

SYMPOSIUM

# Healing the body or the whole world? A reading of Drew Leder's recent moves in the phenomenology of medicine

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**Abstract** In this article I take a look at Drew Leder's recent book *The healing body: Creative responses to illness, aging, and affliction* in view of his earlier scholarship and try to understand in what ways the author's explorations of bodily phenomenology have developed and changed. I argue that Leder is attempting to cross breed phenomenology with critical theory (intersectionality studies) in a way that will appeal to many readers but is ultimately flawed. His attempts to marry phenomenology with eastern religious movements are also scrutinized and found more original and less problematic, although they are hard to evaluate from a secular point of view. Despite this critique, the way the book identifies various healing strategies by highlighting a number of bodily attitudes is found rewarding and helpful for persons suffering from chronic pain.

**KEYWORDS:** Phenomenology of the Body; Suffering; Chronic Pain; Critical Theory; Objectification; Eastern Philosophy

**Riassunto** *Guarire il corpo o il mondo intero? Un'interpretazione delle ultime proposte di Drew Leder per la fenomenologia della medicina* - In questo lavoro prenderò in esame il volume *The healing body: Creative responses to illness, aging, and affliction* di Drew Leder alla luce delle sue precedenti opere accademiche per comprendere sono nate le sue indagini sulla fenomenologia della corporeità e come sono cambiate. Credo che Leder stia tentando di combinare fenomenologia e teoria critica (studi sull'intersezionalità) in un modo che può sembrare accattivante per molti lettori, ma che risulta, in ultima analisi, difettoso. Prenderò anche in considerazione i suoi tentativi di combinare fenomenologia e religioni orientali, che mi paiono più originali e meno problematici, anche se sono difficili da valutare da un punto di vista laico. Nonostante questi aspetti critici, il modo in cui questo volume identifica diverse strategie di guarigione, focalizzandosi su una serie di atteggiamenti corporei, risulta gratificante e utile per le persone che soffrono di dolore cronico.

**PAROLE CHIAVE:** Fenomenologia della corporeità; Sofferenza; Dolore cronico; Teoria critica; Oggettivazione; Filosofia orientale

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## 1 Introduction

DREW LEDER'S RECENT BOOK *The healing body: Creative responses to illness, aging, and affliction* (2024) forms the third part of a trilogy starting out already in 1990 with *The absent body* (1990) and continuing in 2016 with *The distressed body: Rethinking illness, imprisonment, and healing*. Leder mentions this himself in the introduction to the new book but devout readers of his work will have spotted the continuity already by comparing the covers. On *The absent body* you find a famous image by Rene Magritte – *Le Pèlerin* – showing a cut up man in a suit with a bowler hat, the face appearing to the left and the hat and the body to the right in the picture. Curiously, the head to the left is still alive and watching us, while the hat and the suit to the right are visibly empty. The head is hovering in the air, disembodied so to say, like a mask hiding nothing but pure spiritual substance, the perfect illustration of Cartesian dualism.

Cartesian dualism and its contemporary heir, scientific materialism, are Leder's main targets in *The absent body*, representing the philosophical paradigms which have brought us out of touch with the body, while industrialism and capitalism are the bad guys in *The distressed body*. This is illustrated on the cover of the latter book by a skyline of skyscrapers which have replaced the hovering face and is stretching all the way from the left to the right in the image, replacing the soul and severing the body of the man from the hat. Furthermore, the figure has put on a coat and turned its back to us, apparently watching (despite missing its head) the stars in the black night sky appearing on top of the skyline.

The cover of *The healing body* makes use of the same figure as found on the two previous covers, still turning its back to us but now having regained its head. The silhouette is filled with yellow sunlight protruding from the position of the neck, all set out against a light blueish background. A much more hopeful and heartwarming picture than the two previous ones, but who is really the main enemy of the recent book, completing the criticism of dualism, materialism and capitalism found in the two preceding volumes?

This is a question I have asked myself repeatedly when reading *The healing body*, noticing that Leder has increasingly taken on the project and identity signaled by the enigmatic title of Magritte's painting: the pilgrim. The sufferer of chronic pain – which is the main subject of the book – sets us out on a sort of pilgrimage in search of healing strategies for the painful body. This is a journey that Leder has travelled himself, as a philosopher of medicine, but, also, and most importantly, as a sufferer of chronic back pain and many other agonizing medical conditions. Ruptured disks, post-covid, ankle pain, sleep apnea, enlarged prostate and eye

disease are mentioned in the book, and Leder also make use of descriptions of chronic conditions suffered by fellow philosophers and medics to illustrate his philosophical moves.

Since chronic pain is such a common phenomenon, afflicting about one out of four persons in the Western world on a daily basis, and almost every person at some point in life, to look for healing strategies is a truly important mission.

## 2 Phenomenology of the body

Leder's main philosophical approach and home tradition have from the very start been phenomenology. When *The absent body* was published 34 years ago the book was a rare species in the field of philosophy of medicine and bioethics. What made Leder's contribution so impressive was that he not only managed to introduce the distinctions between the lived body and the life world versus the physical body and the scientific world to the English-speaking community, but also delivered an original take on the first-person perspective by stressing the importance of the silent visceral dimension of our bodily being. Merleau-Ponty (2012) and Sartre (2018) had made use of concepts such as body-schema and «being turned into an object by the gaze of the other», but they had largely ignored the depth-disappearance of bodily self-awareness and the way it is transformed in illness to what Leder names the «dys-appearance» of the body (in contrast to the dis-appearance typical of healthy life) (LEDER 1990, pp. 69-99).

Furthermore, Leder in this book stressed the importance of bodily rhythms such as heartbeat, breathing, digestion and menstruation for our ways of finding ourselves in the world together with others. The author combined medical knowledge with in-depth readings of major phenomenologists – Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre and Ricoeur – along with less well-known ones – such as Friedrich Buytendijk, Herbert Plügge, Erwin Straus and Richard Zaner – in an accessible and very inventive manner. In short, this book showed what phenomenology could achieve by being put to work in contemporary debates on things such as the nature of health and illness, the essence of medical knowledge or the meaning of good medical practice. I came five years late to *The absent body*, but after having read it, the book never left me, an experience that I share with thousands of other scholars working within fields such as philosophy of medicine, medical humanities and cultural studies of the meaning of embodiment.

*The distressed body* was a rather late follow up – 26 years in coming – and this book is more of a collection of already published papers, that have been updated and molded to fit together in a single book, than a true monography. The book em-

plays a framework that still proceeds from a phenomenological understanding of the ways of the living body but also, as I mentioned above, a political criticism of capitalism and mechanization. The works of Foucault play a much more prominent role than in the previous book and the author not only discusses illness and medicine but also imprisonment and animal farming as ways of making bodies docile and productive in a morally corrupt society.

*The healing body* continues this political critique but this time with a focus on how we can make our human bodies less distressed and painful given the current situation. This is certainly not a new theme to Leder, he has published several books focused on healing and spiritual guidance before (LEDER 2004), but this time he wants to provide self-help in a more academic style and with philosophical rigor. An immediate question that enters my mind when starting reading is if this is really possible. Do you not have to drop the rigorous analysis if you want to come across to the many sufferers of chronic pain who did not go to university and are not really interested in philosophy (at least not the way it is taught in philosophy departments)? The conclusion I have reached after finishing my reading is that no, not necessarily altogether, but in Leder's case the price you pay is a slight predilection for slogans that play down philosophical analysis in favor of what I would call political and spiritual activism.

Sometimes I fear phenomenology is not the ultimate guide in Leder's game anymore, rather identity politics and Eastern metaphysics appear to have overtaken this role. This shift of emphasis will no doubt make him popular in many academic circles, but it also makes his analysis less original and at times rather shallow, to put it bluntly. Having said this, I have much more respect for Leder's interest Indian and Chinese thought and meditation practices, which were clearly visible already in *The absent body*, than I have for his more recent flirt with critical race studies and crip- and queer theory, that I find rather problematic.

### 3 Strategies of healing

I will now say a thing or two about what I find ingenious and solid in the present book. As mentioned, chronic pain is a major issue for many people that tends to destroy lives, and the corresponding idea of exploring how the attitude taken towards pain could help in finding relief from suffering and new ways of living with bodily limitation is to be applauded. The author makes use of a chess-board model – transformed into a keyboard model when employing musical metaphors – outlining 20 ways in which you can heal the body and your life by personal efforts and practices. The 20 strategies are grouped under five different “features” of em-

bodiment translated into corresponding “healing orientations” – escaping the body, embracing the body, remaking the body, re-timing the body and reconnecting the body – each specified by four verbs (accepting, listening, befriending and witnessing found under “embracing the body”, to give one example) (LEDER 2024, p. 3).

Leder is very fond of drawing diagrams and making schemas – a habit that can sometimes make philosophy rather squarish and sterile – but in this case I think the method works well, having as its ultimate goal to help the reader identifying and remembering the different strategies of healing. An important point is that the healing strategies can be combined but sometimes are also opposed – if you strive to ignore or refuse your bodily pain it is hard to similarly listen to it and accept it, to mention an example. Ignoring and refusing, together with objectifying and transcending, belong to the “I have a body” paradigm (feature) aiming to escape the body, in contrast to the “I am a body” paradigm displaying the strategies of accepting, listening, befriending and witnessing the body. This might sound like an easy choice given the phenomenological emphasis on the lived body (which I am) in contrast to the physical body (which I have), but, as Leder points out, escaping instead of embracing can sometimes be a healthy choice in putting a distance between yourself and the aching, misbehaving body part. Despite emphasizing the first-person perspective of suffering and healing processes throughout the book, Leder, having the education of a physician, shows respect for the medical third-person perspective on pain and illness and points out that there is much help to be gained from the medical establishment and skilled practitioners. What he wants to show – I think – is that such a non-personal attitude towards the body can never bring us *all the way* to a healthy life, which is primarily our own responsibility and possibility to bring about by way of the different healing strategies.

In addition to the “I have” and “I am” (a body) paradigms the author also employs the paradigms of “I can(‘t)”, “I’m time” and “we inter-act” as features of bodily being. These categories display the active, temporal and intersubjective aspects of the lived body in a truly phenomenological fashion, yet I cannot help wondering why Leder does not say more about the emotional aspects of bodily suffering and healing in the corresponding chapters. He does so indirectly by employing musical metaphors to understand the temporal and intersubjective aspects of suffering and healing, but there is no follow up in the book on his earlier pathbreaking studies of pain moods, at least not by way of affective concepts such as emotion or atmosphere (LEDER 2016, pp. 24-42). Perhaps this is simply not the way Leder wants to presently pursue the phenomenology of suffering, instead

the 20 different bodily strategies point the way forward in the healing endeavor.

What we do find in the book is an elaboration of interconnected forms of *alienation* processes typical of suffering – becoming alienated from the body, from the world and from the self – that necessitate healing strategies, which consider personally experienced life stories in addition to exploring the pathophysiology of the body. What does it mean to be authentic in contrast to merely be free of diseases? Is it possible to flourish despite chronic pain, perhaps even because of being weathered by life in this alienating way?

The answer is, yes, but before discussing Leder's ultimate proposal for authentic bodily being, carried out in part three of the book named *The inside-out body*, I want to return to my critique of what is taking place in the second part named *The marginalized body* (the first part of the book is simply called *Twenty healing strategies*).

#### ■ 4 Foucauldian metaphysics and identity politics

In the “we inter-act” column of healing strategies Leder lists communing with, receiving from and giving to the other person, but first of all, and most importantly, the way we are *objectified* by the other. This is a famous theme in Beauvoir's (1953) and Sartre's existential philosophy (2018): the other person dilutes my world and transforms me into a thing devoid of any agency or dignity, and all this by merely taking a look at me.

As Leder admits himself, this is a very stereotypical image of interpersonal being, probably prompted by the experiences of the Second World War and an obsession in French philosophy around 1950 with theories inherited from Hegel, Marx and Freud (this etiology is my diagnosis, not Leder's). Rightly, the author also employs the possibilities of communing with, receiving from and giving to the other in order to heal and become authentic. Becoming objectified can serve the interest of healing if it is part of a medical examination and treatment but in other cases it becomes problematic, as in cases of sexist objectification of women, for instance. If women are merely viewed as sexual objects to be taken favor of (by men), and not as persons to commune with, we (the women) are clearly in trouble. The same applies, of course, to racist or homophobic objectification with the difference that the objectifying gazes and emotions in these cases are not of the desiring- but rather of the destroying type.

Leder claims that these types of objectifying gazes and ensuing disrespectful actions are typically experienced on an everyday basis by persons belonging to certain vulnerable groups (marginalized bodies) being repressed by the corresponding powerful group on the opposite end of the spec-

trum: women by men, black people by white people, homosexuals by heterosexuals, non-binary by binary, disabled by “able-bodied” people, and so on. We all know the drill employed by Foucauldian scholars dividing up the population into repressed objects and repressing subjects by way of identity markers and claiming the whole scenario to be a result of “micropower”: repressive meaning structures and power practices pervading every part and aspect of Western society and culture. This type of analysis, under headings such as “de-colonization” and “intersectionality” studies has become immensely popular and dominates many university departments in humanities and social sciences, not only in the USA, where Leder works, but also in Europe (LUKIANOFF & HAIDT 2018; ÖZKIRIMLI 2023).

So, what is wrong with this analysis, really? Besides fueling intolerance, cancellation campaigns and polarizing contemporary politics, I think the main mistake is the wish to get rid of the experiencing subject in favor of assumed forces of domination as the ultimate source of truth. The strategy in this way is fundamentally anti-phenomenological – as Foucault himself proudly confessed – although its fans try to preserve the label by talking about “critical phenomenology”.<sup>1</sup> But this brand is no sign of critical thinking, rather a very stereotype pattern is applied to understand each and every experience and move taking place in contemporary society or being displayed in historical texts, such as the one's written by Husserl himself and his phenomenological successors, for instance.

No person of sound mind could deny that many persons today, and far more many in the past, have suffered sexist, racist and other forms of oppression. What we should deny is that such oppression is inevitable because it is inscribed in our very style of human life in the form of an unconscious matrix. Power is something that is established between subjects, sometimes by making use of ideas and practices that objectify and hurt one of the parties, but very rarely merely by the use of certain words. For instance, I did not intend to harm, and did not effectively harm, anybody by using the term “of sound mind” above. The use of the word was not an insult to persons diagnosed as mentally ill, as a “critical” reader may suspect and claim. Human persons and the ideas and actions they are employing are the source of repression, not language itself. Institutions and theories may facilitate injustices, but they are not the ultimate sources of power, people are, or so, at least, thinks the phenomenologist.

When Leder makes use of the concept of “embodied injustice” to heed the calls of what he names “marginalized groups” (both concepts borrowed from identity politics) he falls into the trap of Foucauldian metaphysics (JOHNSON 2017; YANCI 2017). According to such an analysis, black bodies are always dominated and repressed by white gazes, no matter the history and societal posi-

tion of the persons in question. If a black person ends up in prison (s)he is always suffering from embodied injustice, because the bars were put in place already before s(he) was born and are extending to encapsulate every part of his/her societal and private life. It does not matter what (s)he has done to end up in prison, it is still unjust because the play was rigged from the beginning, and (s)he did not have any real chance to perform better.

I do not think that Leder is comfortable with such an extreme political and philosophical position, but it becomes the consequence of toying with critical race theory in writing things, such as:

After all, we have seen that imprisonment functions as something like a *socially caused chronic illness*. Despite the rhetoric of “rehabilitation,” it is hard to see how we make people better by deliberately sickening them. Our culture of mass incarceration is bloated, racist, and deeply inhumane, an example of embodied injustice writ large. It treats human beings, often those arriving from disadvantaged settings and limited options, as if they were objects to be warehoused, predatory animals to be caged, or savages who deserve to be punished over decades for a single criminal act (LEDER 2024, p. 132 – italics in original).

One starts to wonder about those criminal acts and if the persons who were abused or killed as a result of them did not also suffer injustice. Does it matter if the bodies of the victims were black or white? Does it matter if the perpetrators’ bodies were black or white?

I guess it does if you subscribe to critical theory, just as it matters whether the victim was a woman, a gay- or lesbian person, a trans- or a disabled person, and so on. I share Leder’s criticism of the way the prison system is financed and set up in the USA, but I think it is risky to identify murderers as suffering from embodied injustice depending upon their skin color, since this marginalizes any form of personal responsibility for criminal actions, which is a shameful move, not least to the persons who suffered or died as a result of those actions, no matter if they were black or white.

I deeply respect and admire Leder for his commitment to improve and understand the life of prisoners by conducting philosophical seminars with them and getting to know their life stories. I first read about this in the book *The soul knows no bars: Inmates reflect on life, death, & hope* (2000) in which the philosophy professor enters the gate of a maximum-security prison in Baltimore – despite many obstacles on the way – and manages to make a group of convicts read philosophical classics with him. They read everything from Plato and Nietzsche to Heidegger and Malcolm X discussing themes such as power and violence, the nature of

space and time, sex and race, politics, ethics and the issue of personal responsibility. This book also contains a truly touching story about Leder’s own family miseries and way to Christian conversion, describing himself as a Jewish quaker with a great interest in Eastern religion (I assume this is still true) (LEDER 2000, pp. 173-179).

In the discussions and conclusions found in this book there are no attempts to play down the personal responsibility for the crimes the seminarists have committed or for establishing a meaningful life behind the bars (the soul can still be free). The pleas for fixed time sentences, paroles, rehabilitation programs and political reforms to make society more just outside the fences are central to the book, but are never made by way of identity politics. The eleven seminar participants are individuals (even portrayed with photos and short CVs in the beginning of the book) and they display different philosophical orientations in the discussions and choose different strategies to survive or even flourish in jail. In the seminars they relate to their own life stories and major choices and this is what makes the book so fascinating.

Taking a closer look at the 20 healing strategies presented in *The healing body*, one realizes that if “embodied injustice” is taken to be a form of “socially caused chronic illness”, political action will always trump the other strategies as an ultimate cure for suffering. This is particularly true regarding the alternatives of communing, receiving and giving in the “we inter-act” column which will always look questionable if you buy into the hermeneutics of suspicion employed by “critical” theorists. Think you are communing on equal terms with white people? Well, they are probably objectifying and exploiting you even if they show a kind face. Think you are receiving favors from white people? Well, that is only because they have already taken everything away from you. Communing, receiving and giving will only be options if they are taking place between members in your own repressed group and ideally in a battle against the oppressors identified by way of their skin color or other bodily characteristics.

I do not think this is the type of political theory that Leder wants to subscribe to, not least because it is incompatible with the phenomenological and existential versions of philosophy he has been making use of from the very start in his own career. He sometimes in the chapter on embodied injustice appears to suddenly remember this, writing things such as: «moreover, no human being is simply and essentially defined by their race, gender, sexual preference, or disability» (LEDER 2024, p. 114). But in the next sentence we learn that this is only because we are constituted by multiple group belongings (preferably of the marginalized type), being «a gay Latina, but one torn between her Hispanic heritage and that culture’s homo-

phobia» (p. 114). Well, I call that being defined by your race (ethnic group) *and* sexuality, not by your individual life project. Intersectionality does not equal phenomenology or existentialism and Leder should know that.

## ■ 5 Transforming the body and escaping the mind

Leder's more independent choice for a super strategy of healing appears in the third part of the book in the form of what he calls "the transparent body". This is not just a strategy but also a separate version of the paradigms (features) of embodiment listed on top of the chessboard. In accordance with the title of this part of the book it could also be called the "inside-out body" or perhaps the "I am everything body". Leder returns to the topic of visceral recess, explored already in his first book, and focuses especially on bodily rhythms, particularly on breathing. Pre-personal organismic functions of the body that are not controlled by our will are not only foreign and strange to us, but they also show how we are connected to all other living things and perhaps to the universe as such. If we open our minds to inner perception – by way of vipassana meditation, yoga, qigong or tai chi – we will ultimately experience our connection to the whole surrounding world, making the body fully transparent and becoming free of an individual point of mind. This is the ultimate cure for chronic pain and human suffering, the grand and final way to healing in comparison with the other 20 strategies to be found on the chess board.

There is much to be learned from Leder's exploration of what is commonly referred to as mindfulness techniques. He knows the Indian and Chinese traditions of philosophy extremely well (his professorship at Loyola University is in both Western and Eastern philosophy) and give many detailed descriptions of his own experiences of the transparent body. The transparent body is not only a possible cure for pain and illness but also for all human suffering, making it a very powerful alternative – although hard to evaluate from a mere reading of the book. The author also tries to find connections to the other super alternative of the book – the resisting political oppression strategy – by citing the BLM slogan "I can't breathe", but as you might have suspected I am a bit skeptical of this combination of new age and political theory. Should we identify with a particular vulnerable group while we are meditating? Or rather meditate first and then take to the streets?

From the phenomenological point of view, I find the chapter on aging and "Elder wisdom" in the second part of the book very interesting. Leder first tries to fit the aging body into the vulnerable body category, talking about ageism in parallel with sexism and racism à la Beauvoir (1996), but I enjoy much more his excursions on elderly wis-

dom that open the door to the finishing "transparent body" chapters of the book (part three). The author rightly points to the counter-productive aspects of what is known as "healthy", or even "successful", aging, making disease prevention into the goal of life as such, rather than a tool in service of a richer life experience. Becoming old is not necessarily something bad in itself. As we become older, we also become, at least to some extent, wiser, and this life experience can be used to find better strategies to deal with the chronic pain and suffering that we will all have to face eventually (if we do not suffer a sudden death before we turn old).

## ■ 6 Conclusion

As I mentioned in the beginning of this article, Leder has in many ways taken on the project of a pilgrim for sufferer's and I think he does this with great style. After having read and thought through the arguments of his book, I have also found an answer to the question of who is presently Leder's the main culprit in comparison with the two earlier volumes in the trilogy. It is no longer merely dualism, materialism, industrialization or capitalism, but rather Western culture as such. This is what is common to the two ways in which Leder now aims to transcend phenomenology; identity politics and eastern philosophy both portray the lifestyle and history of the West as the enemy and disease of our contemporary situation. These two traditions share a sceptic attitude towards the West in sense of the enlightenment movement and the tradition of classic liberalism. However, to my mind this is the wrong diagnosis if you want to find remedies for our present political condition. The tradition that was inaugurated in Europe in the 18<sup>th</sup> century is rather our best hope for cure. Western modern history does not merely consist in colonialism and greedy individualism, but in the attempt to nurture a critical and independent philosophical attitude recognizing the suffering of others, to apostrophize Kant and Hume (PLUCK-ROSE & LINDSAY 2020).

Perhaps my review is unfair to Leder's book as it tends to focus on the parts of it that I am skeptical about, not saying enough about the healing strategies, which I wholeheartedly support and think the author does an extremely good job in dissecting and exemplifying. But it is often more philosophically productive to disagree than merely give praise, especially if the author gets the opportunity of writing a reply.

I would like to end by pointing to the strategies found under the "I'm time" category of embodiment on Leder's board which I think are extremely helpful in thinking about the life of a body that happens to be yours or mine:

The body is constantly in flux. I can take an

energetic walk in the cool of the early morning, but perhaps not when dragging through the heat of late afternoon. Of course, more dramatic changes occur over the course of years as illness or old age bring limitation. In the fullness of time we likely discover that we all are only “temporarily abled” (LEDER 2024, p. 55).

True, so true about our human condition.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See the newly founded journal *Puncta. Journal of Critical Phenomenology* (available at the URL: <https://puncta.journals.villanova.edu/>). The label of critical phenomenology is sometimes applied to include other ways of doing political phenomenology or pursuing phenomenological in-depth analysis in other ways than via identity politics, as shown by the recently published book anthology containing a little bit of everything in phenomenology that could be perceived as critical in some sense (WEISS, SALAMON & MURPHY 2019).

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