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Embodied Soul

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Abstract

Body has been an age-old issue. It's presence can be traced both in the domains of theology and philosophy. From Plato to Aquinas, body has been allocated what was considered to be its measured ground. For Plato, it was in the grand scheme of things, if only to bring to the fore the superiority of soul and in the process help establish a dichotomy that even with the modified approaches of Aristotle and Aquinas afterwards could not be mitigated. This article makes an effort to review the unfolding of the whole situation since then in order to pick up the nuances and trace all the intricacies of the subject matter that can have further bearing on our times.

Keywords: Body, soul, dichotomy, body as capital, lived body.

The dualism that Plato unleashed as part of his design of austere demarcation of ideal and non-ideal realms persisted and got further reinforcement in the Cartesian rationalism. Descartes's 'cogito ergo sum' is the fruit of an assiduous mindset bent on not only subjugating the body to the mind just as it was orchestrated before but also severing every possible tie that there can be between the two. His deliberation in the Second Meditation where he draws an analogy between waking life and sleeping as a strategy to dismiss body as falsity makes it amply clear his intension to disengage it from the constitution of being. And this intension gets further evinced in sixth meditation when he proclaims:

And although I may (rather, as I shall say soon: I certainly) have a body that is joined very closely to me, since I have on the one hand a clear distinct idea of myself insofar as I am a thinking, non-extended thing and, on the other hand, I have a distinct idea of the body insofar as it is merely an extended, non-thinking thing, it is certain that I am really distinct from my body and that I can exist without it. (Descartes 71)

Thus for Descartes body is an appendage, a mere dangling thing attached somehow to thinking thing, an appellation Descartes used for his notion of being. Preposterous as this assertion is, the question is whether we have been able to undermine such a notion of our 'being' in favour of a life lived in all its authenticity. Have we not continued to lead half a

life part body, part mind? And by leading such a life are we not slumbering in the cocoon of a simulated existence, oblivious of which we are, what is ours naturally?

Dissociation has set in and apparently in a more rampant fashion in our times than ever before. For someone living in today's world, body is no more a constituent part in the composite whole of his experience. It is not the other entwined root of his being. He hardly feels the ripples of it reach deep within. Does it mean he is any less conscious of it? Rather it is the contrary. He is conscious of it but in a different way. For him body has become thematic. He is as conscious of it as he would be of an object before his eyes. His body has taken its place in the midst of other myriad objects on display. His body has become an object among objects. What has precipitated this movement on his part? Is it induced from within or engendered by the world he has to move in and get involved with? An explanation as regards this has been offered by Jean Baudrillard in his exploration of the functional value of the human body. A Poststructuralist view would always have the text of the body placed and scrutinized in its context. And this is exactly what Jean Baudrillard does while addressing the whole issue of body in the chapter 8 (The Finest Consumer Object: The Body) of his seminal work *The Consumer Society Myths and Structures*. As he says,

The body is a cultural fact. Now, in any culture whatsoever, the mode of organization of the relation to body reflects the mode of organization of the relation to things and of social relations. In a capitalist society, the general status of private property applies also to the body, to the way we operate socially with it and the mental representation we have of it. In the traditional order- in the case of the peasant, for example- there was no narcissistic involvement or spectacular perception of his body. But an instrumental / magical vision induced by the labour process and relation to nature.

What we want to show is that the current structures of production/consumption induce in the subject a dual practice, linked to a split (but profoundly interdependent representation of his/her own body: the representation of the body as capital and as fetish (or consumer object). In both cases, it is important that , far from body being denied or left out of account, there is deliberate investment in it (in the two senses , economic and psychical , of the term). (Baudrillard 148)

Thus this account reveals how the subject has become enmeshed in the sign system that this world is. Although he has it, his body ceases to be his own only because he becomes complicit in distancing himself from it in order to shape it in a detached fashion as per the codes as Baudrillard observes:

Apart, then from the latent terrorism... What is interesting is the suggestion that one should revert back into one's own body and invest it narcissistically 'from the inside', not in any sense to get to know it in depth, but, by a wholly fetishistic and spectacular logic, to form it into a smoother, more perfect, more functional object for the outside world. This narcissistic relation- it is a managed narcissism, operating on the body as in colonized virgin 'territory', 'affectionately'[tendrement]exploring the body like a deposit to be mined in

order to extract from it the visible signs of happiness, health, beauty, animality which triumphs in the marketplace of fashion... (Baudrillard 150)

Thus, according to Baudrillard, body has lost what he calls its 'use values' (energetic, gestural, sexual) in order to gain a contrived form, 'a single functional exchange value' symbolic of pride, prestige in the fabric of society. Thus body becomes a mere signifier in a signifying system. To make an extension on that line of thought would be this that our bodies have become our assets and we have become the asset bearers, already on an acquisition spree, flaunting them in order to hoard the 'Other' in a bid to survive, sustain and empower ourselves in this eerie capitalist society.

This is the nature of the entrapment that the severance of body from the mind has engendered. And this severance, this dissociation is closely monitored and promoted as we are systematized into embracing it as the way of leading our life. Not only the dissociation is to take place but also once induced, it is to be sustained so that the situation can be exploited to satiate the ulterior motive of what Foucault refers to as power structure of modern society. Unfelt, unknown from within and hence detached, our body has become the site of power politics. It has become vulnerable to the influx of definitions that size it day and night as part of a relentless exercise of what Foucault addresses as power –knowledge structure. Our dangling body has become prey to the invasion of –to use a Foucauldian term – all the bio powers. Our bodies have become colonized.

At variance with this mind-body dissonance are the perspectives held by J.M. Coetzee and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Coetzee's works are conspicuous by their being the voices of resistance. One significant aspect of this resistance is this recurrent presence, in his works, of the notion of lived being. For Merleau-Ponty as well as for Coetzee any understanding and interpretation of life has to be centered on the unification of mind (soul), body. The present study focuses on the alternative that their works offer not merely as a critique of the way we are made to lead our life, thus giving us insight into the muck that we are sunk in, but also as the way out of it, as the sonorous strain that can hush up all the jarring cacophony of our synthetic existence.

There is a moment of revelation in *Life and Times of Michael K*. After his mother's death a nurse comes and meets K and hands him a parcel which contains his mother's ashes. The whole act—right from the cremation of the dead body, packaging the ashes up to delivering the parcel – is done so smoothly, has such an air of detached proficiency about it that it feels eerie as K is left musing:

He imagined the old women from the ward fed one after another, eyes pinched against the heat, lips pinched, hands at their sides, into the fiery furnace. First the hair, in a halo of flame, then after a while everything else, to the last things, burning and crumbling (32).

The rancour of these remains within him as he recounts later:

When she died they threw her in the fire. They gave me an old box of ash and told me, "Here is your mother, take her away, she is no good to us." (136)

What ails K is this insensitivity that, he witnesses, people around him are capable of showing to each other. Immune as they are to their own sensation of living, to those beads of pleasure and pain that only a truly lived being can be awash with, it is inevitable that they fail miserably in reaching, in feeling for the other. K's response to this unfeeling world is simple as he shuts himself off from it to be absorbed in his own world. And we catch a glimpse of how unique yet natural, how rich yet simple that life is in these moments:

After the hardships of the mountains and the camp there was nothing but bone and muscle on his body. His clothes, tattered already, hung on him without shape. Yet as he moved about his field he felt deep joy in his physical being. His step was so light that he barely touched the earth. It seemed possible to fly; it seemed possible to be both body and spirit. (102)

He also ate roots. He had no fear of being poisoned, for he seemed to know the difference between a benign bitterness and a malign one, as though he had once been an animal and the knowledge of good and bad plants had not died in his soul. (102)
All an illustration of what Maurice Merleau-Ponty called 'bodily being'.

Polar opposite is the figure of David Lurie in *Disgrace*. And it remains that way until he finally arrives at what it means to be a lived being. Lurie's life has been all about strutting and huff and puff. Body (feminine) for him is a decorative object, a prize to be chased and coveted, to be snared, to be conquered and possessed, to be won or lost, as Lurie surveys:

He has always been a man of the city, at home amid a flux of bodies where eros stalks and glances flash like arrows. (6)

Demand. She means command. Her shrillness surprises him: there has been no intimation of it before. But then, what should a predator expect when he intrudes into the vixen's nest, into the home of her cubs? (10)

It is not even body per se that lures Lurie. For him body has become a shape. Driven by his acquisition spree, his determination to hold and grasp, body has become distorted and dissected, subdued and chiseled –like an object and he gets caught in that trap of his own:

They wear helmets, but he recognizes them nevertheless. Melanie, on the pillion, sits with knees wide apart, pelvis arched. A quick shudder of lust tugs him. I have been there! He thinks. (35)

Without warning a memory comes back from years ago: of someone he picked up on the NI outside...They drove as far as Touws River, checked into a hotel; he fed her, slept with her. He remembers her long, wiry legs; its feather- lightness between his fingers. (192)

However, everything changes; there is an unexpected turn of events when Lurie joins Bev Shaw as dogs' keeper, as a dog-man. As he attends to the animals mute, helpless, their body writhing, it touches his body and soul; he becomes one with their contortion of pain, his whole being responds:

Nevertheless, he is the one who holds the dogs still as the needle finds the vein and the drug hits the heart and the legs buckle and the eyes dim. (142)

He had thought he would get used to it. But that is not what happens. The more killing he assists in, the more jittery he gets. One Sunday evening, driving home in Lucy's kombi, he actually has to stop at the roadside to recover himself. Tears flow down his face that he cannot stop; his hands shake. (143)

He does not understand what is happening to him... He does not seem to have the gift of hardness. (143)

His whole being is gripped by what happens in the theatre. (143)

Finally Lurie has come to realize what it means to live life fully as Elizabeth Costello in 'Elizabeth Costello' puts it:

To be a living bat is to be full of being; being fully a bat is like being fully human, which is also to be full of being. But being in the first case, human being in the second, maybe; but those are secondary considerations. To be full of being is to live as body-soul. One name for the experience of full being is joy. (77-78)

That we are our body and soul, that they are not disjointed, rather entwined to form a composite whole – this has been the perception and lifelong persuasion of Maurice Merleau – Ponty. We get to see the groundwork of this in his 'The Structure of Behaviour':

When I witness events that interest me, I am scarcely aware of the perpetual breaks which the blinking of the eyelids imposes on the scene, and they do not figure in my memory. But after all, I know very well that I am able to interrupt the view by closing my eyes, that I see by the intermediary of my eyes. This knowledge does not prevent my believing that I see things themselves when I look at them. This is because the body proper and its organs remain the bases or vehicles of my intentions and are not yet grasped as "physiological realities." The body is present to the soul as external things are present; in neither case is it a question of a causal relation between the two terms. The unity of man has not yet been broken; the body has not been stripped of human predicates; it has not yet become a machine; and the soul has not yet been defined as existence for-itself {pour soi}. Naive consciousness does not see in the soul the cause of the movements of the body nor does it put the soul in the body as the pilot in his ship. This way of thinking belongs to philosophy; it is not implied in immediate experience. Since the body itself is not grasped as a material and inert mass or as an external instrument but as the living envelope of our actions, the principle of these actions has no need of being a quasi physical force. Our intentions find their natural clothing or their embodiment in movements... (188)

And this viewpoint gets further reinforcement a few passages later:

He lives in a universe of experience, in a milieu which is neutral with regard to the substantial distinctions between the organism, thought and extension; he lives in a direct commerce with beings, things and his own body. The ego as a centre from which his intentions radiate, the body which carries them and the beings and things to which they are addressed are not confused: they are but three sectors of a unique field. (189)

For Merleau-Ponty 'bodily experience' is a 'psychic fact'. Body and soul are interwoven. They belong to what he calls 'a primary process of signification':

Anterior to conventional means of expression, which reveal my thoughts to others only because already, for both myself and them, meanings are provided for each sign, and which in this sense do not give rise to genuine communication at all, we must, as we shall see, recognize a primary process of signification in which the thing expressed does not exist apart from the expression, and in which signs themselves induce their significance externally. In this way the body expresses total existence, not because it is an external accompaniment to that existence, but because existence realizes itself in the body. The incarnate significance is the central phenomenon of which body and mind, sign and significance are abstract moments. (Phenomenology of Perception, 192)

Utterly distrustful of the reflective stage, of all the theoretical interpretations and erudite conjectures which he perceives as crippled, being only capable of providing body as an idea, Merleau-Ponty perpetually resorts to life as lived experience, to depicting the very existence itself in order to arrive at any understanding of life:

Man taken as concrete being is not a psyche joined to an organism, but the movement to and fro of existence which at one time allows itself to take corporeal form and at others moves towards personal acts. Psychological motives and bodily occasions may overlap because there is not a single impulse in a living body which is entirely fortuitous in relation to psychic intentions, not a single mental act which has not found at least its gem or its general outline in physiological tendencies. It is never a question of the incomprehensible meeting of two casualties, nor of a collision between the order of causes and that of ends. But by an imperceptible twist an organic process issues into human behavior, an instinctive act changes direction and becomes a sentiment, or conversely a human act becomes torpid and is continued absentmindedly in the form of a reflex (Phenomenology of Perception, 101-102).

All this seeing at close quarters gives us insight into our life and the way ahead. And the way ahead is this: it is only by leading life as an embodied soul one can truly realize oneself and other embodied beings.

Since we are of flesh and blood, both body and mind, any abiding understanding of ourselves and of each other, if it is to take place, has to be in terms of finitude rather than infinity. As Foucault has perceived in his later years that it is only by taking care of oneself, by feeling oneself truly one can feel the other beings. And to feel oneself truly one has to realize oneself as bodily being.

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