

From Word to Flesh: Embodied Racism and the New Politics

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Abstract: Drawing on resources from the philosophical tradition of phenomenology and putting them into dialogue with an important theme in Christian theology, I argue that there is a distinctly non-discursive, embodied form of racism that should be recognized and addressed by the new politics. Because this form of racism occurs not at the familiar level of discourse (word), but in the often unconscious habitualities of the lived body (flesh), it resists common antiracist strategies, and seems to be outside the purview of responsibility and of willful, rational change (the *logos*). I situate these underlying issues with regard to the traditional opposition between mind and body, and then offer a reinterpretation of them by way of some key phenomenological concepts: *intentionality, the lived body, the critique of scientism, motivation, and empathy*. I conclude that embodied racism is something which is open to an extended conception of rationality that includes the lived body, and for which we are responsible. I then suggest some antiracist political strategies that put these theoretical considerations to use through attention to embodied spaces and practices.

Keywords: racism; the body; discourse; phenomenology; reason

Introduction

One distinguishing aspect of the new politics is its tendency either to embrace or to confront forms of identity prejudice such as racism, sexism, and transphobia. While much theoretical work on these issues has focused on the *discourse* surrounding them, less attention has been paid to the ways in which these sites of oppression function *non-discursively*. In this paper I focus on one such site of the new politics: embodied racism. The implications of my theoretical claims extend to other forms of identity prejudice and are thus applicable to the new politics more broadly.

While strategies for combatting racism by changing racist discourse (for example, by drawing attention to the powerful negative effects of hate speech or the use of slurs) remain important, such strategies tend to engage primarily with *explicit, expressed* and *intentional* forms of racism. This is especially true in the age of the new politics, given the prevalence of new forms of discourse such as those provided by social media platforms.

However, as the experiences of victims of racial prejudice have long attested, racism also occurs in other, less directly confrontational, and sometimes even unintended ways. Perhaps the most familiar form of such implicit prejudice is structural racism, in which policies and institutions systematically ignore, exclude, or denigrate the rights, concerns, and perspectives of oppressed groups and exacerbate existent inequalities through implicit biases¹ sedimented in social and political structures. Recent protests around the world following the murder of George Floyd have helped to highlight this structural racism, especially as it is manifested in the institution of policing.

¹ For a recent account of the literature on implicit bias, its place in discussions of race and racism more broadly, and some recent criticisms of it, see Beeghly and Madva 2020.

In this essay, I focus on a different, more subtle form of implicit bias—one that is not often noted, but is pervasive in our everyday social lives: racism occurring passively,² at the level of individual lived bodies, as exhibited in first-personal descriptions of the lived experience of racialized bodies.³ Focus on this lived and embodied form of racism shows that a full-fledged political strategy for dealing with forms of prejudice must include antiracist strategies *directly at this embodied, first-personal level, by recognizing the body practices and spaces as sites of meaning and rational engagement*. After further introducing this form of racism in the first section, I turn in sections II-VI to the underlying theoretical issues. The final section presents some concrete recommendations for the move from theory to practice.

I. Embodied Racism and Social Space

In a well-known 1986 essay in *Ms. Magazine*, Brent Staples describes his experience as a young Black man in public spaces in Chicago and later in New York—of people quickening their pace to a run on the sidewalk in front of him, or crossing the street to avoid close contact, or of the sound of car doors locking as he walks in front of drivers at a crosswalk. The scenarios Staples describes are results of a long history of structurally racist policies and problematic depictions of African Americans in public media and discourse. But he locates the effect of this racism explicitly in his embodied inhabiting of social space: “It is in the echo of that terrified woman’s footfalls that I first began to know the unwieldy inheritance I’d come into—the ability to alter public space in ugly ways” (Staples 1986). Similarly, he describes his own approach for dealing with such racism not in terms of discourse and media—though, as an author and later Pulitzer-prize-winning editorial board member at the *New York Times*, he is well familiar with the power of such approaches—but in terms of conscious alterations of his embodied behavior: “I now take precautions to make myself less threatening. I move about with care, particularly late in the evening, I give a wide berth to nervous people on subway platforms during the wee hours...” (Staples 1986).

As Staples’ essay demonstrates, when white people shift further to the opposite side of the sidewalk when walking past a person of color, lock the car doors when a person of color is seen in proximity to their vehicle, or—to use an example from philosopher George Yancy—stiffen and avert their gaze when a person of color joins them in an elevator, they are enacting subtle, bodily habituated forms of racism. But the subtleness of this form of racism means it often goes unnoticed by those who perpetuate it.

² Throughout this essay, I characterize such racism as “passive” both in the sense that it manifests “an apathy toward systems of racial advantage or denial that those systems exist” (Roberts and Rizzo 2020), and in the technical phenomenological sense that it occurs via intentional syntheses below the level of active, thematic, conscious thought (Husserl 2001). Structural racism, as discussed in the previous paragraph, is not always passive. For example, Richard Rothstein (2017) has shown that many of the governmental policies that led to the redlining of American cities were both explicit and intentional.

³ For an explanation of the importance of the approach that presages much of the more recent literature on the topic, see Alcoff 1999. More extended treatments can be found in Alcoff 2006 and Ngo 2017. This approach is employed in George Yancy’s work on social spaces discussed below (Yancy 2008); with regard to the phenomenology of embodied perception in Al-Saji 2014 and Leboeuf 2020.

This is a central theme in Yancy's influential essay "Elevators, Social Spaces, and Racism," in which he develops an extended phenomenological analysis of an encounter between himself and a White woman, in the shared social space of an elevator:

Well-dressed, I enter an elevator where a white woman waits to reach her floor. She 'sees' my Black body, though not the same one I have seen reflected back to me from the mirror on any number of occasions. Buying into the myth that one's dress says something about the person, one might think that the markers of my dress (suit and tie) should ease her tension. What is it that makes the markers of my dress inoperative? She sees a Black male body "supersaturated with meaning, as they [Black bodies] have been relentlessly subjected to [negative] characterization by newspapers, newscasters, popular film, television programming, public officials, policy pundits and other agents of representation." (2008, 846)

In the latter half of the passage, Yancy quotes from the philosopher Robert Goodling Williams, drawing our attention to the representational, discursive context of anti-Black racism. But note that Yancy presents the *bodies themselves* as the site of meaning in the elevator encounter. Although discourse may have helped to determine the racist context of the encounter, the encounter itself is more direct, unmediated by speech or self-conscious representations of the other. Regarding the gaze of the white woman in the elevator, Yancy notes:

Notice that she need not speak a word (speech-acts are not necessary) to render my Black body 'captive.' [...] Indeed, although how she reacts to me is certainly not without its deeper moral implications, and must be called into question, it is not a necessary requirement that she hates me or is morally vicious in order for her to script my body in the negative way that she does. Her *non-verbal* movements construct me, creating their own socio-ontological effects on my body. (Yancy 2008, 858, my emphasis)

The difference between an active, discursive, and conscious or cognitive form of racism and the passive, embodied sort becomes even more evident when Yancy moves on to an account of what it would take for the woman to address such prejudice:

To begin to see me from a perspective that effectively challenges her racism, however, would involve *more than a cognitive shift in her perspective*. It would involve a continuous effort at *performing her body's racialized interactions with the world differently*. This additional shift resides *at the somatic level* as well. After all, she may come to judge her perception of the Black body as epistemologically false, but *her racism may still have a hold on her lived body*. I walk into the elevator and she feels apprehension. Her body shifts nervously and her heart beats more quickly as she clutches her purse more closely to her. She feels anxiety in the pit of her stomach. Her perception of time in the elevator may feel like an eternity. The space within the elevator is surrounded from all sides with my Black presence. [...] The point here is that *deep-seated racist emotive responses may form part of the white bodily repertoire, which has become calcified through quotidian modes of bodily transaction in a racial and racist world*. (Yancy 2008, 847, my emphasis)

Such depictions of passive forms of racism have a tendency to make even politically progressive white readers uncomfortable—myself very much included. Despite a recent political climate in which issues of racial injustice have been thrust to the forefront of our political discourse, such depictions are difficult for white readers to come to terms with because they do not play out on the well-travelled and familiar terrain of discourse. While pretty much everyone today is familiar with explicit, discursive acts of racism in the form of hate speech and racial slurs, and while well-informed participants in the contemporary political sphere recognize the pernicious effects of systemic or structural racism, we remain reluctant to address and become uneasy when confronted with the *lived body itself* as a site of racism.

II. The Problem of Confronting Passive Embodied Racism

There are a few reasons for this reluctance and discomfort. One is simply that addressing the issue is incredibly difficult. Our familiar tools of, for example, rational persuasion through exposure to minority narratives or investigative reporting demonstrating the structural nature of racism, don't seem to be up to the task of addressing this sort of racism, insofar it is not fundamentally about representing facts or perspectives, but rather first and foremost about something that is *felt*.

But there is deeper-lying difficulty: we are uncomfortable with the framing of the lived body itself as a site of racism because, as a site of meaning that is implicit and non-discursive, it is also *not actively willed*, and thus falls outside the commonly conceived moral boundaries of agency and responsibility. Part of the power—and the horror—of Yancy's description of the woman in the elevator is its very passivity: it is *her body* which enacts this form of racism, not only in a way that she may not be aware of, but also in a way not obviously under her cognitive control, “a form of orientation that comes replete with a set of sensibilities that unconsciously/ pre-reflectively position or configure the white self vis-à-vis the non-white self” (2008, 864-65). Passive racism as manifested in our bodily behavior is especially troubling insofar as it rules out a favorite white strategy for denying culpability by appeal to intentions and cognitions: it doesn't matter here if “I was not intending to be racist” or “I wasn't even thinking about race when I acted that way.”

This strategy played out recently in Omaha, Nebraska, where I live and work. A Black man, James Scurlock, was shot and killed by a white bar owner during one of the nights of nationwide protesting following the killing of George Floyd at the hands of police officers in Minneapolis. In the Omaha case, after a verbal argument with several protesters, the bar owner threatened them by revealing that he was carrying a previously concealed gun, and subsequently fired it, at which point he was pushed to the ground by two other protesters, and jumped upon by Scurlock in a manner consistent with trying to seize the gun or prevent additional shots from being fired. The bar owner shot Scurlock in their subsequent tussle, killing him. At the press conference announcing that the bar owner would not be prosecuted for the killing, the District Attorney justified his decision largely through repeated reference to two facts: 1) Neither the bar owner nor his father, who was also at the scene, had been heard using any racist slurs; 2) The bar owner told police that, upon being tackled by Mr. Scurlock, he had feared for his life, despite the presence of multiple police officers only a few feet away and known by all parties to be in the vicinity monitoring the protests. Both of these facts are perfectly consistent with the bar owner

committing a racially motivated murder, and are only morally exculpatory if we assume that racism exists exclusively at the level of overt expressions or self-conscious intentions, and does not exist or is irrelevant at the level of embodied responses. If we recognize the possibility that the white bar owner's fearing for his life is *itself* an act of passive racism, and can be seen as unjustified given the close presence of law enforcement and the fact that all of the protesters who confronted him were unarmed, the case looks very different.⁴ The point here is not that the claim that he felt for his life *is false*, any more than it is *false* that the heart of the woman in the elevator beat more quickly or that she felt anxiety. The claim is rather that there is a sense in which, even if he feared for his life, that feeling of fear was *itself* irrational and (in the phenomenological sense discussed below) problematically motivated.

Passive embodied racism also occurs in the typically less fatal, seemingly more innocuous context of bodily habits. I have noticed it in my own bodily behavior: in cases similar to those discussed by Staples and Yancy, in the presence of people of color whom I do not know, I have sometimes found myself enacting racist bodily postures and movements—e.g., altering my path so that I step further away, to the other edge of a sidewalk or hallway; averting my gaze by looking at my watch, though I have no need to check the time; stepping back to increase the distance between my body and that of another in an elevator. When I become aware of this behavior (though it is likely that it has occurred on many occasions when I did not), I am immediately also aware of the fact that it is both prejudiced and *irrational*. But I cannot end such racist embodied practices in myself (or others) simply by telling myself (them) to stop. It just doesn't work that way: such behavior functions not at a self-conscious, cognitive level, but at the level of *habit*. As anyone who has sought to end a problematic bodily habit—biting one's nails or grinding one's teeth, for example—can tell you, such habits are not something we can consciously change directly and instantaneously through deliberative acts of the will, since they occur largely if not entirely in a manner that is both deeply rooted in the body and *unthought*.

But while I think we must accept as a descriptive fact that passive racism of this sort occurs largely at a bodily level that is unthought, I don't think it follows that there is nothing we can do about it. One thing we can and should do is continue to implement discursive strategies that alter our preconceptions in the ways noted above—through the power of narrative, through the power of statistics, and by continuing to educate future generations about the abhorrent history and legacy of racism. Examples of important discursive strategies for political engagement with issues such as racism abound in this journal issue. Indeed, the descriptions of Staples and Yancy discussed above are themselves examples of such discursive strategies. When faced with problematic, unthought aspects of our embodied behavior, the first thing we need to do, no doubt, is to bring them to our (and society's) attention through description.

But simply drawing attention to such aspects of our embodiment is not enough change them. Thus I am urging an antiracist strategy of a fundamentally different, non-discursive kind—one that begins from the notion that there is a form of racism rooted in our bodies themselves, and that seeks to respond to such racism directly in the flesh, at the non-discursive level of the body itself.

⁴ After public outcry, including, significantly, continued mass public protests, the District Attorney has conceded and called for a grand jury review of the case.

If this sounds strange, I would suggest it is because—even if we accept that there are forms of prejudice rooted in the body—we often implicitly assume not only that such prejudice is unconscious and non-discursive, as noted above, but also that it is thereby outside the purview of aspects of human political life open to rational change, and, thereby, direct responsibility.⁵ Insofar as such forms of passive racism occur outside the bounds of language and discourse and “merely in our bodies,” this assumption goes, they are not *open to rationality*: embodied racism is lamentable, but there is nothing we can do about it politically except at the level of description and data sets. Even if we admit that the problem exists *at the embodied level*, we can only address it discursively. The bodily level itself, on this assumption, is only indirectly open to political transformation, and cannot be touched directly by what at least used to be considered the most basic tool of political change: convincing others and ourselves through rational argument.

Of course, many have suggested that an important aspect of the new politics is the degree to which reason and good argument no longer matter. As a philosopher, I take it as a given that they *do matter*. What I am arguing for here is, in effect, a rejection of the above-noted assumption: an expansion of our conception of what should count as open to rationality to include not only the discursive domain but also aspects of passive embodied behavior. This expansion accomplishes two things: First, it clarifies how embodied racism is something for which we are responsible and situates it as a domain for moral evaluation. It explains, for example, how we can claim that the feelings and bodily reactions of the woman in the elevator and the Omaha bar owner are not just problematic, but *unjustified* and *irrational*, and thereby suggests a path toward holding each other morally *responsible* for embodied racism. Second, it explains how it is possible to effect antiracist political change directly at the level of the body. We can further explore these claims by beginning from the question of the relationship between discursivity, reason, and the body—a question with a long and important history in Western philosophy and in Christianity.

III. Word and Flesh: The Lived Body and the Scope of the Rational in Christianity and The History of Western Philosophy

In the *Prologue* of the Book of John, we are introduced to the idea of the *logos* (usually translated as “the word”): “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God” (John 1:1, NIV). The Greek word *logos* denotes *reason*, and in the ancient Greek context was often associated with the idea that the human mind at its apex of power and creativity in some way participates in *divine reason*. This idea is usually traced to Plato, and sometimes further back to Heraclitus, and can be found in the background of philosophical and religious depictions of reason up to the present day. Take this 2005 passage from a speech by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, given shortly before he became Pope Benedict XVI:

⁵ The implicit assumption I am describing here is that the non-discursive, embodied domain is a-rational, and thus not something for which we can be held accountable. This should not be confused with the claim that embodied racism is *irrational* (contrary to reason) in the obvious sense that all forms of racism are irrational for intelligent twenty-first century human beings. In order to be able to claim that racism at the embodied level is irrational, we must be able to treat this level as, in some sense, open to rationality. I attempt to explain this point in the following paragraphs, and it will become clearer in the context of the phenomenological conception of motivation discussed below.

Christianity must always remember that it is the religion of the “Logos.” It is faith in the “Creator Spiritus,” (Creator Spirit), from which proceeds everything that exists. Today, this should be precisely its philosophical strength, in so far as the problem is whether the world comes from the irrational, and reason is not, therefore, other than a “sub-product,” on occasion even harmful of its development or whether the world comes from reason, and is, as a consequence, its criterion and goal. The Christian faith inclines toward this second thesis, thus having, from the purely philosophical point of view, really good cards to play, despite the fact that many today consider only the first thesis as the only modern and rational one par excellence. However, a reason that springs from the irrational, and that is, in the final analysis, itself irrational, does not constitute a solution for our problems. Only creative reason, which in the crucified God is manifested as love, can really show us the way. In the so necessary dialogue between secularists and Catholics, we Christians must be very careful to remain faithful to this fundamental line: to live a faith that comes from the “Logos,” from creative reason, and that, because of this, is also open to *all that is truly rational*. (Ratzinger 2005, my emphasis)

From Plato to the present day, a close connection has long been taken to hold between the concepts of the Word (or language, or discourse), and reason.

Both notions, furthermore, have historically been “located” in the soul or mind, as that part of the human being capable of participating in or at least approaching the divine. And the soul, of course, has been opposed to the merely physical body, through which, according to Plato, we are problematically tied to the worldly and the irrational. Two millennia after Plato, in the early period of the scientific revolution, Descartes employs the word “mind” as well as “soul,” but the point and the basic opposition are the same: the mind is unextended *res cogitans*, the seat of thought and of the soul’s salvation, and that which we know best; the body is mere *res extensa*, less well known, a source of error, and, in the grand scheme of things, somewhat less important.

The degree which we continue to be under the sway of this traditional binary picture often goes unrecognized, but should not be underestimated. When we participate in a political rally, for example, we tend to focus our attention on the discourse of the speakers or on the chants we are repeating. Our bodies, it may seem, are simply *there*. While it is true that we may evaluate the success of such an event in terms of the bodily felt loudness of the crowd, or even the sheer volume of bodies present, even this evaluation is typically made with an eye to the body’s role in discourse: if enough people show up, perhaps the event will be noticed and appropriately covered on the news; if we are loud enough hopefully what we have to say will finally be heard in the mayor’s office; maybe the size and diversity of the crowd will send a message to passersby.

Later in the *Prologue* to John’s Gospel, however, the *logos* is connected explicitly with the notion of a lived body or flesh: “The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us” (John 1:14, NIV). In both of the cited passages from John, the “Word” has traditionally been interpreted to refer to Jesus Christ and to the relationship between God and Christ—especially, with regard to the 14th verse, to the important idea that Christ appeared in the world in embodied form, in human flesh. Jesus, the Word, is the embodiment of God’s message on earth, and is understood as both fully divine and also fully human.

This *positive* role assigned to the body caused some trouble for Platonists in the period of the early church, as it seems to speak against Plato's privileging of the soul/mind over the body and against the metaphysical pretensions of Platonic realism, according to which what is truly "real" is the universal, intellectual and rational, as opposed to the mere illusions or shadows of our transitory embodied existence.⁶ The assigning of a positive role to the flesh has caused a similar disruption more recently, in the contemporary landscape of philosophy, including work in the epistemology of oppression such as Yancy's essay discussed above. This more recent disruption has led to a renewed interest in phenomenology—a tradition in philosophy that has long emphasized the importance of the body.

IV. Phenomenology and the Lived Body

The philosophical movement known as phenomenology began in the early twentieth-century work of Edmund Husserl, and was continued in the writings of well-known figures such as Heidegger, Jaspers, de Beauvoir, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty. (I'll limit my comments here to a broad-brush-strokes account of some key elements the Husserlian strand of phenomenology.) While concerned to maintain rational rigor in philosophical inquiry, Husserl was also concerned with the increasing *scientism* of his day: the view that only empirical or natural-scientific disciplines are capable of providing genuine, reliable knowledge. This view downplays the importance of first-person experience, and leads to the rejection of the study of meaning and value in so far as they are not scientific domains. Although it wears new masks, scientism is practically omnipresent—and, I would argue, no less alarming—today.

Husserl sought to resist scientism by basing his theory on *intentionality*, a basic structure of consciousness that cannot be reduced to natural-scientific terms. As Husserl used the term, taken over via the psychologist and philosopher Franz Brentano from mediaeval sources, intentionality refers to the "aboutness" of consciousness, to the fact that mental acts such as thinking, judging, or even perceiving, always have *objects*—are always *about* something. The term does not carry the implication of *willing* in the sense of an act of "intending" undertaken consciously, with the desire for an explicit result. If a suspicious stranger suddenly enters the room, I stand in an intentional relation to that person whether I want to or not, insofar as his presence calls my conscious attention to be directed toward him. Nor is the study of intentionality the purview of the empirical sciences: the structure we are examining is not a structure of physical matter, but a structure of human experience and its meaning. In Husserl's later work in the nineteen-teens, twenties, and thirties, his analysis of the structure of intentionality was extended to include not only *active, consciously aware, and cognitive* domains of experience such as thinking and judging, but also *passive, non-conscious, and embodied* domains of experience such as affectivity and kinesthesia (Rump 2018a).

In its focus on the analysis of intentionality, phenomenology went against the dominant trend in twentieth century Western philosophy that focused primarily on the analysis of language and concepts. In this sense, Husserl's work is an exception to the general twentieth-century philosophical trend known as the "linguistic turn." Many philosophers in the twenty-first century

⁶ See, for example, Plato's account of the soul as akin to the form of beauty and the form of equality, as compared to body as akin to all which is composite and dissoluble, at *Phaedo*, 80b.

are turning away from core tenets of the linguistic turn, and are increasingly suspicious of the tendency to approach philosophical questions as ultimately questions about concepts, language, or discourse. It is no accident that, in the midst of this shift, core ideas about meaning, knowledge and the body from phenomenology—the most important systematic area of twentieth-century Western philosophy that never fully took the linguistic turn—have become increasingly important.

Why this recent change in emphasis? The reasons are myriad, but let me broadly sketch one that is of special importance in this context: paralleling the increasing turn to linguistic and conceptual analysis in the twentieth century was an increasing deference to the authority of science—a trend that threatened precisely the sort of scientism that so concerned phenomenologists like Husserl. In the last decades of the twentieth century, however, philosophers increasingly came to realize that this dual emphasis on language and science sat uneasily on both sides of an old Platonic (and later Cartesian) obsession: mind-body dualism. As empirical science continued to uncover fundamental truths about nature, especially the brain, its claims began to seem harder and harder to square with traditional conceptions of reason as expressed through the vehicles of language or concepts and located in the (unembodied, unextended) human mind.

In our contemporary, highly scientific culture, the most obvious way to alleviate this tension is to attempt to account for the rational in terms of the physical: to explain rationality as “nothing but” a physical or biological process. This is the sort of view that Ratzinger, in the passage above, calls “a reason that springs from the irrational,” and according to which reason is only a “sub-product” of nature. Some authors have even theorized that language and meaning are nothing more than evolutionary adaptations of the biology of the human organism.⁷ Overcoming the problems of mind-body dualism in this way looks a lot like reducing the mind to the body, where the concept of the “body” in play is the “body” of physics: a site of physical explanations of nature in purely causal terms.

But alleviating the tension in this way seems to wreak havoc on our moral categories: if this view is right, racism amounts to nothing more than an undesirable natural-physical phenomenon, no different in principle from, for example, congenital heart disease. Though such naturally occurring conditions are without a doubt horrifying and undesirable, it makes no sense to *blame* or *hold people responsible* for them—neither patients nor doctors—because they are outside the purview of our reason: the situation would not have been different if the parties involved had chosen differently or made up their minds to do otherwise. If racism is a merely natural-physical phenomenon of this sort, then it seems to be similarly blameless and outside the purview of rational change.

Now, there are many highly sophisticated and well-supported positions in contemporary philosophy that refuse to reduce reason to a mere “sub-product” of a purely irrational physicalism. In many cases, they refuse to do so precisely because of these sorts of concerns, which are examples of the basic worry Ratzinger raises—that in losing the unique and separate status of the rational we lose something distinct and important about “what it is like” to live the

⁷ See, for example Millikan 1984. For a critique of Millikan from the Husserlian phenomenological perspective, see Rump 2018b.

life of the rational animal. What makes us uniquely human, according to this line of thought, is not simply our brains, but our *minds*.

Phenomenologists, who have largely shared such worries, have insisted that a response to them that does justice to our actual experience involves recognizing something that does not fit neatly within either the discursive-rational domain of the mind or soul or the merely physical domain of the body: what they call the *lived* (or *living*) body or “the flesh.”⁸ To home in on this concept, consider the difference between the body in the sense in which it is the vessel through and in which we experience the world, and the body in the sense of an object of scientific inquiry in physics or biochemistry. The phenomenological tradition, beginning with Husserl himself, made much of this distinction, often framed in terms of the lived body of the subject (*Leib*) vs. the body-as-object (*Koerper*). More recent French phenomenology, following Merleau-Ponty, has emphasized the notion of the lived body in terms of “flesh,” and has even explicitly recognized its religious connotations along the lines sketched above.⁹

It is easy to demonstrate the basic idea behind the phenomenological notion of the flesh through a very simple exercise: touch a physical object near you, such as a piece of furniture (body-as-object, in the sense of physics); now touch your own arm (lived body; flesh). Now think about these experiences with an eye to the structure of intentionality in the sense introduced above. There is a clear difference: only one of these bodies can be experienced not only as the object of your intention but also as the subject who has that intention. While both the object you touched and your own arm are “bodies” in the sense of physics, only the latter is part of a *lived body*. This difference is not attributable to the physical properties of the bodies alone—for example, it’s not like the difference between touching a chair and touching a pool of water. Physical bodies of any sort—even my own body when considered exclusively as a mass of physical matter—are unavoidably not something you can experience as a subject; not something you can *live through*. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty insisted that it is phenomenologically inaccurate even to say that I *have* a body; rather, I *am* my body. I am *flesh* (Merleau-Ponty 2013; Cf. Abram 1997, 66ff).

This conception of the lived body or flesh suggests that, from the phenomenological perspective, we cannot draw a neat binary distinction between the mind as the non-spatial locus of language and reason, on the one hand, and, on the other, the physical body as the spatial locus of all that is non-discursive, irrational, and open to causal explanation but devoid of responsibility. Indeed, it is this distinction that lurks in the background of the assumption discussed above, that the lived body is not a site for direct political change. If we wish to heed Ratzinger’s call “to live a faith that comes from the ‘Logos,’ from creative reason, and that, because of this, is also open to *all that is truly rational*,” this conception suggests a need to re-think what we *count* as “truly rational.” In the passage cited, Ratzinger frames this call in terms that still strongly suggest mind-body dualism, at least insofar as the contrast is between the truly rational (presumably, the purview of the mind or soul, as expressed in language) and the irrational (the purview of the body *qua* physical object). But what of the move from word to flesh? Isn’t there a sense in which

⁸ There are precursors to this idea already in Plato’s doctrine of the tripartite soul (the spirited part), in the early Modern period in Elizabeth of Bohemia’s objections to Descartes for not accounting for the testimony of the passions in explaining the connection between the mind and the body, and—especially relevant in this context—in Blaise Pascal’s adage that “the heart has its reasons, which reason does not know.”

⁹ See especially the work of Michel Henry, part of the “theological turn” in French phenomenology in the 1990s.

our bodies themselves are open to our rationality, and thus can function as a direct site for political change as discussed above?

V. Motivating Embodied Antiracism

Other aspects of the Christian and Western philosophical traditions already contain the beginnings of a positive answer: the Christian doctrine that the Word became Flesh and the phenomenology of the body suggest a way of rejecting the traditional binary picture and the accompanying assumption about amenability to political change. They point, instead, to a need to extend our conception of the domain of rational responsiveness beyond the level of discourse, by recognizing a sense in which reasons for acting reside in the lived body itself—the *logos* is not only in the word but also in the flesh. Such an extension of the rational, in turn, suggests ways to foster antiracist transformation in the lived body not via discursive strategies but by seeking to correct our embodied habits of acting. To further justify and explicate this extension, I turn again to phenomenology, focusing specifically on the impetus for embodied action in the context of social space.

Referring to the work of feminist epistemologist Lynne Hakinson Nelson, Yancy suggests that the incongruency in the recognition of racist acts—lived through by Blacks but often unnoticed by whites—can be made sense of if we understand the role played by “epistemically privileged” communities in the construction of social space. In short, white people are at best ignorant of their participation in such forms of racism and at worst unwilling to accept that such participation constitutes a form of racism because the vast majority of public social spaces *just are* white spaces, and our habituated norms for interacting as embodied beings in lived space are norms for and of white bodies. Importantly, Yancy connects this notion of epistemically privileged communities to history. Public spaces come to be configured in this way because of specific socio-cultural histories. Take, for example, the phenomenon of redlining in American cities—another aspect of racism that has received renewed attention in the age of the new politics (Rothstein 2017).

The degree to which such histories are constructed not simply via documents and discourse but also via the *body* as site of knowledge and meaning can be explained through another important phenomenological concept closely related to the notion of intentionality: motivation. Like “intentionality,” the term “motivation” is a technical term in phenomenology and is used in a way that does not fully overlap with its everyday meaning. The term marks a sui generis domain of the lawfulness of experience outside of the traditional domain of logic, language, and concepts, but also outside traditional notions of nature as the object of study in the empirical sciences (cf. Wrathall 2005).

Husserl distinguished between *motivated* possibilities for a given experience and the logical possibilities *of* that experience. Logical possibilities that remain unmotivated are “empty possibilities”: while conceivable (logically possible), they do not function in the course of my bodily experience as *live* possibilities. To use Husserl’s own example: while it is *logically possible* that the table in front of me—which I see only from a certain spatial perspective and only through a series of acts of intentionality (in this case, perceptual acts)—has ten legs, this is a mere *empty* possibility; nothing in the course of my lived experience so far actually *motivates*

this possibility: in the history of my lived experience thus far, ten-legged tables simply have not featured, or have not featured prominently enough to have any “weight” in predetermining my experiences of furniture.¹⁰

Motivated possibilities, as contrasted with merely logical possibilities, are ultimately determined by the history of our own embodied experiences and by what Husserl calls the “weight” of that previous experience.¹¹ This motivational structure for future experience typically occurs passively, without my conscious awareness, and issues in intentional “anticipations”: implicit, non-discursive expectations about the future possibilities of my experience, based on “sedimentations” of previous intentional acts.¹² Upon entering an unfamiliar room, if I see a typical, four-legged table in front of me, I think nothing of it and simply take it in as part of my ongoing perceptual scan of the room. If the table in front of me is oddly shaped or ten-legged, however, I “stop in my tracks.” Why? Husserl would say that the unusual table has interrupted the stream of my experience as characterized by my anticipations—by the possibilities motivated my previous bodily experience. This is a very technical way of explaining the idea that when I say that I am “stopped in my tracks,” this is not just a figure of speech: I am literally halted in my usual, habitual patterns of bodily movement—including the movement of my eyes as I scan the room¹³—just as, when walking a familiar sidewalk, I may be completely absorbed in my thoughts and paying no conscious attention at all to my surroundings, and yet I can suddenly be brought to full awareness of them by a construction cone or a building newly painted in an unusual color.

To see the importance of this notion, consider again the issue of white recalcitrance at the labelling of bodily behaviors as racist: Yancy notes that in previous presentations of his elevator analysis to primarily white audiences, he has often encountered resistance in the form of audiences suggesting alternative explanations of the body language of the white woman in the elevator, explanations that effectively discount his reading of her bodily gestures as racist: Perhaps the woman was simply afraid of elevators, or even blind; perhaps her body language was in fact the result of her trying very hard *not* to exhibit racial bias. Yancy concedes that these suggestions represent *logical* possibilities, but insists—rightly—that this does not defeat his point (2008, 849-850; n. 24). To put the point in the theoretical terms introduced above, Yancy’s ascription of embodied racism to the behavior of the white woman in the elevator scenario is warranted insofar as it is not merely one among many logical possibilities but is a *motivated* possibility—one that is *lived*. It is motivated, for the Black man, by a lifetime of experiences of racism that weigh on his perception and way of being in the world, “rendered reasonable within the context of a shared history of Black people noting, critically discussing, suffering and sharing with each other the traumatic experiential content and repeated acts of white racism” (2008, 849).

¹⁰ Husserl writes, “Actual experience—and not merely running through ‘possible, envisaged perceptions—furnishes an actual demonstration of positings that pertain to something real.” Husserl 2014, 279-280; Cf. Walsh 2017.

¹¹ See Alia Al-Saji’s response to the idea of social spaces from Shannon Sullivan as “missing the weight of the past” (2014, 150). Fully addressing this important idea is beyond my scope here. For a fuller account of the Husserlian idea of the “weight of experience,” see Rump 2017.

¹² Husserl 1989, 234ff.

¹³ For the claim that even the movement of one’s eyes can be understood as a kinesthetic and intentional function of the body, see Husserl 1973, 84.

And this ascription of racism is not merely “his opinion”: the white woman’s racist behavior is equally motivated, in her own body—even if she is not conscious of it and even if she or her defenders deny it—by a lifetime of experiences of social spaces as white spaces, of experiences of the black body as separate and other under the weight of racist depictions in media and discourse, and through the ongoing legacy of structural racism. The theoretical challenge is to show how antiracist transformations at the level of embodied interactions in social space can also be motivated and “rendered reasonable” by means of new shared embodied histories.

We can begin to meet this challenge by noting that the cases of motivation described in this section are very different from the cases of natural phenomena such as congenital heart disease discussed above, insofar as they do not operate at a purely physical, causal level. To return to the walking example, it would be misleading to claim that the construction cone or the building’s color *caused* the change in my conscious attention in a natural-scientific sense. The appropriate level of explanation for this change in my attention and my thoughts does not seem to be the causal level of physics: it would be odd to think that we could fully explain this attentional and mental shift simply by appeal to physical phenomena such as the chemical properties of the rubber cone or the light-diffraction qualities of the painted walls on the one hand, and of my eyes as causal mechanisms for photoreception via rods and cones on the other. To assume that this is the only possible level of explanation for the shift would be to revert to a form of scientism as discussed above. In a differently affectively charged situation, in which, for example, my attention is suddenly drawn from my wandering thoughts to a “near miss” fender-bender up the street, I might not notice the cone or the building at all, despite the presence of precisely the same physical phenomena. Our best science tells us that these physical phenomena *are also* present in this attentional shift, and we have no reason to doubt the scientific accuracy of this picture on the physical-causal level, but this level of analysis is not appropriate for an explanation of the attentional and cognitive shift as something *experienced*, because such an analysis can only address the body as a physical object, and not as the lived body that my experience is *lived through*.

But it would be equally inaccurate to say that I *inferred* a need to change my attention, in the sense of a rational response to an interpretation of some phenomenon of language, text, or discourse. Despite the tendency of late twentieth-century theorists in the humanities to parse all phenomena in terms of discourse or text, construction cones and painted walls are not signifiers that first appear to my consciousness and then enter into subsequent experiences exclusively at the level of interpretation and rational-discursive response. When my body reacts and my attention shifts, I am making sense of this phenomenon *through the body itself*.

Taken as a whole, the set of anticipations that characterize my perceptual-intentional “map” at a given moment constitute a *system of motivations* that delimit my anticipations of future ways of making sense of my world. Husserl argues that, even at a passive level—outside the domain of conscious awareness and control—bodily experience always occurs in the context of such a “web of motivation,” “built through and through from intentional rays.” These rays of intentionality “refer back and forth, and they let themselves be explicated in that the

accomplishing subject can enter into these nexuses” (Husserl 1989, 236).¹⁴ Instead of at the physical-causal or rational-discursive level, then, the phenomenologist will say that these cognitive and perceptual shifts occur somewhere in between, at the *motivational* level, the level of *intentionality as such*. While this level can be rationally explicated, it is not the same as the level of discourse.

But since webs of motivations exist in shared, social, embodied contexts, they are no more “open to interpretation” by individual subjects than are oppressive usages of language in the domain of public discourse: just as we would not say that the use of racial slurs is merely subjectively racist, “in the eyes of some people,” but rather that it *objectively is racist*, given the history of that discourse, an analysis of embodied behavior at the level of motivations reveals habits of bodily comportment in social space that are not simply possibly racist, depending on the views of the actors involved, but *objectively are racist* in a way determinable through close attention to our shared histories, practices, and other objective, value-laden features of social space. In this sense, the motivational level can be said to offer grounds for acting in its own right, and helps to explain what it would mean to locate the *logos* in the flesh—to extend the domain open to the rational, as discussed above.

VI. Empathy and the Lived Body of the Other

We can apply this account of motivation to the political reconfiguration of social space with the help of one more important phenomenological concept: empathy. Another issue raised by the traditional, strict dichotomy between mind and body is “the problem of other minds.” If we accept this dichotomy, we seem unavoidably to be left with questions such as the following: How, on the basis of the mental representations of you in my mind, do I know that you are a full-fledged human being like me, and not a mere physical object like a well-designed robot? According to the view that regards meaningful action as based exclusively on the representational power of our language and concepts, we are left with the task of explaining how these representations add up to a perception of another human being as something not merely physical; how they feature in my experience as something fundamentally different in kind from a piece of furniture or a pool of water, and not merely different in terms of the physical material of which they are made.

From the phenomenological perspective, the “problem of other minds” stems from an over-intellectualized picture of experience that is phenomenologically inaccurate: recall the thought experiment of touching your own arm vs. touching a piece of furniture discussed above. Now add a third element: touching the arm of someone else. Unlike the case in which you touch yourself, when you touch the arm of the other you do not experience it as your own flesh; this touching is not felt “from the inside.” But nor is touching the arm of the other simply akin to the first case, in which you touched a physical object like a chair. This is not simply because the chair is made of wood and the other is made of flesh, and these are different physical materials. It

¹⁴ But note that full explication can only occur retroactively and reflectively: In the moment, I cannot take in the entire system of anticipations at a glance, and in most cases they never rise to the level of explicit expectations of which I am consciously aware *at all*, so typically I do not even have a *partial* view of them. In this sense, while not *irrational*, such indications function outside the structures of my thematic, conscious awareness (Cf. Al-Saji 2000, 2010).

is because one of these materials is no mere material; it is flesh; the same flesh that I have or—following Merleau-Ponty—that *I am*, although this instance of it is not mine, or is *not me*.

On the phenomenological view, then, there *isn't* really a “problem of other minds.” The perception of the Other, while not the same as the perception of my own flesh, is *also* not the same as the perception of a mere object, for it is still a perception of *flesh*. This is not something that I have to infer, and it is not attributable exclusively to the physical-causal properties of the other’s body. It is revealed directly at the level of intentionality, in my embodied perception.

On the classical phenomenological view of Husserl, but most fruitfully developed by Edith Stein (St. Theresa Benedicta a Cruce) and Max Scheler, the fact that I perceive the Other *as flesh* is the foundation of human empathy. The Jewish phenomenologist Emmanuel Levinas pressed this idea even further to insist that the experience of the lived body of the other, most paradigmatic in our encounter with the face of the Other, is the originary ethical demand: the fact that I encounter the Other *as Other* and not primarily as physical object is the most fundamental source of our ethical commitments (Levinas 1969).

For Christians, the significance of Jesus’ being made flesh and dwelling in and with human beings is often understood in just such empathic terms: great importance is attached to the idea that while appearing in human flesh, Christ, in his crucifixion, experiences *bodily, physical suffering*. This is even emphasized in the passage from Ratzinger cited above, when he notes the significance of the idea of God as crucified. In the ritual reenactment of the stations of the cross, Christians open themselves to *feeling* Christ’s pain as an empathic and often embodied form of connection with the divine; they do not simply “represent” or “rationalize” the pain, but attempt to *enter into it*, despite the impossibility of feeling it fully. When the word (the *logos*) is made flesh, it is no longer simply a matter of language.

VII. Motivational and Empathic Antiracist Strategies for the Lived body

On the basis of the theoretical background laid out here, Ratzinger’s call for “creative reason” cited above can be interpreted as a call to use reason in a way that is *motivated* by our experiences *qua* individual and collective histories of embodied intentionality. When we recognize the body as something more than mere physical matter, we see that combating racism at the embodied, passive level need not be limited to discursive strategies (e.g., convincing others through reasoned argument and discourse). It can be extended and deepened to include *strategies for directly changing our embodied ways of being in the world*. Such strategies are available to us as long as we are “open to all that is truly rational,” which includes commitments to motivated action grounded in our embodied empathy.

So, on a practical level, what would a new antiracist politics that takes a cue from these theoretical considerations look like? First and foremost, it would emphasize the political importance of *physical presence*. We must recognize that there is an aspect of rational engagement in politics that takes place in and through the physical presence of the Other. The politician who physically attends the public forum *held in* the African American community concerning a given policy that will affect that community is in a much different position than one who simply “studies the arguments” and surveys the communications of her constituents. The

politician who is physically present is open to a broader set of reasons. Community service activities in disadvantaged communities of color are not just important for ameliorating social conditions and “raising awareness,” but for educating privileged bodies as well as minds by redistributing the weight of our experience in our embodied perceptions and interactions. Political rallies are not simply occasions to represent the will of constituents by dint of sheer numbers of participants; they are occasions for engaging with the literal body politic, and thereby for motivating changes in our embodied habits in a way that, collectively and over time, can lead to the reconfiguration of the oppressive whiteness of public space.

Second, a new antiracist politics that takes such non-discursive elements into account will tend toward policies and practices that promote physical—and not just policy-level, representational or rhetorical—inclusion. If we recognize the close link between *bodily* familiarity with the Other and egalitarian empathy for the Other, we are much less likely, for example, to accept policies such as bans on travel for residents from certain countries, not simply because such policies “send the wrong message” with regard to a politics of inclusion, but because they quite literally inhibit our ability to empathize and understand the Other at a bodily level.

A sign of hope for a new politics along these lines may be found in the recent decision of public officials around the world to allow peaceful assemblies to protest police brutality in the wake of the killing George Floyd, and the choice of activists to take part in them, despite the increased risk of the spread of the Coronavirus associated with such gatherings. The fact that both politicians and activists have recognized the importance of physical (and not just virtual) presence in such protests, and judged it to outweigh the risks, suggests a growing recognition of the importance of the body itself as a site of antiracist transformation.¹⁵

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