

Towards an Ontology of Corporeal Uniqueness

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Abstract

Pain, exhaustion, illness, infirmity, racism and sexism are all situations in which the body loses its daily familiarity. It would appear that not every experience is a daily *lived* experience (*Erlebnis*) or, as phenomenology puts it, an experience of meaning. The stress is not always on the lived immediacy of a centred subject. Experience can also provoke a loss of identity. Such a non-phenomenological account of experience can be found in Foucault's notion of limit-experience, by which he means an experience that tears the subject from itself in such a way that it may arrive at dissociation. It has been suggested, for example by Drew Leder in *The Absent Body*, that experiences of dissociation encourage Cartesian dualism because they often result in an *apparent* cleavage of the self and the body. The article challenges this Cartesian mode of thinking through a brief discussion of John Maxwell Coetzee's novel *Elizabeth Costello*, in particular Lessons Three and Four, 'The Lives of Animals', because this work reveals something crucial about the complexity of human embodiment. Coetzee's lectures seem to suggest that we are *wounded* animals, not — or at least not solely — because of our physical vulnerability but because animality is no true option for us. The singularity of human existence distinguishes itself from the species character of animal life and this uniqueness has something to do with our body. The notion of corporeal vulnerability is usually understood in a relational sense, but it can also be something very intimate. This means that we are not only vulnerable in our bodily uniqueness, in the sense that our body is exposed to violence and death, but that we are also vulnerable to our bodily uniqueness, that is, exposed to it.

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