

Review Essay



Bringing Tactility Back

Richard Kearney on Touch

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1

Only rarely does one encounter a book that opens an entire vista within human experience, much less does so with such force and eloquence as Richard Kearney's *Touch: Recovering Our Most Vital Sense* (Columbia University Press, 2021). Kearney brings touch into a vivid prominence out of the shadows to which it had been confined in much of Western thought. There had been recent signs of a dawning recognition of the importance of touch on the part of continental philosophers. Merleau-Ponty, inspired by comments of Husserl's, analyzed the "chiasmatic" dimension of self-touching in *The Visible and the Invisible*, and Jean-Luc Nancy singled out the importance of touching in interpersonal relations – a treatment underlined and carried further in Derrida's *On Touching: Jean-Luc Nancy*. But none of these moves, promising as they were, came close to accomplishing what Kearney has done: to bring out the full scale of touch

in human life. Nor did they establish what Kearney demonstrates: the extreme contemporary relevance of touch and its indispensability in how we live on earth today.

Kearney presents his book not merely as an addition to a comparatively neglected topic in the history of philosophical thinking about perception but as an effort to address a crisis of our own day: the demotion of touch in the face of the massive presence of digital technology in people's lives. As a result of our immersion in such technology, we have lost touch with touch itself. Limited to turning on and turning off a given presentation or program online or on television, touch is not valorized for its own sake and for the sake of what it opens up uniquely and diversely in human experience. Downplayed and marginalized, touch has been confined to secondary status, subordinate to the high demands and lures of a predominantly visual culture.

In order to avoid contracting Covid-19, many of us engaged in zoom meetings – with students, business associates, family members, friends. For this we were so grateful and relieved that we barely noticed that in so doing we had thereby *lost contact* – direct bodily contact such that we could reach out and touch our interlocutors. In such straitened circumstances, the only sensory dimensions were visual and oral: sight and voice became the sole modalities of our being-with-each-other. Left out entirely was touch. From our relief at being able to talk with others and hear them while seeing them and staying safe, we lost full consciousness of what we were missing. Gradually it began to dawn on us that some basic dimension was lacking: *touch*. The ramifications, though subtle, were manifold. Richard Kearney's groundbreaking book traces out these ramifications in graphic detail, showing us what we have been missing and suggesting ways we can bring touch back into our lives.

Borrowing from Charles Taylor the term “excarnation,” Kearney argues eloquently and forcefully for a return to *incarnation* (or, in a later coinage, *anacarnation*: multiple modes of incarnation). Incarnation signifies “the image becoming flesh” or “carnal contact” that “feeds us body and soul” (p. 2). Such contact – whether with other people or with inanimate things – can help to restore “our basic common touch” (ibid.) Our “proxy” culture can achieve genuine *proximity* if touching is more fully valued. The loneliness that became so drastically evident during the pandemic of 2020–2022 can be overcome if people are able to congregate in ways that facilitate being back in touch, however nuanced or tactful this may need to be in a given circumstance.

“Tact” is a primary term in Kearney's richly rewarding book. Tact is never simple and is often very subtle in its operation: “tact is an interplay of far and near, knowing how to be subjects *of* our actions while being subject *to* others’

actions" (11). Tact indicates that touch cannot be reduced to literal contact but involves factors of personal history, judgment, and taste. These latter build on the synaesthetic virtues of touch, which forms creative alliances with vision, taste, and smell – all of which can be components of "tactility" regarded as a gentle but generic power of the human body. As Kearney puts it with characteristically condensed poignancy: "there is touch and touch" (11).

In keeping with his claim as to the omnipresence of touch once it is liberated, Kearney draws from very diverse sources: philosophical, artistic, scientific, and therapeutic. Precisely because touch construed as tact and tactility cannot be reduced to literal touching – as Aristotle had maintained – its full enactment calls for very diverse resources, scores of which are invoked by Kearney in this splendidly compact book. Every page bristles with striking insights into how we are in touch not only with other human beings but other forms of life. His overarching vision is that of the Symbiocene, Richard Louv's term for a world in which touch between all earth-bound beings is recognized and respected.

One notion not pursued in this wide-ranging book is that of "pathos-avec," Michael Henry's term that suggests that touch is intimately related to empathic human relationships. But Kearney comes close to Henry's conception when he writes that "tact is a way of staying in contact with the feelings of others so [that] we can be touched by them in turn" (13). If we ever thought that touch was a private sense – *my* touch vs. *your* touch – Kearney deconstructs this solipsistic reading and succeeds in showing how far touch reaches into our lives: between them, among them, as an interpersonal integument that has no equal in human and animal experience. For Kearney, life on earth becomes an experiment in touching and being touched. Thanks to touch, such life is not only incarnate but *intercarnate*, forming the effective basis of a "commons of the touch," as Kearney aptly designates it. Touch is the single most potent force in the undermining of the solitary lives induced by digital technology, for it brings us *to others* – others with whom we can dedicate ourselves to shared projects, travel to places together, cavort or concentrate.

2

Richard Kearney is making a major epistemological claim in *Touch*: touch is not just one more form of sensory awareness, alongside sight, hearing, tasting, etc. It is a central sense – literally at the center of *all* sensuous experience: it is "the heart and soul of [all] the senses" (43). It is by touch that we not only reach out and make literal contact with ourselves and other things, including other human beings, animals, and plants. We *ingress* into them – enter their domain

in uniquely productive and rewarding ways. It is by *staying in touch* – in direct contact and not only digitally – that we join forces with others, finding our way in their midst and interacting with them meaningfully. The interaction is not just two-way, back and forth, here and there, there and here, but omnidirectional, all over the place – the place of our co-habitation with others on earth.

It is on the basis of this extensive but intimate contiguity that touch can be considered a primary way of *understanding the world*, including our place in it. For it is a matter of “the touchstone of carnal hermeneutics” (38). Carnal hermeneutics is Kearney’s term for all the ways in which we come to comprehend the world, ranging from spontaneous takes on what is happening to us at a given moment in daily life to the consideration of philosophical and religious texts. Rather than confining hermeneutical activity to the comprehension of these texts (as in earlier senses of hermeneutics), Kearney *corporealizes* hermeneutic understanding, demonstrating just how the lived body is actively involved in such understanding. At the center of carnal hermeneutics is touch considered in the expansive way that Kearney sets forth in *Touch*. His premise is that touch is “an embodied manner of being in the world” (16) – indeed, that it is the *primary* mode of *in-der-Welt-Sein*.

What can this mean? It is already a bold step to argue for the bodily basis of hermeneutical understanding, given that the very notion of understanding is classically tied to conceptual parameters, as with Kant. This is a step that Merleau-Ponty took in his *Phenomenology of Perception*. But to claim that touch is what is most centrally involved in carnal hermeneutics is still bolder. How can something so literally mute – so inarticulate – as touch serve to convey the nuanced structures of life experience? Yet there are many occasions when touch is a decisive factor in conveying the purport of a given situation. Among these is *hospitality*, which is often based on a handshake or a hug – both highly corporeal actions that recognize and welcome the other by differential forms of embrace. (On hospitality, see especially p. 15, where Kearney explores “the crucial move from hostility to hospitality.”) Another is *empathy* with someone who is suffering psychologically: a gentle touching of the afflicted person can convey our understanding of her or his situation as well as our emotional support of the afflicted other. Closely related to empathy is what Kearney designates as “Healing Touch,” to which he devotes an entire chapter whose premise is that “touch is intimately related to healing” (p. 61). He cites the work of his brother, Dr. Michael Kearney, a hospice-care physician who sits with dying patients and holds their hand. Even Sigmund Freud, in his very early efforts to assist psychologically disturbed patients, lay his hands on the forehead of the suffering person. Another chapter is dedicated to “Tales of the Wounded Healer,” ranging

from Oedipus to the biblical Thomas. It is as if the suffering already incurred by such figures prepares them for healing others – often by touch in one form or another. In the subtitle of his book, Richard Kearney refers to touch as “our most *vital* sense.” It brings life and vitality to those who are in danger of losing their hold on one or both – where the locution “hold on” brings with it an unmistakable allusion to touch.

For touch takes us both ways – to pleasure and delight as well as to pain and suffering. This literal ambi-valence indicates the range of touch as deeply ingredient in our lives: so deeply that its very presence can be lost sight of: literally over-looked.

3

In a book that says so much about its announced topic, it might seem unwarranted to ask for more. But I will here discuss briefly three topics that are not so much glaring lacunae as three areas that would profit from being re-construed with the resources provided by Kearney’s book, my aim being to show the fecundity of its vision. These areas are attention, emotionality, and thinking.

1. *Thinking*: understandably for an author who is preoccupied with developing a model of carnal hermeneutics, thinking is not a central topic. In fact, I find only this one reference: “We taste before we think” (19). Tasting is a form of touching – we taste largely with our tongues – and it happens in very young infants before they think sequentially, much less conceptually. But not long after, they are thinking in a more or less coherent manner. Such thinking is not separate from touching; not only is it initiated by experiences of touching (as when we come upon a perplexing situation by our touching around in the dark, leading us to think out *just what it is*, and *what to do about it*), but I would maintain that the action of touching itself is a form of thinking: it is an embodied thinking that bears on our lived environment, classifying it and sometimes deciding what to do in relation to it. In other words, there is a *thinking dimension of touch* that needs to be acknowledged along with the embodied activity of touching itself. This dimension informs what Kearney calls “deep mind, intimate mind, felt mind” (43). Flesh, the locus and source of touch, is a scene of primal thinking.
2. *Attention*: touching can be considered as itself a form of *attending-to*; it is a sensing of what lies within our reach, attending to it not by deliberation but by taking note of what we are touching (or equally what is touching us) at the moment. Even if not concerted, just noticing something

is itself a form of attention. Touch is especially well suited for all such noticing, for it brings to our awareness aspects of the surface of that with which we are contiguous at the moment of touching. As Merleau-Ponty writes, “attention is the active constitution of a new object that develops and thematizes what was until then only offered as an indeterminate horizon.”¹ Touching is an instance of such “active constitution of a new object” when what we touch emerges from the “indeterminate horizon” of a perceptual field that solicits our reaching out toward it and touching something in it as if to confirm its existence. To be touched is to become a “new object” in that it is thereby emergent in the perceptual field where we are located; even if it is familiar as touched, it comes forward as *new in the moment of touching*: newly presented, newly figuring into our lives at that moment. Attentive touching makes what we touch come alive as it enters into our awareness more distinctly.

3. *Emotion*. We often say things like: “it was touching – very emotional.” Kearney’s book helps us to see that to be touching in an emotional sense is not an idle metaphor. It connotes an expressive gesture that reaches out to us at an affective level, leading to our being moved emotionally, open to the other’s emotional state as conveyed by the gesture. As Kearney states it with characteristic precision: “to touch and be touched simultaneously is to be *connected* in a way that pries us open. Flesh is open-hearted – where we are most exposed, skin on skin, keenly attentive to wounds and scars ...” (41). Touching is where we are most concretely linked to others, a linking that is more than literal contact; it is a *sensing* of the other, including an apprehension of their emotional state. For emotions exist as much *between* people as *in* them – indeed, more so as I would maintain² – and it is touching that creates the most effective bridge, allowing others to *reach out* to us and ourselves to respond to them in forceful and moving ways. On this view, emotion is something not bottled up within us but that exists “at the interface of these three – mind, body, and environment.” (15). Part of the lambent genius of touch is to bring together things that are otherwise isolated from each other; touch is a literally *syn-tactical* medium.

¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. D. Landes (New York: Routledge, 2012), 33.

² See my *Turning Emotion Inside Out: Affective Life Beyond the Subject* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2022), especially “Part Two: Emotional Placescapes: The Interpersonal Dynamics of Emotion.”

4

What we witness in *Touch* is the paradoxical situation whereby what might seem to be the most exiguous and slender of human senses is shown to possess remarkable range and resiliency. It informs entire situations as different as hospitality and empathy, hermeneutic understanding and healing practices. It is “panpervasive,” in Kearney’s apt word. How can this be? From Kearney’s astute observations, one can infer that part of the power of touch lies in its unique combination of being at once capable of extreme focus – as when one plays piano with the tips of one’s fingers – while being broadly spread out in the human body, almost all parts of which are capable of touching as well as being touched. As Aristotle first observed, touch is not anchored in a discrete organ such as the eye or ear but is spread throughout the surface of the sensing body. If we can call the first form of power *touching-in*, we can designate the second as *touching-out*. This is the difference between touching a delimited surface – as when the second finger of my right hand presses against a delimited set of keys on my computer (roughly: j, h, i, u, n, m) – and letting the same right hand range over the entire keyboard (or alternately across the full back of the person I am massaging). In short, touching allows us to *have it both ways*: it is both “the most singular and general” (43) of all the senses. And on the basis of both ways – in and out, singular and general – I can touch virtually anything that comes within my reach (and if out of reach at the moment I can reach it by moving my body to get closer).

Touch, in short, is ambidextrous – or better, omnidextrous. Of previous efforts to come to terms with touch, perhaps only Aristotle glimpsed this, and then in a truncated format. Richard Kearney has allowed us to realize fully for the first time that touch is an altogether unique sense – one that is uniquely comprehensive. Thanks to his vision, we come to realize that *nothing is altogether out of touch, nothing in lived experience*.

Nevertheless, we can find ourselves in situations where we are touch-deprived. This is exactly what happens when other human beings are accessible to us by virtual technology alone. This situation – which is becoming increasingly common – provides the opening of *Touch*, and it is only appropriate that Kearney ends his book by returning to this same situation and asking the basic question that motivates his entire undertaking in *Touch*: “How do we get back in touch with ourselves – and each other – in a time of exponential excarnation?” (p. 124). It is Kearney himself who shows the many ways that this can happen and in widely diverse contexts, ways he sets before us in compelling prose.

Richard Kearney's extraordinary book puts us in touch with touch itself – fully and for the first time ever at this level of insight. It could not be more timely or more welcome.