

REVIEW OF DARIAN LEADER'S

Hands: What we do with them and why

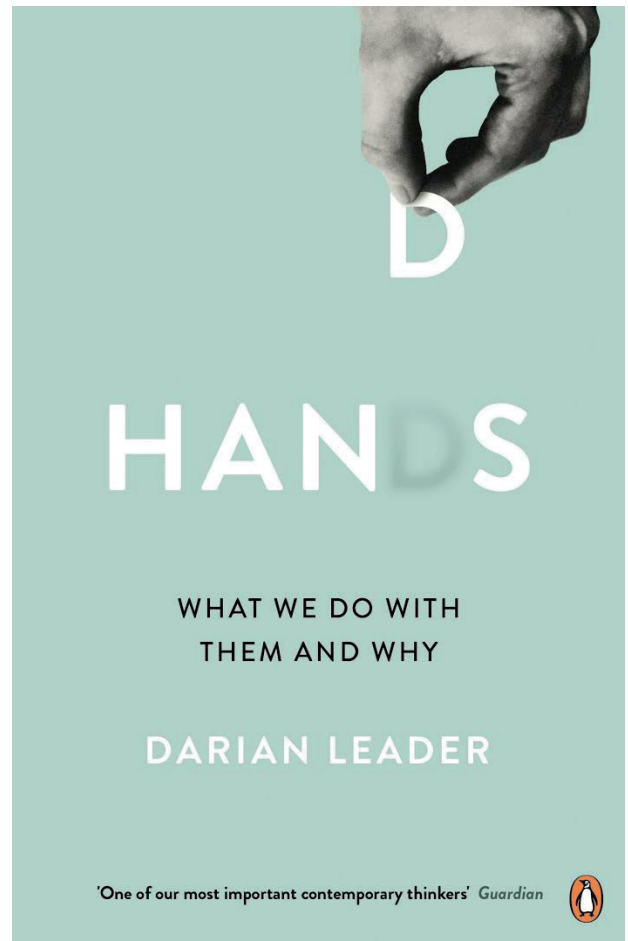


An omnipresent and commonsensical idea today is that we are constantly preoccupied with a gadget in our hands - be that a phone, tablet or laptop - at the cost of social interactions; thereby alienating us from both other people and ourselves. There is a belief in a pure and technology free past, where we connected with others in a genuine and authentic way and thus were freer to truly be our 'real selves'. The focus on hands in relation to these issues of estrangement and technology offers Darian Leader a fascinating and unique window into making the convincing argument, drawing on psychoanalytic ideas, that our need to keep the hands busy has been around since time immemorial. Hands constitute an integral part of our embodied existence. From a such standpoint, Leader takes distance from technology as the sole contributor to alienation by arguing that we have always been estranged from others through different kinds of activities with our hands; there has always been a need to escape the proximity of others, a closeness which is always a possible threat to one's

sense of identity regardless of time epoch. Not only that, but such escape is necessary and can regulate and diminish bodily tension. As he posits, there is a need not to just connect but disconnect, as a way to try to establish an individual identity through activities such as arts, crafts, reading, masturbating etc.: 'as mediators, they allow us to be somewhere else' (p. 107).

These movements are made possible through our hands, and so we ascribe great agency and autonomy to them. We speak of things being in 'our hands' as a way to signify control, which is not a pure symbolic function but reflects the anatomy of our bodies where our hands are indeed capable of engaging in a wide range of material and significant movements. Leader does not prioritise one over the other but skilfully shows how the symbolic and the physical are intertwined in an embodied language. He furthermore points out the paradox that the site of utmost agency can turn into an experience of alien-ness where the hand disobeys and has

a life of its own - which seems to be the case more so today where freedom and autonomy are highly valued. Therefore, while Leader overturns the taken-for-granted idea that technology and modern society in general are alienating, he does not dismiss that contemporary 'handy' activities can contribute to a stronger detachment that has a unique effect on us. The use of gadgets changes the very structure of our anatomies and creates a number of new physical strains centered on the hands, wrists and arms, and the demand for autonomy, which technology makes possible, paradoxically creates addictions we are unable to control. It would have been interesting to hear more about these issues, but overall the book's impressive coverage of hand-related activities, from infancy to adult life, and the way Leader pays close attention to existing human complexities and paradoxes, while using clear and relatable examples such as Hollywood movies and other popular culture references, makes this book an immensely enjoyable experience. While at times drawing on the psychoanalytic work of Freud and Lacan, it remains accessible to anyone due to the lucidity with which Leader discusses and the fact that only the most essential theory is brought in occasionally to support (the focus on) arguments. All in all, what seems at the outset to be a book about a banal topic turns out to be a highly important one which allows in-depth understanding of fundamental human tendencies as well as pertinent modern issues.



Hands: What we do with them and why by Darian Leader (2016), London, Penguin, 128 pages.

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