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The Body is Absent and Maybe Rightly So: An Analysis Based on Heidegger's Phenomenology

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The concept of having a body may seem obvious. We are immersed in a cultural environment that constantly sustains an idea of what a body may be, why everyone has it, and how we are relating to it. Many existential questions are supposedly answered according to it: What are we and what can we do or be? How do we relate to our world? Why we behave as such, why we feel and think as such? What can we do to interfere with our “biological” self? The approach need not be physiological, psychiatric or neurological; it can be psychological, idealistic, artistic, religious or spiritual. Virtual reality by-passes it and architecture and cinema can have “haptic” attributes (Bruno, 1997; Haptic Architects, 2023). Other examples include the performative arts that consciously utilize the body as a medium, any religious doctrine which demands dominance upon the body’s impulses, the sexual revolution which calls for “unchaining” our bodily interactions, and also the possibility of the transformation of the body, in order for it to adjust to a person’s self-identification. Finally, our own language and concepts clearly prove that we use a concept of the body as something we own: we refer to “my body”, to “my hand”. All these show a very solid presence of the “body” in our contemporary perception, interpretations and experience. But is this concept truly describing our reality, and if yes, to what extent? Towards the direction of this question, we find a more general framework that it is important to first delineate, in order to give a proper context to this issue.

A preliminary conception of the body finds it entangled in the dualistic interpretation of our world, among the “mental” and the “physical”. Nevertheless both positions are debatable. Bergson (1911), in the introduction of *Matter and Memory*, makes this exact point with his notion of the “image”. He proposes that “realism and idealism both go too far...For common sense, then, the object exists in itself...as we perceive it”. In other words, reality, as experienced through life, is never given to the common person as either mental or physical. The aforementioned “image” may well be equivalent to the “phenomenon” of phenomenology. Husserl’s maxim “To the things themselves!” resonates with Heidegger’s definition of the phenomenon as “any exhibiting of an entity as it shows itself in itself” (Heidegger, 1962, p.59). Furthermore, according to Aho (2005), Heidegger’s main goal is “undoing the assumptions of modern materialism”, in order to “turn our attention to the ordinary activity of human existence itself”.

A new perspective thus unfolds, uncovering a crucial possibility for our question of body. In our everyday experience, in our most basic and in our most fulfilling state of being, we may not be conscious of the body. “Not conscious of the body” means that our experience does not have an internal reference to a version of a self, manifested as something with an objective and detached character. But, in that case, is the body absent in such an exposure of our experience? We argue that the body, proximally and for the most part (as Heidegger

would put it), is more of a concept than a reality. On the contrary, we support that our (phenomenal) reality is lived as though anything that can be associated with our movement and spatiality is *us*, and it is *us* who have these potentialities as Beings-in-the-world (Heidegger, 1962). Complimentary to this position is the possibility of indeed perceiving and thus experiencing our self in a bodily-fashion in some special cases, in a way that “re-enforces” our perception of our spatiality. We will analyse both possibilities, focusing our interest on the former. Also, we will do this analysis, along with our general approach to this issue, by mainly following Heidegger’s early phenomenological work of *Being and Time*.

First, we have to clarify two possible meanings of the “body”. The body can be understood as “corporeal” (Körper) and “lived” (“Leib” or “corps vivant”), according to Scheler, Plessner, Husserl, and Merleau-Ponty (Großheim, 2021; Merleau-Ponty, 1945; Gallagher, 1986). The lived body may include all the possible experiences we mentioned above, in referring to the perception of our self as body: the “source” we assign specific sensations, or more closely the perceptions we get when we look at our hands, when we feel a pain in a localized place *within* us, when we get conscious of our muscle movement, when we see our eyes in the mirror, or when we touch one hand with the other. See Husserl’s notion of the body as a “bearer of sensations” (Carmen, 1999). In a broader sense it may be considered an embodied subjectivity or the basis of perception. See Merleau-Ponty’s views on the “embodied subjectivity” (Carmen, 1999; Fusar-Poli & Stanghellini, 2009), thus rendering it the basis of what we are and how we exist, without itself necessarily being “presented” while existing.

The corporeal body being an object in a world of objects, is clearly out of reach of the common phenomenal horizon, and thus it is mostly a “parasitic” *idea* within our reality. It is not an experience, at least in typical perception. Heidegger is very clear on this; in the Zollikon seminars he underlines that “I cannot determine the phenomenon of the body in relation to its corporeality ...the body ... is not a corporeal thing” (Ciocan, 2015), while in *Being and Time* he emphasizes that “Being-in...one cannot think of it as the Being-present-at-hand of some corporeal Thing (such as a human body)”.

The lived body, on the other hand, we mentioned that it could be meant at least in two ways. In the first, as in the case of our perception of our hands (which is a typical example of such experiences), the body that is presented is inevitably dual. It is dual in the sense that it indicates that it is *us* and at the same time *and* an “external” object (a locatable thing in space). Such a dichotomizing experience, which needs special attention to be “awakened”, loses its status as a truly intuitive and non-present-at-hand situation. We characterize as such the “complementary possibility of perceiving our self in a bodily-fashion” (mentioned above). In the second possibility, proposed by Merleau-Ponty, this lived body concept conveys almost exactly what we suggest about our self as Being-in-the-world, but this truth, it seems, is enclosed in a terminology that to some extent re-introduces the duality of subject-object empiricists hold, and thus we will not analyse it further, focusing more in Heidegger’s approach. But what can Heidegger say about the “lived body”? He conceives it as a “bodying-forth” which “belongs to being-in-the-world” (Aho, 2005). This concept, “Being-in-the-world”, is fundamental in his phenomenology, and thus it is necessary to be clarified first.

In *Being and Time* Heidegger (1962) starts by setting, as his ultimate aim, the formulation of the ontological question of Being in general. From that basis, he argues that the proper direction towards this “exploration” is the hermeneutic (phenomenological) analysis of a common person’s (“average”) being-there (Dasein). A Dasein that “in its very Being, that Being is an issue for it” and which “understands itself in terms of its existence- in terms of a possibility of itself” (Heidegger, 1962, p. 32-33). This being-there each of us has, is characterized by “a basic state, [which is] Being-in-the-world” (p. 169), such that “Dasein’s Being [is]...understood a priori as grounded upon that state of Being... (Being-in-the-world)” (p. 78). We live and “dwell” always in a world, with an implicit “kind of concern which manipulates things” (p. 95), an involvement which accompanies things experienced as ready-to-hand equipment (p. 98). We understand this as a very clear but crucial truth about our human existence: we exist in situations, we exist entangled in worlds, with their own manifestations and internal dynamics of meaning. We live a vivid interpretation of situations, reflecting our intentions (the intentional content of experience being a main point of Brentano, Husserl, Heidegger and later phenomenologists). We are dwelling in such worlds and this is the way our existence is manifested. We do not exist separately from any world or entity of the world. We may have our location or spatiality, but nevertheless our world is in some sense already “within” us, as much as we are “outside”, all over it.

The whole approach is clearly setting “Being-in-the-world” as fundamental to Dasein, but at the same time it is silent to any positive mention to Dasein’s embodiment, even in terms of a “lived body”. Heidegger (1962) mentions this avoidance stating, “This ‘bodily nature’ hides a whole problematic of its own, though we shall not treat it here” (p. 135). Dreyfus (1991) proposes that “having a body does not belong to Dasein’s essential structure”, linking this statement to Heidegger’s own explanation of the selection of a neutral “Dasein”. Aho (2005) inclines to the same interpretation in concluding that “the emphasis, for Heidegger, is not on the individual but on the Da, on the open region or space of meaning that is already ‘there’” (Aho, 2005, p. 3; Raffoul & Nelson, 2016, p. 273). Heidegger, thus, seems to implicitly position the body out of the essential structure of how we are and live in our everydayness. This argument may seem to support our thesis, but in a subtle way. Because Heidegger, even though he remains quite silent in *Being and Time* about the body, he is not entirely silent about it throughout his work (for example, the “Zollikon Seminars”). And silence is not identical to positively affirming something. Nevertheless, we interpret his position in the light of the primacy of Being-in-the-world over the concept of Dasein-having-a-body, when the latter is usually presented in *Being and Time* as either the detached present-at-hand corporeal thing or as Dasein’s spatial possibility as Being-in-the-world (Heidegger, 1962, Division 1, part III, ch. 21).

It could be argued, that even though Heidegger neglects the body in *Being and Time*, he indicates it in concepts as the “ready-to-hand”, or the intuitive perception of “circumspection” (1962, p. 98). Nonetheless, this does not disprove our point, as our problem is not if the body (lived or corporeal) is implicated in our being or linked to it, but rather if it is phenomenally present in our experience, and to what extent. In that sense, the (lived) body could be indicated in our involvements and the constitution of the world, but if we do not specifically focus our attention to it, it is neglected, hidden and exhausted in the indication.

Indication, indeed, is real, but uncovering it, demands an analytic approach which seems detached, like converting the indicated into something just thematically occurring. As Aho (2005) suggests, “Heidegger’s analysis of everydayness takes for granted the pre-reflective know-how of the ‘lived-body’” and most importantly “Dasein, as the shared referential context, is already there, prior to bodily perception”. We will return to the indicated nature of the lived body later, as it needs some analysis.

We tried to show that Heidegger’s phenomenological ideas exclude the corporeal body and “hide” (in terms of absence) the lived body in Dasein’s everydayness. And we argue, that this absence is compatible with a pure “average” or original experience that does not truly live in such a way as to, for the most part, have something like a body manifest itself. We emphasize that by saying “for the most part”, we mainly describe a spontaneous, basic state of being, but also, and more importantly, a fundamental possibility. We *are*, as Dasein, that which a third-person scientific perspective would call a “body”. Merleau-Ponty (1945) signifies this by saying “I am not in front of my body. I am in it or rather I am it” (Aho, 2005). It may be useful to use the term and concept of “body” in analyses of human experience (especially for pathological ones), as for example in Merleau-Ponty’s discussions of the phantom limb (Moran & Mooney, 2002), but such applications distract from the first-person perspective that is most important for the phenomenological analysis of our lives. We dwell in a world which we understand in terms of our actual and possible involvements.

In our Being-in-the-world, the body may not be *usually* experienced as such, as *something we own*, but it is indicated, silently, as we mentioned earlier. Our reach, our spatiality (the “closeness” of a thing ready-to-hand in our spatiality (Heidegger, 1962, p. 135), our fitness and strength, our skills and expression, all of them define our world in terms of how we can act. The body is indicated also in the social image of ourselves, as we see in others both a person (a Dasein) and an occurring body, which we may project back to ourselves in our understanding of our own situation through the others, when “Being-lost in the publicness of the “They” [or “Anyone”]” (Heidegger, 1962, p. 135). Other indications of the body are found in art creation (dance, music, drawing/painting and performing), in sex and in sickness (Carel, 2013), where again it is almost never truly perceived as something separate. Even in the case of the “lived body” (Großheim, 2021), this body could be interpreted as a world on its own, which Dasein inhabits. Most importantly, the body is indicated as a horizon of limits and possibilities of how we can act, move and reach things in our world (as a world we dwell in, of situations, not strictly the present-at-hand physical world of Nature). Our intentions, as acts with a potentiality to be, are projected in a way that is oriented according to this “compass” of our indicated body. In all cases, people just get “lost”, “thrown” into the world, being “absorbed in the world of concern” [*B.T.*, p. 216], and act, being fully present in the experience. Any account of being in the former situations proves that we, ourselves, proximally and for the most part (*almost & usually*), *are* in the there and now of the moments of action constituting our Being-in-the-world, not as bodies, but as Da-sein.

Is there, though, an area within our experiential horizon, within which we can truly see the independence of the constitution of the world and our perception of the body? I believe that the phenomenon of dreams may present a good candidate. Dreams can constitute

worlds (Revonsuo, 1995), full with engaging meanings and spontaneous actions which reciprocally define the dream-worlds themselves. There, any indication or presentation of the body (together with the self), even though possibly rare, would actually be an illusion, in the sense that no body is truly there to perceive (Metzinger, 2013; Occhionero & Cicogna, 2011). As an illusion, though, it may have some phenomenal truth. Nevertheless, the constitution of the dream-world, and our experience being-in there, has the ultimate primacy, under which all possible dream-experiences (even considered as illusion-like) acquire their content and meaning. Therefore, dreams show a new avenue for phenomenological exploration for the body-issue. In dreams, the world is purely manifested as such, revealing the true nature of lived experience, regardless of “parasitic” representations of a body and their accompanying objectification of the self-Dasein. Our approach in this thesis, is thus complemented by this possibility of dreams: in specific dreams, which are the most usual, as in specific experiences of wakefulness, which are the most usual too, the body is necessarily absent, as we exist as purely Beings-in-a-world. And this absence is revealing a very fundamental, fulfilling and interesting possibility of experience.

Beyond trying to prove that this absence is usual and basic in the description of our everyday/average experience, we could interpret it as a possibility for a “new” perspective on life. We could, thus, broaden the horizons of our involvement and our reach within the world. But most importantly, we could enhance our engagement and our presence in our world, by closing the artificial or intensified dichotomy on our worldly-spatial presence, and by this feeling of participation, also our feeling of responsibility and freedom could be strengthened. This psychological and ethical dimension, becomes, or more accurately, is revealed, as the basis for the motivation of our whole thesis: we should not forget that we exist as ourselves in our world, dream-like or awoken, potentially truly present, and not through a mechanical medium which provides access to our observation of such a life.

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