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REFIGURING BODIES

From E. Grosz (1994) *Volatile Bodies*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Philosophy and the body

SINCE THE INCEPTION OF PHILOSOPHY as a separate and self-contained discipline in ancient Greece, philosophy has established itself on the foundations of a profound somatophobia. While I cannot here preset an adequate or detailed discussion of the role of the body in the history of philosophy, I can at least indicate in a brief sketch some of the key features of the received history that we have inherited in our current conceptions of bodies. The body has been regarded as a source of interference in, and a danger to, the operations of reason. In the *Cratylus*, Plato claims that the word body (*soma*) was introduced by Orphic priests, who believed that man was a spiritual or noncorporeal being trapped in the body as in a dungeon (*sēma*). In his doctrine of the Forms, Plato sees matter itself as a denigrated and imperfect version of the Idea. The body is a betrayal of and a prison for the soul, reason, or mind. For Plato, it was evident that reason should rule over the body and over the irrational or appetitive functions of the soul. A kind of natural hierarchy, a self-evident ruler-ruled relation, alone makes possible a harmony within the state, the family, and the individual. Here we have one of the earliest representations of the body politic. Aristotle, in continuing a tradition possibly initiated by Plato in his account of *chora* in *Timaeus* where maternity is regarded as a mere housing, receptacle, or nurse of being rather than a co-producer, distinguished matter or body from form, and in the case of reproduction, he believed that the mother provided the formless, passive, shapeless matter which, through the father, was given form, shape, and contour, specific features and attributes it otherwise lacked. The binarization of the sexes, the dichotomization of the world and of knowledge has been effected already at the threshold of Western reason.

The matter/form distinction is refigured in terms of the distinction between substance and accident and between a God-given soul and a mortal, lustful, sinful carnality. Within the Christian tradition, the separation of mind and body was correlated with the distinction between what is immortal and what is mortal. As long as the subject is alive, mind and soul form an indissoluble unity, which is perhaps best exemplified in the figure of Christ himself. Christ was a man whose soul, whose immortality, is derived from God but whose body and mortality is human. The living soul is, in fact, a part of the world,

and above all, a part of nature. Within Christian doctrine, it is as an experiencing, suffering, passionate being that generic man exists. This is why moral characteristics were given to various physiological disorders and why punishments and rewards for one's soul are administered through corporeal pleasures and punishments. For example, in the Middle Ages, leprosy was regarded as the diseased consequence of lechery and covetousness, a corporeal signifier of sin.

What Descartes accomplished was not really the separation of mind from body (a separation which had already been long anticipated in Greek philosophy since the time of Plato) but the separation of soul from nature. Descartes distinguished two kinds of substances: a thinking substance (*res cogitans*, mind) from an extended substance (*res extensa*, body); only the latter, he believed, could be considered part of nature, governed by its physical laws and ontological exigencies. The body is a self-moving machine, a mechanical device, functioning according to causal laws and the laws of nature. The mind, the thinking substance, the soul, or consciousness, has no place in the natural world. This exclusion of the soul from nature, this evacuation of consciousness from the world, is the prerequisite for founding a knowledge, or better, a science, of the governing principles of nature, a science which excludes and is indifferent to considerations of the subject. Indeed, the impingements of subjectivity will, from Descartes's time on, mitigate the status and value of scientific formulations. Scientific discourse aspires to impersonality, which it takes to be equivalent to objectivity. The correlation of our ideas with the world or the reality they represent is a secondary function, independent of the existence of consciousness, the primary, indubitable self-certainty of the soul. Reality can be attained by the subject only indirectly, by inference, deduction, or projection. Descartes, in short, succeeded in linking the mind/body opposition to the foundations of knowledge itself, a link which places the mind in a position of hierarchical superiority over and above nature, including the nature of the body. From that time until the present, subject or consciousness is separated from and can reflect on the world of the body, objects, qualities.

Dualism

Descartes instituted a dualism which three centuries of philosophical thought have attempted to overcome or reconcile. Dualism is the assumption that there are two distinct, mutually exclusive and mutually exhaustive substances, mind and body, each of which inhabits its own self-contained sphere. Taken together the two have incompatible characteristics. The major problem facing dualism and all those positions aimed at overcoming dualism has been to explain the interactions of these two apparently impossible substances, given that, within experience and everyday life, there seems to be a manifest connection between the two in willful behavior and responsive psychological reactions. How can something that inhabits space affect or be affected by something that is nonspatial? How can consciousness ensure the body's movements, its receptivity to conceptual demands and requirements? How can the body inform the mind of its needs and wishes? How is bilateral communication possible? Dualism not only poses irresolvable philosophical problems; it is also at least indirectly responsible for the historical separation of the natural sciences from the social sciences and humanities, the separation of physiology from psychology, of quantitative analysis from qualitative analysis, and the privileging of mathematics and physics as ideal models of the goals and aspirations of

knowledges of all types. Dualism, in short, is responsible for the modern forms of elevation of consciousness (a specifically modern version of the notion of soul, introduced by Descartes) above corporeality.

This separation, of course, has its costs. Since the time Descartes, not only is consciousness positioned outside of the world, outside its body, outside of nature; it is also removed from direct contact with other minds and a sociocultural community. At its extreme, all that consciousness can be sure about is its own self-certain existence. The existence of other minds must be inferred from the apparent existence of other bodies. If minds are private, subjective, invisible, amenable only to first-person knowledge, we can have no guarantee that our inferences about other minds are in fact justified. Other bodies may simply be complex automata, androids or even illusions, with no psychical interior, no affective states or consciousness. Consciousness becomes, in effect, an island unto itself. Its relations to others, to the world, and its own body are the consequences of mediated judgments, inferences, and are no longer understood as direct and unmediated.

Cartesian dualism establishes an unbridgeable gulf between mind and matter, a gulf most easily disavowed, however problematically, by reductionism. To reduce either the mind to the body or the body to the mind is to leave their interaction unexplained, explained away, impossible. Reductionism denies any interaction between mind and body, for it focuses on the actions of either one of the binary terms at the expense of the other. Rationalism and idealism are the results of the attempt to explain the body and matter in terms of mind, ideas, or reason; empiricism and materialism are the results of attempts to explain the mind in terms of bodily experiences or matter (today most commonly the mind is equated with the brain or central nervous system). Both forms of reductionism assert that either one or the other of the binary terms is "really" its opposite and can be explained by or translated into the terms of its other.

There are not only good philosophical but also good physiological reasons for rejecting reductionism as a solution to the dualist dilemma. As soon as the terms are defined in mutually exclusive ways, there is no way of reconciling them, no way of understanding their mutual influences or explaining their apparent parallelism. Moreover, attempts to correlate ideas or mental processes with neurological functions have thus far failed, and the project itself seems doomed.

Cartesianism

There are at least three lines of investigation of the body in contemporary thought which may be regarded as the heirs of Cartesianism. [...]

In the first line of investigation, the body is primarily regarded as an object for the natural sciences, particularly for the life sciences, biology and medicine; and conversely, the body is amenable to the humanities and social sciences, particularly psychology (when, for example, the discipline deals with "emotions," "sensations," "experiences," and "attitudes"), philosophy (when, for example, it deals with the body's ontological and epistemological status and implications), and ethnography (where, for example, the body's cultural variability, its various social transformations, are analyzed). The body either is understood in terms of organic and instrumental functioning in the natural sciences or is posited as *merely* extended, *merely* physical, an object like any other in the humanities and social sciences. Both, in different ways, ignore the specificity of bodies in their researches.

The more medicalized biologicistic view implies a fundamental continuity between man and animals, such that bodies are seen to have a particularly complex form of physiological organization, but one that basically differs from organic matter by degree rather than kind. In a sense, this position is heir to the Christian concept of the human body being part of a natural or mundane order. As an organism, the body is merely a more complex version of other kinds of organic ensembles. It cannot be qualitatively distinguished from other organisms: its physiology poses general questions similar to those raised by animal physiology. The body's sensations, activities, and processes become "lower-order" natural or animal phenomena, part of an interconnected chain of organic forms (whether understood in cosmological or ecological terms). The natural sciences tend to treat the body as an organic system of interrelated parts, which are themselves framed by a larger ecosystemic order. The humanities reduce the body to a fundamental continuity with brute, inorganic matter. Despite their apparent dissimilarity, they share a common refusal to acknowledge the distinctive complexities of organic bodies, the fact that bodies construct and in turn are constructed by an interior, a psychical and a signifying view-point, consciousness or perspective.

The second line of investigation commonly regards the body in terms of metaphors that construe it as an instrument, a tool, or a machine at the disposal of consciousness, a vessel occupied by an animating willful subjectivity. For Locke and the liberal political tradition more generally, the body is seen as a possession, a property of a subject, who is thereby dissociated from carnality and makes decisions and choices about how to dispose of the body and its powers (in, for example, the labor market). Some models, including Descartes', construe the body as a self-moving automaton, much like a clock, car, or ship (these are pervasive but by no means exclusive images), according to the prevailing modes of technology. This understanding of the body is not unique to patriarchal philosophies but underlies some versions of feminist theory which see patriarchy as the system of universal male right to the appropriation of women's bodies (MacKinnon, Dworkin, Daly, and Pateman), a position that has been strongly criticized by other feminists (e.g. Butler and Cornell). In many feminist political struggles (those, for example, which utilize the old slogan "get your laws off my body") which are openly and self-consciously about women's bodies and their control by women (e.g. campaigns around such issues as sexual harassment and molestation, rape, the control of fertility, etc.), the body is typically regarded as passive and reproductive but largely unproductive, an object over which struggles between its "inhabitant" and others/exploiters may be possible. Whatever agency or will it has is the direct consequence of animating, psychical intentions. Its inertia means that it is capable of being acted on, coerced, or constrained by external forces. (This is not of course to deny that there are real, and frequent, forms of abuse and coercive mistreatment of women's bodies under the jealous and mutilating hostility of some men, but rather to suggest that frameworks within which women's bodies must be acknowledged as active, viable, and autonomous must be devised so that these practices can no longer be neatly rationalized or willfully reproduced.) As an instrument or tool, it requires careful discipline and training, and as a passive object it requires subduing and occupation. Such a view also lies behind the models of "conditioning" and "social construction" that are popular in some feminist circles, especially in psychology and sociology (Gilligan, Chodorow).

In the third line of investigation, the body is commonly considered a signifying medium, a vehicle of expression, a mode of rendering public and communicable what is

essentially private (ideas, thoughts, beliefs, feelings, affects). As such, it is a two-way conduit: on one hand, it is a circuit for the transmission information from outside the organism, conveyed through the sensory apparatus; on the other hand, it is vehicle for the expression of an otherwise sealed and self-contained, incommunicable psyche. It is through the body that the subject can express his or her interiority, and it is through the body that he or she can receive, code, and translate the inputs of the "external" world. Underlying this view too is a belief in the fundamental passivity and transparency of the body. Insofar as it is seen as a medium, a carrier or bearer of information that comes from elsewhere (either "deep" in the subject's incorporeal interior or from the "exterior" world), the specificity and concreteness of the body must be neutralized, tamed, made to serve other purposes. If the subject is to gain knowledge about the external world, have any chance of making itself understood by others, or be effective in the world on such a model, the body must be seen as an unresistant pliability which minimally distorts information, or at least distorts it in a systematic and comprehensible fashion, so that its effects can be taken into account and information can be correctly retrieved. Its corporeality must be reduced to a predictable, knowable transparency; its constitutive role in forming thoughts, feelings, emotions, and psychic representations must be ignored, as must its role as threshold between the social and the natural.

These seem to be some of the pervasive, unspoken assumptions regarding the body in the history of modern philosophy and in conceptions of knowledge considered more generally.

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