The Recovery of the Body: The Disclosure of a Forgotten Precondition in James Mensch’s *Embodiments: From the Body to the Body Politic*


1. Body Politics: a Blind Spot of Political Philosophy

James Mensch’s new book distinguishes itself by making the body central to political debate. The body has been a topic of philosophical anthropology for a long time. It is, after all, owing to embodiment that an irreversible rift occurs, rending the fundamental condition of human existence: Because of its spatiotemporal relationality, the body functions as the backbone of grammar—of the grammar of speech and of the grammar of space: I and Not-I, Here and There.

However, the role of the body in political philosophy is mostly marked by absence. In the eyes of political theory it is simply “non-existent.” Accordingly, the concept of “political space” carries a similar stigma. Even determinedly anti-traditional thinkers such as Hannah Arendt or Maurice Merleau-Ponty only focus on one of these aspects, i.e., either on the body or on political space. Arendt thoroughly deals with political space, the neglect of which she regards as a major shortcoming of traditional philosophy, but she never makes the tangible body the centre of this space. Merleau-Ponty, on the other hand, generally places much emphasis on the tangible body, but when it comes to analyzing political space, he seems to ignore this feature. And not for nothing have leading figures in philosophy lamented the absence of the body in social and political science. Among them is the French phenomenologist Gabriel Marcel, who argues that because of this abstraction from the body, “the interpretations of political events, of conflicts between nations, denominations and cultures remain completely superficial and deficient.” Thus, reconstructing political space in a phenomenological manner is much more than meeting a desideratum for research. It is, in fact, the disclosure of a blind spot in intellectual history. And this disclosure comes along with a reversal of meaning for

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many constitutive terms of political science such as freedom, violence, and political space.

The central question of Mensch’s book is: “How can we think of the state, not just as a soul written large, but as a ‘body politic’, that is reflecting our embodied being?” (4). He is fully aware that such a question and the taking of perspectives linked to it definitely collide with many notions of traditional philosophy such as perfect objectivity, absolute knowledge, and pure thought. Phenomenological analysis, however, replaces objectivity with meaningful rootedness in the human condition originating in the human body. By using this approach, he first of all does away with the classical Cartesian dualism of body and soul. Therefore, in order to gain knowledge, the body need not be overcome any longer, as traditional philosophy has demanded over a long period. In this view the body, rather, serves as an instrument of world appropriation and of the localization of the self (7f.). When considered that way, political space constitutes a chiasmus of seeing and being seen: “‘Public space’ is the space where individuals see and are seen by others as they engage in public affairs” (175). It becomes the essential place for intersubjective emergence of meaning as well as self-actualization.

2. The Ethical Call for a Continuous Return

One of the characteristic structural features of the book can be described by the notion of continuous return. Mensch depicts this thought pattern as a repeated return to the other’s excessive character. This means that the other’s personality generally implies more than he would be able to disclose within one single encounter. So we need to go back to the other in order to gain a closer insight and to experience additional options for action. But this process of understanding can never be concluded, because the other, who is free and has a future, always transcends us. The same pattern of thought can be found in Mensch’s methodology. He repeatedly returns to the concepts described above, seeking to understand them more deeply or to cast a different light on them by approaching them from another perspective. Thus he brings into existence a network of highly interdependent notions that offer alternative ways of thinking, thereby also prompting the reader to think further. His account is accordingly far from being charged with the pathos of absoluteness.

The first five chapters of the book serve as an exposition of terms and definitions. Apart from meta-categories such as intertwining and return/recursion, which are marked by having a methodological component next to a content-related component, in these chapters the focus is on notions or pairs of notions