

# Embodied Realism as Interpretive Framework for Spirituality, Discernment and Leadership



Jack Barentsen

**Abstract** There appear to be two ways of knowing, the one driven by scientific evidence, the other by practice and intuition. The concept of embodiment brings these two ways together. Embodiment is now widely studied, as in the disciplines of nursing (Benner), cultural psychology (Voestermans and Verheggen), and cognitive psychology (Lakoff and Johnson). These developments point to the philosophical perspective of “embodied realism,” as initially outlined by Merleau-Ponty and Dooyeweerd. Our human system of knowing is directed and limited by the way our bodies enable us to interface with the world we inhabit. It requires dialogue to transcend our individuality, without arriving at universals, as research on cognitive bias by Kahneman has demonstrated. The centrality of embodiment, then, implies that spirituality is not in opposition to material concerns, but rather that embodiment is foundational for spirituality, as evident in religious ritual practices as well as in the Christian confession of the Incarnation. Moreover, spiritual discernment takes shape, not as a disembodied practice of meditation to access the divine, but as embodied seeing, listening and feeling in a collective effort to understand God’s call in the middle of one’s rapidly changing world. Finally, leadership can be seen as the embodied performance of providing a safe holding environment amidst liminality in order to enable people to cope, to be transformed and to develop a new sense of personal and social identity.

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J. Barentsen (✉)

Department of Practical Theology, Evangelische Theologische Faculteit, Leuven, Belgium

Institute of Leadership and Social Ethics, Evangelische Theologische Faculteit, Leuven, Belgium

Faculty of Theology, North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa

e-mail: [jack.barentsen@etf.edu](mailto:jack.barentsen@etf.edu)

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## 1 Introduction

Evidence-based strategies seem to be the answer to everything, from evidence-based coaching, evidence-based nursing, evidence-based horsemanship, evidence-based psychotherapy, evidence-based investing and evidence-based vitamins.<sup>1</sup> A particular example of this trend was when my daughter explained that after changing her baby's diaper, she needed to take his temperature. If the temperature was below 36.5°C she should put on his cap; if it was above 37.5°C, he didn't need a cap and probably not even socks. This lasted only 2 weeks. Such a technical approach might provide the needed personal security; it was after all her first baby. It might also teach her to distrust her developing motherly instincts. Or perhaps she learned to discover her motherly instincts through this more technical approach rather than through networking with family and friends. Such a priority of "evidence-based baby care" probably spawned reactions in the opposite direction, namely "natural" baby care, natural pregnancies, hypno-birthing and a veritable "baby wrap consultant" to assist in carrying your baby more "naturally" against your body instead of in highly mechanized baby carriages.<sup>2</sup> Presumably, mothers are encouraged to trust nature's care processes, including their own intuitions about baby care, where "nature" becomes a rather romanticized opposite of "science."

This phenomenon juxtaposes two ways of knowledge, one through evidence-based approaches supported by scientific research, the other through more intuitive ways of knowing, sometimes labeled as "natural" or "spiritual." These might be viewed as complementary, as when my daughter would be helped to develop her motherly intuitions by first relying on evidence-based strategies, but they might also be conceived of as competitive or in opposition, proposing that the scientific way (like taking the temperature) is better than the intuitive or spiritual way (following motherly instincts), or vice versa.

The same duality can be recognized in the domain of spirituality and religion. Theological scholarship has always devoted considerable effort to historical and empirical research in a search for theological knowledge. Since the Enlightenment this search has become dominated by a strictly critical and a-religious approach to historical and empirical religious claims. For more liberal theologies, this often meant applying a hermeneutic of suspicion to any historical or empirical aspect before they would be counted as trustworthy evidence of theological knowledge (Gill et al. 2013, pp. 47–50). In my field of Practical Theology, this approach has sometimes led to purely descriptive approaches, bracketing any claims about transcendental realities (van der Ven 1998), or to forms of pastoral care that seemed to have more in common with psychotherapy than with spiritual guidance and "shepherding" (Graham 2002, chapter 3). Based on the understanding that

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<sup>1</sup>An internet search for "evidence-based" on amazon.com yielded these and other results for recent book titles with this phrase in the title.

<sup>2</sup>From <http://natural-baby-care.nl/>, carrying the baby in a wrap-around cloth or sling ("babydraagdoekconsulent").

transcendental phenomena cannot properly be the subject of scientific inquiry, these theological approaches have principally not counted transcendental claims and spiritual experiences as theological knowledge, leaving them to the realms of personal faith or spiritual practice.

More conservative approaches have taken a different approach to what counts as theological knowledge. This form of theological inquiry often operates from a mode of “faith seeking understanding,” adopting a hermeneutic of faith. Again, in my field of Practical Theology, this has led to renewed attention to a normative engagement with faith praxis as a primary avenue of scholarly research. Browning, De Ruijter and Osmer each advocate in their own way a normative assessment of practice as part of the practical theological enterprise (Browning 1991; Ruijter 2005; Osmer 2008). More recently, some practical theologians have argued that spiritual experiences or divine encounters are an explicit concern or even a center of practical theological reflection (Root 2014; Cartledge 2015; Iyadurai 2015). These conservative approaches have been more generous in counting a wider range of evidences as theological knowledge.

The debate between the liberal and conservative approaches has changed with the onset of postliberalism in a postmodern climate (Michener 2013, 2016). Nevertheless, these approaches all use certain scientific criteria for establishing what counts as evidence for religious phenomena and theological knowledge. They may differ on the criteria, but they seek to operate as an evidence-based scholarly discipline.

However, what counts as theological knowledge in the setting of a faith community or in Christian praxis may be quite different. Religious leaders, for instance, deliberately speak and lead in such a way, that people connect their lives with God or the divine. They aim to lead believers in experiencing divine presence and recognizing God’s work in and among them. In many churches, testimonies of miraculous religious experiences or dramatically transformed lives count as key evidences for God’s presence and transforming work. There is usually little concern over whether these testimonies can stand the test of scholarly scrutiny and interpretation, and in some quarters such scholarly scrutiny is even rejected as potentially harmful. On a more scholarly level, some discussions of missional leadership focus on discerning the Spirit’s work and joining God in serving the neighborhood (Roxburgh 2015; Vlaardingerbroek 2011). In these instances, knowledge of divine presence and activity is quite intuitive and experiential. There seems to be quite a gap between the logic and the evidences of formal, academic theology, and the evidences as experientially encountered in vital faith communities that are intuitively accepted as true.

This raises a question of discernment: “How does one discern God’s presence and the Spirit’s work?” It seems that there are two different sources for theological knowledge, the one scholarly, the other more intuitive. Should we privilege scientific theological knowledge, for instance in its historical-critical form, over the non-critical faith experience of believers? Or should we prioritize spiritual knowledge arising from faith praxis over against rigorous scholarly theological analysis? It does not seem sufficient to identify one area with objective fact-finding, concerned with “truth,” and the other area with subjective meaning making and identity construction. In fact, both areas are concerned with facts, and both areas contribute

a sense of meaning, belonging and identity for its practitioners. What is needed is a way to bring these two sources of knowledge together.

This chapter proposes that the concept of “embodiment” links these areas of knowledge to each other.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the chapter will argue that “embodiment” provides a fruitful tool for deepening our understanding of spirituality, and the practices of discernment and of leadership. The research question can now be phrased as: “How can the concept of ‘embodiment’ link scientific and spiritual streams of knowledge together, and what does this imply for spirituality, discernment and leadership?” This question will be answered, first by an exposition of the concept of embodiment as illustrated by its reception in various disciplines. Second, the paper will present a more philosophical case for “embodied realism” as a primary way to bridge the scholarly and experiential dimensions of our knowledge. Third, the paper will analyze the implications of embodied realism for our understanding of spirituality, discernment, and leadership.

## **2 The Turn Towards the Body: Embodiment**

The relationship between emotions and the body on the one hand, and knowledge and reasoning on the other, has been a subject of intense study over the last decades in disciplines such as sociology, cultural theory, and cognitive psychology. Gabriel Ignatow presents an overview of how disembodied theories of knowledge have been changed by what he calls “the bodily turn.” Newer theories consider the body as location of symbols and meaning, so that knowledge is foundationally embodied (Ignatow 2007). Taking a closer look at these developments, I focus on embodiment in nursing, cultural psychology and then cognitive psychology.

### ***2.1 Embodiment in Nursing***

The concept of “embodiment” is perhaps easiest understood by considering briefly the discipline of nursing, which is both a highly demanding medical and technical profession, as well as a professional practice that is strongly focused on embodied intuitions and interventions. By this, I mean more than simply that nurses care for hurting bodies. Dr. Patricia Benner, herself a nurse, academic and educator, is known in her field for her study of learning and skill acquisition throughout a nurse’s career (Benner 2000, 2001). Much of this learning is technical or medical skill, but a good nurse also learns to recognize early warning signs of conditions like shock or embolism and to detect slight variations in patient color and demeanor. This

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<sup>3</sup>See similar arguments in Bass et al. (2016), especially in Chapter 6 on the eclipsing of embodied knowledge and Chapter 7 on recovering it within practical theology.

represents a fuzzy recognition process with varying degrees of vagueness that develops throughout a nurse's career and becomes an embodied, non-rational process of discernment that is vital for patients in their time of need. Referring to philosopher Merleau-Ponty's work on embodiment, she writes that "the sensing, skilful body allows one to negotiate and flourish in the context of the inevitable human condition of ambiguity." She continues, with reference to Dreyfus' model of skills acquisition: "Through our embodied capacities of perception we are able to notice subtle, imprecise changes, recognize family resemblances and comparisons with past whole clinical situations" (Benner 2000, p. 7).

Benner argues that medical and experiential or embodied knowledge are complementary, both necessary for developing excellence in nursing (Benner 2000, pp. 6–10). These bodies of knowledge are developed differently, the first through the study of theories and books, the second through reflective practice which develops increasingly trustworthy levels of intuition. She compares these bodies of knowledge with the Aristotelian distinction between *techne* as knowledge about production and goal accomplishment, and *phronesis*, discernment rooted in embodied and experiential knowing that requires moral agency. Moreover, she critiques the overreliance on rationalization in some forms of nursing practice with a critique of Cartesian mind/body dualism that is continued in the Kantian reason/moral agency dualism. Instead, she sides with Merleau-Ponty who views the body as mediating our access to the world (instead of through "pure reason"). Dualistic approaches that posit a rational subject "I" over against an external objective world imply a commitment to the correspondence theory of truth; instead, Benner is committed to "a socially constituted, embodied view of agency" with "socially intelligible terms and intersubjective knowledge that reflect skilful comportment and knowing" (Benner 2000, pp. 11–12). Such intuitive practices develop and improve within a community of practice that upholds particular standards of excellence (Wenger et al. 2013).

Benner's arguments are intended to correct an overreliance on formal, medical knowledge by pointing out the importance of more tacit forms of knowledge that are learned through repeated experiences. As Merleau-Ponty points out, such experiences over time become like layers of sediment in the body, so that nurses are able to respond adequately and quickly to situations that are similar to previous experiences. In other words, repeated experience allows rational medical knowledge to become part of a bodily repertoire of nursing interventions that requires only minimal reflection in order to be effective. This is not so much to argue that *techne* is gradually overshadowed by *phronesis*, since unfamiliar cases are typically discussed in interdisciplinary consultations, so that doctors and nurses alike determine (and learn) how to act in this new situation. Rather, I would interpret Benner as arguing that both forms of knowledge are necessary and integrated in how nurses interact with patients and situations as *embodied practitioners*.

This brief consideration of nursing demonstrates how various forms of knowledge converge as embodied knowledge, how they develop through experience and within community, and how they lead to intuitive assessments as part of a discernment process for providing excellent care.

## ***2.2 Embodiment in Cultural Psychology***

Benner's views that nursing practice is nurtured and developed in a community of practice move us towards the concept of embodiment in the discipline of cultural psychology. Voestermans & Verheggen, educators at Dutch universities in this discipline, argue that culture should not be treated as the cause or explanation of behavior, as if "culture" explains that certain people behave in a particular fashion. "Culture does not do anything, only people act." That is, agency should not be attributed to culture but to people (Voestermans and Verheggen 2007, pp. 18–20; English translation 2013). They ask how it is possible that we intuitively recognize particular behaviors as belonging to our culture. To explain this, they speak about the body not primarily as a collection of complex biological and biochemical processes, but as the visible and practiced body that is the carrier of social norms and meanings. Through being raised in a particular family and within intrinsic social groups, our bodies are trained, literally "in-corporated," into the life of the group. These "intrinsic social groups" consist of social groups that are held together by a mixture of rules, conventions and arrangements that together constitute the culture of the group. Furthermore, they also demonstrate how our emotions, as the primary embodied responses that set us in motion, and our feelings as an imaginative or conceptual layer between these primary responses and our environment, are trained and shaped within our cultural group (Voestermans and Verheggen 2007, pp. 65–90). Culture then, is "created" by our bodies, trained and sensitized in particular social groups, where norms are internalized and embodied in a pre-reflexive process of socialization and inculturation. This creates a community of skilled practitioners, whose bodily interactions will be intuitively recognized as fitting (or not so fitting) participation in the group's culture. Such a group cannot be joined simply by taking the multicultural integration exam that governments typically require of immigrants; however, one can grow into it, gradually developing more of the sensitivities and patterns of behavior of the host culture (Voestermans and Verheggen 2007, p. 95).

Thus, while our considerations of nursing discussed the norms and practice, i.e. the culture of a particular community of nursing practice, cultural psychology broadens the scope from professional to larger cultural groupings that share certain cultural identity markers. In both cases, it is clear that the groups being discussed are socially constructed, and that our bodies are primary and visible carriers of this social construction. Our bodies are shaped and sensitized through daily practice in a particular culture, or, we should say, in particular cultures (plural), since we may identify with varying groups depending on what is relevant in a given social context.

## ***2.3 Embodiment in Cognitive Psychology***

When we deal with nursing or culture, we can readily admit that embodiment is an important if not crucial dimension for understanding these disciplines, because it is

fairly intuitive that nursing and culture are not only and perhaps not even primarily cognitive constructs that we adopt through deliberate rational processes. Yet, when we speak of “scientific knowledge” in comparison with or even in contrast to “experiential knowledge,” it may appear as if “scientific knowledge” relates to the rational and universal, while “experiential knowledge” is merely local or personal, and intuitive. However, a consideration of embodiment within the discipline of cognitive psychology helps us realize that even scientific knowledge is an embodied form of knowledge.

Lakoff and Johnson, well known within theological studies for their study on metaphor (Lakoff and Johnson 1980), extend their work in their magnum opus, *Philosophy in the Flesh* (Lakoff and Johnson 1999). In an ambitious project, they aim to revise 2000 years of philosophy, since it is based on the allegedly mistaken assumption that reason is independent of our body and senses, and that there are such things as universal rational principles. Instead, they propose that: “The mind is inherently embodied. Thought is mostly unconscious. Abstract concepts are largely metaphorical” (Lakoff and Johnson 1999, p. 3). These propositions are the three major findings of cognitive science, according to Lakoff and Johnson.

Their argument begins with the recognition that our mind is embodied not merely in the trivial sense that our brains are part of our physical bodies. Rather, based on our particular sensory-motor system, our bodies have distinct ways of perceiving, moving and applying force, which are the source of spatial and causal categories in our conceptual system. Our concepts are particular neural patterns in our brain, originating in embodied experiences, that allow us to categorize our concepts and to reason about them. Human categories are typically conceptualized as prototypes with rather general or fuzzy elements, but we think of them as sharply distinct, envisioned spatially as containers. The container schema turns out to be a very basic schema of perception and reasoning. Lakoff and Johnson describe how spatial concepts depend on our capacity for vision, how the logic of causality depends on our capacity for bodily movement, and how the aspectual structure of actions and events depends on how bodily movements create a perspective of “before” and “after,” generating a basic concept of time (Lakoff and Johnson 1999, pp. 18–39).

Next, in their analysis of abstract thinking, Lakoff and Johnson explain that primary metaphors are based on our bodily capacities. A few primary metaphors are (Lakoff and Johnson 1999, pp. 50–54):

- Affection is warmth
- Important is big
- Happy is up
- Intimacy is closeness
- Bad is stinky
- Difficulties are burdens, etc.<sup>4</sup>

Abstractions are then created by combining primary metaphors into complex metaphors, such as the “a purposeful life is a journey” metaphor (Lakoff and

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<sup>4</sup>These primary metaphors are not arbitrary social constructs, but have been shown to be consistent across many different languages and cultures in the world.

Johnson 1999, p. 61ff). In the remainder of their book, they describe how time, events, causes, the mind, the self and even morality all consist of one or more complex metaphors that can be analyzed in terms of primary metaphors, that in turn are grounded in our bodily constitution and capacities. Thus, they make a case that even abstract thinking is, in its very roots, embodied thinking, in the sense that our bodies intimately and subconsciously shape our categories and direct our thinking.

They describe from the perspective of cognitive psychology what Merleau-Ponty said much earlier, that our bodies mediate our access to the world (quoted above). Lakoff and Johnson add to that perspective that our bodies also shape, empower and limit the ways in which we talk and reason about the world. That is, embodiment not only affects a particular kind of knowledge (i.e. tacit knowledge in a well trained nurse), but all our knowledge of whatever kind is essentially embodied.

### 3 The Case for Embodied Realism

Lakoff and Johnson stand within a philosophical tradition that seeks to overcome dualistic thinking in terms of the subject/object divide that permeates much of Western philosophical thinking. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception is a key resource for understanding this movement. Although Merleau-Ponty was a careful student of Husserl and Heidegger, he differs from them in significant ways. Husserl's phenomenology was built on the assumed distinction between the inner and the outer, between the immanent sphere of consciousness with its "ideal essences," and the transcendental sphere of external, "real" objects. Merleau-Ponty rejects this subject-object duality by focusing on the body, which is neither object in the world, nor ideal essence in our consciousness, but our way of being in and interacting with the world (Merleau-Ponty 1978, pp. xv–xvi; Carman 1999, pp. 205–207). Moreover, in contrast to Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty does not focus on the abstract nature of Being, but rather on understanding concrete human experience in all its immediacy (Thomas 2005). For instance, in discussing intentionality he describes how an infant does not watch its hand but focuses on the object it attempts to grab. The members of our body are only known in their functional value and their coordination (Merleau-Ponty 1978, p. 174). Also, a door does not appear in the world as an object with an ideal essence, but as a passageway through which to enter or exit a room, with which we engage automatically and intuitively. The door has significance, constructed through social interaction, as I inhabit the world, quite apart from my critical reflection on the "nature" or "function" of the door. It is through and with our bodies, as well as in interaction with others that we perceive and interact with the world. Our bodies give us a world (Scharen 2015, pp. 52–54).

Merleau-Ponty argues that we are, as it were, thrown into the world bodily (cf. Heidegger's "Being-in-the-world"). With our bodies we "get" a world. Our bodies participate in the world and it is through this embodied participation that the "I" constitutes itself as consciousness in relation to the world and itself. We do not

*have* a body as we might have a house, but we *are* bodies (Carman 1999, pp. 218–221; Scharen 2015, pp. 54–55). Merleau-Ponty drew heavily on empirical psychology (Gestalt psychology, psychoanalysis), neuroscience, physiology and Saussurian linguistics for his phenomenology (Toadvine 2016), and offers a perspective that Lakoff and Johnson build on with their research in cognitive psychology. Although their *Metaphors We Live By* does not refer to Merleau-Ponty, they credit him for his pioneering work on “flesh” in their *Philosophy in the Flesh* (Lakoff and Johnson 1999, pp. xi, 97).

The lesser-known Dutch philosopher Herman Dooyeweerd, a contemporary of Merleau-Ponty, shares the focus on concrete human experience, which he labels as the non-theoretical attitude of naïve experience (Dooyeweerd 1999, p. 12). Although Dooyeweerd speaks of the subject-object relationship, he denies that the human subject can describe qualities to objects as if they pertain to the metaphysical realm of being. These qualities cannot be abstracted from the experience of an object within a subject-object relationship. For instance, the color red has no meaningful metaphysical conception as a quality of flowers, but is only grasped as an aspect of daily human experiences of a flower.

The subject-object relations of naïve experience are, consequently, fundamentally different from the antithetical relations which characterized the theoretical attitude of thought. Subject and object are certainly distinguished in the non-theoretical attitude, but they are never opposed to each other. Rather, they are conceived in an unbreakable coherence. In other words, naïve experience leaves the integral structural coherence of our experiential horizon intact (Dooyeweerd 1999, p. 14).

Dooyeweerd investigates the relationship between our naïve, pretheoretical experience and the antithetical theoretical attitude. This relationship cannot be founded by further abstractions of theoretical thought, but must find its origin in “the inner nature of the human *I*” by way of critical self-reflection (Dooyeweerd 1999, pp. 15–23). This *I* can only find its source and meaning in “the central religious relation between the human ego and God, in whose image man was created,” which is at the same time intimately connected to the selfhood of “our fellow-men.” Dooyeweerd speaks of this religious center as the human heart, which is the integrative point of human experience and knowledge (Eikema Hommes 1982, pp. 112–121). He began work on a philosophical anthropology, including theoretical reflections about the various modal aspects of the human body, such as the physical-chemical and biotic functions and its “act-structure,” but unfortunately this work was never finished, and it would take us too far afield for this chapter. Suffice to say that Dooyeweerd aimed to offer a Christian critique of theoretical thought that transcended the usual conceptions of the subject-object relationship, and identified the integrative center of human experience not as much in the human body, as Merleau-Ponty, but in the human heart with its religious orientation towards its Origin.

For readers of Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, it may appear strange that a prereflective attitude towards concrete human experiences is valued as the primary mode of being and knowing by these twentieth century philosophers, over against more reflective, theoretical reasoning and its strategies of knowing. In his research

on cognitive bias, Kahneman and his team found that intuitive reasoning, based on impressions, feelings and fuzzy categories (stereotypes) provides solutions to puzzles in our daily human experience (Kahneman 2011). Experts may render intuitive judgments that are quite accurate, even without much rational processing, based on years of training and experience in their field, as Kahneman and his team carefully documented. However, in difficult puzzles where the answers are not immediately apparent, sometimes our intuitions hide our ignorance and mask the uncertainty in the world as they point confidently to solutions that may prove false upon further rational examination, even though we are not aware of that. The intuitive level of thinking is labeled “System 1” and is compared with “System 2” that is effortful, more deliberate, rational thinking which kicks in when we encounter new situations in which we need to learn or when we discover that our System 1 conclusion may not be adequate. Kahneman’s theory seems to suggest, then, that reflective or theoretical thinking is more reliable than intuitive thinking, and should have priority—which appears to contradict the priority that both Merleau-Ponty and Dooyeweerd gave to embodied human experience and non-theoretical thinking.

This is, however, not the case. Rather, System 1 and System 2 thinking are both aspects of human experience and embodiment. First, note that Kahneman himself observes that much intuitive thinking, especially by experts in a matter related to their field of expertise, is very helpful and often on target, even if not perfect. This parallels descriptions in the first section of this paper of the intuitive and embodied judgments of well-trained and experienced nurses and reflects precisely the present argument on embodiment. Second, Kahneman acknowledges that though he deals with cognitive bias, this is not meant to imply that intuitive reasoning as a whole malfunctions—only that occasionally it is inadequate (Kahneman et al. 2011). Rather, System 2 supplements System 1 thinking when an error is detected or when rule-based reasoning is required. It is unclear precisely how System 1 and System 2 thinking are related, or how they could be mapped biologically and psychologically, but clearly System 2 receives input from System 1 thinking (Shleifer 2012).<sup>5</sup> That is, both systems are rooted in human experiences and in embodied knowing. Third, in a popularizing article, Kahneman et al.’s theory describe how difficult it is for corporate decision makers to detect their own System 1 biases, and that they should use their System 2 rational thinking to ask questions and uncover biases in the reasoning of their subordinates in the proposals they bring to them (Kahneman et al. 2011, pp. 50–52). This presents a communicative strategy for overcoming the limitations of our embodied knowledge. Through dialogue and interaction, multiple perspectives are brought to bear on a particular situation or proposal, resulting in the detection and correction of cognitive biases. This strategy links System 1 and System 2 thinking from a variety of actors, so that the pool of embodied knowledge is enlarged, and personal limitations are transcended. This implicitly reflects Herbert Simon’s theory of bounded rationality (Simon 1972),

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<sup>5</sup>Note that Lakoff and Johnson’s *Philosophy in the Flesh* is an extended discussion of this psychological mapping.

which acknowledges that people rarely have all the relevant knowledge or insight at their disposal in making choices. Their rationality is bounded:

Rational behavior in the real world is as much determined by the ‘inner environment’ of people’s minds, both their memory contents and their processes, as by the ‘outer environment’ of the world on which they act, and which acts on them (Simon 2000, p. 25).

In this way, Kahneman’s theory about cognitive bias and System 1/2 thinking confirms rather than contradicts the emphasis on concrete human experience and embodied knowledge that we found in Merleau-Ponty and Dooyeweerd.

We now return to Lakoff and Johnson’s proposal to label their account of how reason and reality interact as “embodied realism.” This view accepts the “assumption that the material world exists and . . . [that] we can function successfully in it,” as well as the assumption that we have direct access to the world (no mind-body gap). However, it denies that there is one and only one correct description of the world, since our knowledge is based upon the nature of our bodies and brains, and upon our particular location in the world. This is a form of relativism that is connected to the nature of our bodies and the way our bodies enable us to see, to know and to be carriers of practices and cultures. Yet, it also remains connected to the real world to which we all have direct access (Lakoff and Johnson 1999, pp. 94–96).

Our entire human knowledge system is so finely attuned to the world we live in that, even though we cannot access that reality without our cultural and physical conditioning, nevertheless we generally succeed well in functioning in this world. We not only have access to reality, but we also succeed in communicating about it with others who are similarly equipped. The various groups within which we find ourselves influence our habits, our movements (literally) and our communicative patterns, giving rise to communities of practice and, on a larger scale, to cultural groups. All of this is implied in the argument that we live in and know the world in the form of embodied realism.

Embodied realism has fascinating implications for how we think about concrete experiences in all their diversity. For “pure reason,” diversity is simply the contingent part of our experience that needs to be “peeled away” to attain universal knowledge. For practical reason, however, diversity is precisely the stuff from which we discover and attain knowledge. Such embodied forms of knowledge require relationships, interaction and dialogue to share personal embodied knowledge, to make it explicit or public. This can be done informally through common manipulation of the material world, and through conversation and dialogue, or more formally through community negotiations and scientific research. Dialogue within relationships is needed to supplement our own embodied knowledge with that of others, which turns it into what Merleau-Ponty described as public, intersubjective knowledge which is open to debate and questioning (Benner 2000, p. 8). It is thus, by interacting with the specific and particular, by being confronted with diversity, that we gain a broader appreciation of certain phenomena, without necessarily ever reaching an absolute level of universal knowledge. Embodied knowledge, then, also implies a process of community formation and development, which implicates

ethical qualities like patience, openness, respect and perseverance in the process of knowledge formation.

## **4 The Importance of the Concept of Embodiment for Spirituality, Discernment and Leadership**

After describing the “turn towards the body” in various disciplines, and making a case for embodied realism, the next task is to apply this perspective to the key dimensions of this book: spirituality, discernment and leadership.

### ***4.1 Embodiment as Foundational Mode of Spirituality***

Much of theological thinking seems unaware of the embodied nature of our religious knowledge. That is not surprising, since theological scholarship often focuses on texts and the history of ideas. Moreover, there is a tendency to reduplicate the mind-body dualism by focusing religious knowledge on that which is spiritual, in contrast to the body as a material dimension of faith. However, since time immemorial, Christian beliefs and practices are inherently linked to embodiment. Sacred objects point to spiritual presence or have spiritual significance. Rituals involve the body in patterns of behavior as a way of interacting with or presencing the divine. Christians regularly celebrate how the Spirit transforms people’s lives and gives gifts in ways that can be bodily experienced. Christians confess that God entered human experience in bodily fashion through the Incarnation. Finally, as followers of Christ, Christians typically picture themselves as incarnating Christ anew in their own lives and experiences. Thus, embodiment is an essential part of Christian thinking and practice, even if much of academic theology has been disembodied, perhaps even disincarnated.<sup>6</sup>

Yet, following the dictum that all theology is born of practice, theology is called to be empirically responsible. If theology is not in some significant sense a theology of embodied practice, it is not theology at all since it has lost sight of the primary mode for living theologically, that is, through incarnating Christ daily in our bodily existence. What is needed is a theological account of embodied spirituality as basic feature of Christian living.

Lived religion and religious embodiment have surfaced recently as important themes in the study of religion. First, sociologist of religion McGuire demonstrates that the long centuries of reformation, from 1300 to 1700, led to the historical marginalization of embodied practice. During this period, people’s everyday religious practices, especially where they involved the body and the emotions, were

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<sup>6</sup>See Bass et al. (2016) for an extended discussion of the historical background and current issues on embodiment.

devalued, while religion was defined more institutionally and theology more cognitively. In short, “church” became organized religion which was seen as a “creed” or “faith” (McGuire 2007, pp. 188–190).<sup>7</sup> Much of the modern sociology of religion betrays this institutional bias, surveying people’s institutional attachments as markers of religiosity. Instead, McGuire argues, sociologists should be more sensitive to daily spiritual practices, which may or may not reflect the institutional practices that people are connected to:

Lived religion is constituted by the practices by which people remember, share, enact, adapt, and create the ‘stories’ out of which they live. And it is constituted through the practices by which people turn these ‘stories’ into everyday action. Ordinary material existence—especially the human body—is the very stuff of these meaningful practices. Religious and spiritual practices—even interior ones, such as contemplation—involve people’s bodies and emotions, as well as their minds and spirits (McGuire 2007, pp. 197–198).<sup>8</sup>

Second, psychologist of religion Luhrman investigated extensively how people learn to recognize God’s voice. She found that newcomers in certain charismatic faith communities went through a process whereby they learned to distinguish an internal mental process as not their own, but God’s. Trained in psychoanalysis, Luhrman uses the technical term “dissociation” to describe this practice, which refers to the phenomenon that individuals may dissociate themselves from some of their own mental processes as if they came from another, external source (Luhrmann 2006). Although Luhrman does not self-identify as a Christian, and makes no claim about the reality of the transcendent that her respondents claim to experience, she describes a psychological and even physiological learning process that leads some individuals to conclude that they hear the voice of God in their own mind and body. Even if this process is experienced differently in other types of faith communities, this case study shows that there is an embodied process involved in learning to know God.<sup>9</sup>

As a theologian, I would argue that God has created a world with human beings in such a way that they are intimately attuned to this world and to one another. It is a material and embodied world that serves as stage for humans and God to know each other and to interact.<sup>10</sup> Our entire human system of perceiving and knowing is attuned not only to knowing the world and the other, but also to knowing God. Moreover, God entered upon this creaturely stage to literally flesh out the bridge between the human and the divine. The gospel writers testify that it is in the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth, that is, in his embodied experience, that we observe and experience God the Father: “Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9, ESV).

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<sup>7</sup>For the extended argument, see her monograph, McGuire (2008).

<sup>8</sup>James K. Smith makes a similar argument in developing a theological anthropology in which human beings are portrayed as essentially liturgical beings (Smith 2009, 2016).

<sup>9</sup>See her full length study on this phenomenon in Luhrmann (2012).

<sup>10</sup>For a theological argument about human nature as essentially relational, based on an understanding of the Trinity, see Grenz (2001).

Knowing God, then, comes through our human capacities for knowledge, as described by the perspective of embodied realism. This implies, first, that spirituality is essentially an embodied phenomenon, like all other human forms of being and knowledge. God created an embodied system of knowing people, God and the world. Thus, knowing God does not take place without our bodies for we simply have no language and no way of being other than embodied.

Second, embodied spirituality is essentially a relational phenomenon. Our embodied, metaphorical mode of thinking, and our embodied discernment in communities of practice assume a social and ecological system in which we live. Humans cannot function otherwise. It is only in relational fashion that our embodied intuitions and knowledge become shared, open for discussion and dissent, whether this knowledge concerns the physical or the spiritual world. Knowing God and knowing the world is to participate in the material, social and spiritual world by sharing with and relating to other participants. Although we dare not minimize the impact of divine-human encounters,<sup>11</sup> humans need the context of a community of practice to begin to interpret the significance of these encounters and to translate them into knowledge of God.<sup>12</sup>

## 4.2 *Discernment as Embodied and Extended Cognition*

This conception of spirituality as an embodied and relational form of knowing God has significant consequences for processes of discernment. Usually, Christian discernment is conceived of as a process of finding the will or call of God. It involves a sense of vision, seeing “the essence of the matter,” that cannot always be achieved through “reasoned discourse” and “business-as-usual meetings” (Morris and Olsen 2012, pp. 3–8). It also involves close listening for God’s call and guidance, sometimes discerned through impressions and emotions. It may take some solitude, but it always needs the Christian community in an effort to determine how to act faithfully. Contemporary Christian practices of discernment stand in a tradition of two millennia and more (Morris and Olsen 2012; Liebert 2015). These aspects indicate an awareness of the embodied nature of discernment, with its attention for vision, hearing and feeling in the context of relationships, dialogue and commitment.

Moreover, discernment should be distinguished from decision-making, since it focuses on the processes of “seeing,” “listening” and dialogue more than on the final result, the decision. Of course, discernment usually leads to a decision. However, rational decision-making processes, with their focus on rational techniques like a

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<sup>11</sup>Root offers an extended argument that divine-human encounters should be moved to the center of practical theological investigation (Root 2014), and Iyadurai argues that “religious experience” should be a prime focus in studying conversion, next to psychological and sociological aspects (Iyadurai 2015).

<sup>12</sup>For a further theological assessment of embodied spirituality, see Murphy 2006, Brown & Strawn 2012).

SWOT analysis, seem to presuppose that a group of people deliberating an issue see through a single lens, and should find the one right solution (Berlinger and Tumblin 2004). Discernment, instead, acknowledges our embodied situatedness, which leads to multiple competing and incomplete perspectives on the issue that cannot always be resolved through rational methods. Realizing that there may be more than one “right” solution, or even that several “right” solutions might yield significantly different results, discernment helps weigh the alternatives while listening closely to intuitive and more rational assessments in the group. Thus, discernment processes may complement more rational techniques for decision-making (Kaak et al. 2013).

Thus, the current literature on discernment already demonstrates various features of embodiment. The perspective of embodied realism adds more depth. Our bodies are the interface with the world, so we think in terms of sensing, motor movements and action—this even applies to more abstract domains of theoretical thinking (Brown and Strawn 2017, p. 414). Long years of socializing in social and cultural groups shaped our habits, our movements (literally), and our communicative patterns, giving rise to communities of practice. Thus, our bodies are shaped socially and culturally, often in a prereflective attitude. Discernment, then, is the interactional and communicative process that takes place within a community of practice to reflect on these habits, actions and communication patterns, and to bring to the surface that which is relevant but hidden, in order to determine the best course of action for a particular situation.

Such a process of discernment is helpful in overcoming the limitations of our situated embodiment. Asking reflective questions about our habits and (intuitive) practices—reminiscent of Kahneman’s research—surfaces both practical knowledge as well as cognitive bias. Communication enables multiple actors together to overcome the limitations of their personal embeddedness in concrete situations by becoming aware of and compensating for our biases, and by enlarging the shared pool of experiences and knowledge. The aim is not to produce universal knowledge—which is beyond our reach—but to develop a broader social consensus suitable for a particular time, place and culture.

Newer theories of extended cognition enhance our understanding of this process (Teske 2013). In this communal discernment process, a dynamic occurs that makes it difficult to decide from which person the solution originated. Cognition is not limited to what happens within one individual (embodied cognition), but can be extended across a larger collective or group with a common identity. As individuals become incorporated in the group and participate in mutual problem solving, an encompassing identity is created that is larger than the sum of the individual identities involved (Brown and Strawn 2017, p. 416). Individual cognitions are not simply exchanged, but as it were networked throughout the group, like computers might be networked to create a larger, more powerful processing unit. Thus, solutions produced in such a group by this mechanism of extended cognition cannot be simply attributed to one of the minds, but to the aggregate whole.

The perspective of embodied realism, then, portrays discernment as a somewhat fuzzy and intuitive, but also rational and relational process, based on our incorporation in a social group and our embodied participation in a particular context.

Rational, emotional and intuitive concerns each play their role in corporately constructing or adapting the interpretation of the situation in such a way that one or more courses of action open up for the group, and that a choice can be made for what appears at that moment to be most optimal.

Embodiment further implies that discernment is not primarily framed by institutional concerns and societal values, except in so far as they represent the social setting within which one participates. It also implies that authority figures have no special claim to discern better than other participants, except in so far as the authority figure is incorporated in the group in which the discernment process takes place. Discernment is a fuzzy and relational process in which all participants have an important role to play in contributing from their perspective as embodied participants.

### ***4.3 Embodiment, Discernment and Leadership***

Embodiment is beginning to impact leadership studies as well. In 2013, the journal *Leadership* published a special issue on “The materiality of leadership,” creating a space for discussions on how embodiment effects the relationship between leaders and followers, on the gestures and aesthetics of leadership, on the effect of (material) place on leadership, on the embodiment of emotions and passion in (abusive) leadership, and on gender and transgressive bodies in leadership. In the same year, the International Leadership Association published a volume in its Building Leadership Bridges series on *The Embodiment of Leadership* (Melina et al. 2013). The introduction explains that great leaders are memorialized by statues, celebrating their bodies. These statues present a visible reminder that the leader is different from followers even in their bodies. Also, leadership involves a particular bodily performance of various tasks, and is experienced as embodied authority, control and/or empowerment (Melina et al. 2013, pp. xiii–xvi). To advance our argument about embodied spirituality and discernment, the question arises, How does embodied discernment affect our views of leadership?

In his contribution to *The Embodiment of Leadership*, David Holzmer offers a three-part conceptual framework to reconstruct leadership as embodied leadership in a context of rapid and continual change. The first concept, “liminality,” focuses on experiences of “disruption and upheaval” which leaders can use “as an important and necessary condition . . . to construct new narratives” (Holzmer 2013, pp. 49–50). This liminal period is not simply an insecure transition period through which leaders quickly navigate their constituency; rather, the leader is able to bear and hold fast this liminal insecurity in order to lead others in re-habituating their practices and remolding their identity. In Heifetz’ theory of adaptive leadership, this is comparable to the holding environment that leaders are to create as they strive to harness and resolve conflict (Heifetz et al. 2009, pp. 149–157). The description of this “holding environment” indicates various physical and embodied features, so that people are, as it were, physically held together in one place to face the conflict or liminality. Liminality, then, is not a moment of cognitive confusion but a period of

disorientation and change that is felt and experienced viscerally as well as cognitively. The holding space likewise is an embodied experience of being held together, not so much by force (although that might occur as well), but by factors such as persuasion, encouragement and empowerment by adaptive leaders to resist the tendencies that drive the group apart in order to find a constructive way forward. Although Heifetz et al. did not use the terminology of embodiment, Holzmer's analysis makes the embodied dimension manifest.

Holzmer's second concept, "performance," relates to how leaders present themselves and their body, and how their embodied leadership is experienced by subordinates. Typically, leaders embodied control and domination in a long history of leadership practice, but now leaders are called upon to openly acknowledge the hierarchical norms they embodied and to experiment with new forms of embodied leadership to create new ways of common action (Holzmer 2013, pp. 53–56). It has long been maintained that domination and hierarchy are simply rational ways of controlling and leading others, in a way that leaves the role of leadership bodies unexplored. However, in many ways, leadership is the performance of a particular social role in which social and cultural norms are enacted. This performance is more than just rational, and relates to the leader's presence and interaction with his or her followers. Occasionally, a leader's presence can be intensely felt in bodily fashion (Ladkin 2013, pp. 321–22). Thus, the way a leader uses his or her body is an essential part of leadership performance, highlighting the embodied nature of leadership.

Finally, Holzmer's third concept, "dialogue," focuses on the leaders' task to create "communicative space between people" so that the "transformative process" of dialogue can yield fruit (Holzmer 2013, pp. 57–58). In this perspective, leadership is not simply a rational process that directs the vision and actions of followers through disembodied discourse, but it becomes a rational, emotional and intuitive performance to create a safe holding environment for followers in spite of fears and insecurities. The concept of extended cognition, discussed above, can explain how such a dialogue in a safe holding environment can create a new sense of group purpose and identity. It creates cognitive connections between group participants that allow for a broader and more adequate way to process the challenges of liminality. This, in turn, creates the personal and organizational transformation necessary to stand strong in a fluid society. Evidently, dialogue in all its richness is an embodied process that cannot be managed purely rationally and cognitively.

Holzmer thus illustrates how leadership is an essentially embodied process in which discernment and dialogue are vital social practices to enable groups and organizations to determine fruitful courses of action.

## 5 Conclusion

In summary, based on theories about embodied and extended cognition, embodiment offers important epistemological insights that generate the perspective of embodied realism, a perspective that has gained significant attention in various disciplines.

Embodied realism implies that spirituality, as a concern with the divine-human encounter, is an embodied phenomenon, as practiced in religious rituals and as confessed in the Christian doctrine of the incarnation. This, then, allows us to consider discernment as not merely a rational or disembodied spiritual practice, but as a practice of seeing, listening and sensemaking that draws our embodied experiences, memories and perceptions together to arrive at a collective attribution of meaning and wise action. This, in turn, recasts the framework of leadership from one of vision casting and rational strategizing to embodied (social and institutional) performance, creating a safe but liminal space to enable the transformation of personal and collective identity, leading to renewed social and religious action.

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**Jack Barentsen** (Ph.D.) studied physics, philosophy and theology in the US, and moved to the Netherlands in 1988 as pastor and church planter. Working with new church plants provided opportunity to learn about discipleship and leadership development. This became an academic pursuit at the Evangelische Theologische Faculteit in Leuven (Belgium) by researching leadership development in early Christianity through the lens of modern leadership theory (Emerging Leadership in the Pauline Mission, W&S 2011). Since then, Barentsen teaches and researches the practice of pastoral and religious leadership in multiple countries, developing his own descriptive “Integrative Model of Pastoral Leadership.” He serves as Full Professor and Chair of Practical Theology and as Senior Research Fellow of the Institute of Leadership and Social Ethics. He also holds an appointment as Extraordinary Associate Professor of New Testament and Practical Theology in the Faculty of Theology of North-West University, South Africa. He is married and has two grown-up daughters, with their own expanding family.

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