

Knowing and Liberal Irony: Hegel, Rorty and the Criterion of Progress,” forthcoming in *International Studies in Philosophy*, Spring 1999.

JONATHAN SALEM-WISEMAN, *York University*

The Gift of Touch: Embodying the Good

STEPHEN DAVID ROSS

Albany, State University of New York Press, 1998, 389 p.

What is the significance of touch for a contemporary thought of materiality and alterity? Is it possible to rethink touch in ethical terms, linking it with the notions of expression, exposure, sacrifice, general economy, and *poiēsis*? In *The Gift of Touch: Embodying the Good*, Stephen David Ross raises these and other provocative questions in a remarkable re-reading of the Western philosophical tradition in which he attempts to understand touch in terms of the Platonic Good beyond Being (*epekeina tes ousias*). This book is the third and most recent in a series of books by Ross on ‘the gift’ and ‘giving’— a concept, or perhaps better, a *logic* borrowed from various anthropological (Mauss), literary (Bataille, Cixous), and philosophical (Heidegger, Lévinas, and especially Derrida) sources. Ross’ first two books in the series (*The Gift of Beauty* and *The Gift of Truth*) deployed this logic of the gift in order to explore the relation of beauty and truth to ethics and the Good. Similarly in *The Gift of Touch*, traditional ontological concepts and entities such as materiality, flesh, touch, and bodies are re-read in an ethical register in an effort to couple touch and bodies with what Ross calls an ‘ethic of inclusion’ (I’ll return to this ethic in more detail below).

Ross’ general strategy in this book is a dazzling and impressive one: he offers informed, critical readings of nearly *all* the relevant texts on touch and bodies in the history of western philosophy and contemporary poststructuralism. Ross’ readings range across authors as diverse as Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, and Spinoza to Merleau-Ponty, Foucault, Deleuze and Guatarri, Lévinas, Irigaray, Elizabeth Grosz, and Judith Butler. In this review I concentrate on what I take to be the most important chapters for gaining a general understanding of his project, viz., those on Plato, Aristotle, Spinoza, Merleau-Ponty, Foucault, Lévinas, Grosz, and Butler.

Plato is often read as the thinker of dualism par excellence, the prime philosophical representative of those who argue for the priority and primordiality of the soul over the body. Plato, it would seem, is the philosopher most removed from the body and touch, the philosopher who knows nothing of flesh or materiality. Often Plato’s *Phaedo* — where Socrates, facing death, insists on the importance of the soul and the

insignificance of the body in the afterlife — is cited as evidence of this general trend in Platonic thought. In a surprising and nuanced reading of Plato in the first two chapters of his book, Ross turns this classical reading of *Phaedo* on its head, or more precisely, places it firmly on its feet. Ross begins by citing, and reminding us of the fact that early on in *Phaedo*, Socrates “lowered his feet to the ground, and sat like this for the rest of the discussion” (*Phaedo*, 61cd). Beginning from this point of contact and touch, Ross does not deny the anti-body thrust of Plato’s work, but reveals instead a more complicated picture of Plato’s thought of materiality.

Here, under Ross’ pen, Plato is transformed from a superficial critic of materiality into a profound thinker of finitude and mortality, one who challenges us to think of Socrates’ death both as a disaster and a call of the Good. Ross carefully negotiates the complex tensions in Plato’s writings between knowledge and the unknowable, life and death, suggesting that Plato’s understanding of Socrates’ death oscillates between a general and restricted economy (terms borrowed from Bataille). In this wavering between two economies, Plato’s dialogue gives us to think Socrates’ death as a disaster and loss which no mourning can ever recover or heal — and, at the same time, Socrates’ finitude is thought in terms of general economy, as an opening to alterity and abundance through materiality and touch. The point for Ross is not to argue for the preponderance of a general over a restricted economy in Plato, but to insist upon this double register in Plato’s text and to show how this other, general economy has been overlooked by most readers. The critical task for a thinking of materiality after Plato is not to decide on one of these two economies — choice makes little sense here, especially in terms of general economy — but to work through the overlapping of these two economies in his texts, as well as the difference between them.

Aristotle is often lumped in with Plato as another critic of the body, locating the essence of the human in *logos*, distinguishing man from animals and the rest of the physical world. The famous opening line of the *Metaphysics*, that “All men desire by nature to know (980a),” is taken to be the quintessential gesture of Aristotelian epistemology and ontology. Aristotle is also the foremost thinker of kinds and place, of location and space. As Ross argues, the Aristotelian desire to know that motivates his entire philosophical approach fixes bodies in place, readying them for a touch that desires to *know* alterity. In a Lévinasian vein, Ross suggests that we understand desire and touch as being beyond mastery, as a response to the call of the Good that exceeds knowledge in all directions, beyond the ability of consciousness to know bodies, what they can do, and what their proper place and kind are. For Ross, the critical question for any reading of Aristotle on materiality, touch, and bodies is: what if bodies in their alterity escape the bounds of knowledge, of restricted economy, and *techné*? What if bodies, rather than having a fixed place, belong to an abundance that knows nothing

of kinds and hierarchy? Despite his reliance on a metaphysics of knowledge, *logos*, and *techne*, on Ross' reading, Aristotle is not wholly unaware of abundance and *poiésis* in nature beyond knowledge. Thus, it is necessary to recognize two competing senses of *phusis* in Aristotle, one linked to restricted economy, the other to general economy. Also, Ross suggests (following a thread of thought that is more his own than Aristotelian) that we understand Aristotle's characterization of the good as "for the sake of which" (*Metaphysics*, 982ab) not in terms of *telos* or end, but as the good of nature in abundance. This rethinking of the good and *phusis* in Aristotle leads to an engaging re-reading by Ross of the matter/form binary in terms of restricted and general economy.

Of all the classical philosophical thinkers he reads in this book, Ross is perhaps closest to Spinoza. It is Spinoza who knows better than any other traditional philosopher that we know little of what bodies can do. Spinoza tells us that "no one has yet determined what the Body can do ... that the Body itself ... can do many things which its Mind wonders at" (Spinoza, cited by Ross, 89), a passage with which Ross begins his book and echoes many times throughout the pages that follow. In a quasi-Deleuzian reading of Spinoza that runs counter to traditional Spinoza scholarship, Ross singles out Spinoza as perhaps the first thinker in European thought to understand the body and touch as an opening onto nature's abundance in expression and exposure. Ross achieves this through a fascinating reading of the theme of *mimesis* (representation) as it relates to mind and body in the *Ethics*. But Ross' proximity to Spinoza's thought of abundance — a thought that leads Ross toward an ethic of inclusion, and Spinoza, in certain texts, to an ethic of limits based on a restricted economy of kinds — places him in contradistinction to some of Spinoza's more chauvinist remarks on the non-place of women in ethics and the place of animals in human economy. Critical of this latter tendency in Spinoza, Ross urges us to *think from* Spinoza's conception of nature as abundance, to understand nature's infinity in terms of general economy, resisting exclusion and hierarchy. He will continue to pursue this thought throughout the rest of the book as he turns his attention to contemporary poststructuralist writings on bodies and touch.

It would be impossible to understand the impetus behind Ross' re-reading of classical philosophical texts in the first part of the book without knowing something of the context out of which it is written. One could broadly and reductively refer to this context as 'postmodernist,' 'poststructuralist,' 'Continental,' or 'post-phenomenological'. If anything ties together these varied and highly differentiated trends within modern thought, it could indeed be an increased attention to and a complication of the themes of materiality, bodies, and touch and their relation to subjectivity. Some of the important background thinkers and movements necessary for understanding what is going on in Ross' text include: Heidegger's transformation of Husserlian

phenomenology into a phenomenology of being-in-the-world, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty's work on the body that developed out of Heidegger's early writings, Lévinas' writings on the role of embodiment in the ethical, French feminist writings on bodies and the maternal, Foucault's genealogical investigations into how power is inscribed on the body, as well as recent poststructuralist feminist appropriations of Foucault and Nietzsche. It is with an understanding of this context that one can gain a better sense of what is at stake in Ross' deconstructive intervention into the history of Western philosophy, and why he is *obligated* by these thoughts of difference to repeatedly return to traditional philosophers in his books on the gift.

None of this should be taken to suggest that Ross is simply an uncritical follower of poststructuralism, repeating lessons he has learned from Foucault, Derrida, Lévinas or others. Ross does indeed borrow heavily from these thinkers, but his use of their work *also and always* takes the form of a responsible reading, sifting through the multiple inheritances that these thinker's texts leave to us. For example, in his chapters on the two best recognized theorists of the body, Merleau-Ponty and Foucault, Ross is not content to simply accept their refreshingly positive analyses of the body. Merleau-Ponty's work on the body, which is motivated largely by ontological and epistemological concerns, is critically interrogated by Ross as to its inability to ask the question of the body's relation to alterity and the Good beyond knowledge. Similarly, Foucault's analysis of disciplinary mechanisms and their effects on the body are pushed to their limits by Ross when he raises questions about bodies for which Foucault has little interest, viz., women's and animals' bodies (Ross returns to women's bodies in more detail in a later and important chapter on Irigaray).

Perhaps the most interesting part of the book is Ross' chapter on Lévinas. Any reader who is familiar with Lévinas' writings is bound to notice that on many points, Ross' concerns throughout the book are indistinguishable from basic Lévinasian themes. What is at stake in Ross' project thus becomes all the more apparent where he departs from him. This departure from Lévinas, it seems to me, stems from three distinct limits in Lévinas' *oeuvre*: 1) the question of sexuality in alterity, 2) the privilege of the human over animals and nature, and 3) the inability on Lévinas' part to think touch and love in conjunction with the ethical. Ross' concerns with the first two limits are engaged in more depth in the chapters on Irigaray, Grosz, and Butler; the third limit is the central focus of the Lévinas chapter. In the latter chapter, Ross finds himself largely in agreement with Lévinas' analyses of expression and exposure, but starkly at odds with Lévinas' understanding of touch. For Lévinas, touch is closely linked with, or inevitably leads to, totality and mastery. In place of an ethics of touch, Lévinas gives us an ethics of the face, a face that comes to one as master from a certain height. Ross questions Lévinas' reliance on an ethics of the face as well as his understanding of

touch as sedentary, wondering why Lévinas either cannot or does not understand that touch wanders and circulates in exposure. This limit in Lévinas' work stems perhaps from his somewhat sharp distinction between totality and infinity. Ross reads this distinction in a more contaminated way, insisting that totality and infinity are inextricably intertwined through touch in a manner that Lévinas does not pursue. This distance from Lévinas does not, however, prevent Ross from circling back and invoking Lévinas' conceptions of responsibility, infinity, and incarnation for the purposes of developing an embodied ethic of inclusion. More than any other figure (with the possible exception of Irigaray), Lévinas presents for Ross the possibility of thinking embodiment in its ethical specificity against more neutral accounts of exposure and alterity such as one finds in, for example, the motif of singularity in the texts of Deleuze and Guatarri or Jean-Luc Nancy.

The final four substantive chapters (the very last chapter is a summary and conclusion of the book as a whole) of Ross' book take up poststructuralist feminist and ecofeminist concerns with the politics and ethics of bodies and touch. In Chapters 12 and 13, he offers a reading of Elizabeth Grosz' important work *Volatile Bodies*, before turning to an analysis of Judith Butler's influential *Bodies That Matter* in Chapter 14, and Carol Adams', Susan Griffin's, and Donna Haraway's various versions of ecofeminism in Chapter 15. At stake in Ross' reading of Grosz is an insistence on the importance of rethinking not only subjectivity in terms of corporeality (Grosz's task), but an expanded understanding of subjectivity-as-corporeality in relation to exposure and the good everywhere, not only in human bodies but in natural and animal bodies as well. Similarly in his chapter on Butler, whose work represents perhaps the most sophisticated feminist writing on materiality today, Ross questions the implicit humanism in Butler's work on materiality. Where Butler discusses the abjection of certain *human* bodies (the bodies of those who do not matter, those who have been denied full subjectivity and are able gain access to subjectivity only by acceding to the demands of the Symbolic), Ross wants to re-mark not only the abjection of those bodies, but other bodies as well. And this is a project that derives from Butler's own work, read in a certain (I would suggest 'responsible') way. For instance, becoming a 'subject' in Butler's terms means not only renouncing a certain conception of embodiment, but consists also in creating and denying a constitutive outside that eventually returns to disrupt that pretension to unity in subjectivity. This outside is constituted by abjected others of all sorts — women, children, men and women of color, lesbians, animals, nature, the non-living, etc. Butler contents herself with tracing the exclusion of various *human*, especially women and lesbian, others, but seems unwilling to make the ecofeminist gesture of considering the exclusion of women alongside the exclusion of animals and the rest of nature.

Hence the importance of ecofeminist discourse for Ross' ethic of inclusion. Ross employs ecofeminist writings from Carol Adams, Donna Haraway, and Susan Griffin to think exclusions in their historical interconnectedness, their multiplicity and specificity — women and animals, women and nature, white women and men of color, women of color and lesbians, and many, many others. If we are to work toward an ethic of *inclusion*, an ethic that, as Ross understands it, strives as much as possible to avoid exclusion based on kinds, then each one of these exclusions needs to be traced both in its specificity and its interconnectedness with other exclusions — a massive, indeed infinite, task. This infinite project to which we have been promised has its (non)origin in the good, in the call of and toward justice — and, for Ross' purposes in this book, most importantly — in touch and embodiment, in one's being-exposed through touch to all other embodied beings.

MATTHEW R. CALARCO, *Binghamton University*