

## REVIEW ARTICLE

# IDEAL EMBODIMENT: KANT'S THEORY OF SENSIBILITY

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**Angelica Nuzzo, *Ideal Embodiment: Kant's Theory of Sensibility*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008, 414 pp. ISBN: 978-0-253-35229-3 hb, \$ 75.00, ISBN 978-0-253-22015-8 pb, \$ 27.95.**

Kant writes in the *Critique of Pure Reason* that our eyesight is a sense that in a certain way is affected by light (A28), but he does not dwell on the actual, material eye without which this affection would not be possible. And whereas the first *Critique* does not contain the terms *Leib* and *Leiblichkeit* at all, Kant uses the term *Körper* only with regard to physical bodies to which we attribute extension and weight, or when he examines traditional conceptions of the relation between soul and body. Neither does the living human body seem to play an important part in Kant's pre-critical and other critical works. And why should it? Why should Kant's investigation into the possibility and limits of human cognition, acting, and judging have to take into account the human body? If the depths of the human mind are already as unfathomable as Kant held them to be, why would one try to penetrate the body by means of thought?

Evidently, Kant has good reasons for excluding eyes, noses, and hands from his transcendental investigation. Yet in her ambitious, comprehensive, and groundbreaking work Angelica Nuzzo challenges the common view that Kant, in line with his rationalistic predecessors, depreciated sensibility in favor of the higher faculties. On the other hand, she also takes issue with the view that Kant's conception of sensibility, the body, and the affects can best be studied by examining texts such as his lectures on anthropology or physical geography. If, as she claims, "pure reason

owes the capacity of establishing itself in the realm of concrete human experience to its embodied sensible condition” (5), then the classical distinction between disciplines that concern the body and the mind cannot be used to grasp the role Kant granted to sensibility in his critical philosophy. Putting the three *Critiques* center stage, Nuzzo aims to rehabilitate Kant’s account of sensibility and embodiment without giving up on the specific characteristics of transcendental philosophy.

This is no small endeavor. Whereas the topic of the body has haunted philosophy from the outset, phenomenology, feminist theory, and philosophy of mind have turned it into one of the greatest challenges of contemporary philosophy. Yet so far no one seems to have presented Kant’s critical work as a response to precisely this challenge. Moreover, there are very few books that cover all of Kant’s three *Critiques* and offer clear, in-depth analyses of the relevant parts of each of these works. And this is not all. Apart from discussing Kant’s critical thought in relation to some of his pre-critical texts, Nuzzo elaborates extensively on the relation between Kant’s philosophy and that of rationalistic predecessors such as Leibniz, Wolff, and Baumgarten. Her focus on Kant’s account of sensibility allows her to bring together a great many texts that would normally not be related to one another, thus throwing new light on the continuity between Kant’s pre-critical and critical works. For these reasons, her book is noteworthy even apart from the topic to which it is devoted.

Nuzzo’s reading of Kant’s work is guided by what she terms transcendental embodiment. She introduces this term to refer to the “pure, a priori dimension of our sensibility (cognitive, practical, and aesthetic) – a dimension that is irreducible to purely mental activity and is necessarily embodied” (7). Whereas Kant deprived the soul of its traditional characteristics, he can indeed be said to raise sensibility into a faculty that possesses an a priori dimension and for that reason is not completely opposed to pure reason. Because of this a priori dimension, sensibility is a topic that can be treated from a transcendental perspective, as is illustrated first of all by the Transcendental Aesthetic. Yet within this part of the first *Critique* Kant seems to be exclusively concerned with space and time conceived as pure forms of intuition. He mentions the process of affection and the impressions to which it gives rise, but, apparently, only to contrast the passivity characteristic of sensibility to the spontaneity characteristic of the understanding. Opposing the claims of former rationalist metaphysics, Kant argues that any form of knowledge presupposes intuition and, moreover, that the latter cannot be reduced to the understanding.

Given Kant’s overall focus on the problem of (a priori) knowledge one might wonder how the features of sensibility that emerge from the Transcendental Aesthetic – sensation, the two forms of intuition, and passivity – can teach us something about

embodiment or the human body. Nuzzo takes Kant to consider the body to be the 'locus' or 'site' of sensibility (9-10, 13). In the first part of her study, she turns to Kant's pre-critical essay 'On the Ultimate Ground of the Differentiation of Regions in Space', among others, to bring out the role of this 'site' in Kant's various accounts of sensibility. In this early essay, Kant refers to the sense of orientation that allows us to intuitively distinguish our right hand from the left. According to Nuzzo, Kant stresses that we intuitively relate things to the orientation of our body in order to argue that space can neither be perceived by the senses nor grasped by the intellect. Even if Kant was primarily concerned with the problem of space, his account of left/right orientation is also relevant to his more or less implicit conception of embodiment. For if this orientation makes it possible to experience objects in the first place, and if it can neither be reduced to the forms of intuition nor to a merely empirical fact, Nuzzo argues, then Kant must have conceived of the oriented human body as a "transcendental ground for our cognition" in its own right (25). On her account of Kant, "the body is not the site of the empirical senses but the reference point of our formal sense for spatial orientation" (36). It is only in this capacity that the body can give rise to the forms of intuition constitutive of mathematics, the sciences, and our a priori cognition of objects of possible experience. According to Nuzzo, the body is thus "transcendentally transfigured in its pure form" (70), an operation that allows Kant to refute materialism and naturalism. By eliminating, on the other hand, the traditional conception of the soul, he no less opposes the metaphysics of his predecessors.

But can the site that results from this transfiguration still be called the body, as Nuzzo does? In the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant rather considers what he calls *Gemüt* to be the site of both sensibility and thought. One might hold that the theme of the body is simply absent from Kant's critical works. Yet one might argue as well, as I take Nuzzo to do, that the theme of the body presents itself as that which tends to disappear behind Kant's treatment of sensibility, the forms of intuition, or imagination. On this reading, it makes perfectly sense to try to retrieve Kant's conception of embodiment by relating his views on sensibility to the body conceived as its site. As I see it, this retrieval constitutes the core as well as the most challenging element of *Ideal Embodiment*.

Nuzzo traces the role of the body in Kant's philosophy also by examining the *Critique of Practical Reason*, the *Critique of Judgment*, and related texts. For Kant, sensibility is not just a necessary condition of cognition, but also that which makes it possible for transcendental freedom to enact itself as moral action. In this context, embodiment emerges primarily as the human will. The will, Nuzzo writes, is "the

practically transfigured 'body' through which reason performs its intelligible causality in the order of nature" (122). What remains of the will if we abstract from the will such as it is treated within empirical psychology or anthropology is the transcendental form that makes it possible for human beings to act morally. In the second part of her book Nuzzo seeks to interpret Kant's account of desire, feeling, and emotion in light of his effort to thematize the will from a transcendental perspective. Once again, one can only agree with her view that Kant in his practical no less than in his theoretical philosophy seeks to oppose both materialism and spiritualism by positing sensibility – in its guise as will - as a formal condition of possibility of moral acting. But do we not thereby lose sight of the body as a thing that ultimately resists being transformed into sensibility and, hence, into a condition of possibility of something else than the mere drive to persist?

The same question can be raised with regard to Kant's treatment of taste and pleasure in the third *Critique*, to which the last part of *Ideal Embodiment* is devoted. By elevating pleasure to something worthy of being treated within transcendental philosophy, Kant once again offers an alternative to empiricist or naturalistic accounts of pleasure. Yet he can only do this by treating pleasure as "a pure pleasure that does not arise out of sensation but out of judgment", as Nuzzo writes (217). The body, in other words, "must be transcendently reflected to usher in a new aesthetics" (218).

Throughout her book, Nuzzo consistently emphasizes what is gained by Kant's effort to raise the various aspects of human sensibility into topics of transcendental philosophy. This constitutes one of its major strengths. Precisely because her detailed analyses are guided by such a strong interpretative claim, she invites questions that one would otherwise not have raised with regard to Kant's critical philosophy. In my view, it remains to be seen to what extent Kant's transcendental account of the will, the passions, and other aspects of sensibility really reveals something about human embodiment. According to Kant, there is no sphere of human life that does not depend on sensibility. Yet this entails, on his account, that human beings can and must put sensibility in the service of cognition, moral actions, and aesthetic judgments, in other words, that sensibility can and must be transformed into something that enhances rather than threatens the activity of the higher faculties. It might be argued that Kant enacts a similar transformation within the element of philosophy itself. If transcendental philosophy offers a "means for thinking about the body in a radically new way", as Nuzzo claims (137), is that which figures as the body in transcendental philosophy really the body that has always haunted and eluded philosophy? Perhaps philosophy should admit that the human body, despite the fact that it is always ours, lies as much beyond the domain of human cognition as the soul,

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the world as such, and God. Considered in this way, what Kant terms sensibility and what Nuzzo conceives of as transcendental embodiment are phenomena that refer to something that itself does not appear, but that nevertheless might be considered as their unfathomable ground. Nuzzo's *Ideal Embodiment* is an exciting book because it takes us further into the direction of this ground than any other work on Kant I am aware of. Apart from its other qualities, it illustrates that Kant's work can give rise to interpretations that are original, scholarly, and attuned to debates in contemporary philosophy.

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