

Trumpeter (1993)  
ISSN: 0832-6193  
A Few Foot Notes on Walking

David Macauley  
SUNY

David Macauley is a Ph.D. student in philosophy at SUNY in Stony Brook, New York. He has published articles on ecology, animals and political thought in numerous journals.

1. We start with and on the foot (barefoot!), crawling...stumbling...falling...toddling...but gradually, evolving into walking.
2. We are a-foot. Upright. Homo Erectus. Humans (from humus, the ground). Children of the Earth. Earthlings.
3. The foot, our feet, keeps us apace and in-place. Place, on one etymological path, can be followed back to planta - the sole of one's foot. Thoreau, in his essay, "Walking," says that half of one's walk is but a retracing of earlier steps, so that even if we do not know where we are (ultimately) going - I surely don't - at least we might know where we have been.
4. We walk many places, but usually return home. I am here, at home, on earth. More particularly: Old Field-Setauket-Paumanok- Turtle Island-Gaia-Milky Way. This past Friday, I went walking through the woods with the students whom I instruct (and who teach me). We walked and talked in pairs and small groups. Along the way, I learned about the songs, dances and trees of the Dominican Republic and Jamaica as well as my own surroundings. And we came across a small, stunned mouse, who apparently wanted to walk with us. The path made a turn and arrived in a bamboo grove where we sat and thought about mountains walking and the darker side of nature - an ecology of depth - what Gary Snyder evokes viscerally "as the sight of your beloved in the underworld, dripping with maggots." Wandering among the young, green trees, our ears adjusted to the silence much as one's eyes regularly adjust to the dark. One student felt that silence can be extremely oppressive if one is not used to it. We also listened with our feet. And we began to know one another in ways which the classroom makes difficult. Half an hour later a path led us back into campus, where a few of us walked and talked for another hour or so longer.
5. As I bicycled home, I wondered whether there might not be other forms of walking. Was this pedaling itself a variation on walking, like marching; that is, a form of body-motility and transport? What about walking in place, rather than through it, as in the stomping of grapes?
6. Does it make sense - in a sense - to say that my fingers are also walking? As on the piano or this computer keyboard right now. Is the hand, then, really a more dexterous, distinguished foot? (Personally, I prefer to think of both as unique kinds of clay leaves with red chlorophyll in their veins?) In any event, the foot, in contrast, to the hand has taken quite a pounding, historically speaking. Whereas the hand is held up (literally) in the rarefied air, adorned with gold and diamonds, and privileged in discourse (eg. the hand of god) 1, the foot is repeatedly stepped on from above by the powers that be; it is clearly more

pedestrian, less hand-some. Think of the orders which foot-soldiers are routinely handed or terms and phrases such as footle (to waste time or act foolishly), footboy (a servant or page), footling (inept, lacking judgement) or "put one's foot in one's mouth" (surely not as sweet tasting as thumb — sucking). 2 And what does all this have to say about the earth, which rests below the level of our feet, at least most of the time. We are unsettled by the sight of dirt, mud or soil, even on our toes.

7. Walking, too, is an activity of lifting and propelling, a tiny attempt to flee the ground's gravity, a brief foot-fantasy, perhaps, of leaving the Earth in a flight of ever small measures. When we walk, however, we are also rolling, from the heels to the ball to the toes of our feet, which send us forward (bodily) but also backwards (to the heel) again. In this way there is a certain circularity always at work in the walk, a phenomenon more readily grasped in the activity of pedaling, or cycling. In fact, the word "walk" harks back in Old English to wealcan, to roll, and wealcian, to roll up. One hopes, however, despite the tendency, not to find oneself walking in circles. (Thoreau tread in parabolas, perhaps to walk away from the influence of Emerson who celebrated the circle and its perfection.)

8. Walking seems to involve a form of carrying or self-conveyance as well; we lift our knees and fall forward momentarily, catching and collecting our weight into a rhythm which is repeated. Walking carries us to distant people and places, making them near. But we are also "carried away" in two other corporeally-conscious ways: first, by the sights, sounds and smells which we encounter and which walk us toward and through them. The elements in the atmosphere, for example, or the mood (as in the weather or song) frequently bear and guide us. Secondly, we are carried by the places we walk and which hold us ("place" relates to plat, meaning broad or flat; as in Plato, who had broad shoulders and could certainly hold his own) - i.e. the paths, trails or markings we follow in the wild or the side-walks, alleys, and promenades we plod in the city. Occasionally, one is even carried away to the point where the goer (doer) passes completely into the going (doing). He or she disappears - is gone, oned - with the Walk-Way. In both instances, we are borne of and by the earth.

9. To carry this point a final step further, it should be (foot) noted that Thoreau, too, conjectured that there exists in nature a "subtle magnetism" which carries us, often unconsciously, in the "right" direction, and his speculations are being born out today in a sense by the discovery of magnetic zones in many wilderness areas which exert a particular attraction for us. (He, of course, believed this "rightness" also lay on a moral compass.) It is a further irony that while he always gravitated in spirit to the West - a synonym and symbol of the wild - he remained forever rooted on the eastern coast of the U.S. - though, in all fairness, his journeys did usually proceed southwesterly.

10. Walking stands in stark contrast to remaining idle, standing still, or resting, but it is not in opposition to "standing out" or "standing forth" - i.e. existing

and appearing. Some forms of walking, in fact, accentuate and celebrate one's appearance; they are "showy", as in strutting or marching, which tend to evoke stares. City struts - less like country strolls and unlike bushwhacking, bivouacing or even "kerouaking" walkabouts - thus often become visual parades. It may even be said that when we are seated, prone or stationary for long that are our bodies start itching to walk, to stretch and show themselves off, and so we compensate by wandering, or walking, with our eyes. We let the world walk by instead when we are too tired to walk it.

11. But in idleness we are in danger of losing our sense of depth; we are taken out of the thick of things. The horizon flattens. Walking puts things back into perspective. Spacial, placial and qualitative changes occur. Distances and measurements, too, have historically been associated with the walking body - eg. the foot or the mile (from mille, a thousand paces) or the foot-candle. Pace, naturally, is important to perspective and is what distinguishes running, in part, from walking. When running distances of more than 20 miles I have occasionally been taken out of my body and its perspective - I begin to disassociate - or in better moments, lose myself in the rhythm. In our walks, we must try to harmonize body-mind — environment. We should be alarmed, as Thoreau was, when the body has walked a mile but the spirit is still loitering at the doorstep or the library.

12. So we walk the surface of earth. Horizontally and laterally, forward and backward, sidestepping others in our path. But, in rare flights of fancy, we also ascend with our feet; we walk up. During class one day this semester, I sat with a group of individuals at the foot of a tree. About half way through class I heard the leaves above rustling and looked up. There sat a grinning student, peering down upon us like a chipmunk. He had been perched there for quite a while, contemplating the truth of the tree (the two words, incidentally, share a common Indo-European root). "We hug the earth, - how rarely we mount! Methinks we might elevate ourselves a little more" says the Concord philosopher, who also noticed in his Journal entries that we walk the sky in a sense when we gaze down into ice from our path of movement above. The frozen liquid holds the clouds and birds in a perfect crystalline mirror. The same might be said about walking water; Jesus wasn't the only one who could do that trick. Finally, the question might be asked whether the earth itself walks even if we are crazy enough to grant with Husserl that as basis-body it is phenomenologically stationary. What are earthquakes, plate techtonics, and soil erosion but a bit of stretching, shape-shifting and bodily flow?

13. We must thus question our human-centeredness - in walking and other ways. Thoreau, for instance, made appointments to visit trees and kept them come rain or shine. Animals, of course, also walk, though a consideration of fox-trots, squirrel scampers or horse gallops would take us a little a-stray. In the wild, we find the walking stick (*Diaperomera femorata*), the walking catfish (*Clarias batrachus*), who scrambles about on land at times and has become an

ecological problem in Florida, and the walking leaf (*Camptosorus*) - might it be said in this last regard that plants are also slow animals? In more poetic philosophical circles, it is common to find mountains walking. Dogen, a 13th century Zen Buddhist, speaks of "Blue Mountains Constantly Walking" in his sutras while Thoreau, perhaps less consciously, echoes this experience in the chapter, "Sounds," of *Walden*: "When the old bell-wether at the head rattles his bell, the mountains do indeed skip like rams and the little hills like lambs." But what on earth could they mean? Are not mountains the symbols of stability, permanence, hardness, rigidity and the like? Apart from erosion which eternally walks the peaks down to the rivers and lowlands, we also speak, curiously, of the foot-hills and the foot of a mountain. Could language be telling us something? I suspect there is more, however, which might require a walk or climb to discover. As Aldo Leopold, an early American naturalist says, "Think like a mountain." To which we might add, and you will begin to walk as one too.

14. Western philosophy finds its beginnings in walking, with the Peripatetic philosophers, who walked boldly out of the dark and deep realm of myth and into the lighted house of logos. (Some might say this was also a step in the wrong direction.) Peripatos originally meant a covered walking place, and the school provided by Theophrastus for his teacher Aristotle likely yielded the name for this group of thinkers, who were thought to have walked and talked among the trees in the morning as a method of learning. (It is disputed as to how widely this method was adopted, though the view goes back at least as far as Hermippus at the close of the 3rd century BC.)

15. On the other side of the globe, walking has always been a part of the philosophical Way, as in Taoism and Zen Buddhism, where the sages and monks sauntered the countryside in search of enlightenment. Walking is even given a special place as one of the four Chinese "dignities" (modes of being in the world), along with Standing, Sitting and Lying. In the *Dao De Jing*, we encounter, "Gladly then the Way receives/ Those who choose to walk in it," though we also find a warning that walking is not such a straight-forward enterprise: "He who tiptoes cannot stand; he who strides cannot walk."

16. Indeed, Thoreau shows us that walking is both an art and a crusade which perhaps "requires a direct dispensation from Heaven" to master. My own opinion is that Thoreau was often a little too elitist and not down to earth enough in his views on perambulating - as he was on reading - and that some of his essays must have been penned in a period of sedentariness. Gary Snyder, Thoreau's present day counterpart, suggests instead that walking embodies the perfect balance of spirit and humility (a word close to humus and human), presumably in that it brings us back down from the transcendental heights while at the same time freeing our mind to move, breathe (akin to spirit as animating breath) and imagine in natural ways. (It is difficult to picture humans being arrogant on a walk in the woods.)

17. Philosophy, in this sense, begins not simply in wondering but also - quite

literally - in wandering. Walking facilitates meditation, in part, because it provides mediation between us and the earth; it initiates conversation between the foot and the ground; it introduces our bodies to and into the world, the surrounding medium. Ideas and images start to flow; they form their own kinesthesias of a sort. Of Thoreau's strolls, Emerson said, "The length of his walk uniformly made the length of his writing. If shut up in the house he did not write at all." Maybe walking, then, is the best laxative for writer's block. Open your gaits and let the thoughts themselves walk out - while guarding against a running case of logo-rhea I suppose.

18. I had originally intended to write about the sauntering reflections of Husserl, Rousseau and Heidegger, but now I am left with a series of foot notes and no body to my paper. The once lowly foot has stepped away on its own and perhaps into its own. It is on strike - a walk-out - until it receives its proper due. Perhaps we should be cautious, tread lightly, for Emerson warns: "Whoso goes to walk alone, accuses the whole world; he declares all to be unfit to be his companions, it is very uncivil, nay, insulting. Society will retaliate."

## Notes

1. Handnote: The right hand is also privileged over the left hand in a number of ways which would be interesting to explore, as in the activities of eating and toilet etiquette, pledging allegiance, religious ritual, fighting and so on.

2. Handnote: Heidegger, among others, distinguished humans from nonhuman animals by their supposed unique possession of a hand (and the related capacity for language, speech and thought), though he was surely grasping in the air himself for a difference. (See, for example, "Was heisst Denken?") On better footing is Derrida, who takes Heidegger to task not only for his misplaced anthropocentrism but also for the monstrous hand he raises to Nazism. (See "Geschlect II: Heidegger's Hand").

---

### Citation Format

Macauley, David (1993) A Few Foot Notes on Walking *Trumpeter*: 10, 1.  
<http://www.icaap.org/iuicode?6.10.1.5>

Document generated from IXML by ICAAP conversion macros.  
See the [ICAAP](#) web site or [software repository](#) for details