

# Commentary on “Some historical dimensions of the ‘dialogical body’: From Bakhtin’s dialogical grotesque body to the monological body of modernity” (Nora Ruck)

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This is a commentary on Ruck’s paper entitled “Some historical dimensions of the ‘dialogical body’: From Bakhtin’s dialogical grotesque body to the monological body of modernity.” While I agree with her main claim, that Dialogical Self Theory still retains aspects of Cartesian rationalism, I do not agree that this retention is due to the theory’s reliance on James. Rather, the rationalism that marks the physiognomic body finds its way into the theory by way of its reliance on Johnson’s notion of *image schemas*. This commentary is an (1) attempt to move forward Ruck’s claim by suggesting sounder critical ground and (2) situated it in an important discussion in socio-cultural theory in general.

Ruck’s (2009) paper is a timely one because the topic of embodiment is emerging as an important issue—whether it is in cognitive science, social constructionism, or the interface between the two (e.g. Cromby, 2004; Soffer, 2001; van Dijk, Kerkhofs, van Rooij & Haselager, 2008). In particular, this article has merit because it falls in line with a critique of a problem that underlies social constructionist roots in Dialogical Self Theory (DST; Hermans, Kempen & van Loon, 1992). Embodied phenomena such as commitment, authenticity, belief, and so on are often treated as topics about which we construct our knowledge in talk (e.g. Edwards, 1999). Critics state that, far from being capricious constructions that occur in a “free play of discourses” (Gergen, 1991, p. 247), such experiences are lived with a deep experiential weight that cannot be reduced to socially constructed knowledge-about experience (e.g. Baerveldt & Voestermanns, 2005; Soffer, 2001). This is not to say that such critics minimize the role of sociality. They address how recognizing that sociality is entwined with embodiment allows us to better address the plane of lived life: the body *we* are. As such, Ruck’s paper has substantial merit because conceptualizing the *dialogical body* falls in line with this critique that continues the move away from self-contained individualism that emphasizes the social constitution of bodily experience.

However, in its present form, Ruck’s article cannot fully realize its own merit. She argues that DST ultimately retains hallmarks of Cartesian rationalism that marks the physiognomic body. I agree that remnants of Cartesian rationalism still plaques DST but not on the basis that Ruck argues. It is the goal of this commentary to further the claim that Ruck advocates by moving it onto sounder critical ground.

## IN DEFENSE OF HERMANS AND DST

The author traces the evolution of the physiognomic body and demonstrates that it finds its way into William James, whose psychology rests upon a single Cartesian rational *I* (self-as-knower). Ruck claims that James' typology of the *I* that rationally knows and the *Me*'s that are known is adopted by Hermans in early incarnations of DST (note that Hermans' adoption of James has already been criticized in Barressi, 2002). However, DST does not adopt James' psychology in the manner that Ruck claims. In the introduction of *The Dialogical Self*, Hermans and Kempen (1993) argue that they synthesize Bakhtin's notion of the polyphonic novel and James' notion of self to create something new. An innovation to which the authors claim throughout their book is that they remove themselves from the monologism inherent in James' *I*. They state that they move away from the singular *I* in James and advocate multiple I-positions such that each *Me* has an I-position. Consequently, they explicitly deny the singular *I* that Ruck's argument depends upon.

## CARTESTIAN RATIONALISM IN DST

The physiognomic body is a body that we have knowledge-of and Ruck argues that this knowledge is a hallmark of Cartesian rationalism. If rationalism can be shown to be part of DST, then we can retain the claim that the DST still involves physiognomic characteristics to some degree. What remains in this commentary is to show that the rationalist aspect of the physiognomic body is taken up in DST on the basis of its reliance on Johnson's (1987) "*image schemas*."

Hermans and Kempen (1993) rely heavily on Johnson (1987) and his notion of image schemas. They describe how an image schema is drawn from our embodied activity in the world. That is, an "image schema functions as a frame [metaphor] for orienting ourselves in varying situations on the basis of the form of our body" (Hermans & Kempen, 1993, p. 9). Physical bodies are treated as the center of experience and we make conceptual sense of the world in terms of our bodies. This conceptual sense comes about by way of metaphorically transferring one conceptual understanding to another: "...metaphor is an implicit comparison between two unlike entities. The quality of one entity is transferred to the other entity" (Hermans & Kempen, 1993, p. 9). For example, people can conceptualize life in terms of spatial metaphors like feeling *down*, going *through* a difficult time, or waking *up* to a surprising fact.

Hermans and Kempen (1993) appropriate the notion of image schemas to explain how the mind comes to be populated with multiple *personae* ("voices"). People are treated as being able to *imaginatively* recreate social relationships in an *imaginal landscape* by way of image schemas (Hermans et al., 1992; Hermans & Kempen, 1993). That is, they focus on how an image schema is formed on the basis of how people make sense of interpersonal interactions. The image schema enables people to form abstract conceptualizations of social relationships—so abstract that *personae* can be imagined on the basis of image schemas. Social relations are re-mapped intra-psychically so that they become intra-psychic relations.

Hermans and Kempen (1993) turn to a discussion of narrative in an effort to integrate the narrative construction of the self with the notion of image schemas. They argue that *personae* can be incorporated into the imaginal landscape of the psyche to act like independent agents in their basis. Such *personae* engage in 'intersubjective exchange' with each other and the outside world to jointly construct a self narrative. Hence, the narrative conception of a single author orchestrating life does not fit because there are many authors in DST. DST often treats Bakhtin (1984) as bringing together a narrative approach with the multi-voiced imaginal landscape because of his claims that Dostoevsky was an author among many in the polyphonic novel. Bakhtin's discussion of Dostoevsky and the polyphonic novel is taken to be an illustration of how social relations are re-mapped to shape intra-psychic relations that result in constructed self-narratives (for a discussion on why this is a misinterpretation of Bakhtin see Cresswell & Baerveldt, submitted).

The reliance upon image schemas has the markings of Cartesian rationalism that Ruck is looking for because it involves the construction of conceptual knowledge. Johnson's notion of image schemas is based upon uncovering how we gain our understanding of the world and this understanding includes the knowledge we have of our bodies. Via image schemas, our bodies become objects of knowledge. Furthermore, narratives are the means by which we gain knowledge of ourselves in DST. Included in these narratives are those told about our own bodies and narratives are the means by which we come to *know about* the body we have. The self-narratives that are created by the dialogue among multiple I-positions are effectively constructions of the rationalistic knowledge that marks the physiognomic body, even if they are not monologic. In other words, DST does not escape socially constructed knowledge-of the body and its emphasis on narrative enhances this entrapment. While escaping monologism, DST does not escape the rationalism of the physiognomic body.

## CONCLUSION

As noted by Ruck, the dialogical body ('body we are') is not a body that is rationally conceived because it is a body that is lived. In his early work, Bakhtin (1990; 1993) was quite clear that he was concerned with approaching life as it is lived experientially in opposition to the abstracted rational knowledge-of life that is emphasized in the likes of DST and other social constructionists (Cresswell & Baerveldt, 2006, in press, submitted). Moreover, Bakhtin's notion of the dialogical body that Ruck draws upon is one where the body is conceived as socially constituted. We have outlined how Bakhtin treated the act of Being as living socially cultivated embodied styles of communities (Cresswell & Baerveldt, 2006, in press, submitted). People are socialized in terms of how to talk, think, and act in the manner of a community but such socialization involves 'inner' experience as well. Even our own 'inner' emotionality is socially constituted in Bakhtin's view and our 'personal' proprioceptive experience also belongs to the plane of the 'body we are.' His view was that we never escape social participation in all our action because all action is an expression of a community. The skin, which is described by Ruck, would not even be considered a site of mediation as she intimates. Rather, Bakhtin conceived of it as the place where the I-other exist in community. The dialogic body is thereby a conception of embodiment that both makes room for sociality in psychology and steps back from the rationalism inherent in the idea of constructing knowledge about life.

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