

Studied Perception and a Phenomenology of Bodily Gesturality

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In this essay, the author explores the as-of-yet underappreciated role of the body, gesturality, and perception in study. Rather than “disappear,” the body, even in the most abstract forms of study, forms the necessary background for thought. Appropriating and expanding upon the phenomenology of “studied” perception provided by Samuel Todes, the author examines how study relies on bodily gesturality to delay perceptual apprehension of the object. This delay or suspension of perceptual grip over an object opens a space of studied perception where new sensations can emerge, new pleasures arise, and new qualities of objects identified without necessary end. In sum, the freedom offered by this suspension of perceptual ends is most directly a biopolitical gesture against the standardization of the body in the learning society. The essay concludes with an example of studied perception from the field of museum education.

The attempt to find alternatives to the discourses and practices of learning has become a central problematic for critical philosophers of education. While scholars such as Gert Biesta,¹ and Martin Simons and Jan Masschelein,² have critiqued the discourses and practices of learning and proposed a more robust notion of education, others have proposed a more precise alternative: study.³ While exploring various facets of study, these theories have not yet fully examined how this educational phenomenon offers a unique perceptual and bodily experience distinct from learning. Perhaps this is no accident, for studying is often thought of as the most detached and withdrawn form of educational experience. Indeed, the Old English term “brown study” indicated a sense of being lost in thought, pulling away from the world of things into a state of melancholic reverie. In this sense, there seems to be little room for the body when studying. This is perhaps also why studying is often conflated with philosophical speculation. Like Descartes, the studier must subtract him- or herself from the world and from the senses into a realm of pure thought, detached speculation, and introversion. Studying is, or at least has been historically, directly related to the mind and the internal activity of our conscious selves. Certainly we have all had this feeling in our own practical experiences of studying. Late at night, in the library, we find ourselves lost in a book or obsessing on a math problem to the point where time seems to be suspended and we have a growing sense of being dis-embodied minds engrossed in the thought at hand. Such scenes of study promote the assumption that studying is somehow *otherworldly* or outside of the world. The only time our sense of an embodied self emerges is when there is a sudden breakdown as when the body become fatigued or crampy. Then and only then does the studious mind return to attend to the body, which is a bothersome burden. In this sense, the body appears to be nothing more than a material *interruption* of study. At these moments, I can easily imagine the studier wishing that he or she was simply a mind divorced from the hindrances and limitations of our mortal bodies. In my own

experience of studying, the limitations of the body in such breakdown situations are frustrating, reminding me that I have a finite rather than infinite capacity for study.

In this scenario, the body only emerges as an obstacle to studying, a frustrating limitation on how much time and energy we can spend in the library, reading books, thinking deeply, and tinkering with objects. Thus the body impedes the mind's work, especially the work of brown study where we become "lost" in deep reverie and contemplation. Yet in the rest of this short article, I would like to argue that this image of the relationship between the body and the act of studying is incorrect. Rather than peripheral, the body is absolutely essential to the work of study, providing the *gesture* of study. Indeed, it is the very success of the body to achieve this gesture that makes the role of the gesture in studying invisible and undetected by the studier. My goal here is to uncover the hidden role of the body and of gesture in studying, thus making visible what has, up to this point, remained largely invisible, especially to philosophers of education interested in the work of study.

To accomplish this goal, I will undertake a phenomenological description of studying. Perhaps the best definition of phenomenology can be found in Heidegger's *Being and Time* where he writes that phenomenology describes "its objects in such a way that everything about them which is up for discussion must be treated by exhibiting them directly and demonstrating them directly."²⁴ In other words, phenomenology, at its root, always returns to direct experience of phenomena in order to solve certain questions. In particular, the questions that concern phenomenological analysis are when a thing "proximally and for the most part does not show itself,"²⁵ thus remaining transparent, hidden, or concealed as a taken-for-granted background to our actions and thoughts. It is my concern in this essay that the literature on studying has, while unconcealing certain aspects of study, nevertheless obscured the location and function of the body. Phenomenology must return to the experience of studying itself in order to let the body "show itself" and solve an oversight which philosophical analysis has, since Descartes, perpetuated and naturalized, creating the false impression that studying is a form of educational activity divorced from the body and its actions.

Although there is vast literature in education on the body from phenomenological, feminist, and poststructural theorists, I want to introduce a new figure into this literature, someone who is completely unfamiliar to philosophy of education: Samuel Todes. Todes is a marginal figure in philosophy in general, yet his book *Body and World* is an underappreciated masterpiece of phenomenological analysis and critique that has many wide applications. While the scope of this book is too broad for the purposes of this essay, I want to focus on his phenomenological description of what he refers to as a "studied" perception in order to re-cooperate the role of the body in studying. Overall, Todes will help fill in the theory of the studious body and its perceptual peculiarity. I will then conclude the essay by highlighting an as-of-yet underappreciated role of the teacher in opening up the time and the space for students to find their own sets of bodily gestures that heighten studied perception as a form of embodied, pre-cognitive freedom. To do so will be to move ultimately beyond Todes and toward a biopolitical horizon.

THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF STUDIED PERCEPTION

In Samuel Todes's book *Body and World*, he argues that phenomenology has neglected to account for the particular role of the body in the act of perception. The body cannot be taken for granted because its features constitute the schema through which perceptual and cognitive forms of knowledge are possible. One of the central questions that preoccupies Todes throughout his book is how to get from perceptual presentation to cognitive representation. The key move here is to recognize an intermediary step between immanence and abstraction. The go-between is what Todes refers to as "sensuous abstraction."⁶ Such abstractions are not the total disengagement found in Kantian disinterestedness. Rather, they are the slightest of shifts, a "mild, incomplete, and delicately controlled inhibition of the perception of the particular object having the abstracted sense-quality" found when one "stands-back" (*BW*, 272). "Standing back" can only be accomplished by an embodied subject who "remains, however tentatively, in touch with his real material rather than detached from it" (*BW*, 272). This is not the transcendental subject of pure cognition, but rather an engaged and active subject who, nevertheless, pauses for a moment to view the appearance of the world *from within the world*.

Standing-back is a midway point in a longer and more complicated process that can be summarized by three steps leading from perception to cognition of objects, from nonknowledge to knowledge. The first step in perception is a readying of the body to be in the most efficacious position to grip (and be gripped) by an object. Thus, for instance, moving the hand in the right position to pick up a cup, or squinting the eyes so as to best see letters come into focus that are at a distance. The second step is to prepare the object in a tentative and preliminary way. Todes gives several useful examples such as tasting food before eating it fully, or whiffing something before taking a deep breath. In the third stage, the subject finally perceives the object. In common language, we would say the subject has "got it." In summary, Todes writes, "getting hold of something is the fulfillment of having reached for and touched it; seeing is the fruition of looking at something looked for; hearing is the successful outcome of listening to something listened for" (*BW*, 273). Perception, in this complete model, is a form of embodied intentionality that has a clearly defined, natural endpoint. We could say that this endpoint (a completed perceptual apprehension of the object) is the realization of the potentiality of perception, which culminates in mental abstraction and mastery over the object at hand.

But here is where Todes introduces a wrinkle into this three step process — one that delays and suspends the fulfillment of perception. It is worth quoting Todes in full:

Man is no more a slave to his nature in perception than in his other affairs. We make a frequent, enjoyable, and highly significant practice of holding back the course of perception so as to prevent its natural completion. We indulge in a kind of perceptual foreplay, stimulating our senses for stimulation's sake without regard to their natural end of consummation in the founding of an objectified reality. (*BW*, 273)

This state of suspended perceptual clarity and completion is a kind of "rapt attention" (*BW*, 274) and attentiveness to the moment of perceptual abstraction let loose from cognitive representation. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty once wrote in a

slightly different context, sensuous abstraction — like Cézanne’s paintings — gives “the impression of an emerging order, of an object in the act of appearing, organizing itself before our eyes”⁷ in a kind of spontaneous play of color and form. The state of sensuous abstraction is, for Todes, a “delightfully prolonged adolescence or immaturity” (*BW*, 274) that enables us to glimpse the qualities of objects rather than the objects as the objects that they are (as complete, whole, and unified substances with determinate features). Todes offers a series of examples of such rapt attention: savoring taste over the fulfillment of eating a meal; listening carefully to tones and timbers of sounds rather than hearing the sound as a message (to be interpreted) or a noise (to be avoided); stroking the texture of a surface instead of grabbing and holding firm. What all these forms of attention have in common is a similar “studied” (*BW*, 274) way of perceiving that enables us to stand-back from the completion of a perceptual act and linger in the indefinite space of an immature, enjoyable abstraction. This sensual abstraction, while enjoyable, is deficient in the kind of knowledge of the object world that complete perception allows. This is the knowledge of things as the kind of things that they are in the world. Rather than the knowledge of things existing, abstracted, perceptual pleasure remains immature, transforming what is normally a transient moment into a prolonged “anticipatory presence” (*BW*, 274) without necessary end. Indeed, what was once a means to an end becomes a kind of end in itself where we study the world before we determine knowledge about that world. If knowledge is acquired in this state of abstraction, it is knowledge of the perceptual conditions which enable anything to appear as anything at all.

In this sense, Todes gives a perceptual account of studying. The inhibition of perceptual completion enables us to linger in a space and time of fuzzy, indeterminate pre-objects which are suddenly opened up to new uses and pleasures, new descriptions and new articulations that are productively and pleasurably immature. Instead of fully immersed coping and dealing with the world, the studier slows down the march toward perceptual completion and stands back to allow qualities to emerge, adjusting the body so as to dwell within an emergent field of potentials. Again, standing back is not a form of transcendental, dis-embodied disinterestedness but rather a studious form of embodied play that experiments with new possibilities. Thus standing back is another form of engagement — a distance from necessity that creates a new intimacy and familiarity that would otherwise be simply absorbed into the natural flow of the perceptual process we experience in everyday coping.

Study is not guided by conscious intentionality with propositional content so much as the *body’s gesture*, which makes us receptive to the sensual abstraction that exists before a strict subject/object split. When we study, we study — first and foremost — with hands that caress the corners of books or the surfaces of ancient objects, with eyes that are attentive to seemingly inconsequential details that suddenly pop-out against an indefinite backdrop, with ears that listen to sounds for unfamiliar if not surprising qualities, and so on. These seemingly transparent gestures are not within our subjective control. Rather they have what Merleau-Ponty

refers to as motor intentionality or bodily intentionality.⁸ Yet unlike Merleau-Ponty's description of this concept, Todes's analysis of studied perception reminds us that the body's natural propensity toward maximal grip/apprehension of objects can be *interrupted* or *rendered inoperative*. Thus the intentionality of the body, when it is studious, can suspend the natural dictates of certain reflexes and habits, for instance, producing a pre-reflective, pre-conscious form of freedom from determinate ends/projects.

Moving beyond Todes slightly, I would like to push his phenomenology further and argue that sensuous abstraction is a kind of perceptual hesitation which both presses forward toward maximal grip while also delaying its arrival. Neither a pure potentiality (divorced from any phenomenological content) nor a determinate actualization (cognitive representation), perceptual hesitation is, importantly, a perception of the potentiality of perception itself. Studied perception holds onto the *fact of perceptual contingency, of perceptual appearing*. As Todes provocatively suggests, this hesitation is a form of "foreplay" which stimulates *for stimulation's sake* without desiring total consummation. Stimulation as such is the issue here, not the end, which such stimulation is intended to serve. Certainly the pleasure that attends sensuous abstraction in the moment of hesitation is a pleasure in the qualities examined, but what is most important, and what Todes does not adequately realize, is that these pleasures are secondary to the most primordial and basic pleasure of them all: that the studier *can* perceive.

While the argument might be convincingly made that the body plays a central though invisible role in the studied perception of *objects*, can the case be made in terms of mental concepts? Famously, Dr. Watson, in Sir Author Conan Doyle's story "*The Adventure of the Cardboard Box*," informs the reader that: "leaning back into my chair, I fell into a brown study"⁹ or deep reverie. What is interesting to note here is that the *positioning* of Dr. Watson's body *induces* the brown study. The body must lean back in a chair, the hand must rub the chin or massage the brow, the fingers must tap the table, the foot must wiggle back and forth. These motions are not simply contingent and thus superfluous to the act of brown study but are necessary and essential to the movement from perceptual abstraction to imaginative abstraction. And even when the mind withdraws into deep meditation (as in brown study) it is not disembodied. Rather the body must position itself in order to allow imaginative abstraction to become activated. Bluntly stated, the body must be in *some specific* position for mental abstraction to take place. This position can (and will) change given certain circumstances, but in each circumstance, there will be a specific gesture (or set of gestural possibilities) that work better than others for unlocking the abstraction process. Even in its seemingly *inoperative state* when the body is most passive and withdrawn from the mind, it remains relevant to the work of imaginative abstraction. In this sense, the body and its gesture are not marginal but rather central concerns.

THE BIOPOLITICS OF GESTURALITY

The role of the teacher in promoting and facilitating study is not simply to provide the space and time for studying but to actively promote the studier's

experimentation with perceptual foreplay. In other words, teachers open up a space and a time wherein students can *stumble upon/into their gestures, get lost in these gestures, and thus take pleasure in the delay of perceptual completion*. Neither the teacher nor the student can predict the gestural movement that will lend itself to the pleasures of perceptual hesitation — hence the need to allow students to stumble and fall into gestures that appear alien or strange. Such gestures are unique, creative, and contextually specific and thus cannot be prescribed. Auguste Rodin’s famous sculpture, “The Thinker,” cannot be used as a blueprint for students to model or for teachers to evaluate the gestures of study. What must be done is to offer a loosening of restrictions on what counts as an “educational body.” Time and space have to be given in order for the one who studies to begin to determine which movements of the body are simply ticks and reflexes versus gestures with their own corporal intentionality that enables the body to position itself in such a way as to find pleasure in the zone of indetermination that exists between perceptual stimulation and cognitive abstraction.

And this function of the teacher is perhaps more pressing now than ever before. With standardization and high-stakes testing, the gesture has become more and more an irritant or obstacle that gets in the way of learning. If, as Giorgio Agamben argues, modern individuals have lost their gestures,¹⁰ then perhaps we can make a similar argument in relation to education: the learner has lost the gesture necessary to study. Michel Foucault’s description of the disciplined body is also relevant in this context. The disciplined body as a learning body incorporates the everyday, average, or typical movements of the body according to a predetermined norm of conduct and practice.¹¹ If the norm works through individuation, such individuation is nevertheless ranked and quantified in terms of standardized rubrics of efficiency. Yet not all bodies are receptive to such standardized posturing. Bodily conditioning levels off the gestures of study, which are unique not only to the individual but to the situation of the studier. Indeed, within learning classrooms, the gesticulating body might appear as nothing more than a “behavioral issue” to be punished or singled out as a “deficit.” Those whose bodies do not conform to the rules of proper classroom posturing become disruptive students subject to disciplinary action, medical treatment, and/or psychological evaluation. The body of the learner cannot take pleasure in perceptual foreplay without getting “distracted” from the prescribed ends dictated by learning, without interrupting the efficiency of the classroom. The result is, in educational terms, a loss of studying and the peculiar pleasure that studied perception brings.

A focus on perception opens up a new vista for thinking about the politics of education. Although Todes did not live long enough to write a book on the politics of perception, I would like to offer an all-too-brief speculation. Politics does not begin with changing a student’s beliefs or raising critical consciousness. Rather, the political work of teaching begins with the teacher opening up the time and space necessary for the student to become phenomenologically attuned to his or her own gestural potentiality. Studied perception is not only pleasurable; when placed within the context of learning, it also becomes a biopolitical act of interruption. The studier

is the one who *prefers not to* pass over perceptual immaturity for perceptual completion, and therefore embraces immaturity as a site where potentialities for new sensations and thoughts might arise beyond the dictates of efficiency and standardization. Studied perception is a kind of motor intentional refusal to obey biopedagogical training, monitoring, and classification, offering up the *sensation* of freedom. In this sense, politics in education has its fleshy roots in the pre-reflective, pre-cognitive erotics of perceptual foreplay wherein the potentiality for sensing differently — sensing *otherwise than* the disciplinary apparatus of learning dictates — is not sacrificed but rather nurtured.

THE GESTURE OF STUDY IN THE ART MUSEUM

At this point in the essay, I would like to offer an example of the role of the teacher in promoting gestural experimentation. As a former museum educator, I often encouraged my students to find a place to stand in order to *see* the painting. Most people in a gallery or museum stand in a certain way at a certain distance from the work of art. This posture is rather artificial, a form of mimicry which replicates the disciplined, “normal,” “average,” “everyday” way of approaching art. Teenagers and adults in particular are susceptible to such conformism, watching and observing others to see what the “right way” to look at art is, to conform to the norm so as not to stand out in the crowd and embarrass themselves. No one wants to “stand out” especially at an art museum where one’s posture is often interpreted directly as a sign of one’s taste, refinement, class, and even intelligence. When subjects enter into the museum space, there is no time to study the artwork precisely because their time is spent monitoring each other.¹²

Yet with my students, I would ask them to find their own stance to experiment with their bodies so as to position themselves in such a way so as to be gripped by the work of art. This stance was far from arbitrary: the goal was to demonstrate how the object solicits the viewer in ways that break with the normal, average approach to objects. To listen to the object’s solicitations, one must actively shift one’s body in relation to the work of art, turning the head, squinting, moving in closer then drawing back. The role of the teacher here was not (a) simply to give information to students about the work of art, nor (b) simply to cultivate “taste” for fine art, nor (c) to let them do whatever they wanted (and thus play around in the art museum). Rather it was to allow them to *experiment* with the interactive and co-creative zone of perception that lies between and below the level of the subject and object split. Thus some students would sit on the floor and others would stand on their tiptoes. Some would lean forward while others would lean back. In front of some works of art, the various stances taken by students would differ wildly, and, in front of other works of art, the students would all more or less cluster together and take a similar stance. Rather than achieve a kind of maximal grip, what students discovered was that such a grip eluded them, but that this missing grip offered a kind of *sustained study of the art through which their own perceptual pleasure became an issue*. In the discussions that followed, students would sometimes change their bodily stance, re-adjust, and thus re-locate themselves in order to once again *experience differently the indeterminacy of perceptual potentiality*. These students were persuaded not through art-

historical information, quantifiable justifications, or intellectual argumentation so much as from simple phenomenological descriptions of the “clarity” or “realness” or “fullness” of a painting, sculpture, or photograph. Consensus was not the intent of either the exercise or our follow-up discussions. Rather, these dialogues enabled students to reflect on how objects elicit a certain pull on our bodies, and in turn how our bodies are set up in certain ways to respond to these pulls. The studied body is, as Todes describes, the sight of the pleasurable tensions, which emerge from an indeterminate negotiation demanding that we continually circle and recircle the artwork. The freedom here is not found in perceptual license so much as perceptual receptiveness and openness to what appears, what emerges in the foreground as offering new, as-of-yet unimagined and unanticipated pleasures.

The lesson of the art museum can in turn be applied directly to the more or less traditional classroom where students wrestle with books, equations, and graphs. The teacher should give time and space for students to study, and thus experiment with their bodily and perceptual (dis)placement. A sensitive teacher encourages students to experiment with the prolonged space and time of perceptual potentiality that defines the hesitation between appearance and cognitive representation. In other words, the teacher should allow students to stumble around and hit upon the exact gestures they need to find new pleasure in studying. The resulting studied perception, as in the example of Dr. Watson, is not merely lassitude. Rather, it is a space and time wherein new clues, traces, and affective subtleties appear that would otherwise be glossed over. To take pleasure in these qualities means that the studier opens him- or herself up to new potentialities for tasting, smelling, hearing, seeing, and, importantly, thinking about the world.

CONCLUSION

Studying cannot be done in isolation from the body. Indeed, we are studious *animals* precisely because of our embodied status. Before cognitive abstraction, we study with our bodies, prolonging the period of time betwixt and between sensation and knowledge. Through the qualities that emerge, the potentiality of sensation itself is sensed as a perception in its own right. The gestures that adjust and sensitize the body to the pleasures of sensual abstraction cannot be dictated by any kind of measure or standard and thus are unique, contingent on the situated relation. Even in the most disengaged form of study — brown study — the stance of the body works as a support. Indeed, it is the very invisibility or transparency of the body in such instances that speak to its efficacy rather than its insignificance — hence the need for phenomenological description, which retrieves the secret work of perception and gesture. In conclusion, I suggest that we, as educators, allow our students to take pleasure in education, and thus, give them opportunities to cultivate studied perceptions beyond measure. It is therefore only in the erotics of immature yet studied perception that education can be redeemed as a practice of freedom.

1. Gert Biesta, *Beyond Learning: Democratic Education for a Human Future* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2006).

2. Jan Masschelein, Maarten Simons, Ulrich Bröckling, and Ludwig Pongratz, eds., *The Learning Society from the Perspective of Governmentality* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007).
3. See for instance Robbie McClintock, "Toward a Place for Study in a World of Instruction," *Teachers College Record* 73, no. 2 (1971): 161–205; Luka Arsenjuk and Michelle Koerner, "Study, Students, Universities: An Introduction," *Polygraph* 21 (2009): 1–13; Samuel Rocha, "Erotic Study: Fortune, Baby-Talk, and Jazz," in *Philosophy of Education 2012*, ed. Claudia Ruitenberg (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2013), 63–71; and Tyson E. Lewis, *On Study: Giorgio Agamben and Educational Potentiality* (New York: Routledge, 2013).
4. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), 35.
5. Ibid.
6. Samuel Todes, *Body and World* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 272. This work will be cited as *BW* in the text for all subsequent references.
7. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 14.
8. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge, 2010).
9. Arthur Conon Doyle, "The Adventure of the Cardboard Box," http://sherlockholmes_cases.tripod.com/cardbox.htm.
10. Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999).
11. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).
12. See Tony Bennett, *Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1994), for an illuminating overview of this phenomenon.