

STUDIES IN GERMAN IDEALISM

## BODY AND PRACTICE IN KANT

by Helge Dreyer

Kant is generally assumed to have offered little attention to the fact that we experience the world by and through our bodies. This book argues that this standard image of the great German philosopher is actually wrong. Not only does Kant – throughout his career and in texts published before and after the collapse of pure reason – reflect extensively upon the fact that human life is embodied, but the collapse of pure reason itself may be read as a critical reflection aimed at restoring some significant philosophical implications of this fact. Thinking this aspect of Kant's philosophy may hence be important, not only because it sheds new light on our understanding of Kant's work, but also because it is relevant to contemporary discussions in philosophy about embodiment, language and practice. By making his philosophy of embodiment less obscure, the author makes Kant stand out as a more contemporary in our well-embodied world.

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Springer

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# **BODY AND PRACTICE IN KANT**

by Helge Svara

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# Studies in German Idealism

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by

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If, instead of gluing a child to books, I bury him in a workshop, his hands work for the profit of his mind; he becomes a philosopher and believes he is only a laborer.

Rousseau, *Émile*

## CONTENTS

Abbreviations	xi
Introduction	1
1. The embodied mind	11
1.1 <i>Seele, Gemüt</i> and <i>Geist</i>	14
1.2 Empirical and rational psychology and anthropology	14
1.3 Some preliminary remarks on Kant's intellectual development	17
1.4 Living forces	20
1.5 New elucidation	27
1.6 Universal natural history	29
1.7 Maladies of the mind	33
1.8 Dreams of a spirit-seer	34
1.9 A crisis?	39
1.10 An embodied empiricism	41
1.11 Kant's <i>Inaugural dissertation</i>	44
1.12 A new perspective on the body-mind problem	47
1.13 Holism in the <i>Critique</i>	50
1.14 The virtual presence of the mind	53
1.15 Anthropology	55
1.16 Conclusion	59
2. Body and space	61
2.1 The European discussion of space in the 18th century	63
2.2 Rousseau and space	67
2.3 Directions in space	69
2.4 A Copernican position?	73
2.5 Orientation	74
2.6 Anthropology	75
2.7 Summary	77
3. Rationality and embodied practice	79
3.1 Practice	82
3.2 Pragmatism	85
3.3 The historical origin of Kant's pragmatism	86
3.4 Rousseau's influence	89

3.5 Basedow and Crusius	95
3.6 Kant's theory of the understanding	99
3.7 Concepts and rules	102
3.8 Rules and practices	104
3.9 Learning by doing	106
3.10 The unconscious employment of the understanding	109
3.11 Judgments cannot be learned	111
3.12 Pragmatic priority	115
3.13 Some modern parallels	117
3.14 More about Kant's theory of concepts	123
3.15 Summary	126
3.16 A short summary of the first part of the book	127
4. The body in the <i>Critique</i>	129
4.1 The <i>Critique</i> – a brief presentation	130
4.2 Phases, perspectives and continuities	131
4.3 Some trends and positions in the interpretation of the <i>Critique</i>	136
4.4 Transcendental philosophy	142
4.5 Kant's Copernican perspective	145
4.6 Some further remarks on the transcendental and the empirical	147
4.7 Transcendental idealism	148
4.8 What did Kant mean?	151
5. Spatial experience and the body in the <i>Critique</i>	155
5.1 A brief remark about the structure of my argument	158
5.2 The architectonic of the <i>Critique</i>	159
5.3 The cognitive theory of the <i>Critique</i>	160
5.4 Synthesis	162
5.5 The syntheses of imagination	164
5.6 Apprehension	165
5.7 Reproduction	166
5.8 The B-deduction	167
5.9 Transcendental apperception	168
5.10 § 26 of the B-deduction	171
5.11 Problems of comparison	173
5.12 Two versions of the same theory?	174
5.13 Summary	176
6. Spatial schematism	177
6.1 The production of images	181
6.2 The construction of geometrical figures	182
6.3 Mental constructions?	183



6.4	Rossvær's anti-mentalist approach	185
6.5	Kant's theory of mathematical construction	186
6.6	Further remarks on the imagination	190
6.7	Construction and subsumption	192
6.8	The key argument	196
6.9	Visual perception	198
6.10	Schematism in the transcendental deduction	201
6.11	Degrees of consciousness	201
6.12	The empirical aspect of apprehension	204
6.13	Falkenstein's argument concerning intuition and body in the <i>Critique</i>	207
6.14	The embodied agent	210
6.15	Summary	212
7.	The body and the transcendental	213
7.1	The transcendental distinction	216
7.2	The unknown subject	218
7.3	The temptations of self-consciousness	219
7.4	The unknown origin of affection	220
7.5	From the empirical to the transcendental	223
7.6	Kant's representationalism	229
7.7	Kant's anti-skepticism	235
7.8	More about the Kantian notion of a representation	240
7.9	Summary	242
8.	Kant's transcendental epistemology	245
8.1	The necessary structure of the world	246
8.2	Problems	248
8.3	The a priori	249
8.4	Embodied practice as a condition of experience	251
8.5	An empirical or a transcendental deduction?	252
8.6	The normativity of practice	255
8.7	Arithmetic as an a priori synthetic science	258
8.8	Thinking as practice	259
8.9	Logic	261
8.10	Transcendental logic	263
8.11	The categories are acquired	264
8.12	Summary	266
9.	Quantity	267
9.1	Transcendental schematism	268
9.2	Quantity	269

9.3 The production of time	270
9.4 Some objections and answers	273
10. The relational categories	277
10.1 The analogies of experience	278
10.2 The second analogy	281
10.3 The third analogy	283
10.4 Time and the world	284
10.5 Time measuring practices	284
11. Causality and common sense physics	289
11.1 Piaget and the cognitive development of the child	291
11.2 Practice as a condition of experience	293
11.3 Sensorimotor practices and the relational categories	296
11.4 Causality and interaction	297
11.5 Sensorimotor intelligence in the adult	299
11.6 Objective time revisited	301
11.7 A very brief remark on transcendental apperception	304
11.8 The categories of quality and modality	305
11.9 Summary	306
Conclusion	307
Bibliography	313
Name index	327

## ABBREVIATIONS

Ak: The Academy edition [Kants gesammelte Schriften]

a.t.: Author's translation.

*Announcement*: Mr. Immanuel Kant's announcement of the program of his lectures for the winter semester 1765-1766. [Nachricht von der Einrichtung seiner Vorlesungen in dem Winterhalbenjahre von 1765-1766.]

*Anthropology*: Anthropology from a pragmatic point of view. [Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht.]

*Critique*: Critique of pure reason. [Kritik der reinen Vernunft.]

*Directions in space*: Concerning the ultimate ground of the differentiation of directions in space. [Von dem ersten Grunde des Unterschiedes der Gegenden im Raume.]

*Dreams of a spirit-seer*: Dreams of a spirit-seer elucidated by dreams of metaphysics. [Träume eines Geistersehers, erläutert durch Träume der Metaphysik.]

*Inaugural dissertation*: On the form and principles of the sensible and the intelligible world. [De mundi sensibilis atque intelligibilis forma et principiis/Von der Form der Sinnen- und Verstandeswelt und ihren Gründen.]

*Living forces*: Thoughts on the true estimation of living forces, and criticism of the proofs propounded by Herr von Leibniz and other mechanists in their treatment of this controversy, along with some preliminary observations concerning the force of bodies in general. [Gedanken von der wahren Schätzung der lebendigen Kräfte und Beurtheilung der Beweise, derer sich Herr von Leibniz und andere Mechaniker in dieser Streitsache bedienen haben, nebst einigen

vorhergehenden Betrachtungen, welche die Kraft der Körper überhaupt betreffen.]

*Logic*: The Jäsche logic. [Immanuel Kants Logik, ein Handbuch zu Vorlesungen, hrsg. von G.B. Jäsche.]

*Maladies of the mind*: An essay on the maladies of the mind. [Versuch über die Krankheiten des Kopfes.]

*Negative magnitudes*: Attempt to introduce the concept of negative magnitudes into philosophy. [Versuch, den Begriff der negativen Größen in die Weltweisheit einzuführen.]

*New elucidation*: A new elucidation of the first principles of metaphysical cognition. [Principiorum primorum cognitionis metaphysicae nova dilucidatio/Neue Erhellung der ersten Grundsätze metaphysischer Erkenntnis.]

*On a discovery*: On a discovery according to which any new critique of pure reason has been made superfluous by an earlier one. [Über eine Entdeckung, nach der alle neue Kritik der reinen Vernunft durch eine ältere entbehrlich gemacht werden soll.]

*On the common saying*: On the common saying: that may be correct in theory, but it is of no use in practice. [Über den Gemeinspruch: Das mag in der Theorie richtig sein, taugt aber nicht für die Praxis.]

*Orientation*: What does it mean to orient oneself in thinking? [Was heißt: sich im Denken orientieren?]

*Prolegomena*: Prolegomena to any future metaphysic that will be able to come forward as science. [Prolegomena zu einer jeden künftigen Metaphysik, die als Wissenschaft wird auftreten können.]

*Universal natural history*: Universal natural history and theory of the heavens; or an essay on the constitution and mechanical origin of the entire world edifice treated according to Newtonian principles. [Allgemeine Naturgeschichte und Theorie des Himmels, oder Versuch von der Verfassung und dem mechanischen Ursprunge des ganzen Weltgebäudes nach Newtonischen Grundsätzen abgehandelt.]

## INTRODUCTION

I still believe that, with classical works of the past, philosophers today should attempt, at least on some occasions, to give attention to all the dimensions of a major thinker's work.

Karl Ameriks<sup>1</sup>

Kant has often been accused of being a philosopher who blatantly ignores both the body and the fact that we experience the world in and through our bodies. This purported neglect is sometimes used as a basis for arguing that Kant's philosophy is hopelessly outdated today. Occasionally it is also ascribed to some unfortunate feature of Kant's psychological predisposition. Hartmut and Gernot Böhme exemplify both trends. They first declare that Kant's philosophy represents an extreme version of the baseless dualism separating mind and body that has haunted Western philosophy for too long, a dualism that tends to devalue the physical aspect of human existence, and then explain this purported extremism by claiming that Kant was alienated from his body.<sup>2</sup> Thandeka categorically states that Kant fails to see that we are biological beings.<sup>3</sup>

Looking at more than two hundred years of Kant research seems to confirm that our embodied existence was of little concern to Kant. As for the *Critique of pure reason*,<sup>4</sup> which has probably received more attention than any of his other works, scholars contend that it contains a theory of human experience. It even contains the concept of an empirical subject, referring to humans as biological, embodied beings. However, following tradition, they deny that this empirical subject occupies any substantial position in the work. If the *Critique* is regarded as containing a

<sup>1</sup> Ameriks (2000), viii.

<sup>2</sup> Böhme and Böhme (1983), 14ff.

<sup>3</sup> Thandeka (1995), 18.

<sup>4</sup> In this book the *Critique of pure reason* will be referred to simply as the *Critique*. For other texts by Kant referred to, please consult the list of abbreviations at the beginning of the book and the bibliography at the end of the book.

philosophy of man at all, this man is seen as a transcendental subject existing somehow above or behind the empirical dimension.

The aim of this work is to show that this established image of Kant as a philosopher who ignores embodied human existence is radically wrong. Not only does Kant, throughout his career, in works published before and after the *Critique*, constantly reflect upon the fact that human life is embodied, but he is also occupied in exploring the philosophical implications of this fact. Discussing human cognition, for instance, he often emphasizes that cognition is embodied, and that the constitution and functioning of the human body condition our way of experiencing the world: Our experience of space, for instance, is based on the immediate awareness we have of being in our bodies and of our embodied acts. This idea is found in the first scholarly work that Kant published in 1747 and is repeated in a number of works until his death in 1804.

In the *Critique* the case is not that simple. Its highly abstract style seems to support those scholars who maintain that human embodiment is a topic of little significance within it. Against this, I would argue that the idea that human life is embodied is not only clearly assumed in the text but also that in a very basic sense the *Critique* may be read as a critical reflection upon the very fact that human life is embodied. This implies not only the simple and relatively trivial fact that while writing the *Critique* Kant held that a human being was both mind and body, it also means that a number of the philosophical doctrines promoted in this work, such as transcendental idealism, cannot be fully understood without taking human embodiment into account.

Bringing this aspect of Kant's philosophy into the light is important, not only because it has too long been generally ignored, but also because it is highly relevant to contemporary discussions in philosophy about, for example, embodiment, learning and practice. By taking his philosophy of embodiment into account, we discover that far from being outdated, Kant stands out as a true contemporary.

Even if this aspect of Kant's philosophy has for the most part been ignored, I am not alone in emphasizing that central parts of it rest on reflections upon human embodiment. A growing number of scholars are paying attention to this dimension in his thought today. In the German Kantian tradition, this trend goes back further than it does in the Anglo-American one, due to the fact that in Germany more attention was given earlier to what Kant wrote before and after the *Critique*, texts in which human embodiment is more explicitly discussed. Discussing his early

academic years, Friedhelm Nierhaus, for instance, has written a helpful study of the young Kant's views on the mind-body relation.<sup>5</sup> Turning to the *Critique*, in the 1960s Friedrich Kaulbach published a number of studies arguing that the central part of this work may be interpreted as a reflection upon self-conscious, embodied movement.<sup>6</sup> Friedrich Kambartel later argued that Kant's theory of the categories may be read (at least in part) as a theory of embodied practice.<sup>7</sup>

Within the Anglo-American Kantian tradition, the significance of the body in his early philosophy has been explored by, among others, Alison Laywine, Susan Meld Shell and Andrew Carpenter, to mention only a few.<sup>8</sup> Kant's reflections on embodiment have also received an increasing amount of attention through the growing interest in his ideas on pedagogy and anthropology, stimulated by, amongst other things, the publication of volume 25 of the Academy edition containing his lectures on anthropology.<sup>9</sup> As for the *Critique*, the idea that parts of its theory refer to embodied events, acts or practices has been suggested by, among others, Sarah L. Gibbons, Lorne Falkenstein and Howard Caygill.<sup>10</sup> Most radically this approach has been followed by Arthur Melnick.<sup>11</sup> In

<sup>5</sup> Nierhaus (1962).

<sup>6</sup> Kaulbach (1960, 1965, and 1968). It may be worth noting that while in the texts referred to here he seems to be taking it for granted that Kant's critical philosophy is a philosophy of the body, he later appears to be more cautious. In his *Philosophie als Wissenschaft* from 1981 he suggests that the notion of embodied acts and practices were first incorporated into Kant's transcendental philosophy towards the end of his life, cf. Kaulbach (1981), 101.

<sup>7</sup> Kambartel (1976).

<sup>8</sup> Shell (1996) demonstrates convincingly how throughout his life Kant held a continuous interest in the embodied aspects of human life, and also how this interest is reflected in his philosophy. Where the period up to the *Critique* is concerned, the philosophically most systematic studies I have found in English, besides Shell's study, are Laywine (1993) and Carpenter (1998). Also worth mentioning is Kitcher (1990) which, moreover, gives valuable information on the intellectual context in which Kant's ideas of mind and body were moulded. I also want to draw attention to Schönfeld (2000) who even if he does not see the mind-body problem as the young Kant's central concern, still offers a comprehensive discussion of the topic. Cf. also Ameriks (2000).

<sup>9</sup> A survey of relevant literature regarding Kant's pedagogical and anthropological ideas is found in Munzel (1999), 1ff. Here I want to emphasise Pitte (1971 and 1978), Brandt (1999) and Zammito (2002).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. e.g. Falkenstein (1995). Cf. also Gibbons (1994) and Caygill (1995).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Melnick (1989). I came across Melnick's work just as I was about to finish my own, thus, I do not relate extensively to it. On a number of points I think