

# Have we lost our mind(s)?

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## Comment on Sabine Koch's "Embodiment as symbolic and semantic grounding – directional movement, meaning and language"

Every age has its blind spots. This, in itself, is not a bad thing. A dedicated pursuit of any research goal often requires that we delimit our topics and modes of inquiry. However, since these delimitations, once actualized, tend to sediment into self-evident truisms, we often forget about their presence and simply take what they disclose at face value. The issue with blind spots, then, is not so much that we do not see, but rather *that we do not see that we do not see*.

In the grand philosophical project of the Early Modern Period – bent, as it was, on forging unequivocal conceptual categories that would allow for rigorous investigation of nature – the phenomenon of 'living body' became one such blindspot. In a polarized conceptual space, which lumped everything that exists either the external domain of materiality (*res extensa*) or the internal domain of thought (*res cogitans*), vitality seemed like an awkward nomological dangler hovering in the intermediate realm. The attempt to tame this feral notion and subsume it under the category of 'materiality' opened a Pandora's box of thorny philosophical problems, the most daunting of which is the infamous 'mind-body problem.'

The so-called 'corporeal turn' [1] has been a welcome corrective to some of the more spurious tenets of the said project. For one, it has led to a recognition that living as *living* cannot be exhaustively explained in terms causal relations between discrete physio-anatomical parts, but has to be construed in terms of dynamic autonomous wholes. Further, it has pointed out that living body effectively straddles the inner-outer dichotomy, as it is not only that which is given as an object of experience, but also that which functions as a *vehicle* of experience. As the famous maxim goes: I both *have* a body and *am* one.

The revitalization of the body has thus not only brought to light an important blind spot at the core of our epistemic edifice, but has, in doing so, also opened exciting new research avenues. Koch's target paper [2] is a welcome contribution to this collective effort. It shows the

intimate link between corporeality and higher echelons of our being, particularly language, and indicates how this close tie feeds into both theoretical and practical (therapeutic, empirical) research. Moreover, echoing the ideas of authors such as Johnson, Lakoff, etc., it puts forward a daring claim, namely that "embodiment is the ground upon which language is based."

In my commentary I would like to focus on two points – one empirical, the other philosophical – which are both related to the idea of the *corporeal groundedness* of language. The first (empirical) point has to do with something that Koch herself alludes to. Namely, when presenting data in support of the idea that there exists a close link between symbolic meaning and bodily planes, she mentions the possibility of intercultural differences in how specific bodily postures/movements along those planes are understood. For instance, when discussing how time construal is related to bodily movements along the sagittal axis, Koch notes that while in the Western cultures 'pointing to the front' implies future and 'pointing to the back' implies past, the reverse is true for the Ayamara Indians: 'front' means past, 'back' means future. Things become even more interesting if we consider the Aboriginal Australian cultures such as Guugu Yimithirr and Kuuk Thaayorre [3]. What makes these cultures particularly pertinent is that their languages use *cardinal* (absolute) instead of *egocentric* (relative) spatial designations, i.e., spatial designations that refer to four cardinal directions (North, South, East, and West), and not to our bodily planes (back, front, left, right, up, down). That is, unlike, say, English speakers, who use cardinal terms but rarely (e.g., on the open sea), the Guugu Yimithirr and Kuuk Thaayorre speakers use them universally – even for such everyday utterances as: "I left the cup on the northern part of the eastern table."

Even more significant, however, is the fact that this linguistic peculiarity seems to reflect how they perceive, remember, or even dream about space and time. For instance, certain spatial constellations which seem identical for the English speaker (e.g., two equally furnished rooms, first of which is rotated 180 degrees in relation to the other), will be perceived as different by the Guugu Yimithirr speaker. Similarly, when the Kuuk Thaayorre speakers were asked to arrange a set of cards designating a temporal sequence, which most English

speakers would arrange from left to right, they arranged it from East to West, which means that the direction of the sequence depended on their respective orientation when asked to perform the task in question!

These, and similar, examples bring us to the second (philosophical) point, namely the question as to what exactly do we mean when we say that the body *grounds* symbolic and linguistic meaning? Clearly, groundedness does not mean determination. The Ayamara example shows that there is plenty of leeway as to what meaning a certain bodily posture will acquire in a given cultural setting. Even more pertinently, the Guugu Yimithirr and Kuuk Thaayorre examples seem to indicate that the signifiatory framework on the symbolic and linguistic level can be, in some sense at least, uncoupled from my lived body as the 'zero-ground' of my experience.

Are we then required to forego the idea of embodied grounding and opt for some unbridled form of linguistic/cultural relativism? Not necessarily. However, I do think that our ideas about embodiment need to be spelled out more carefully. Merleau-Ponty [4] is generally regarded as the founder of – or at least a key figure in – the 'corporeal turn.' In an important sense, this is true: Merleau-Ponty contributed greatly to the revival of interest in the corporeal dimensions of human existence. However, what is often overlooked is the fact that Merleau-Ponty argued for a clear dividing line between *non-human* and *human* embodiment. That is, he argued that there exists a qualitative difference between a living and a *minded* body, a difference that, although irreducible, does not hinge on the (re)introduction of a world-transcending Spirit, but on the idea that there are *more ways for a body to be a body*.

If we oversimplify somewhat, we could articulate the difference as follows. All living beings embody a perspective: an autonomous center from which they respond to external stimuli in accordance with their organization and developmental history. In doing so, they modify their environment by bringing forth their unique domain of significance, their milieu (*Umwelt*). With the emergence of mindedness, however, this vital intentionality transmutes into the capacity to not only actualize a perspective, but a *multitude* of perspectives. That is, a minded being is both able to embody different perspectives on the same thing and to anchor its perspective in different things. This perspectival variability allows not only for a far greater number of possible engagements with, and thus modifications of, the environment, but also – and even more importantly – for *transforming the very conditions* of possibility of such engagements, and thus for a shift from inhabiting a milieu to being open to the world (*Welt*). Following Plessner [5], we could say that a minded being is not deprived of its positionality – it is still an embodied being – but that its positionality is *de-centered* or *ex-centric*. As such, it is no longer fused with its living body, but can alternate its 'center of gravity,' and make its own living body into one of the objects of experience. Thus, although, for instance, I still have to breathe, eat, feel, etc., the ex-centricity of mindedness allows me to adopt

a different stance towards these biological necessities and even, at the utmost limit, *transcend* them – I can breathe, etc., in many different ways or even opt for death instead. This is why, in the case of Guugu Yimithirr or Kuuk Thaayorre, a radically different spatio-temporal frame of reference can be made into one's existential abode and why a relatively fluent transition between cardinal and egocentric frameworks is possible.

Another way of spelling out of the vitality-mentality distinction is by saying that, while 'life' is characterized by the 'surplus of meaning' – the ability to inhabit a given domain of meaning –, the determining characteristic of 'mindedness' is the 'surplus of negativity' – the ability to inhabit *and* alter a domain of meaning. Note that only where there is (a possibility of) *negation* can there be (a possibility of) *affirmation*; and only where there is affirmation, can there be a *taking of a position* (as opposed to simply *living a situation*), and thus truth, objectivity, etc. Let us wrap this up by returning to our starting point, the question of blind spots. In the past, it was customary, and almost too self-evident, to think in terms of *differences* and *discontinuities*, with 'everything human' put on the pedestal of creation. In the last two centuries, this has changed dramatically: for well-known reasons – some of them valid, some of them dubious – we have grown weary of acknowledging the existence of differences, and prefer to speak of similarities and continuities instead. However, in order to attain a truly comprehensive understanding of phenomena, we need to find modes of not only thinking but also seeing and being, in which *both continuities and discontinuities* are given their right due. The embodiment community often seems to forget – and this, I feel, is its own blind spot – that, originally, 'corporeality' was meant to stress not only that human mind is *embodied* but also that human body is minded. I think this is something worth reflecting on, lest we (re)gain our body, but forfeit our soul.

## Notes

### Competing interests

The author declares that he has no competing interests.

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**Please cite as**

Vörös S. Have we lost our mind(s)? GMS J Art Ther. 2022;4:Doc09.  
DOI: 10.3205/jat000024, URN: urn:nbn:de:0183-jat0000248

**This article is freely available from**  
<https://doi.org/10.3205/jat000024>

**Published:** 2022-10-27

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