition. Thus I retain a slight suspicion of the Sartrean cast here—it can be at most one of the possible multistabilities of perceptual-bodily experience.

Finally, with respect to Feenberg, I want to affirm his way of positioning himself in an “R&D” position which I have suggested is a good site for philosophers to occupy, and for his observations about internet and distance learning mediations. He is probably right that my polemics against romantic utopianism and hype associated with AI, VR and other “hyperreality” claims may make me sound too reductionistic with respect to what is possible through admittedly less than full body mediations.

Feenberg’s pioneering work in distance learning and his subsequent observations and thoughts about possible online communities actually find a deep resonance in my own thinking. He forefronts the linguistic-textual presence dominant in most current internet mediations, and notes interesting features of the *compensatory effects* which accompany this communication. In my terms, we always experience with whole bodies—but if the forefront is monodimensional, its background supplies apperceptively the rest. Take, for example, role playing over chat rooms or messaging—there can be both planned “revealing” but equally “masking.” The reduced presence of the other is not that of a mere linguistic phenomenon, but of the “text” set within a wider and enigmatic compensatory “aura.” Fictive compensations are part of this game.

And, I agree with Feenberg that some kind of online community is possible. Electronic communications transform spatial experience, making all geographic locations technologically equidistant. So, out of my communications daily or weekly, my online community of like-interested people may well bodily live in China, Hungary, or Denmark, yet my communications with them may be more significant and more frequent than with some of my colleagues on the same floor of the Philosophy Department. I would add, however, that the online community also more easily enables the alternating VR/RL occasions through the greater ease with which we can later meet in other geographical situations as well. Extended bodies can also be present bodies in today’s rapid and closely linked technoculture.

Turning now to Melissa Clarke’s critique, I again found some degrees of surprise where she took turns from what I expected or thought I had done. First, she does a variant upon my “body one”/“body two” distinction which is already marking this book. She takes my synthesis as a “body three.” This distinction is actually

a variant upon what I called in *Technology and the Lifeworld*, a relation between *microperception and macroperception*, the former being the bodily-sensory location of experience, and the latter the hermeneutic-cultural signification dimension of that same situated experience. I did invent the new variant to be used a heuristic device to distinguish between the warring godfathers of phenomenology and post-structuralism, i.e., Merleau-Ponty and Foucault. And then my editors who liked this, wanted it elevated into a deeper organizing principle which now marks this book. Clarke takes this distinction into a synthesized “body three” position “which cuts across and is an improvement on both these views.” And, she is also right that I am criticizing my Godfathers for deficits in their own views. Allow a little background detour here: First, in the contemporary literature—and particularly within the feminist debates about embodiment—Merleau-Ponty and Foucault play important and polar roles. Historically, one should be aware that Foucault was, in fact, a student of Merleau-Ponty and as in so many such relations, the student wants to oppose and exceed the teacher. (I have pointed this out previously and shown how Foucault’s analysis of *Las Meninas* is a direct response to Merleau-Ponty’s claim that while there can be language about language, there cannot be painting about painting. Foucault’s opening in *The Order of Things*—without a single reference to Merleau-Ponty, another typically French habit—shows that *Las Meninas is a painting about painting*.) But Clarke is dead right that I hold that Merleau-Ponty, while cognizant about the cultural role in perception, was less sensitive than he should have been. It is in the posthumous *Visible and Invisible* that he shows deeper insights into what I call “macroperception,” the hermeneutically meaningful perception which is cultural embeddedness. And, it is also in the *Visible and Invisible*, that the deeper reciprocities of the mutual interrogation of body-world becomes more apparent. I shall return to this soon when I address Clarke’s attempt to have me situated closer to Merleau-Ponty than she thinks I might acknowledge.

With Foucault my problem is the loss of the sense of one’s own embodiment and the relapse to a third person point of view or a variant upon the “god trick” which Haraway calls it, that I find my problem. Foucault is the “floating observer” even in his analysis of *Las Meninas* referred to above. In *Bodies*, I point to the work of both Iris Young and Susan Bordo who bring the cultural dimensions right back into our bodily experience—both do precisely what Clarke is calling my “body three” analysis regarding breasts, penises, and even pregnancy. All are both “body one” and “body two” synthesized into full embodiment descriptions which include the sensory and the enculturated experience.

A small quibble which now relates to this architectonic—Clarke seems to think that I have to place phenomenology in some way with ‘modernity’ since it is not ‘postmodern’ in the Foucault and Co. sense. I don’t actually do this, I see *both* phenomenology and postmodernism as opposed to early modern epistemology. But she does have a point in that early phenomenology, particularly Husserl, does pose an ambiguity. Both Rorty, in his belief that phenomenology is “foundational,” and later, Latour, in his belief that even Merleau-Pontean phenomenology does not go far enough regarding the body, in effect associate phenomenology with modernity. Husserl is the most guilty of this possible charge since he borrows almost *tout court* the language of early modern epistemology—‘ego,’ ‘cogito,’ ‘sensation,’ etc. And while a careful reading, particularly of something like the *Cartesian Meditations* shows how he, in the end, is inverting virtually every Cartesian position—subjectivity is not subjectivity in the body-box with representations, but is intersubjectivity; the ego is not self-sufficient but is bound to a world and is thus co-relational; etc.—the language of consciousness and such conceals the radicality of the phenomenological project. Merleau-Ponty is a great improvement upon this and his development of the notion of a phenomenological body is just as important as Clarke claims. So, my minor quibble is that I do not associate phenomenology with modernity, although it is also not “postmodernist” either.

Now let me turn to Clarke’s questions, most of which revolve around trying to get me to admit that Merleau-Ponty’s version of embodiment pretty much takes care of my concerns. She begins by wondering if I can make a distinction between early modern views of the “object body” and the phenomenological body—but this may be a second result of the architectonic problem above. The ‘object body’ within the modernist sense is a body seen from the third person point of view and is ‘external’ to me. I have, but do not experience a brain or its neural firings. The experiments which electrically stimulate the brain areas ‘causing’ an arm motion produce a very weird phenomenon: I can recognize that my arm moved, but subjects usually say “I didn’t do that.” But I can’t follow the complex phenomenology here any further. But, just as I liked and considered Feenberg’s phenomenologies as complimentary, so I consider most of what Clarke says in the same spirit. Yes, Merleau-Ponty does have a robust notion of body-world reversibility, thus not privileging either interiority or exteriority (and thus avoiding what most wrong-headed interpreters of phenomenology claim regarding ‘introspection.’) Yes, Merleau-Ponty removes the subject from the box as she points out in another paper of hers, “...even the phantoms of ‘internal

experience' are possible only as things borrowed from external experience. Therefore consciousness has no private life..." (PP p. 27) Yes, there is a strong actional sense of embodiment in Merleau-Ponty which is also interactive and thus already intersubjective. And, we have no pre-social way of relating to the world. With all of this I already agree. But—and here is where I would nuance the situation: What Young in particular showed earlier, is that while all that is true, still the Merleau-Pontean description of bodily activity remains effectively pre-gendered, or better implicitly masculine. It does not yield what she calls the split awareness similar to Feenberg's seeing with glasses equals being seen as a glasses wearer. A parallel nuance is needed for the socially awareness of embodiment—what is clearly the intersubjective and interactive 'social' body in Merleau-Ponty seems to me to be somewhat short of what might be called in the strong sense both a 'cultural' and a 'gendered' body. This, in spite of his gestures towards recognizing that "Renaissance perspective must be learned," or in recognizing that Japanese smiles are opaque to him. Just as Young earlier recognized, the Merleau-Pontean body is implicitly masculine in its very anonymity, so I contend in a parallel fashion, that its sociability is short of cultural 'style' in its intersubjective anonymity. I do not have the time here to expand as far as I would like, but here is where a phenomenology more sensitive to ethnomethodology is needed to describe 'body three.'

Clarke seems to like my notion that science's visualism is precisely such a 'cultural' phenomenon in that I project a possible 'auditory' science which would be a different 'cultural' variant. (I like Steven Feld, the ethnomethodologist's, adaptation of my auditory work in anthropology. In his analysis of a New Guinean tribe, he shows how an 'acoustemology' of place is in effect a cultural variant upon just our visualist bias.) And even as Merleau-Ponty recognizes gesture as an expressive bodily activity which is pre-linguistic, he does not go on to nuance this into its clearly highly cultural differences whereby gestures are as variable as are natural languages. When someone shows "one" by hand, Americans typically use the index finger; Europeans the thumb. But we understand immediately either of these and neither is developmentally 'primary.' So, to Merleau-Ponty's denial of any pre-interactive or pre-social understanding, I would add there is no pre-cultural dimension either.

Clarke's third question regarding my attempts to avoid either utopic or dystopic stands concerning technologies is an interesting one. She seems more pessimistic than she thinks I am regarding the possible multistabilities of technology and environment interactions. I wish I could escape this problem by saying that all of

Bodies was written before our present regime came to power! And if there is no recycling in Texas, today Texas has been partially joined by New York City. Today, I am probably more ready to join the cause with the critique of the critical theorists again. But the deeper issue I was trying to point to is that whatever directions we take, given our now deep cultural immersion in technologies, I still believe that all problems and solutions will necessarily be ones which implicate technologies and that in an equally deep sense the solutions to problems posed by technologies will have also to be answered *through* technologies.

Finally, I want to come full circle to the unexpected directions and audiences which I find make writing philosophy interesting. The first full public trial run on *Bodies* occurred this fall in Denmark. I gave my annual internordic seminar in Aarhus this year on ‘bodies,’ using this book and Welton’s anthology, *Body and Flesh*. It drew participants from most of the Scandinavian countries, Canada and Germany, and the theme of ‘active bodies’ as initially posed by Feenberg came forth as a dominant theme. The disciplines represented reached from informatiks to performance art to medical simulation and beyond. Participating in the seminar was a researcher from Learning Laboratory Denmark, a spin-off of Lego, who invited me to come to Copenhagen to visit the Lab. I did, and there the director who had just bought and read *Bodies*, made an enthusiastic proposal. It seems that the Scandinavians are big into mobile technologies, but are also concerned that their children may become immobile and even fat, i.e., couch potatoes, if they end up plugged into screen technologies such as TV, video games, computer games and the like. So, Learning Lab has made a large proposal for the European Communities educational division to invent ways to encourage bodily activity within technological contexts. The director’s enthusiasm for *Bodies* was obvious—he thinks it poses a philosophical framework for just such a direction and thus the end of the session was an invitation to collaborate and to return to Copenhagen next May for a think-tank workshop on just this issue. You can imagine my delight at this turn of events, both unexpected in terms of audience, and yet a positioning for work in a new “R&D” site. But, the final comment from this meeting, not from the director, but from a philosopher working for Learning Lab, was, “Looks like we finally have Cartesianism on the run, don’t we?”