

Chapter 3, “The Dys-appearing Body:” Discussion questions

Find a discussion partner. Take 15 minutes to discuss all the questions under your assigned theme. The quotes are intended to remind and provoke you to find the edges and tensions in Leder’s analysis.

Theme 1: Pain

“Aesthetic, objective, or pleasurable self-encounters retain a large volitional element. With pain this is less the case, not only because of its typically involuntary etiology but because of the quality of the sensation itself.... In the face of pain, one’s whole being is forcibly reoriented.”

“Pain engenders a further dimension of alienation that is not a part of neutral or pleasurable self-experience. There are admittedly certain pains, such as that of the athlete pressing against limits, that are congruent with life projects and have a positive significance (‘no pain, no gain.’) Yet this is the exception rather than the rule.”

- Phenomenologically speaking, pain effects dys-appearance, Leder argues. Can you think of cases of pain that do not fit his model? (“The athlete pressing against limits” is his.) Can these cases all be dismissed as “the exception rather than the rule”?
- Leder is primarily interested in “organic” pain—that is, pain that comes from a dysfunction of the body (like a heart attack). Can you think of contexts where pain is more intersubjective? Or even where pain is used as a political tool? Do these examples fit the same phenomenological profile?

Theme 2: Disease

“I will not...seek the elusive definition of *disease* versus *health*.”

“The disease itself inaugurates a constriction that does not end with the period of formal confinement...A landscape is viewed not as a field of possibility but of difficulties to negotiate. The ordinary sense of free and spontaneous movement is now replaced by calculated effort; one does not want to take chances. Etymologically, ‘ease’ comes from the French word *aise*, originally meaning ‘elbow room’ or ‘opportunity.’ This experience of world-as-opportunity is precisely what dis-ease calls into question.”

“In disease, one is actively *dis-abled*. Abilities that were previously in one’s command and rightfully belong to the habitual body have now been lost.”

- Might Leder’s reluctance to define disease belie certain difficulties in his analysis?
- To what extent is disease a socially constituted condition in relation with others, rather than a condition of the private body?
- Which of these is a *disease*, on Leder’s analysis: losing one’s leg in a car accident; getting arthritis and walking uncomfortably with a stick; getting old; becoming short-sighted; taking prescription drugs that have severe nausea as a side-effect; being pregnant; realizing that no matter how hard you train you won’t make the team; terrible acne; “stress”?

Theme 3: Dys-appearance

“Dys-appearance tends to arise when we are away, apart, from our ordinary mastery and health. There is the sense of privation, a reversal of a normal or desired state, which then provokes a bodily thematization.”

“When my embodiment radically diverges from the habitual, dys-appearance is likely to result... This dys-appearance by virtue of temporal discontinuity can also characterize normal phases of life.”

“Health and illness can be taken as examples of the two complementary poles. Both exhibit an element of alienation from the body. In the case of health, the body is alien by virtue of its disappearance, as attention is primarily directed toward the world. With the onset of illness this gives way to dys-appearance. The body is no longer alien-as-forgotten, but precisely as-remembered, a sharp and searing presence threatening the self.”

- What is the normal state of bodies’ “mastery and health” from which dys-appearance marks a departure?
- Is Leder’s analysis undercut by acknowledging that bodies are *always* in flux?
- To what extent is dys-appearance a private experience of the body and to what extent is it intersubjective?

Theme 4: The Other

“I have suggested that an explicit thematization of the body can arise independently of the Other’s gaze. There are physical experiences such as pain, exhaustion, and illness that bring about the emergence of the body as explicit object. Corporeal alienation does not come to be solely through the social confrontation but from within the body-for-me.”

“Physical and cultural divergences can also bring about a dys-appearance. I most easily forget my body when it looks and acts just like everyone else’s.”

“The body is always a place of vulnerability, not just to biological but to sociopolitical forces... This susceptibility of the body to the Other’s intentions, not just to illness and other organic forces, is a primary mechanism of dys-appearance.”

- Can social dys-appearance be conceptually separated from “organic” dys-appearance?
- How do we know when our bodies “look and act just like everyone else’s”?
- Does the introduction of social dys-appearance at the very end of the first part of the book trouble the neutral phenomenological tenor of Leder’s discussion in chapters one and two?

Chapter 5, “The Threatening Body”

General discussion questions:

“Within the Western philosophical tradition the body has often been regarded as a force of negativity, an obstacle to the soul’s attempt to secure knowledge, virtue, or eternal life....Such a distrust of embodiment is by no means a universal phenomenon. To fully understand its ascendancy within our culture would necessitate a careful examination of the specific social and historical contexts out of which it developed, including a consideration of salient political, economic, technological, religious, and gender relations. However, I wish to suggest in this work that our imagery of the body can be understood not only in reference to the cultural projects at play but as an articulation of certain phenomenological possibilities and predispositions arising out of the lived body.” (127)

1. How does the distinction between the phenomenological anatomy Leder thinks is universal and the contingent cultural projects that shape our phenomenology play out in this chapter? Did you ever find yourself questioning whether a particular phenomenon arose anatomically, from the lived body, or whether it was actually a culturally defined way of experiencing the body?

“Truth... is a process of simultaneous revealing-concealing. Aspects of world are disclosed only by virtue of obscuring others.” (147)

2. Leder argues overall that Descartes’ understanding of the body is a *motivated misreading* stemming from various phenomenological and cultural moments. Is Leder offering us a *truer* reading of the lived body, and what role (if any) do *his* motivations play in his critique of Descartes?

“Those Western religious and philosophical traditions which adopt a largely negative view toward the body have placed a lesser emphasis upon cultivating its powers. The effect is to further skew our sense of body toward the negative.” (153)

3. Are there ways of doing philosophy that don’t contribute to this negative sense of the body?

4. At the end of the book, Leder argues that onto-valuational dualism has contributed to oppressive hierarchies of gender, class, culture, species, and human/nature relations (153-5). He suggests that a model of the lived body provides a better alternative to reorient our political thinking. What could he mean here? Does this seem promising for a different kind of political theory to you?