

Trauma and Literature
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Lecture - 24
Malabou's The Ontology of the Accident - Part 5

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The identity formed by brain pathologies can help us offer a response and retrospectively provide Freud with the example or type he was either missing or unwilling to see, turning his back on it as violently as he rejected his profession as a neurologist: the formation of a survivor's identity, a never before seen existential and vital configuration. A brain damaged identity which, even as an absence from the self, is nonetheless well and truly a psyche.

Advances in neurobiological research point to the need to think through a new relation of the brain—and hence also the psyche—to destruction, negativity, loss, and death.

Interestingly, some American scientists are turning to continental philosophy to develop this new relation between biology and thanatology. Antonio Damasio, for instance, recognizes a clear affinity between his work and Spinoza's philosophy. He sees Spinoza as a "proto-neurobiologist," the first philosopher to recognize the

This is an NPTEL course entitled "Trauma and Literature" on Catherine Malabou's book, "The Ontology of the Accident". We had a sort of a theoretical summary of what we have covered so far in terms of looking at the philosophical framework that Malabou is offering.

Especially in the way she is bringing neurology and continental philosophy in terms of understanding a new kind of selfhood, an alternative model of selfhood, which is informed by interruption, informed by trauma, informed by absence and informed by silence. It is to question how can you give an ontology to that and offer an ontological framework to that.

The moment we offer an ontological framework or the moment we think of conceptualizing an ontological framework, we need to also extend that into a representational framework. It is to question how one represents an accident, trauma, and absence of silence.

These are very complex philosophical questions that Malabou is a very complex philosopher because she is bringing in hardcore medical science, hardcore neurology, and combining that with interesting continental philosophy. For instance, in the session today, we will see how she draws on the works of the neuroscientist Antonio Damasio. And in the process she brings in Spinoza as well.

We saw how she uses Kafka, and Deleuze's reading of Kafka's "Metamorphosis" in terms of understanding how the accident or the accidental self, or the post-accident self that is the temporal quality as well, the post-accident self, how that emerges in the representational matrix.

It is how representation becomes interesting in "Metamorphosis" because the human subject becomes an organism, becomes an insect. But at the same time, how she argues that Kafka's reading or Kafka's writing or representation is an inadequate representation in a sense that it does not completely move away from the humanist model, that the humanist voice is retained to a certain extent.

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She is trying to interestingly connect Freud or the missing link in Freud, the absent research in Freud. She has not informed or supplemented, or addressed that using contemporary research in neuroscience. We see Damasio is coming in.

She says one very vital absence in Freud scholarship, is the lack of engagement or the refusal or the rejection of an engagement of the survivor's identity. Several questions rises like what happens post-trauma, what is the subject, is there any subject at all after trauma, and if there is a subject, what kind of subjectivity does that conform to.

An ontological framework or existential framework or epistemological framework or representational framework the post-accident subject have is questioned. It is something which Freud study does not offer, Freud's psychoanalysis does not offer at all. It is something he rejected. Now Malabou is saying that we can take a cue from current neuroscience and go back to Freud and maybe we can have a more consolidated a more inclusive model of psychoanalysis.

It is to know what is abstinent. Any engagement with the survivor's identity, which is a kind of identity, which is never before seen existential and vital configuration. It is to know what happens after the subject is deterritorialized. There is a reterritorialization. It is to question whether there is any possibility of defining or addressing the subject. This is something which Freud does not have.

Freud talks about trauma and neurosis but not what happens after that. What happens to the subject after that is something which is missing in Freud, and that is something that she is trying to address in this book, what kind of identity would that be. A brain-damaged identity, which even as an absence from the self, is nonetheless well and truly a psyche.

It is a psyche. It may be a complete departure from the erstwhile self, a complete destruction or deconstruction from the erstwhile. But at the same time there is a psyche, there is a model, there is the structure of a psyche, which is available over there. That is something which we need to address. This connects to the title of the book, "The Ontology of the Accident".

We need to give accident an ontological framework, accident deserves an ontology. It is to define an accident, a post-accident identity to a certain extent and advances in neurobiological research point to the need to think through a new relation of the brain. Hence also the psyche to destruction, negativity, loss and death.

Negativity, absence, destruction, and again, this connects Malabou's idea of destructive plasticity. These need to be conceptualized. These need to be addressed medically as well as philosophically. Malabou is offering us a medical, philosophical conferences. Interestingly, some American scientists are turning to continental philosophy to develop this new relation between biology and thanatology.

Thanatology is death. The study of death is what happens with destruction and death, thanatology. This idea of looking at biology, not just as a mechanism to study life, but also the destruction of life. A new kind of biology is emerging, a new kind of neurobiology is emerging, that looks at cellular suicide, at destructive plasticity, at thanatology, and the study of death.

It is to see how the destruction appears in this new biological research, in this neurobiological research. She brings in Antonio Damasio as a good case in point. Antonio Damasio, for instance, recognizes a clear affinity between his work and Spinoza's philosophy. Damasio had written lots of books in Spinoza.

There is a book called "Looking for Spinoza". There is also a book called "Descartes' Error" where Damasio is looking at Descartes and calling out the error and Descartes' idea of the self and the brain and the mind. And instead, he is positing a more embodied model of cognition where the body informs the mind, body informs the self. There is all forms of consciousness as embodied consciousness.

There is a departure from Descartes, where there is a difference between the thinking self and the feeling self. Therefore, the self is given the primacy of privilege in Descartes' philosophy. Whereas the Damasio's work, Damasio is a scientist. He is saying that model of cognition is faulty.

Hence the name of the book is "Descartes' Error", is an error and an erroneous model. He instead resurrects to a certain extent Spinoza, Baruch Spinoza, the Dutch philosopher, the Dutch continental philosopher, who was writing around the same time as Descartes was, roughly the same time.

But he had offered something called something very similar to what we now call embodied distributive cognition where the whole body becomes part of the same system of cognition. It is not just a top-down model. It is a more distributed model. Damasio's work on Spinoza is interesting, and that also offers a very fine example of the confluence between medical science and continental philosophy, which is what Malabou is offering as well.

He recognizes, Damasio recognizes a clear affinity between his work and Spinoza's philosophy. He sees Spinoza as a proto-neurobiologist. Damasio defines Spinoza as a proto-neurobiologist, a prototype of the neurobiologist, working in a philosophical tradition. The philosophy of Spinoza is interesting.

It is something that is informing the biology, informing the current models of neurobiology that offer a different model of cognition altogether.

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ontological, or essential, importance of the nervous system.

Damasio argues that Spinoza was also the first in the metaphysical tradition to give the concept of form a new meaning as the indissoluble identity of body and spirit. Indeed, in Part III of his *Ethics* Spinoza claims, "the first thing that constitutes the essence of the mind is simply the idea of a body that actually exists."¹⁹ Form is thus the name given to the actual unity of body and spirit, but also, and even more deeply, to the unity of the subject's ontological constitution and biological structure.

Spinoza's achievement is not only to have accorded a fundamental role to the body but also to have inscribed biological phenomena, notably the emotions, within being itself, in other words, precisely within the fundamental ontological given that is the *conatus*, that is, the tendency of all living things to preserve their being. Damasio writes:

Spinoza appears as the first philosopher to recognize the ontological or essential importance of the nervous systems. The choice of metaphors, the choice of the vocabulary used by Malabou, the ontological idea of the nervous system. We have the medical idea of the nervous system but also the ontological idea, the philosophical idea of the nervous system as a distributive framework.

Rather than a top-down framework, a distributive framework. This distributed inactive quality of cognition is something that Spinoza offers. Today, he is seen as some kind of a prototype or a proto-neurobiologist in certain extent, to a certain extent, who offered a different model of cognition compared to Descartes.

It is scientifically more valid today. “Damasio argues that Spinoza was also the first in the metaphysical tradition to give the concept of form a new meaning as the indissoluble identity of body and spirit. Indeed, in Part III of his *Ethics* Spinoza claims, the first thing that constitutes the essence of the mind is simply the idea of a body that exists.”

Spinoza offers a monism or rather a monistic model of cognition, where the mind and body inform each other instead of the dualism Descartes, where the mind and body are separate and disparate entities. He says in *Ethics*, the first awareness of the self is the awareness of the body, the awareness that houses the body, as an embodied cognition, by default, every cognition is embodied.

It is embedded through the body. It is embodied as well as embedded as well as enactive in quality. When it comes to something like language, it becomes extended as well. It is to extend one’s cognition through a performative play of language. Language becomes something like a connection between the embedded body and the external environment.

There is this loop-like quality about language, which is why language becomes the causality during you know neurological disorders, the ability to narrate goes away, the ability to frame linguistic sentences goes away. Language becomes, language becomes a hindrance, language becomes you know something which disappears during those instances and medical shock, or medical complexities.

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structure.” This union of body and spirit, this union of the body and the consciousness is something which is the, you know the ontological constitution and biological structure of the self.

We can see how this different entity, the body, the nervous system all come together to offer a more complex and more accommodating model of selfhood and cognition. Selfhood, as a complex philosophical term as something which constitutes language, cognition, body, etc.

Consciousness becomes an entanglement of different kinds of orders, the material order, and the biological order. Everything is just embodied and entangled together. There is a happy entanglement according to Spinoza. It is cutting across the dualism of Descartes to a large extent. It is deconstructing the dualism to a large extent.

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Conatus is the innate drive of the body to preserve itself or self-preservation drive. We are all are hardwired to protect and preserve ourselves as a system, as a subject, as a body, as an entity. That drive, that appetite to preserve yourself is the conatus. Conatus according to the philosophy of Spinoza is the innate biological drive of the body to preserve itself and protect itself.

Now in that structure of conatus emotions play a very important role. We can see how there is something which is missing in Descartes’ philosophy, because in the Cartesian model, thoughts or rationality become more important than the body or emotion. There is a sense of hierarchy given to the mind, the consciousness the fine model and as against which the body is seen as more appetitive, as more beastly, as more fleshy.

It is the problem that is not seen as the right kind of cognition. The more reliable cognition is the consciousness-centric model of cognition, which is just completely located in the mind in Spinoza's philosophy in Descartes' philosophy, sorry. But when it comes to Spinoza, we find that he is given a lot of primacy to emotions, to an embodiment, to sentiment, to mood, to the body.

These become very important. We know through scientific research today, scientific studies today, that emotions play a very important role in cognition. In other words, if one's ability to emote goes away, one's ability to recognize and cognize and connect to recognizable reality disappears as well. Damasio's work has a lot to do with this. He is one of the finest neuroscientists in the world today, who has looked at the connection between cognition and emotion. If one's emotive ability disappears, so does one's cognitive ability to a large extent. We have seen a very complex and graphic literary example of that in "Mrs. Dalloway".

When Septimus has a cognitive crisis, he also cannot feel and he keeps saying that he cannot feel and there is nothing that connects to him at the level of feelings. His ability to emote disappears, his ability to connect through feelings disappears. That compounds the cognitive crisis. The emotional crisis and the cognitive crisis in "Mrs. Dalloway" are connected in a very organic way.

The connection is scientifically valid. Spinoza was one of the first philosophers working in that tradition of cognition, metaphysics, etc., who offer this combination of cognition and emotion, and that is something which we see all the time in his philosophy. And conatus, the drive of the body, the drive of the self to preserve itself is innately emotional in quality.

Conatus is an emotional quality. When the emotional quality goes away, the emotional appetite goes away, the drive of the self to preserve itself also disappears as well. We see this in "Mrs. Dalloway" when Septimus begins to get more and more disconnected. What that also does is that emotional disconnection also begins to disintegrate him as a self.

In the end, he commits suicide, he kills himself. He essentially shuts down the system. The conatus goes away as well entirely. It is a very complex and loaded term, conatus. There are different ways one can read it. What is evident here is how Spinoza is offering people like Damasio and also Malabou, a very philosophical framework through which cognition can be studied.

The reason why this is interesting to someone like Malabou is because Malabou talks about the destruction of cognition, the destruction of emotions. It is to question what happens if emotions are destroyed, what happens to the ability to emote disappears entirely through an accident or trauma, injury, or whatever the case may be and whether it will be of a cognitive crisis at a different neurobiological level altogether.

Malabou is trying to do here is trying to give a name to the cognitive crisis, trying to define that kind of crisis, where emotions disappear, where we have a different kind of self-emerging out of the erstwhile self.

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The importance of biological facts in the Spinoza system cannot be overemphasized. Seen through the light of modern biology, the system is conditioned by the presence of life, the presence of a natural tendency to preserve that life; the fact that the preservation of life depends on the equilibrium of life functions and consequently on life regulation; the fact that the status of life regulation is expressed in the form of affects—joy,

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preservation of life depends on equilibrium of life functions, and consequently on life regulation; the fact that the status of life regulation is expressed in the form of effects, joy, sorrow, and its modulated appetites, and the fact that appetites, emotions and the precariousness of life condition can be known and appreciated by the human individual due to the construction of self, consciousness and knowledge-based reason”.

Ontology of the Accident

sorrow—and its modulated appetites; and the fact that appetites, emotions, and the precariousness of the life condition can be known and appreciated by the human individual due to the construction of self, consciousness, and knowledge-based reason.²⁰

It is impossible to comprehend the tendency of being to conserve itself without acknowledging the role of the affects in modulating the intensity of the *conatus*. Indeed, just like the appetite, the tendency to persevere is qualitatively and quantitatively variable, more or less open, more or less intense. The hunger to live is not always equal to itself: it changes, increasing or decreasing according to affects, depending on how one feels. For Spinoza, the affects manifest a range in which joy and sorrow are two opposite poles. Joy increases the power to act, increases the intensity of the *conatus*, widens its scope.

It is quite clear how interestingly and beautifully, even a scientist like Damasio is looking at affect.

We can see and this is the new kind of research was emerging today, connected to the kind we are doing now. Memory studies, affect studies, which look at these qualities of emotions and memory and remembering through effective framework, as well as through a scientific framework.

Because more and more scientists like Antonio Damasio, Eric Kandel, Joseph LeDoux, these are people who are looking at affect very seriously today. Emotions are taken very seriously today. Mood, emotion, sentiments, you know joy, sorrow, everything. They are treated very seriously in scientific research. And for someone like Damasio, resurrecting Spinoza becomes almost like a project.

Spinoza offered as one of the earliest philosophical models in the Western tradition, talking about affects, talking about emotions, talking about emotions as being connected to cognition, and the self-drive to preserve itself. The entire construction of selfhood, the entire construction of identity, the extended enactive quality of identity and selfhood are reliant to a certain extent on emotions and affect and joy and sorrow, and all the rest of it.

This idea of the precarious life, the complexity of life, the precariousness of life is conditioned by affect is something which we know through scientific research, through neuroscientific research, you know famously through the works of Antonio Damasio. Malabou is bringing in together that kind of scientific research on effect and emotion, and you know positioning that apropos of the philosophical framework around effect and emotions. She is offering a very rich and original model of looking at cognition in the process.

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“The human body can be affected in many ways by which its power of acting is increased or diminished.”²¹ This power coincides precisely with “the endeavor [*conatus*] by which each thing strives to persevere in its being.”²² This “endeavor” is adjustable; it can be tuned like an instrument; joy and sorrow play it like a strange moving keyboard, making it resonate or muffling its

“It is impossible to comprehend the tendency of being to conserve itself without acknowledging the role of the effects in modulating the intensity of the *conatus*.” Affects is also an act of regulation. Affects also regulate affects. Affects have the quality of extension, the quality of emergence, but also the quality of regulation.

The auto-regulatory quality of affects is important over here. We can see how that gets interrupted in “Mrs. Dalloway” as well. Septimus is not able to regulate himself anymore. He cannot control his emotions again. His emotions have disappeared. Either they come back in a flux and overwhelm him or they disappear entirely. This auto-regulatory quality of affects is completely gone from Septimus’ system.

It is an emotional problem. But the doctors around that time around him at that time, they failed to see it because they are looking at the body as some kind of a problem, rather than looking at the mind and body separately. It is that disparity, that distinction, that separation between the mind and body is a very Cartesian legacy the doctors are embodying in the First World War.

That becomes the problem. That informs the accounts for the failure on their part to address and heal Septimus. We are looking at a very fine literary example of this kind of philosophical and medical complexities. Indeed, just like the appetite, the tendency to preserve is qualitatively and quantitatively variable, more or less open, and more or less intense.

The hunger to live is not always equal to itself. It changes increasingly, increasing or decreasing according to affects, depending on how one feels. For Spinoza, the affects manifest a range in which joy and sorrow are two opposite poles. Joy increases the power to act, increases the ability, the intensity of the conatus, and widens its scope. Sorrow, on the other hand, dampens, diminishes and restricts this power.

We have an interesting, bidirectional way of looking at effects. It is to see immediately how innovative Spinoza philosophy was and how relevant it is to current affect studies. We find that one of the key qualities of affect is a kinetic quality, the movement, it is a kinetic act as seen in affect studies. Affect is a kinetic activity, it moves all the time.

Using the word ‘move’ in a pluralistic sense; it moves the self as well as it moves inside. We are moved by affect. You are moved by sorrow, you are moved by

happiness, and moved by joy. At the same time, there is a mobility quotient as well about affect, and that is something which Spinoza had philosophized many centuries ago.

It is the reason why he is such an important philosopher for us today and also for the neuroscientists. This auto-regulatory kinetic quality of affect is something which had been given a philosophical framework by Spinoza.

With sorrow, the conatus quotient diminishes or dips, the body's ability to preserve itself, the body's hunger or appetite to preserve itself, it diminishes or dwindles according to the fall, depending on the sorrow, the level of sorrow. The human body, and this is a quotation that Malabou is giving. "The human body can be affected in many ways, by which its power of acting is increased or diminished.

This power coincides precisely with the endeavor conatus by which each thing strives to preserve in its being. This endeavor is adjustable." There is an auto-regulatory quality about affect. Affect, the affective body must be able to regulate its own affective system, the affective movements.

It must be regulated to a certain extent, both of which do not happen in "Mrs. Dalloway" with Septimus' crisis and embodiment. This endeavor is adjustable. It can be tuned like an instrument. Joy and sorrow play it like a strange moving keyboard. The metaphors chosen by Malabou are very beautiful. It is like a keyboard through which we can produce different kinds of joys and sorrows.

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tone. Joy affirms. Sorrow diminishes. "Joy and sorrow are passions by which the power, i.e. the endeavor, of each thing to persevere in its being is increased or diminished, helped or hindered."²³

One cannot be without being affected. This founding observation opens a new path for neurobiology in so far as it takes into account the fundamental role of emotion in cerebral life, in other words, in the unity of the organism, the complex formed by body and spirit. Reason and cognition cannot develop or exercise their functions normally if they are not supported by affects. Reasoning without desiring is not reasoning. In order to think, to want, to know, things must have a consistency, a weight, a value, otherwise emotional indifference annuls the relief, erases differences in perspective, levels everything. When reasoning is deprived of its critical power, its ability to discriminate and make a difference that proceeds from emotion and affect, then, as Damasio says, it becomes cold-blooded reasoning, and no longer reasons: "selective reduction in emotion is at least as prejudicial for rationality as excessive emotion."²⁴

In emphasizing the consubstantiality of rationality

It should be regulatable, it should be moving right, making it resonate or muffling its tone. "Joy affirms, sorrow diminishes. Joy and sorrow are passions by which the power, that is, the endeavor of each thing to preserve in its being is increased or diminished, helped or hindered."

The reason why Malabou is spending so much time looking at emotions and cognition and the neuroscientific, neurobiological research on the connection between emotion and cognition is she is looking at disruptive plasticity. What happens to the self, when its ability to cognize, when its ability to emote disappears. It is know what happens to the post-emotional self.

It happens to the post-cognition self. Is there a cognitive system available to the post cognitive self. A post-emotional self does not have any emotions at all. It is to know whether they have an alternative model of emotions which we need to address and locate and perhaps define. One cannot be without being affected. One cannot be without being affected.

The very ontology of the being is an affective ontology, is an ontology built out of affect, built from affect, informed by affect. This ontological information, ontological investment is an affective investment. Affects inform the being. Every subject, every human being is a construct of affect. Is a product or is an epiphenomenon of affects.

This founding observation opens a new path for neurobiology in so far as it takes into account the fundamental role of emotion in cerebral lives. Cerebral life, consciousness, thinking, thought processes, rationality, all these are deeply emotional activities.

This is something which we know through neuroscientific research today that emotions and cognition, emotions or rationality are not ontological opposites, they are cognitive components of each other. They inform each other in very fundamental organic ways. This accommodation of emotions and rationally together is a very Spinozian kind of model.

That deconstructs or debunks the Cartesian binary between emotions and rationality, between mind and body. That binaristic, dualistic system is debunked over here in the philosophy of Spinoza, as well as through modern research in neuroscience. In other words, in the unity of the organism, the complex formed by body and spirit, reason and cognition cannot develop or exercise their functions normally, if they are not supported by affects.

The very ontology of the being the very ontology itself, is informed by affect, is a construct of affect. Reasoning without desiring is not reasoning. In order to think, to know, to want things must have a consistency, a weight or value. Otherwise emotional indifference annuls the relief, erases perspectives, erases differences in the perspective, and levels everything.

If there is no emotion, just everything just levels away. In other words, there is no value quotient in rationality. We do not know what to attach ourselves to, if we are not emotional. If there is no value quotient, we will attach ourselves equally at a leveled way to everything and that will be very faulty kind of cognition.

We can go back to “Mrs. Dalloway”, where Septimus is unable to attach himself to anything because there is nothing of value to him around him. Because his ability to

emote has gone away and because he cannot emote anymore, he cannot ascribe value to things anymore. That affects his being in a very fundamental, biological sense.

When reasoning is deprived of its critical power, emotion is seen as a critical power, the ability of the being to hierarchize to a certain extent, to know what is valuable and what is not valuable. This decision, this filtration happens through emotions. When the emotions go away, emotions go away, there is no filtration available, and everything becomes leveled and dulled and numbed to a certain extent.

We can go back to Kafka, and find that there is a post-emotion state, a post-emotion ontology of it by Kafka, where everything appears as a dull and you know numbed way, leveled way. When reasoning is deprived of its critical power, its ability to discriminate and make a difference that proceeds from emotion and affect, then as Damasio says, it becomes cold-blooded reasoning, and no longer reasons.

Selective reduction in emotion is at least as prejudicial for rationality as excessive emotion. Emotions must be selective, rationality must be selective in quality. Total rationality is a myth. Just like total memory is a myth. There must be forgetting embedded in memory. Forgetting is a cognitive component of remembering. In the same way rationality and emotions inform each other.

Every act of rationality is a selective act of rationality. When the selective quality goes away, it just becomes cold-blooded reasoning. It becomes devoid of empathy. It becomes devoid of imagination, it becomes devoid of emotion. There is no value given to rationality at all. We do not know what to rationalize, how to rationalize.

Our ability to rationalize begins to get compromised because of lack of emotions at a very quantitative and qualitative level. It is important for us is to see how Malabou is going back and connecting Freud and Spinoza and Damasio, and offering a very complex model of cognition, using medical science, using neurobiology, using continental philosophy, to offer a very rich and new framework of information.

The whole point is what happens to the subject, the emotional subject post-emotion, post-accident, and post-trauma. The models of cognition available to them, and that is something which this book will continue to address.