

A phenomenologist tries to read yoga –a case study and some lessons

The German philosopher Hermann Schmitz (1927–2021) is one of the most prolific and original phenomenological thinkers of his generation. He is perhaps best known for his work on the “felt body” (Leib), where he discovers and systematically describes several structural and dynamic traits of this phenomenological entity. These are, according to him, basically all-human (though, on a higher level, culturally formed) and so enable the cross-cultural understanding of concepts and texts concerning this sphere of experience. It is therefore not surprising –but certainly rather untypical for a classically trained 20th century European philosopher – that Schmitz also deals more than cursorily with yogic material. The proposed paper will be based on the pertinent passages in his book *Der Leib* (1st ed. Bonn 1965), where 13 of 600 pages are devoted to yoga. The hermeneutical situation will be analyzed in both directions. Firstly, Schmitz’ attempts to come to terms with the yogic evidence is treated as a case study of problems and limitations facing scholars who stem from a Western philosophical tradition and lack a background in South Asian studies, even if they are interested and open-minded. Secondly, the shortcomings of Schmitz’ interpretations will be taken as a reminder that scholars of yoga too should reflect on their own way of communicating their findings to an audience outside of their field. It is easy to stay in the “comfort zone” of yogic jargon, but nevertheless attempts to sometimes leave it should be made, and it will be argued that a phenomenological approach is in fact particularly promising in this regard.

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