

Philosophy Incarnate

*Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and
Its Challenge to Western Thought*

George Lakoff and Mark Johnson

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reviewed by Larry D. Harwood

Philosophy has been occasionally subjected to humbling and sometimes humiliating castigations from disgruntled practitioners. One recalls William of Ockham's radical criticisms of medieval philosophy, the logical positivist's criticism of much traditional metaphysical philosophy, and the later Wittgenstein's contention that «philosophy is descriptive.» Each of these criticisms called for radical revisions in the way philosophy had been done, and in many ways each attempted to circumscribe the future practice of philosophy. The aforementioned criticisms had some success: Ockham's nominalism contributed to the Protestant Reformation and the Scientific Revolution, the positivists scientism contributed to the piecemeal analytic approach to philosophy so pervasive in Anglo-American philosophical practice, while Wittgenstein's turn from the prescriptivism of philosophy ushered in part the celebration of diversity in postmodernism.

Particularly in modern times, thinkers trained in the sciences, such as not a few of the 1920's positivists, had tried to put philosophy's house in order by forcing it to move to the scientific neighborhood. Here philosophy lived in servants' quarters and helped arrange the logical order of utensils on the philosophical table, but it had little to say about what went on the plate. The free reign of philosophy and previously unaccountable philosophers now had to answer to science. The days of unchecked speculations were over. Whereas most of the sciences historically got their start in the speculations of philosophy, the scientific progeny of philosophy were now telling the mother of the sciences-their mother-about the future of philosophy.

Philosophy in the Flesh is a book about the future of philosophy and a continuation of the tradition of trying to put the house of philosophy in order from the perspective of science. The authors, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, specifically want to see the data of science incorporated into how we do philosophy. The authors regard the current philosophical situation as having skirted «cognitive science,» and they are willing to name ways of doing philosophy that are guilty. Every current orientation in philosophy is on the list, so the point is that all are guilty. Analytic philosophy, the phenomenological tradition, and last, the philosophy of postmodernism are all guilty of scientific sins, that is, neglect of science, and have been particularly negligent of cognitive science in doing philosophy.

The tale of the woe of philosophy in *Philosophy in the Flesh* is clustered around the main idea that philosophy, and even empiricist philosophy has not been empirical enough. Furthermore, traditional philosophers have not taken sufficient account of the simple fact that our minds are in a body, and as such, the authors argue that all of our thinking about things-and the thinking of philosophy too-for no exemptions can be claimed, is embodied. Therefore, the authors also argue that philosophy is futile that falsely presumes to tell us how things «out there» are from inside an embodied brain. The difficulty of the author's work, moreover, arises from the fact that they are not traditional philosophical realists, nor are they relativists. They prefer to label their position «embodied realism.» Realism is the belief that at some level the concepts through which we interpret and study the world match the way the world actually is. Thus the authors describe themselves as embodied realists, but not literal realists. They reject relativism, but nevertheless admit the general contingency, or non-absoluteness of claims to knowledge. The standard conception of truth in Western philosophy has been of truth as literal, and not metaphorical, with truth measured as correspondence to fact. The authors contest both notions.

This bit of summary is enough to indicate that *Philosophy in the Flesh* is not for beginning students of philosophy, but for upper division students, and graduate students. I suspect, however, that it will be established philosophers who will be the greatest audience for this work. A book that is written as a critique of a whole discipline would hardly be appropriate for a beginning student of philosophy who is gasping to grasp the fundamentals of philosophy. And yet the book does seem appropriate for the beginner in philosophy, because the authors contend that the starting place of philosophical practice has been in the wrong place. For that reason, the book may be more appropriate for the beginner than the entrenched philosopher who is not apt to savor being told that he has practiced his craft wrongly and for so long. On the other hand, philosophy these days is characterized by some much soul-searching, that another criticism of existing philosophical practice is apt to be welcomed by many.

The book is nicely organized into three parts with a final summary chapter serving as the fourth part. Except for this final section of the book, each part has several chapters geared to the main idea of each part. Thus, part one attempts to place the author's theory of embodied mind in terms of its general ramifications for the practice of philosophy. Here the authors castigate analytic philosophy for its presumption that human reason is disembodied and literal, as in formal logic or the manipulation of signs. In such a conception, the peculiarities of the brain and the body are virtually ignored as contributing nothing to the formulation of human concepts. This is philosophy forgetful of the human aspect of philosophy, and thus is labeled by the authors as «philosophy without flesh.» Analytic philosophy thus to the authors is vitiated by too much naive realism.

In this part of the book the authors also confront the Kuhnian thesis about scientific knowledge and voice agreement that there is fundamentally no science that is purely objective. They are, however, careful to protect such an admission from the ravages of postmodern relativism, by arguing that this does not mean that there is no reliable or standing science. For example, «We are not likely to discover that there are no such things as cells or that DNA does not have a double-helix structure.» Nonetheless, the metaphoric character of virtually all human knowledge is not absent even in scientific thinking, nor

do the authors wish to see metaphor eliminated: «Conceptual metaphor is one of the greatest of our intellectual gifts.»

Part two focus upon particular notions in philosophy: causality, time, self, mind, and morality. Morality may seem an odd inclusion among other topics that plumb the depths of metaphysics, but morality-or wrong morality-seems a special concern of the authors. In each of the aforementioned notions, the fundamental error of classical philosophy was the attempt to arrive at a metaphysical certainty concerning the famous Kantian thing-in-itself, without consideration of the human psychology involved. Indeed, classical philosophers were eager to escape from the confines of their own mind and psychology to plumb what is. It is a fundamental thesis of Lakoff and Johnson, however, that a philosopher unaware of human psychology, or one who resists its study in doing philosophy, makes an initial error that permeates entire philosophical traditions. Oddly enough many philosophers see and lament Kant's philosophy as a psychologizing of philosophical thinking. Kant, however, is a foe and not a friend of the authors.

Part three functions to catalog the specific errors of prior philosophers, and the authors stretch their judgements from the pre-Socratics to the contemporary Chomsky. Here there is something of a continuation of part two, except now certain philosophers are tagged for certain of the philosophical errors concerning the topics in the prior section. Given as many topics as one finds in these two parts, the book is necessarily large, and also at times too summary about topics and thinkers that simply require more discussion. The title of the book, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, renders the first impression that this book will be a criticism of the criticism of Plato and Platonism against matter. This impression, however, quickly goes by the board when the authors are found criticizing not only the venerable Plato and his progeny, but also Aristotle and his legacy, and Kant in particular, and most of the other «greats.» The authors, however, do have some kindred spirits among past philosophers. They like Merleau-Ponty as well as John Dewey for their earthy, empirical, and embodied approach to philosophy, though each of these thinkers is only occasionally mentioned in the course of the book.

Because the thesis of the authors is that philosophy has been vitiated by the presumption that thinkers could get out of their body to philosophize, the philosopher Kant is a special object of criticism. For it is to Kant that we owe that notorious adjective that he affixed to the noun, reason, namely «transcendental.» In the estimation of the authors, the reach of reason must be mapped in and through the body. There is no outside «transcendental» reason that embodied reason can mesh itself with. The authors, however, are very careful to not see the body as an impediment to knowledge, however much it is the case that knowledge must be seen as conditioned by the body. The configuration of reason determined by the body will not therefore be some out-of-body experience of or union with Reason. At times the authors sound very much like the older logical positivists, who circumscribed knowledge according to the capabilities of scientific method. Lakoff and Johnson, however, circumscribe knowledge and science by the configurations of the body and the brain. Moreover, typical of the middle ground they attempt to steer between realism and relativism, they «strongly reject the myths that science provides the ultimate means of understanding everything and that humanistic knowledge has no standing relative to anything that call itself science.» One wishes they had said more about how these two are put together.

Most philosophers of the West have had the idea they had to get outside themselves so as to get at truth. A prime motivation of philosophers is to discover what the world-to include ourselves-is like. What has dogged them for most of their history is the assumption that the description that emerged was only valid if it was removed from the influences of the subject-us- that was looking. This of course was the impetus and the assumption in making our way toward an «objective» truth. That truth was tainted if the subject doing the looking somehow included a part of herself in the picture. Lakoff and Johnson, however, contend that we are a part of the picture that we paint as «truth.» Furthermore, the stringent dichotomy between object and subject presupposed in the traditional search for the object is simply not there.

The authors theory of knowledge is both similar and different from that of Kant, and a comparison between the two is useful for seeing the important difference between them that goes to the heart of the author's thesis. I suspect that it is Kant's «transcendental» terminology that most puts them off. Nevertheless, Kant is something of an epistemological agnostic as well as an idealist metaphysician. Kant's view is that we can never know whether the categories by which we understand the world truly reflect or correspond to the world as it really is. This world of course has been the must sought after objective world of most metaphysicians of the West. But he is also an idealist in the sense that the human mind, through its categories of understanding, organizes how it will understand the world. Thus, for Kant the mind is not a blank slate that receives the data of the world, but more like a program that fits the empirical data to suit the tools of the mind, not the mind to the empirical data. For Lakoff and Johnson, but unlike Kant, the tools of the mind are not philosophical categories, but metaphors molded by our experience of being an embodied mind. Furthermore, unlike Kant, who references «mind» in his discussion of the categories, Lakoff and Johnson reference the brain, and fault those philosophers who settle on the spiritualized mind in abeyance from the material brain. However, like Kant, Lakoff and Johnson are fundamentally suspicious of any claimed match of the categories (Kant) or metaphors (Lakoff, Johnson) to the perceived reality.

John Dewey once said that agnosticism is simply the honesty of admitting that we do not know what we do not know. In the tradition of Dewey, Lakoff and Johnson want to bring philosophy back to earth, but explicitly back to the human body-and away from the mistaken long standing tradition of the human person seen as a disembodied spirit. Their mapping of the body and brain that navigates toward truth deserves the attention of every philosopher on that journey.

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