

On Breath and Breathing: A Concluding Comment

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Abstract

To conclude the discussion of breath and breathing in the foregoing contributions, this comment sets out from a critical perspective on embodiment. For a being that breathes out and in, should we not add to embodiment its complement of vapourisation? Breath, after all, is fluid, animate and fundamental to human conviviality. While it can temporarily be put on hold, breath cannot be contained. That is why bodily breathing is unlike the ventilation of buildings. Moreover, breathing in and breathing out are dissimilar movements which cannot be reversed. This presents particular problems for those with breathing difficulties, above all in societies where speech, carried on the outbreath, is modelled on print, and where thought is attributed to a self whose powers of cognition transcend bodily experience. In place of the complementarity of self and body, we posit the soul as a vortex in which breathing, thinking, speech and song all flow into one another.

Keywords

animacy, breath, embodiment, soul, speech

One of the more irritating affectations of much recent writing in the humanities and social sciences is the habit of inserting the word ‘embodied’ in front of the topic in question, as though by doing so the spectre of binary thinking could be magically exorcised. Almost anything, it seems, can be embodied – the mind, consciousness, experience, knowledge, skills, practices, the self, meaning. If there is one thing that cannot be embodied, however, it is the body itself. At first glance, the phrase ‘embodied body’ looks like a simple case of tautology, of saying the same thing twice. ‘How can a body *not* be embodied?’ you will protest; ‘it’s the embodiment that makes it a

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body!’ But on second thoughts, the matter is not so straightforward. For if the body is the predicate of a process of embodiment – if it comes *after* embodiment, so to speak – then all the other things we claim can be entered into the process must come *before* it. Thus the dualism of mind and body, to take just one example, is still there, just as categorical as it ever was, but it no longer equates to a schism between ideal and material worlds. It is rather a matter of separating what is poured into the funnel of embodiment from what is extruded at the other end of it. It is a division between what goes in and what comes out. Only things that go in can be embodied. The body, since it comes out of the process, cannot.

This thought was running through my mind as I read through the articles making up this special issue. Here, the topic is breathing. Does it make sense, I wondered, to regard breathing as a practice of embodiment, or to add breath to the list of things that can be embodied? That a body breathes goes without saying; that breath is thereby embodied is another matter entirely. Perhaps there’s a sense in which breath is embodied on the inhalation, as air is drawn into the oxygenating process that keeps a body alive. But the release of air on the exhalation seems like the reverse, since it serves to expel gases – principally carbon dioxide – which in concentration would be lethal. If your body absorbs as you breathe in, it exudes as you breathe out. Embodiment, then, catches only half the picture, minus its complement of vaporisation. Likewise with the body itself, we have only half of the living being: the fleshy part. The other, gaseous part is normally invisible, though under certain conditions it can be seen, for example in a room full of smokers, in which everyone is wreathed in a haze, or when it is very cold, causing the warm humid air issuing from the lungs to condense into a little cloud. As vaporisation appears to be the complement of embodiment, so the cloud, whether of tobacco smoke or condensed moisture, seems to complement the body comprised of flesh and blood. And while in the Western world, there is a long tradition of prioritising body over breath, for others – including indigenous people of lowland South America – this priority is reversed. For them, the vital complement of the living being wafts in smoke and resonates in song, whereas the bodily complement is but an ephemeral, almost ghostly appearance, the mere ‘tunic’ of things (Santos-Granero, 2006; Rahman and Brabec de Mori, 2020).

Although a comparison of Western and Amazonian ontologies might appear to lend support to the thesis of complementarity, pitching Westerners into a world of bodies and Amerindians into a world of vapours – both demi-worlds which, if only they could be combined, would make a perfect whole – we shall find, to the contrary, that with a focus on breath and breathing the division between the two halves is ultimately unsustainable. Our more immediate problem, however, is to get the measure of the topic at hand. What is a breath anyway? And what does it mean to breathe? These questions are not easily answered. Searching through the articles collected here, I came across a call to incorporate breath into theory, along with wind, as ‘a non-human agentic entity’ (Allen, 2020). Could this provide a clue? A formula so condensed needed some unpacking. But as soon as I began to do so, I found myself doubting its terms. Is breath really an entity? Is it endowed with agency? Is it even non-human? The more I thought about it, the more convinced I became that the answers to all three questions is ‘no’.

To start with the entity question: for something to be an entity, at least to my ear, it has to have a certain solidity and fixity about it. You can point to it and say it is there. You can determine its limits: where it ends, and where other things begin. It is a unit, complete in itself. Alongside other entities, it can be counted. Fixity, solidity, boundedness and completion, however, are all inimical to life. Perhaps this is why we tend to think of entities as inanimate. This, after all, is how they present themselves to the intellect, as objects of analysis. ‘The human intellect’, as Henri Bergson wrote over a century ago, ‘feels at home among inanimate objects, more especially among solids, where our action finds its fulcrum and our industry its tools’ (Bergson, 1911: ix). Later commentators would go on to substitute ‘male’ for ‘human’, turning Bergson into a proto-feminist in his call for a vitalism that enters into the fluxes of life, as opposed to an intellectualism that looks back on their residual products. I don’t myself find this gendering, or the essentialisation of masculine and feminine attributes on which it rests, particularly helpful. But the contrast between the connective logic of solids and the generative dynamics of flux, so often confused under the catch-all of ‘assemblage’, is critical. Breath manifests in the latter mode. It is not fixed but fluid, not solid but gaseous, not bounded but diffuse, not complete but ever arising. And just as with the waves of the sea, breaths

don't succeed one another like beads on a string. You can count them, if you will, but they don't add up. Their succession is the rhythm of time passing.

Breath, of course, is active. But to turn to our second question: Is it agentic? To my mind, the same logic, which converts breath from the form of a movement into an entity that moves, also converts that movement into an effect set in train by a cause – namely a power of agency invested in the entity itself. It is this logic that leads us to suppose that the song is an effect of the breath of the singer, modulated by her voice, or that the melody of the flute is an effect of the breath of the flautist, modulated by the instrument. Yet in truth, neither song nor melody is an effect of breath; *it is rather breath itself*, rendered audible by vibrations induced in the vocal cords in one case and in the instrument in the other. For there can be no breath without breathing, without the alternating inflow and outflow of air that constitutes its generative movement. You can no more catch your breath in a bubble than you can trap the wind in a jar. In the jar, there is air but no wind; in the bubble, air but no breath. In short, breath can be held, if only for a short while, but it cannot be contained. Arguably, air forced into a confined space under pressure is possessed of a certain agency, in its capacity to explode, as in the operation of a mechanical piston. That the containment of air is the very opposite of holding one's breath, however, can be seen from comparing the inflation of a balloon with the procedure of mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. In both cases, you blow into another body with unaccustomed force, but while the former aims to store up its explosive potential, the purpose of the latter is to stimulate an equal and opposite reaction in the patient. Indeed the act of tying the neck, which seals the balloon and secures its content, would – transposed to the human case – be tantamount to strangulation. The difference is a matter of life and death. Breath is not agentic; it is animate.

Is breath, then, non-human? For sure, breathing is not peculiar to humans. All organisms respire, albeit in a great variety of ways: it is a condition of life. But if there can be no breath without breathing, then it surely stands to reason that breath is human to the extent that the one who is breathing is human too. How, then, can I, as a human, breathe non-human breath, without relinquishing my own humanness? Breathing, of course, is not the only way in which a body takes in and gives out to its surroundings. This happens too when we eat

and drink, defecate and urinate, and in sexual intercourse. The latter, normally, is with another human. And it is from another human that its lively outcome, the newborn baby, sucking at its mother's breast, takes in a fluid that delivers virtually all the materials it needs, barring the air it breathes, for bodily growth. Surely no substance can be more imbued with humanness than breast milk! But as the infant is weaned and moves on to solid foods, it continues to be fed within an environment of nurturance, love and care. The foods may be of animal or vegetable origin, but feeding and being fed is still a human relation. Why, then, should it be any different when it comes to breathing? No human, as Peter Sloterdijk has observed, exists at the centre of their own circle; they are always with another, as one pole in a bipolar ellipse. The one who breathes is also breathed upon: the two, 'bonded by an intimate complicity', are ontological twins (Sloterdijk, 2011: 44). Or in short, in the sharing of breath lies the very essence of human conviviality. How, then, in the face of all this, could anyone still argue that breath is non-human?

I believe the argument rests on an assumption so deep-seated in our own traditions of thought that we are most often unaware of it. This is the idea that the body is a vessel. What is distinctive about a vessel is that you can pour into it, and pour from it, content that is alien to its nature and substance. For the vessel to fulfil its proper function, of containment and discharge, the materials poured in should not react in any way with the material of which it is made. Consider, for example, a water-jug made of clay. Should the clay absorb the water, due perhaps to inadequate firing or glaze, it would soon buckle and collapse. So likewise with the body, were it to function as a vessel its inner tissues would have to remain unreactive to what it receives from the outside – to content that is other to it. In as much as the vessel is human, its content must, then, be other than human. Yet everything about the living, breathing body speaks to the contrary. A body that received and gave out, while taking nothing into its own substance and process, could not remain alive. A living body, however, is not a vessel at all. It is rather a complex topological configuration admitting to the continual interchange of materials across its intricately folded surfaces. And while the movement of breath, as we have already seen, can be momentarily put on hold, its substance cannot be contained.

What then of buildings? Do they breathe like bodies? While the indoor environment does indeed provide a breathing space for its

inhabitants, with its own particular characteristics, this space does not really work like a lung (Garnett, 2020). To be sure, air circulates inside a building, as it does in a body. And in this circulation, its composition is altered, not least thanks to the breathing of its inhabitants, and to their everyday activities of cooking, washing, heating and refrigeration. By opening doors and windows, you can let fresh air in and let stale air out, though both draughts carry their load of pollutants, respectively exogenous and endogenous. You could even use extractor fans and air conditioning units to augment the flow. There is a world of difference, however, between the operation of a fan that moves air across a threshold between the inside and outside of a structure whose surfaces are otherwise fixed and the breathing of a body – more comparable, perhaps, to a bellows or a bagpipe – where the movement of air is brought about by the heave of the surfaces themselves. The fan can be on or off, doors and windows open or closed. But for a folded configuration like the body, this binary, on–off or open–closed choice is not available. It can never be completely open or completely closed. It is rather launched on a perpetual and alternating movement of opening and closing, dilatation and contraction. And that is what it means to breathe.

Breathing in and breathing out, however, are far from the simple reverse of one another. They are very different operations. Under normal conditions, with a body that is calm and in good health, inhalation gathers and prepares, while exhalation carries the forward propulsion of life, its ‘doing’. This is rather like the breaststroke in swimming, where the backward sweep of the arms readies the body for the forward thrust (Ingold, 2015: 87). It goes against the grain to put this into reverse: that is to use the inhalation for doing and the exhalation for preparation. Examples of such ‘reverse breathing’ include the sniff, designed to draw enough air to test its smell, the pant, when intense exercise or stress heightens the body’s demand for oxygen, and the gasp, where the airways are constricted by bronchial spasm. With the sniff, pant and gasp, it is the following outbreath that prepares the body for its next act. People with chronic medical conditions that make breathing difficult have to face this reversal all the time, and many suffer social isolation as a result (MacNaughton, 2020). This is largely because it is the outbreath that carries the voice. In fluent speech, as also in song, the outbreath tends to be prolonged, and the inbreath foreshortened, so as to reduce pauses to a minimum

and not to interrupt the flow. Singers and flautists are trained to control their breath, enabling them to perform long melodic lines, apparently without a break. Of course the breaks are there, but they are few and far between, and a trained performer knows how to conceal them. For those with breathing difficulties, by contrast, the inbreath is prolonged relative to the outbreath, leading to interrupted speech that can seem jerky and even incoherent. And where the fluency of speech is taken as an indicator of the cognitive prowess of the speaker, it is but a short step to the inference that those who are short of breath are deficient in mind as well.

There is nothing universal, however, about the denigration of the pause and efforts to conceal the inbreath that are so characteristic of modern Western societies. They are a historical consequence of the modelling of speech, through education and training, on the printed word. In print, words and sentences are laid out as segments, chained end to end to form an articulated sequence. When we say of proper speech that it is – or should be – ‘articulate’, we assume that it should be concatenated in the same way. In articulate speech, the pause is an unproductive gap that should ideally be closed. It is considered unproductive because all the thinking, which the words are meant to convey, is assumed to have already been done by a cognitive machine that sits atop the apparatus of speech, and delivers its outputs for execution. This assumption is shared even by cognitive theorists who would extend the mind beyond the compass of the brain to include the body in which it is housed, and the world in which both brain and body subsist (Clark and Chalmers, 1998). The extended mind, in the purview of these theorists, is an intellectual machine with the logical connectivity of solids, undisturbed by the turbulence of wind and breath that aerates its joints. Here again, it is the machine – now including somatic and extra-somatic components – that does the thinking, leaving the voice, on the outbreath, to manage the speaking, and the inbreath with nothing to do but reload with air.

Yet for many people around the world – indeed perhaps for all of us, in our own experience – thinking cannot thus be cut off from the life-sustaining process of respiration. Rather, thought and speech are felt to be inseparable, as intimately involved as inbreath and outbreath. The pause, on the inbreath, is itself a pause for thought, where to think is to feel, to pay attention to things, to gather the forces and

energies of one's surroundings, to recollect and prepare. It is, quite literally, to draw inspiration – to breathe in as one is breathed upon (Ingold, 2015: 139). To speak without pause, then, is a sign not of cognitive mastery but of thoughtlessness. It is a sign, too, of the modernist valorisation of the self over the soul. For where we identify the self with a certain capacity for reflective awareness and cognition, albeit situated within a body and a world, the soul is formed as a vortex in the flow of life. It is not on the inside rather than the outside of being but exists, like breath itself, in the churn of taking in and going out. Its form is the envelope of this movement. Winding up on the inbreath, and unwinding on the outbreath, the soul as vortex is a place not of rest but of tumult, adrift on the current of air that it temporarily pulls aside, into the 'whirl of organism' (Cavell, 1969: 52), prior to its re-release. To live, and to breathe, is not to run with the current but to deviate from it, to hold out against the flow. 'I am myself a deviation', wrote Michel Serres, 'and my soul declines, my global body is open, adrift . . . Who am I? A vortex' (Serres, 2000: 37).

In short, whereas the self may be embodied, it is the soul that breathes. Is it, then, because breath is so much a part of our thinking and doing – because it is consubstantial with the life of the soul – that we are so hard put to speak of it? How, after all, can you talk about breathing if you are breathing as you talk? It is like asking a swimmer to analyse the ocean – not an easy thing to do when your first priority is to stay afloat. While it may be difficult for analysts to speak of breath, however, they seem to have no problem in speaking of the body, at often tedious length. The body, it seems, is *all too easy* to talk about. Yet is the body, too, not along with us in everything we do? Why can we so readily expound on one but not the other? Perhaps we should be grateful that breath – a word whose very pronunciation evokes the sound and gesture of exhalation – has not gone the way of the body, that it retains a kind of poetic resonance that the body, in its solidification as an object of the self's regard, has lost. With breath, the muscular movement of breathing, in the heave of the lungs, merges with thinking, with the voice, with speech and song. All are together on the same plane of being, in the torments and the ecstasies of the soul (Gatt, 2020).

Take breath away, however, and words and muscles part company, appearing in separate registers of verbal cognition and embodied

practice. Song decomposes into language and gesture; the animate soul splits into self and body. That breath and body have fared so differently as topics of scholarship tells us much about the lingering effects of old habits of thought which, still elevating the mind over its body, lead us also to raise words to the pinnacle of self-consciousness while allowing bodily practice to sink to the silent depths of unconscious automatism. If we find it hard to speak of breath, it is because it challenges this rupture between verbalisation and embodiment. By all means, then, let us begin with the ‘stuff itself’, as Mark Jackson and Maria Fannin advise in their call for elemental aerographies (Jackson and Fannin, 2011: 438), but let it not be stultified by terms of art that snuff it out, such as cognition, articulation and even embodiment. It is greatly to be hoped that the focus on breath and breathing, exemplified in this special issue, will help to save the soul from its suffocation at the heavy hands of social theory.

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