
In his latest monograph, Frank Schalow, a prolific interpreter of Heidegger, has tackled some of the most neglected and contentious issues in his oeuvre. In the history of the reception of Heidegger’s thought, some of the most prominent complaints, raised by commentators from a plurality of philosophical perspectives, have focused on Heidegger’s apparent neglect or de-emphasis of embodiment. Despite his well-known criticisms of the intellectualist bias or “theoretical attitude” that characterizes much of Western intellectual history, it would seem, according to these critics, that Heidegger perpetuates this bias through his neglect of the physical aspects of human existence (e.g., gender). The fact that his only discussions of embodiment, or, as Schalow terms it, “incarnality,” are brief and underdeveloped only seems to feed the suspicions of many commentators. Undaunted by the prominence of critics like Jacques Derrida, John Caputo, and Heidegger’s student Hans Jonas, Schalow undertakes to show how Heidegger indeed offers a phenomenological account of many (if not quite all) of the significant facets of our embodiment that touches in important ways on a host of ecological, social, and ethical issues.

In Chapter 1, “The Materiality of the World,” Schalow first of all sets out to clarify the “hermeneutical situation” from which we, living at the beginning of the twenty-first century, must approach Heidegger’s work. He raises the important issue of the degree to which Heidegger’s analysis of everydayness, emerging as it does from the cultural milieu of the 1920’s, might be of more than mere historical interest. He offers a compelling case for the claim that the general patterns or structures identified by Heidegger reappear in the contemporary situation. In the concluding portion of the chapter, Schalow presents a Heideggerian analysis of addiction. Despite the surprisingly moralistic tone of this analysis, Schalow’s discussion of addiction in terms of the Heideggerian categories of everydayness and falling succeeds in breaking new ground.

In Chapter 2, “The Erotic, Sexuality, and Diversity,” Schalow takes up another thematic field that Heidegger left largely unexamined in his own writings. Taking his cue from the notoriously difficult and underdeveloped concept of “metontology,” Schalow aims to correct the picture of Heidegger
inherited from critics like Derrida. Schalow argues that Heideggerian concepts like “guilt” point to a way of conceptualizing sexuality as part of the existential task of living out an individual identity, while at the same time remaining alert to the difficulty of recognizing our own finitude and the individuality of other people.

In Chapter 3, “Ethos, Embodiment, and Future Generations,” Schalow takes up a topic that he has already explored in some of his earlier essays and monographs, viz., Heidegger’s critical reception of Kant’s ethics. Schalow focuses on Heidegger’s contribution to the situationist or particularist tendency that characterizes discussions of ethics in contemporary “Continental” philosophy. In one of the most interesting discussions in the book, Schalow describes how embodiment lends urgency and ultimacy to our moral decisions (p. 73).

In Chapter 4, “Of Earth and Animals,” Schalow examines Heidegger’s conception of the “earth” in his writings from the 1930’s. While this concept has been occasionally read as a pointer to the development of a new perspective in environmental ethics, Schalow is careful to point out some of the limitations of Heidegger’s discussions in this regard.

In Chapter 5, “The Body Politic: Terrestrial or Social?”, Schalow again takes up an issue that he has explored elsewhere, i.e., the concept of freedom in Heidegger. In particular, Schalow articulates Heidegger’s conception of freedom as an alternative to conceptions, like that of Kant and his successors, that operate within a dualistic metaphysical framework.

Finally, in Chapter 6, “The Return to the Earth and the Idiom of the Body,” Schalow takes a broad view of how the theme of embodiment or “incarnality” can be read into Heidegger’s philosophical revolution. According to Schalow, as an expression of finitude, “incarnality” provides a helpful cipher for understanding Heidegger’s critique of the metaphysics of subjectivity.

This is an ambitious study and, as such, it faces a number of difficulties. Most prominently, Schalow’s study reads more like a collection of essays interspersed with aphorisms, than like a sustained commentary. While the overall thematic orientation of the book is clear, the way in which individual parts of the discussion contribute to or fit with this broader concern is sometimes difficult to discern. Moreover, despite Schalow’s clear command of Heidegger’s corpus, he strangely neglects the period preceding Being and Time, in which many of the issues dealt with here are introduced and treated by Heidegger, often in revolutionary ways.