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Body Philosophy

I

A disciple of Plotinus, the founder of Neo-Platonism, began his biography of his teacher with the remark that Plotinus was “ashamed to be in a body”. This is illustrated by Plotinus’s lack of hygiene as well as his rejection of being painted. (His followers had to make a picture of him secretly.) Plotinus was convinced that the physical world was vain, and the soul was the only valuable part of the human being.

I have always found this anecdote to be rather exemplary for the philosophical relationship to the body. Throughout the history of philosophy, one can observe again and again an extreme emphasis on the intellectual and a disregard of the physical, of the body.

Critics of Christianity (e.g. Nietzsche) have righteously pointed out that this tendency reached its peak in Christian thought. It is worth noting, however, that Christianity regarded the human being as a bodily being, i.e., it was not dualistic, in the beginning. The Revelation predicts the resurrection of humans as whole beings, the bodies are predicted to literally raise from the grave, just as Christ is said to have.

Late Christianity, however, ceased to believe in a near apocalypse and developed the vision of an afterworld separated from the human world; and thereby separated the soul from the body – which were inseparable in Judaism and early Christianity.

But even though late Christianity has popularized this view and has taken it to the extreme, the idea was not essentially new, but was foreshadowed by Plato in the Dialogue on the Immortality of the Soul; and even before by the Pythagoreans, Cynics and Stoics, who emphasized the superiority of the soul over bodily needs. Similar ideas can be found in other cultures as well, e.g. in Buddhism – which aim is to free the soul from the bodily needs – and in the mythology of Ancient Egypt.

II

Whole cultures and periods have been dominated by the idea that the body is inferior to the soul¹, e.g. the baroque with its talking of the *vanitas*. But they always ended after a while. It seems to me that philosophy, on the other hand, has kept this idea over the course of history.

¹ For the sake of simplicity, I will use the terms *soul*, *mind* and *intellect* interchangeably throughout the essay.



This is also true for philosophers who did not look at it from the orthodox Christian or ecclesiastical point of view, most notably Descartes.

I hope it is not too audacious a hypothesis that a philosopher is more likely to despise his (or her) body than the average man (or woman) – and I myself must confess that I belong to this type of human beings. A lack of physical capability is often a reason for higher education and intellectual training – time and effort are invested differently. Intellectual, sensitive, introverted personalities are also more likely to withdraw themselves into their mind than others, so that their body is rather strange to them. At least the hypothesis is backed up by the biographies of great philosophers: Kant had a narrow chest, Descartes was weak and delicate (he probably died of pneumonia), Hume was obese due to an illness in his childhood, Kierkegaard was hunchbacked and we do not even have to talk about Nietzsche. (This is just a general observation I make, just as the fact that an overwhelming proportion of philosophers has not been married, as Nietzsche noted in the *Genealogy of Morals*; of course, there are exceptions to the rule.)

Could this be the reason that philosophers have always emphasized the superiority of the intellectual over the physical – because it was true for them? Nietzsche has suggested something like this in regards to Schopenhauer (again, in the *Genealogy*), but did never explicitly postulate it concerning the philosophical branch. (The same might be true for many religious personalities, by the way.)

I myself have always felt that philosophy has an insufficient approach or attitude to the body; but, at the same time, could not help but to sympathize with it. I have always had a distaste for the bodily needs, for eating, for sleep. But I have experienced first-hand that the French materialists were right: If you do not care for your body, the mind will suffer from it as well.

III

In the last centuries, philosophy has overcome many metaphysical convictions, just as science has overcome many old superstitions. The idea of the soul being a distinct, integrated entity has been discredited by more philosophers and scientists than would be appropriate to list here; and the idea of a spiritual realm, separated, but somehow connected to our world, has been revealed to be a mere speculation.

Now is the time to emphasize the importance of the body, and the dependence of the intellect on it. The following four premises I wish to be accepted by any future philosophy: (i) No form of mind – no feeling, no perception, and no thinking – can exist without a physical substrate. The mind is a behavior of matter. (ii) The mind is more subject to the laws of matter (physics) than the body (or another material substrate) is subject to the laws of mind. There is no way out of this hierarchy. (iii) Mind without physical power is useless. (iv) The mind constructs its world from raw data, but it cannot create anything without those data. All data must be provided by the senses, which are parts of the body.

The mind has become so powerful that it has come to believe that it is all-powerful. This is what I call the *megalomania of the mind*. We must overcome this megalomania, but we must not think little of the mind. Its delusion is a sign for its advancements since the beginning of civilization. Nietzsche has called it the selfishness of the mind (or the “I”), cf. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. The mind has become so powerful that it seemed to itself that it was able to create its own world, a world of concepts, ideas, notions; and this, I suppose, was the intention of



Plato's world of ideas. But such a world does not and cannot exist. It is all in the mind, i.e., all in the head.

I dare claim that we even have to converse Aristotle's famous formula: Aristotle said that Reason was the essence (or substance) of the human being, the Body was an accident – I say: *Reason is an accident, the Body is the essence of the human being*. I thereby complete a notion of the body which was foreshadowed by Schopenhauer's conviction that the blind will was primary and the intellect secondary.

IV

I hope I have not made myself an advocate of pure irrationality and instinct in the third section. I do think very high of the mind; indeed, I believe it to be the most interesting and fascinating phenomenon our universe can offer – and that we have to take care of it and to protect it at any cost, as long as the physical reality allows us to do so (which, sadly, will not be for eternity, as far as we know today from the astronomers and cosmologists).

Believe me: I have the most sympathy for the most doubtful readers of this peace; I myself have not been ready to accept the Truth of the Body for a long time, and still have accepted it only as an intellectual matter – I have not yet embraced it with all my heart, I may say. But as I proceeded in this matter, I could not help but to change my mind.

The mind has been the object of philosophical reflection since the beginning. This is another proof of the introverted tendency of philosophy; a philosopher is someone who looks into himself (or herself). This is clear to anyone who has only looked for a moment into Plato (especially the Dialogue on the Soul, which I mentioned above), Descartes (especially the meditations), Hume (especially a *Treatise on Human Nature*), Kant, or Schopenhauer. The bibliography concerning the nature of the soul is overwhelming. Maybe it is the only thing which philosophy was concerned with at all, in some sense.

I propose that it is time for a *philosophy of the body* as well. A philosophy which has not only accepted the premises I have set above, but which is also interested in the body as the object of philosophical reflection and investigation.

Philosophy is, of course, an activity of the mind. And therefore, body philosophy must look at the body through the mind's eyes. (I hope the reader is willing to accept this bizarre metaphor.) And it must deepen the human understanding on the connection, on the relation of body and mind; on the meaning of "being in a body", so normal and necessary a condition, yet so shameful and painful for Plotinus and the like (to which I belong). *The body shall not be the mind's shame; the mind shall be the body's pride!*

V

I am afraid that a temporary overestimation of the body is necessary to cure the mind's megalomania. I am not happy about that. In the long run, we shall aim to develop a philosophy which does not hold the mind higher than the body, nor the body higher than the mind. For a long time, mind was in charge. Now it is time to help the body to get to its right! Only as equal partners, both can work together. The philosophy of the body shall help mind and body to reconcile. It is a form of mediation. Finally, I hope that we will be able to view body and mind



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not as two different things anymore, but as the two sides of the same coin. This would be the true fulfillment of monism.

I feel like I have wanted to express all these thoughts for some time. Vaguely and inarticulately they have been around. And I find it very meaningful and miraculous that I am writing them down on a day of May in Olympia, Greece. Olympia! Which place could be more fit to recognize the wholesomeness of the human body? Where has the body been more celebrated than here?

And Greece! Hellas! Is it not the ancient Hellenistic ideal I am approaching? That efforts of education must not suppress the training of the body, that the intellect must not be neglected over physical striving – that body and soul must equally be taken care of? Yes, modern philosophy must return to this old, but not outdated ideal.

I am a stranger in the land of the body. I was lost in the seemingly endless fields of the mind. But what a gift to enter here! What a refreshment! What a nutrition!