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Kierkegaard and/or Embodiment

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“Likewise it is unfair to claim that an elephant has no intelligence worth studying just because it does not play chess.” R. A. Brooks, “Elephants Don’t Play Chess” (1990, p. 13)

What would Kierkegaard think about the so-called *situated turn* in the cognitive sciences proposed by embodiment theorists, whereby the mind is viewed as distributed—extended—throughout our nervous system and socio-cultural practices? (Pecher & Zwaan, 2005; Semin & Smith, 2008) A situated approach is multidimensional, prompting us to take into account in addition to what goes on between our ears as motivators for behaviour, the role of our bodies and the socio-cultural context. How much “extension” the embodiment thesis commits us is up for grabs: are our minds distributed throughout just our bodies (our central and peripheral nervous systems) or also the socio-cultural context? (Robbins & Aydede, 2009; Smith & Conrey, 2009). In what follows, I use the embodied thesis in the more radical situated sense encompassing our bodies and our socio-cultural history.

After a brief defense of the situated turn, I shall consider three ways to think of Kierkegaard’s philosophy in relationship to the embodiment thesis: one negative, one positive, and one a “hands-off” position. Next, some of the potential positive consequences of adhering to the embodiment thesis are discussed. Further, I endeavor to explore how we could understand Kierkegaard’s asceticism—where we are to be free from the body—from a developmental point of view, using a Hindu view of life for the purpose of illustration. Finally, some of the positive consequences of adhering to a developmental view coupled with the embodiment thesis are discussed.

Embodiment

For embodiment theorists, whatever the mind is, it is not as far as location goes, as Jerry Fodor held, north of our necks. It is south, east, and west. The title of a book by the philosopher of mind Mark Johnson captures what embodied theorists aim at: *Body in the Mind*. For embodiment theorists, we just cannot usefully understand the mind apart from the body or the world in which we use it to navigate.

The idea that behaviour shapes our thinking is commonplace in various aspects of psychology (Flanagan, 2000). The point buoys up the embodiment thesis: what we do with our bodies shapes our minds. Our perceptions, thoughts, and feelings, often socially founded, leave their neurological traces (Gibson, 1979; Gupta, 2009a; Rogoff, 1993). We perceive the world with through sensory nerves. There are motor nerves that let us pick up a coffee cup with the right amount of effort. Once automated, we depend on our motor memory, a type of procedural memory, to do daily activities like brushing our teeth or typing in a password. Further, what we do can leave its epigenetic traces. Just as we have been selected to have certain traits that shape behaviour the converse is also possible. Our experiences could turn “on” or “off” genes affecting their expression in our lifetime, and even that of our progeny.

Previously considered Lamarck's mistake, the idea that a giraffe has a long neck because its parents stretched theirs. There has been relatively recent evidence that some behaviours can affect dispositions in future generations. For instance, it has been observed that frogs forced to mate on land, due to arid conditions—a behaviour—predisposed their progeny to likewise even when marine conditions returned—a biological proclivity genetically encoded.

In any case, part of having a mind is to be in a meaningful world that has a history built up through our relations with other people, physical objects, and our evolutionary history. A coffee cup is meaningful to me because I live in a culture where for various historical reasons (related to the American rejection of the British crown) coffee was chosen over tea, and is with us at local Tim Horton outlets in Canada, and biologically, caffeine is experienced as a stimulant that makes it desirable.

I shall turn now to consider a challenge to the embodiment theorists, before going on to bring them into dialogue with Kierkegaard. One challenge to embodiment that goes like this. Is the embodiment thesis not just some ontological version of the genetic fallacy, whereby the source of a claim does not bear on its truth or falsity? The source of an algebraic problem's solution has no bearing on its truth. Following a similar line of reasoning, where something *emerges* from does not tell us what something *is*. Tomatoes, organic ones, are grown in dirt, but I am obviously not eating dirt when eating tomatoes. Thus, the mind, we can agree, relies upon having a brain; external stimulation to construct ideas, and those include socio-cultural experiences, exposure to a host of artifacts, and so on. However, we could argue, the mind is not co-extensive with what allows it to be what it is.

As a rejoinder, I offer two points. First, the embodiment thesis provides a powerful lens from which to understand ourselves. Watching a child grow and develop, we can get a sense of how much we serve our bodies: we want food, toys, attention, and even though our tastes, trinkets, and social aspirations change, the desires are quite basic ones that stay with us. We want to belong, and part of that spiritual sense of belonging is to have loved ones near in times of joy and trouble, to have someone to celebrate with, to be comforted when ill, or to find refuge in God, something we can understand intuitively as a human need (perhaps as an extension of the need to belong) and study it psychologically and neurologically.

The second point deals with historical context and engrained bias against the embodiment thesis. As Pascal had said, "In the entire world man is but a reed, but he is a thinking reed." In light of the intellectual traditions spread across continents and time periods, we have generally valued ourselves as special, made in the image of God, the center of the universe (e.g., the geocentric view), having reason making us akin to the gods, and having access to truth because of it. These traditions whose proponents have emphasized the rational parts of our souls have shaped our thinking, for instance, with an emphasis on language and cognitive processes related to abstract thought in the cognitive sciences. (In fact, only recently has there been the inclusion of a chapter on emotions in some textbooks on cognitive psychology (Eysenck & Keane, 2010; Matlin, 2013).) It has taken us a long time to pay heed to the idea that thinking involves us with emotions, with our bodies, with others, and with history, both the recent, and that of our species over evolutionary time.

Thus, it is reasonable to think that we cannot just be minds—we cannot truly live a life of the mind—and trying to extricate ourselves from our bodies and social relations is potentially a philosophical mistake, which has practical consequences. So, let us now turn to what Kierkegaard may say about the embodied thesis to scrutinize it further.

The Uncoupling

The natural place to start in thinking about Kierkegaard's position in relationship to the embodied thesis seems to be negative. Kierkegaard would be hostile to the idea of embodiment. Considering the three stages of development, Kierkegaard charts, that of the seducer, the ethical, and the religious, the following picture emerges. The seducer is wrapped up in the physical world, specifically, his own desire for gratification. He lives the life of the body, or Kierkegaard understands of it. One can be either a hedonist, uncouth, or restrain oneself, disciple one's desires to attain a higher spiritual life, one closer to God, hence, further away from the body. The ethical person, realizing the inherent failings with seeking constant pleasure, commits to something beyond the here and now, emblemized for Kierkegaard in marriage.

Given the vicissitudes of human existence, the loss that comes with growing and aging, Kierkegaard considers the sole refuge for the self must be in a relationship to God through faith. We can say that the entire purpose of development is to move further away from the life of the body, and towards one of a life of the mind.

As the Buddhists say, “Just as cows are driven to pasture by sticks, Man is driven to God through suffering.” The pain and pleasure that comes with having a body, being able to experience the world, to act in it, to achieve our wishes, becomes a story of more pain terminating in death—one that Kierkegaard experienced in spades, with much early loss in his life. Before the age of nine he had lost a brother and sister; another brother and his mother died before he was twenty-one. Yet this seemingly unhappy story of increasing pain and loss, is actually the key through which we may find ultimate peace in the religious narrative of Kierkegaard. For him, the ultimate peace, indeed, lies outside the world.

Generally, his philosophy has Platonic overtones. The purpose of titles like *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* and why Gupta’s (2005) book on Kierkegaard contains the phrase “Romantic legacy” is because Kierkegaard’s thinking can be located at a time of growing conflict between science and traditional belief systems that were rooted in a religion.

Even questions impermeable to the gaze of the scientist, some positivists held to be non-sense. Against such a current, even if preceding it historically, Kierkegaard focuses in on the preeminent value of faith. As he emphasizes in the re-telling of the story of Job from the Old Testament, faith requires us to believe when all reason is all but thrown out, when nothing makes sense, and all the evidence is to the contrary—in this case that there does exist a benevolent caring God.

Insofar as embodiment theorists fall within the positivist tradition, guided by the cognitive sciences, there is little quarter to entertain notions of faith in what cannot be determined empirically (although there could be psychological interest in the notion of faith and the important consequence it has in people’s lives, which is another thing altogether). There is little kinship between Kierkegaard’s motivations and embodiment theorists; Kierkegaard is subjectivist, the other objectivist.

In addition, Kierkegaard’s philosophy is intended to be a universal one. He is providing an account of human nature not just for a certain time and place, not just for Denmark in the nineteenth century, but about the human predicament itself. Recall, part of the situated thesis, is that human nature is contextual.

Linkages

In light of the foregoing, it seems a daunting task to think of how Kierkegaard could have a positive view of the embodiment thesis. After all, his view is a recapitulation of Platonism in a modern context, where faith and science clash.

However, there are points of contact between the embodiment cohort and Kierkegaard. Like proponents of the embodiment thesis, Kierkegaard does pay heed to other aspects of our minds than the intellect. After all, the leap of faith requires recognizing the limits of reason, and hence, being forced to make a critical judgement that rests on something else, perhaps the passions. As Kierkegaard would put it, we cannot get to truth upon syllogisms.

Having a body, for Kierkegaard can be seen as positive in that it leads us along the stages of development, and terminates in solidifying our moral relations to others. He may be open to using empirical methods of the social sciences to justify his account. The end result of obtaining the religious stage of development, as it was for Plato in his own secular fashion, was not simply to exit the world.

At the religious stage, according to Kierkegaard, we find the foundation of ethical behaviour, because our love for each other is mediated through our relationship to God. Also, there are universal aspects to the embodiment thesis that could be consistent with Kierkegaard’s theory of development. Given that he is writing within the Christian tradition, he may acknowledge that socio-cultural factors that shape his own thinking, too.

I would like to end this portion with some personal reflections on my embodiment. There are at least two reasons to do so, which I mention because my tack differs from a traditional philosophy paper. First, I believe that all of philosophy must find a footing in our own life experiences, but not that alone (as we must be open to empirical evidence scientifically accumulated);

Second, this personal-anecdotal approach tallies with Kierkegaard's own subjective approach to truth: truth must be what we must believe, not just what is true in the wilderness.

How many of our needs, wants, and ideas relate to where we are along the developmental lifecycle. Development influences who we are, and every culture takes into account our needs along our path, and attends to them, or better yet, develops them, in varying ways and to different degrees. We can usefully turn to Tharakad's, Mistry's, and Dutta's (2011) "Reconceptualizing Lifespan Development Through a Hindu Perspective." All cultures probably have some way to conceptualize the lifespan into stages, and here we look to the Hindu one as an illustration.

Some Consequences of Embodiment for the Religious

Kierkegaard, who was born on May 5, 1813 and died November 11, 1855, is considered one of the founders, or inspirations of existentialism, even though that was a post-World War II development. He is often taught in schools alongside Nietzsche. We cannot help but think that many others under the banner of existentialism or phenomenology, be it Nietzsche, Heidegger, or Merleau-Ponty, would offer a better fit with proponents of the embodiment thesis. Some recent examples of utilizing Heidegger in embodied-like ways are Winograd's and Flores' (1987) *Understanding Computers and Cognition: A New Foundation for Design*, and Clark's (1997) *Being There: Putting Brain, Body, and World Together Again*. These authors emphasize the key themes of embodiment proponents: the kinesthetic-bodily, technological, and socio-cultural aspects of thinking.

Embodied themes also echo in fragments from Skinner's (1974) behaviorism, who emphasized the role of the environment in shaping thinking; the constructivist psychology of Piaget (1985), who discussed how our manipulation of objects allows us to develop abstract ideas; and the social constructionism of Vygotsky (1978), who dwelt perhaps more than any other on the interpersonal dimensions of learning (Woolfolk, Winnie, & Perry, 2012), and who has been read as offering an account of entry into a society (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wertsch, 1993), or even more radically in the tradition of Marx, providing an explanation of the historical change of bodies of knowledge via Luria (1976) (del Río, & Alvarez, 1995; Cole, 1993; Engerström & Cole, 1997).

Kierkegaard's thinking and dispositions affected his own life dramatically, for instance, when he considered, and refused, marriage to Regina Olsen. In fact, Kierkegaard is known to have said, "If I had faith, I would have married Regina." He chose not to marry her, and dedicated his life to his work, which seems to tally with his the ethos of his philosophy as I have characterized it: away from the world, and to God.

However, we can ask how our bodily lives show our minds and culture through our creations (in the case of most academics, papers and books, and maybe patents, programs, or other artifacts), our relationships and all the things that make up our world. Our lives do not just reside between our ears (though they do that too), but in our entire bodies, in our relations, in our culture and history, and the meanings we create or discover are inexorably bound up with all of this.

Before proceeding further, it is worthwhile to consider in addition to the rejection of the embodiment thesis, and its adoption, an in-between position, namely the idea that the embodiment thesis poses no conflict or support for Kierkegaard's position. Sure, stylistically, the embodiment thesis seems to cut against the metaphysically Platonic, methodologically romantic, and ethically ascetic tradition in which Kierkegaard wrote. But the embodiment thesis does not lead us to make claims about faith. And the embodiment thesis does not commit us to any one ethical regiment, hedonistic or otherwise.

Yet I have tried to look at the embodiment thesis within a larger context, as a historical and cultural reconfiguration of human nature. In so doing, there does seem to be presuppositions about methodology, reality, and ethics tied in with the embodiment thesis.

Though there are some potential points of congruence between the embodiment thesis and Kierkegaard's thought, namely, in valuing the emotions. Overall, however, we are forced to acknowledge a lack of connection between the two.

Kierkegaard's theory of development leads us away from the body, from the physical world, and to divinity. The body is the problem of human existence not the place for its salvation. In sum, his view fits broadly within the Platonic tradition where reason is elevated because it allows us to hook on, in his case with faith (hence, using reason to go beyond itself by self-suspension), to a universal, eternal truth. His psychology is intended to be a universal one, little affected but multicultural or broader sociological factors that are paramount for embodiment theorists.

Further, the reason to acknowledge the lack of a relationship between Kierkegaard's thought and the embodiment thesis is the shortcomings of the other two avenues we have explored. Kierkegaard would likely be hostile to the notion that faith in God is just a grand illusion foisted upon us by our needs, likely thinking such a view is a consequence of the positivist age in which he lived.

Even though it is true that the religious stage of life in Kierkegaard's thought provides a foundation for his ethics, and hence, robust interpersonal interactions, the proponents of the embodiment thesis would just not likely assent to beliefs in things that go beyond the preview of scientific inquiry (see Table 1, "A Tale of Two Natures," below).

Table 1 A Tale of Two Natures

Elements	Embodiment Theorists	Kierkegaard
Development	Always linked to the body, fulfillment of basic needs could be organized differently in various societies, highly contextual	Leads away from the body, the three stages, universal
Platonism	No	Yes
Mind/Body	We are both physical matter and give rise to mental events, like meanings. Anti-Platonism. We cannot lose sight of where ideas come from	The body is something that is the cause of our ailments, and we should get away from, seeking refuge in abstract ideas like God. Platonism. Ideas are more real than any physical source they come from
Meaning of life	Psycho-social harmony, wrapped in a grand narrative	The God-relationship
God	Can be discussed in the terms empiricist terms of origin of ideas, like psycho-social needs	Must be handled personally as a matter of faith
Reason/Emotion	Yes	Yes
Methodology	The empirical sciences, emblemized in the hypo-deductive scientific method, and anything beyond that is perhaps necessitated by our needs	Going beyond the scientific method and logic is essential to become what we are intended—faith is a legitimate path to truth
The socio-cultural context	Meanings exist in culture: The foundation of being human	An aspect of being human that like the body can lead us astray. Group think.

By way of summary of Table 1, "A Tale of Two Natures," for embodiment theorists, human nature can be characterized by neurological and cognitive systems, the latter of which involve us with others, the socio-cultural context, and our history; we become who we are within a certain world. For Kierkegaard, conversely, human nature is about being composed of both mind and matter, and coming to terms with the shortcomings of the intellect (hence, the need for faith) to solve the problems entailed in being embodied.

As detailed in Table 1, there are broad disagreements between the embodiment theorist and Kierkegaard characterizing seemingly different worldviews. Except notably with the case of elevating the role of the emotions in human existence, there are likely stark differences: Embodiment theorists values the body more than him developmentally; they are anti-Platonists; they think that the notion of God is dispensable; they think that the God-relationship is not the only way to become fully human; and subsequently, unlike Kierkegaard, they believe that the God-relationship is not the ultimate meaning of human life;

They contend that the scientific method is more effective than faith as a path to knowledge; they esteem the socio-cultural context more than him.

In fact a key motivation for bringing Kierkegaard into dialogue with the embodiment thesis comes from believing that it is a significant reconceptualization of our understanding of human nature. Part of what it means to be human is to develop, physically and mentally, to attend to our bodies, and those of others. Caring for others involves us with making sure others are comfortable, and understanding what that would mean: for instance, making one psycho-socially and physically comfortable.

A Developmental View of the Mind

Aristotle had remarked, “The rattle is a toy suited to the infant mind, and education is the rattle or toy for children of a larger growth” (*Politics*, 8.6, 1340b30). Our thinking changes as we develop, and then in often predictable ways.

Since philosophers are often writing in their ripe years, its little surprise that what is important to them is no longer the world, which some, famously Plato, have judged to be an illusion. In what follows I want to take a brief look at Hinduism, to reconfigure the Platonic ideal that I have identified in Kierkegaard’s writings—namely, a flight from the world approached through various stages that terminates in asceticism.

In Hinduism, there are thought to be four different stages (*ashramas*) of life. According to Hindu scriptures, as I shall explain in the foregoing, there are four divisions of life: the student phase (*brahmacharya*); the householder phase (*grihastha*); the hermit phase (*vanaprastha*); and the wandering-ascetic phase (*sannyasa*), where someone renounces the world in search of God.

The main purpose of life for a Hindu is to escape the cycle of birth and death, to achieve liberation (*moksha*), which entails merging with Brahma (*Pramatma*), the ultimate reality. In addition, there are thought to be four main occupations in society: priests (*brahmins*), warriors (*kshatriyas*), merchants (*vaishyas*), laborers (*shudras*), which have over time come to be solidified as castes. (Somewhat symmetrically to the four vocations, as I show in Table 2, there are also four goals to life (*purusharthas*): righteousness (following moral dictates, *dharma*), wealth (*artha*), pleasure (*kama*), and emancipation (*moksha*).

Table 2. Hindu Modes of Life

Stages of Life	Occupational alignment	Goals of Life
1. Student life (<i>brahmacharya</i>)	(Priests-in-training?)	righteousness (<i>purusharthas</i>), following moral dictates, (<i>dharma</i>)
2. Householder (<i>grihastha</i>)	laborers (<i>shudras</i>) merchants (<i>vaishyas</i>) warriors (<i>kshatriyas</i>)	wealth (<i>artha</i>) and pleasure (<i>kama</i>)
3. Hermit (<i>vanaprastha</i>) 4. Wandering-ascetic (<i>sannyasa</i>)	Priests (<i>brahmins</i>)	righteousness (<i>purusharthas</i>), following moral dictates, (<i>dharma</i>), and emancipation (<i>moksha</i>)

I shall elaborate Table 2, “Modes of Hindu Life,” thus. The first stage of life is that of an apprentice (*brahmacharya*), from 8 – 18 years, and involves celibacy and learning. The second stage is to become a householder and raise a family (*grihastha*), which involves us with the accumulation of wealth (*artha*) and desire (*kama*). The third stage concerns us with the extrication from wealth (*vanaprastha*), or “forest bound,” where we are to take up a life of contemplation and strive for equanimity. The final stage is that of renunciation (*sannyasa*) for those over 75 years of age, where we are to abandon attachment to worldly objects. The final stage of life, renunciation, is not advised until one has paid of one’s debts to Gods, Gurus, ancestors (*Pitru*), as well as fulfilled obligations to family, parents, and society. Further, a school of Hindu thought called Vedanta can be summarized as proposing that Brahman is Atman, or God is equivalent to the soul.

In Table 2, “Modes of Hindu Life,” I offered a simplification, since one’s *dharma* is also given by one’s occupation: a warrior is meant to be such. So, one is not just committed to wealth and pleasure as a householder. However, the general outline does highlight that there is an ascent over the course of one’s life, and over lifetimes, to reach freedom from the cycle of birth and death.

Further, human life is considered special because it provides the opportunity to do good deeds, and these acts (*karma*) carry over into our subsequent lives. In fact, a child has urges (*vasanas*) and a temperament (*gunas*) that are said to be the result of what they did in their previous lives.

Now, from an embodied point of view, even though there may not be a realm of inquire higher than the body, than our social relations and our cultural traditions, we can still appreciate why we may seek one. Admittedly, part of being embodied may involve us with un-embodied ideas contained within our cultural tradition. As St. Thomas Aquinas put it, “I am an individual with a single nature composed of matter and form” (ST 75.7).

It is plausible to think that some invariant features of development could be identified, even if expressed in radically different ways. For instance, belonging according to Maslow and Baumeister (Finkle & Baumeister, 2010, p. 434) could be a primary human need, but leading to different types of behaviours, in gangs, religions, and cultures, more broadly. In fact, we can further understand that what factors tend to make us more resilient, like belonging are at play at different levels: to use Bronfenbrenner’s bio-ecological language, within the microsystem, such as our interpersonal relations; within the meso- and exo-systems, the social context of our lives; as well as within the macro-system, constituting culture and spirituality.

I have posed the following questions: how can what we learn from the cognitive sciences influence our understanding of Kierkegaard? How can our cultural/religious beliefs about the lifespan inform our thinking about asceticism in his thought? What I have tried to suggest is that the asceticism in his thought finds both challenge and support within the cognitive sciences.

Since the cognitive sciences are concerned with the body, they seem removed from Kierkegaard’s account. Yet from a developmental point of view, they need not be. We can be seen to develop in a way where we become both enmeshed in abstract cultural ideas about what constitutes self-actualization, while all the while moving further away, literally, from the world. We find the world by losing it. As Kierkegaard may put it, we find the self, by losing it in something greater than ourselves. The embodiment and unembodied self, paradoxically, go hand-in-hand.

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