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The body ideal in French phenomenology

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Abstract

Is the phenomenological concept of “body” not, in general, an ideal? The purpose of this article is to defend this thesis within the scope of the French phenomenological tradition. The French phenomenological concept of “lived body” points to an ideal, rather than to our actual experience of the body; and this ideal is none other than that of the soul. The Cartesian ideal of the soul becomes, in the French phenomenological tradition, the ideal of the body—of a body that is determined, in return, by the soul’s properties. The French concept of “lived body” results indeed from two forms of idealization that will be exposed successively: the *epistemological* idealization that consists in attributing, to the body, the soul’s mode of knowledge as a *cogito*; the *practical* idealization that consists in attributing, to the body, the soul’s mode of power and action as an unlimited will. This twofold gesture finds its paradigmatic expression in Michel Henry’s phenomenology of the body, but can also be seen at work in Sartre, Ricœur and Merleau-Ponty.

Keywords

Phenomenology
 Lived body
 Soul
Cogito
 Will

1. Introduction

This article is entitled “The Body Ideal” in reference to Freud’s expression of an “ego ideal” (*Ichideal*) in his text “On Narcissism” (1914). Even though Freud does not explicitly distinguish, in this text, between the “ideal ego” (*Idealich*) and the “ego ideal” (*Ichideal*), the status of ideality shifts from one expression to the other.¹ In the first expression of an “ideal ego”, ideality is a property of the ego, that could be ideal and that has actually been in its infantile state. In the second expression of an “ego ideal” the ego becomes the content of an ideal that is itself the substrate. It is in this latter sense that one understands here the expression of a “body ideal”. The phenomenological concept of “lived body” does not point to our actual experience of the “body”—that could, or not, be ideal—but points rather to an “ideal” that happens to become, in the phenomenological tradition, an ideal of the body.

This ideal, from which the body is described by phenomenology, is none other than that of the Soul. The modern and Cartesian ideal of the soul becomes, in the phenomenological tradition, the ideal of the body—of a body that is determined, in return, by all the perfections of this ideal. The phenomenological tradition attributes to the body at least two different properties of the Cartesian soul. Hence the body’s two forms of idealization that will be exposed successively.

- (1) The first *idealization* is the *epistemological* one that consists in attributing, to the body, the soul’s mode of knowledge as a *cogito*. This ideal is precisely that of *consciousness*—the dualistic opposition between Body and Consciousness becoming here an identification. This identification does not only result in thinking a consciousness that is embodied—a bodily consciousness—but also leads, inversely, to a conception of the body as fully conscious.²
- (2) The second *idealization* is the *practical* one that consists in attributing, to the body, the soul’s mode of power and action, conceived by Descartes as an unlimited will. Likewise, this identification between body and will does not only result in thinking a will that is embodied—a bodily will—but also leads, inversely, to a conception of a body as absolutely voluntary and powerful.

This twofold gesture, already sketched by Husserl's *Ideas II*,³ is radicalized by French Phenomenology. It finds its paradigmatic expression in Michel Henry's Phenomenology of the Body, but can also be seen at work in Sartre, Ricœur and Merleau-Ponty.

2. The epistemological ideal: body, *cogito* and consciousness

2.1. Henry

The first perfection of the soul that is attributed to the body is its mode of knowledge, as a *cogito*. A radical instance of this idealization can be found in Henry's reading of Maine de Biran—in *Philosophy and Phenomenology of the Body*.

In the *Essai sur les fondements de la psychologie*, Maine de Biran explicitly starts from Descartes' *cogito* as the sole principle in the history of philosophy to have ever reached the "primitive fact". And Biran identifies the "I think, I exist" with the "immediate feeling of an action",⁴ of an "acting force" which continuously applies to a resistance. "I take over Descartes' principle, I Think, I exist; I try to characterize, in a more precise way, what is this substantial and primitive thought that is supposed to constitute my entire individual existence; and I find it identified, in its origin, with the feeling of an action and of a *willing effort* (*effort voulu*)."⁵ Thus conceived as an act or an effort, the *cogito* is not the sole privilege of thought anymore—in its opposition to the body. As Biran explicitly writes: "Descartes' doubt, which supposes an annihilated body while thought subsists, is absolutely opposed to the primitive fact."⁶ This explains Henry's reading of Biran, according to which the body now benefits from this primordial mode of knowledge.⁷ It is not the *cogito* that changes here, but the body, now detached from the extended substance to be attached to the thinking one. Henry praises Biran for daring to name this "primordial and ontological knowledge", a "body". The *cogito*'s ideal mode of knowledge has not changed through its embodiment, it has simply taken another name. The body's mode of knowledge is then deduced from the main properties of Descartes' *cogito*. The body is known accordingly in an absolute immediacy (1), certainty (2) and transparency (3).

- (1) First, the body gives itself in an *absolute immediacy*. Maine de Biran reads Descartes' *cogito* as a "primitive fact". The connection between the subject's existence and his thought is a "fact of consciousness" that is "immediately given in the fact of the intimate sense."⁸ This explains, according to Biran, the uselessness to prove such a fact. Descartes is

failing to see that this fact does not need to be proven “since individual existence is immediately known.”⁹ Yet, this immediate fact of consciousness is not to be obtained, as in Descartes, by exclusion of the body. It is, on the contrary, our body’s own mode of knowledge. Our lived body (*corps propre*) “has the reality of a primitive fact.”¹⁰ The body is the “object of an immediate apperception.”¹¹ There is therefore an immediate and primordial knowledge of the body. And Biran’s immediate apperception becomes, in Henry, the absolute immediacy of an auto-affection.

- (2) The body then gives itself in an *absolute certainty*. According to Biran, the *cogito* does not get its absolute certainty from a deductive kind of reasoning, but from its immediacy only. This certainty is therefore that of the body’s existence and reality—“just as certain as the reality of our existence.”¹² As Henry puts it then, the body gives itself in an “immediate absolutely certain manner, and *its study is comprised within the project of a first philosophy*.”¹³
- (3) Eventually, the body gives itself in an *absolute transparency*. Henry here radicalizes Biran’s conception of the body. The body is not only “a fact of consciousness”. It is, according to Henry, a pure and absolute consciousness that leaves nothing aside, not even the organic body. While Biran, in the third chapter of the first volume of the *Essai*, conceives “the lived body” as the organic body or the continuous resistance that constantly surrenders to the willing effort, Henry identifies the lived body with this effort, removing what Biran thought as the body’s interior resistance to reduce it entirely to this pure and primitive fact of consciousness. The body is not only a “fact of consciousness” anymore, but a fully conscious body that gives itself in the absolute transparency of a pure auto-affection. The body and its movements “belong to the sphere of the transparency and absolute certitude of transcendental subjectivity.”¹⁴ Or, as Henry wrote in a handwritten note to *Incarnation*: “the body does not lie, any more than a *cogitatio*.”¹⁵ From the theological perspective of *Incarnation*, this transparency is thought by Henry in terms of the flesh’s “arch-intelligibility” that he defines as its “self-affirming and self-legitimizing dimension” that makes it an “unshakable foundation”. Hence what he calls the “*cogito* of flesh” or “the Christian *cogito*”.¹⁶

AQ1

AQ2

Maine deBiran writes about the primitive fact of consciousness or the *cogito*, that it is the “most perfect of its kind”.¹⁷ And this perfection becomes, by proxy, that

of the body. This identification is accomplished more radically by Henry, since nothing of the body is left unconscious and remains outside of its *cogito*. As Henry writes in another handwritten note that says it all: “There is no difference between flesh and soul.”¹⁸ This could give rise to, at least, two different kinds of objections. *First*, the body is thought from an epistemological ideal—from the mode of knowledge through which it can be accessed. Henry clearly posits an identity between the “ontological nature” of the body and its “ontological knowledge”. He even claims, in the *Genealogy of Psychoanalysis*, that it is the material body only that has been excluded by Descartes’ *cogito*, not the knowledge of the body. There is therefore a body that is identical with its knowledge and that is nothing more than the soul’s consciousness. The phenomenal experience of the body is then reduced to the knowledge that we have of it—which, from a phenomenological standpoint, is already questionable. *Secondly*, this knowledge is that of an immediate and absolute consciousness and identity, at the ground of every other certainty. The lived body would perpetually give itself in a perfect transparency. Which excludes, from the lived body, any phenomenon of unconsciousness, otherness or opacity.

2.2. Sartre

This gesture, that defines the body from a Cartesian ideal of consciousness, is also that of an intentional phenomenology that starts from Husserl’s reading of the *cogito*—in the *Cartesian Meditations* and in the third section of *Ideas II*.¹⁹ The “deepest meaning” of the phenomenological return to the *cogito*, according to Husserl, is not a return to the pure interiority of this “primitive fact”, but a return to the *cogito*’s *cogitatum*—to an interiority that contains an exteriority, or to an intentional consciousness. And *Leib* is defined accordingly, in §44 of the *Cartesian Meditations*, as the organ of the intentional perception. Likewise, in the third section of *Ideas II*, *Leib* inherits the intentional consciousness by which it has been constituted—and the “I move”, “I hit”, “I dance”, become accordingly a *cogito*.²⁰

This gesture is achieved by Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*. Sartre starts from a Husserlian and intentional reading of the *cogito*, conceived in its pre-reflexivity.²¹ And he defines consciousness accordingly as a “being-for-itself” (*être-pour-soi*) that always implies a pre-reflexive kind of inadequacy. Yet, it is from this definition of consciousness as a “for-itself”, that Sartre first defines the body, depriving it of its remaining hyletic dimension. Hence an absolute identification between consciousness and body: “Being-for-itself must be wholly body and it must be wholly consciousness [...] the body is wholly ‘psychic’ (*le corps est tout entier psychique*).”²² The body’s consciousness is, of course, not a self-affected-consciousness, but rather that which perpetually vanishes in its own

transcendence or intentionality. Hence Sartre's critique of Biran, according to which the "effort sensation" or primitive fact is a "psychological myth". When I lift a glass, says Sartre, I feel *its* weight—not *my* own effort.²³ The body is then defined from an entirely different ideal of consciousness than it is in Henry. But it is still from an ideal that also reduces the body's residual materiality and material kind of opacity, and makes it transparent again—not as a self-transparency but as a worldly one.

2.3. Merleau-Ponty

This ideal of transparency is precisely criticized by Merleau-Ponty.²⁴ Yet, Merleau-Ponty's conception of the lived body still follows somehow a "Cartesian scenario", to use Saint-Aubert's expression.²⁵ If Merleau-Ponty redefines the *cogito* beneath its transparency, as a "tacit *cogito*",²⁶ he still defines the lived body as a kind of *cogito*.

The tacit *cogito* is, first, that of Descartes' *VIth Meditation*. According to Merleau-Ponty—explained by Saint-Aubert in *Le scénario cartésien*—Descartes' description of the close union of soul and body introduces the human body between the thinking and the extended substances and contradicts everything that precedes, opening thereby a thought that is not clear but obscure, not distinct but confused.²⁷ This thought, Merleau-Ponty finds it in Malebranche as well as the soul's mode of knowledge. The soul, in Malebranche, is not known by means of clear ideas, but by means of an obscure and confused consciousness.²⁸ It is obscure since "Human beings are not their own light unto themselves"²⁹; and confused since the soul cannot be given as distinct from the body.³⁰ As Merleau-Ponty wrote in his 1947–48 lectures on *L'union de l'âme et du corps*, I am not in possession of my thought in Malebranche's *cogito*: "There is, in Malebranche, the deliberate intention to bring the *unreflective experience* into philosophy (*de faire entrer dans la philosophie l'irréfléchi*)."³¹ This non-distinction is also that of Maine de Biran's *cogito*, according to Merleau-Ponty. In a strict opposition with Henry's reading of Biran, Merleau-Ponty points indeed to the primitive fact's duplicity, to the impossibility of distinguishing between the effort and the resistance. Hence the primordial confusion and obscurity of a *cogito* that, thus opened to our tacit and unreflective relation to the world, has gained some thickness and been deprived of any transparency.

Yet, it is still from a *cogito* that the body is conceived by Merleau-Ponty. And the body's obscure consciousness, made of its unreflective relation with the world, still bears the immaterial marks of the Cartesian Soul. Something of the body cannot be felt: the touching-body cannot itself be touched—at least not as it touches, or as a touching-body; the seeing-body cannot be seen—at least not as it

sees, or as a seeing-body; the sentient-body cannot be sensed—at least not as it senses or as a sentient-body.³² As Merleau-Ponty writes in the *Phenomenology of Perception*: “Insofar as it sees or touches the world, my body can therefore be neither seen nor touched.”³³ This lack of materiality, at the heart of the body, latter becomes the body’s inherent absence, thought by Merleau-Ponty in terms of “soul” and “spirit”. In “The Philosopher and His Shadow”, the soul of the other is his body’s “absence”,³⁴ that becomes, in *The Visible and the Invisible*, the negative wake at the heart of the flesh. The sensible, writes Merleau-Ponty eloquently, makes “of a visible a seer, and of a body a mind, or at least a flesh.”³⁵ The seer is a flesh—if not a mind. It is the “rarefied flesh” of “a glorified body.”³⁶

Secondly, the sentient-body is not localized or spatialized—it is not a fragment of space, says Merleau-Ponty. The touching hand, is not “brought down at a point of space” but “shoots through space like a rocket.”³⁷ This non-localization of the body is even defined as “the zone of not being in front of which precise beings, figures and points can come to light.”³⁸ The body as this zone of non-being is “the reserve of vague power against which the gesture and its aim stand out.”³⁹ This non-localization results from the sentient-body’s practical and kinesthetic intentionality, from its motor function or ability, and eventually from its voluntary dimension. This meets the second ideal of the soul from which the body is defined by the phenomenological tradition—the practical ideal of the soul’s unlimited will.

3. The practical ideal: body and will

3.1. Henry

The second perfection of the soul, attributed to the body by the French phenomenological tradition, is its mode of power or action. Descartes distinguishes the body’s mode of action—thought in mechanistic terms of movement and causality—from the soul’s mode of action—thought in terms of will and freedom.⁴⁰ Will, as the action of the soul is, as Descartes writes in the *Principia Philosophiae*, one of Man’s “highest perfection[s]”.⁴¹ And, if this perfection is not in Descartes a perfection of our body—one would never praise an *automaton* for its actions—it becomes such in the phenomenological tradition.

One can find, in Henry’s reading of Maine de Biran, a radical instance of this idealization. In the *Essai sur les fondements de la psychologie*, Biran proceeds indeed to a twofold identification.

- (1) He first identifies Descartes’ two modes of thinking. Whereas, in Descartes, will is a mode of thinking besides perception as an act of the

understanding,⁴² Biran claims that the *cogito* is always already an acting force.⁴³ In this primitive fact, the self gives itself as both a substance and a cause or a productive force. The immediate feeling of our existence is always already the immediate feeling of our effort or activity. As Henry puts it: “the thrust of the Biranian thought is precisely the determining of the *cogito* as a power of production”; “The *cogito* does not mean an I think but an ‘I can’.”⁴⁴ And the feeling of this force is our will: “the feeling of a *cause* or a force currently applied to move the body is an acting force that we call *will*.”⁴⁵

- (2) Hence Biran’s second identification of the *will* with a *power* and an *activity*. Will is not the soul’s powerless and abstract wish, but a force or a power.⁴⁶ No will can be thought that is not already powerful. Likewise, in Henry’s reading of Biran the concept of “will” almost disappears before the concept of “power”. And this power is not a pure potentiality, but a power that is already an act, or an acting force. No will can be thought that is not already an activity.
- (3) This twofold identification gives rise to a third one in Henry’s reading of Maine de Biran. As powerful and acting, will is our Body. If the body is still partly identified by Biran with the resistance that is inherent to our will, Henry accomplishes this absolute identification between will and a body that is not organic anymore, but entirely subjective. According to this reading, the body is not the instrument of my will, or its organ, it is my will. The body is not in my power, it *is* itself my power. The body, says Henry, *is* this “act” that immediately feels itself, this tension at the origin of every other power.

Thought as such, the body’s will is an unlimited one—recalling the unlimited dimension of Descartes’ will.

- (1) First because the body’s will is not itself subjected to an exterior power. As Biran already writes about the effort, it is “beyond any reach” and cannot be subordinated to any “foreign force”. No exterior sensation could ever inflect my will.⁴⁷ But, whereas Biran maintains the body’s sensible kind of passivity, Henry criticizes Biran’s remaining dualism that repeats the body’s mechanistic explanation in terms of a sensitive form of causality. Henry rejects therefore this sensible form of passivity, along with its mechanistic explanation, and refuses to maintain the body’s sensible dimension besides its acting one—the passivity of sensibility besides the activity of the will. Passivity is not a sensible affection, opposed to the body’s activity: “activity and passivity are rather two different modalities

of one and the same fundamental power which is nothing other than the original being of the subjective body.”⁴⁸ Passivity is not opposed to the body’s primordial power, but is merely one of its modalities. It is this power’s own mode of givenness.⁴⁹ The subjective body is passively subjected to and affected by its own power.⁵⁰ So that it can only be powerful—since its passivity is its power, and its power, is passivity. As Henry wrote in a handwritten note to *Incarnation*: “Impossibility for the body to differ from itself = its possibility to act.”⁵¹ This suppresses, from the subjective body, any kind of *involuntary*—i.e. of a body that could be exposed to a foreign power that moves it involuntarily.

- (2) The body’s will is unlimited then because it has a full power over exterior things. This power first extends to the organic body which, according to Henry and Biran, constantly surrenders to our willing effort. As Henry writes: “the organs present themselves to us as an empire over which we have power and authority.”⁵² And this power then extends to “everything that is”, namely, to the exterior world. The body, writes Henry “is the ensemble of powers we have concerning the world.”⁵³ This suppresses, from the subjective body, any kind of *powerlessness*—i.e. of a body that could not move further or faster.

3.2. Merleau-Ponty

These three kinds of identifications—between *cogito* and will, will and power, power and body—can be found as well in Merleau-Ponty.

- (1) In his 1947-48 lectures, Merleau-Ponty comments Biran’s identification between thought and will, within the *cogito*. Biran “asserts the motor power of the body in the same terms in which Descartes asserted the existence of the self”⁵⁴; “there is a mutual implication of will and perception”; “with Biran’s notion of ‘fact’, one would conceive the *Cogito* of an operating and actual thought.”⁵⁵ This reading of Biran might explain Merleau-Ponty’s definition of the “tacit *cogito*” in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, as a practical *cogito*. As Merleau-Ponty asserts in this text: “Consciousness is in the first place not a matter of ‘I think that’ but of ‘I can’.”⁵⁶
- (2) Will, therefore is not a powerless mode of thinking either, but it is already, like in Biran, a power and an action. As Merleau-Ponty writes in the *Phenomenology of Perception*: “If I want to take hold of an object, already, at a point of space about which I have been quite unmindful, this power of

grasping constituted by my hand moves upwards towards the thing.”⁵⁷ The “I want” is an “I can” and an “I do”.

- (3) Hence the position of a third identity between this voluntary action and our phenomenal body. A note to the *Phenomenology of Perception* reveals this transposition of the soul’s voluntary dimension to the phenomenal body: “It is not a question of how the soul acts on the objective body, since it is not on the latter that it acts, but on the phenomenal body.”⁵⁸ Moved by the soul, the phenomenal body is essentially voluntary. In the instance of the double sensation, the hand that touches the other is said to be “an exploratory power.”⁵⁹ According to this kinesthetic power, the phenomenal body is not attached to a place in space: “the word ‘here’ applied to my body does not refer to a determinate position in relation to other positions or to external co-ordinates, but the laying down of the first co-ordinates, the anchoring of the active body in an object, the situation of the body in face of its tasks.”⁶⁰ The phenomenal body then, is not passively subjected to space and time, but “actively assumes them.”⁶¹

These descriptions also result therefore in the partial exclusion, from the “normal” phenomenal body, of any *powerlessness* and *involuntary* dimensions—that are at least restricted to pathologies.

3.3. Ricœur

This identification between body and will is both accomplished and questioned by Ricœur in the first volume of his *Philosophy of the Will*, entitled *The Voluntary and the Involuntary*.

- (1) Ricœur conceives will as a *cogito*. Will is the “practical function of the *cogito*.”⁶² But this practical function is opposed to the theoretical one of perception and judgment—which announces a renewed definition of the Cartesian *cogito*.
- (2) Ricœur conceives will as a power and an action. For sure, Ricœur distinguishes between will as a decision and will as an action. The “I move” is preceded—not in time but in meaning—by an “I decide”. But, while this distinction could open descriptions of a powerless will that could not be followed by any corresponding action, Ricœur claims instead that a decision, by contrast with a wish or a command, always already implies a “power or capacity for action.”⁶³ Decision always implies a power—“What I will, I can”⁶⁴—and an action—“Inasmuch as I have done nothing, I have not yet fully willed.”⁶⁵ This intrinsic relation between

decision power and action, suppresses in the end any real phenomenon of powerlessness.

- (3) Will is then identified with the lived body. Against any naturalistic kind of explanation, Ricœur's project is to retrieve the body within the *cogito*'s first person perspective. This gesture, Ricœur defines it as a "truly Copernican revolution"⁶⁶: It is not consciousness that is conceived from the objective body, but the body that is conceived from consciousness—"from the apperception of *cogito*." Yet, in order to be retrieved within the *cogito*, the body must partly cease to be identified with an objective involuntary, to start being identified with a subjective voluntary. "*Cogito*'s intuition is the intuition of a body conjoined to a willing (*au vouloir*)."⁶⁷ In this sense, Ricœur also takes over Biran's description of the body's voluntary effort, motion and action—even though he disagrees with some other aspects of his psychology.⁶⁸

But this *cogito* has been changed by its embodiment. The *cogito*'s absolute will, as its absolute self-position, has been lost on the way to its embodiment. The embodied *cogito* must now embrace the *involuntary*. Hence Ricœur's expression of an interiorly "broken" *cogito*.⁶⁹ As such, the body is thought by Ricœur beneath the will, and a larger room is made for a "corporeal involuntary", of which one can distinguish three kinds: the involuntary existence (i.e. needs, exposition to pain), the involuntary functions (i.e. preformed skills, emotions, habits), and the absolute and irreducible involuntary (i.e. character, unconsciousness, birth or the body's physiological constitution). And, if the formers are embraced by the will, the latter remains irreducible. The rich descriptions of the third section must then serve as a basis for any phenomenology of the body that wishes to insist on the body's involuntary dimension.

Yet, Ricœur still subjects these descriptions to a presupposition according to which the lived body always implies the will's hold, grasp or consent. This presupposition is none other than the Cartesian identification between subjectivity, consciousness and will—here transposed from the soul to the body. An absolutely involuntary body could not be "mine", since subjectivity corresponds to the holding of my will. Indeed, according to Ricœur's thesis of a "*reciprocity of the voluntary and the involuntary*",⁷⁰ the corporeal involuntary is always related to the voluntary, and can only get its meaning from the will that embraces it. (1) The involuntary existence—as needs or the fear of pain—are motives for the will; (2) the involuntary functions—as preformed skills, emotions and habits—are means or organs of the will; (3) and even the irreducible involuntary explained objectively—such as the character, the unconscious, birth

or the body's physiological constitution—is to be eventually accepted by the will, as a “consent”. These latter descriptions still rest upon the presupposition of the body's dualistic kind of explanation according to which, one would have either the subjective experience of a corporeal voluntary—as *cogito*—or the natural, objective and factual necessity of a corporeal involuntary; either a voluntary *Leib*, or an involuntary Körper—the latter needing to be retrieved by the former in order to be truly lived. In brief, Ricœur's concept of the lived body is still defined from the ideal of the will. The body is only *lived*, it is only *my* body, insofar as its involuntary dimension is reduced by the will. Ricœur explicitly writes: “The experienced body corresponds to a ‘behavior’ of the will (*Le corps vécu est réciproque d'une tenue de la volonté*)”.⁷¹ My body is a “body-for-my-willing”.⁷² This still suppresses from the lived body any kind of involuntary that would be passively experienced as such, before any consent. In other words, this suppresses from the lived body any phenomenon that could neither be explained by a Cartesian kind of mechanistic explanation, nor by a Cartesian kind of spiritual explanation—neither by Descartes' conception of the body, nor by Descartes' conception of the Soul.

4. Conclusion

The phenomenological concept of the “lived body” is then a “body ideal”. The lived body inherits these two perfections of the Cartesian soul that are consciousness and will. And there is, at least, a third perfection of the soul that has been paradigmatically attributed by Henry to the body. It is the soul's metaphysical mode of subsistence or *immortality*. The living body is not a finite body but belongs, says Henry, to a “sphere of infinite existence.”⁷³ This threefold idealization results in a body that is *transparent, all-powerful and immortal*.

This gesture can be generalized to a significant part of the French phenomenological tradition. Despite their discrepancies, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Ricœur and Henry, have all defined the lived body from the same prevalence of spiritual properties. The first spiritualization of the lived body, as an immaterial consciousness, has already been criticized by recent phenomenological developments.⁷⁴ But the second spiritualization of the lived body, as an all-powerful will, seems to remain generally unquestioned. Hence the general prevalence, even in the most recent phenomenological developments, of a phenomenology of will over a phenomenology of the involuntary; of a phenomenology of possibility over a phenomenology of impossibility; of a phenomenology of force and power, over a phenomenology of powerlessness and fragility. This reveals the strength of this ideal that happens to become, in phenomenology, an ideal of the body.⁷⁵ As Freud said in his text *On Narcissism*, idealization is always correlative of a repression.⁷⁶ Yet, it is not from any kind of

ideal that phenomenology has defined the body. It is *from the very ideal that excluded it in the first place*.⁷⁷ As sharing the very same ideal than Descartes, the phenomenological conception of the body carries on the same kind of repression. If the first attitude despised the body along with its imperfect dimensions, the second attitude excludes these imperfect dimensions from the body, leaving them, just as Descartes, to a naturalistic kind of explanation. In its fight against naturalism, phenomenology still presupposes its truth: the non-subjective, natural or objective dimensions of the body's unconscious, passive and even finite dimensions.

The first objective of this critical discussion would be to free the phenomenological concept of “lived body” from this Cartesian conceptuality. The lived body should no more be conceived from thinking than it should be conceived from extension. It is not a self-affected *cogito*, nor a pre-reflexive *cogito*, nor even a broken *cogito*—but it is simply not a *cogito*. It is neither a part of nature, nor the organ of the soul or its expression—and it is not even a mixture of both determinations. Rather than to these Cartesian determinations, one should return to the phenomenon that precedes them. And the threefold direction of its “idealization” already opens by contrast three different perspectives for a renewed description of the corporeal phenomenon.

It is therefore the second objective of this critical discussion to allow descriptions of this corporeal phenomenon in its forgotten dimensions. This critique could therefore open the phenomenological description to the body's repressed dimensions: (1) This would firstly open a description of the lived body's unconsciousness and opacity. The body is not lived as a conscious body only, but can be intimately experienced in its opacity; (2) This would secondly open a description of the lived body's powerlessness and involuntariness. The body is not only lived as powerful and voluntary, but can be intimately experienced in its powerless and involuntary dimensions; (3) This would eventually open a description of the lived body's finitude. The body is not lived as an infinite body, but is intimately experienced in its mortality. These properties of the lived body, that are not for sure the most comfortable ones, might well be the most important ones to be addressed today by a renewed phenomenology of the body.

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¹ See Freud (1946, p. 161).

² This article is an extended version of a paper presented at a Phenomenology Workshop organized by J. Bloechl in Boston College on “Phenomenology of Bodily Consciousness/ Body and Consciousness”.

³ This gesture, that consists in defining *Leib* from the soul—itself defined by contrast with matter and extension—clearly appears in the *Ideas II*. In the second section, *Leib* is first defined from the sensitive soul (*sinnliche Seele*) of the animal subject, as the support of immaterial sensations. In the third section, *Leib* is then conceived from the spiritual soul (*Geistesseele*) of the intentional and personal subject, as consciousness and will. For a more detailed exposition of this point, see our paper “De l’âme à la chair. Les *Ideen II* de Husserl”, to be published soon in the *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*.

⁴ Maine de Biran (2011, p. 9).

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

⁷ Let’s note however that Henry’s reading of Biran seems to shift from this first thesis of a primordial knowledge of the body integrated to the acting *cogito*, to the second thesis of an absolute identity between this acting consciousness and the body. Yet, in the first volume of the *Essay* at least, the body is less identified with the effort itself, than with the first resistant term to which it applies and that Biran calls the “continuous resistance”. In this sense, Biran’s “lived body” remains an “organic body”. It is Henry’s reading of Biran that completes this identification between the primordial fact of consciousness and the lived body, then conceived as a “subjective body”. On Henry and Biran, see Frogneux (2005) and Devarieux (2018). See also our article “The Lived Body: From Maine de Biran to French Phenomenology” to be published in E. Boublil (Ed.), *The Roots of Desire: Reframing 20th Century French Philosophy*, Lexington Books (in progress).

⁸ Maine de Biran (2011, p. 77).

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Henry (1975, p. 54).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

¹⁵ Université catholique de Louvain, Plateforme technologique “Fonds Alpha”, Fonds Michel Henry, Ms A 26,212: “un corps qui ne ment pas/pas plus qu’une *cogitatio*.” We warmly thank Pr. Jean Leclercq, director of the Fonds Michel Henry, for authorizing us to access these notes in Michel Henry’s Archives.

¹⁶ Henry (2015, pp. 134–135).

¹⁷ Maine de Biran (2001, p. 80): “What more could we ask for, or what could we look for that could be clearer and more evident? Why can’t we stick to the knowledge or to the internal immediate apperception of the thinking subject? It is the most perfect of its kind (*elle est parfaite dans son genre*)”.

¹⁸ Université catholique de Louvain, Plateforme technologique “Fonds Alpha”, Fonds Michel Henry, Ms A 026,412: “Si c’est la chair qui doit manifester l’âme il faut se demander en quoi consiste ce pouvoir de manifestation propre à la chair on s’apercevra alors que c’est précisément celui de l’âme et qu’ainsi (contre le dualisme grec) il n’y a aucune différence entre chair et âme”.

- ¹⁹ One could say that, if Husserl's definition of *Leib* in the second section of *Ideas II*—as the support of immaterial sensations and impressions—announces Henry's and even Merleau-Ponty's idealization, its definition as an intentional *cogito* in the third section—following that of the *Cartesian Meditations*—announces Sartre's idealization.
- ²⁰ Husserl (1952, p. 218).
- ²¹ See part 3 of the Introduction entitled “The pre-reflexive *cogito* and the being of the *percipere*”.
- ²² Sartre (1978, p. 305); pp. 344–345 of the French Edition.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, p. 324.
- ²⁴ See Alloa (2008).
- ²⁵ See Saint-Aubert (2005).
- ²⁶ Merleau-Ponty (2002, p. 468).
- ²⁷ Saint-Aubert (2005, pp. 23–52).
- ²⁸ See Malebranche, *The Search After Truth*, Book 3, part 2, chap. VII and *Elucidation XI*.
- ²⁹ Malebranche (1997b, p. 32).
- ³⁰ See Malebranche, *Elucidation XI* and the third *Dialogue on Metaphysics and on Religion*.
- ³¹ Merleau-Ponty (1968b, p. 18, p. 22).
- ³² Ironically, this critique has already been addressed to Merleau-Ponty by Henry, the latter claiming, in *Incarnation*, that the former maintains, within the body, the oppositional structure of the constituting and the constituted—the body remaining partly transcendental (cf. Henry, 2000). See, more recently, R. Barbaras' critique according to which Merleau-Ponty still attaches the body to consciousness, soul and spirit—missing the body by lack of matter, not by excess (2019); and C. Romano's critique according to which Merleau-Ponty still conceives the body from the opposition between *Leib* and *Körper*, or thought and extension—the body partly remaining a non-extended and immaterial flesh (2020).
- ³³ Merleau-Ponty (2002, p. 105).
- ³⁴ Merleau-Ponty (1964, p. 172): “This is what animalia and men are: absolutely present beings who have a wake of the negative. A perceiving body that I see is also a certain absence that is hollowed out and tactfully dealt with behind that body by its behavior. But absence is itself rooted in presence; it is through his body that the other person's soul is soul in my eyes”.
- ³⁵ Merleau-Ponty (1968a, p. 147).
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 148.
- ³⁷ Merleau-Ponty (2002, p. 105).
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 115.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁰ See *Passions of the Soul*, Article 17.
- ⁴¹ See *Principles of Philosophy*, Article 37. Descartes (1991, p. 17).
- ⁴² See *Principles of Philosophy*, article 32.
- ⁴³ See the quotation above-mentioned, Maine de Biran (2011, p. 9).
- ⁴⁴ Henry (1975, p. 53).
- ⁴⁵ Maine de Biran (2001, p. 9).

⁴⁶ The unlimited dimension of the Cartesian will—claimed in in the 4th *Meditation* and in the §35 of the *Principles*—is not an unlimited *power* and *action*. As Descartes says in the *Passions of the Soul* (art. 4) will is a mode of thought that has no extension, and that is not the direct cause of movements. As such, it cannot directly act on the movements caused by the soul's passions (art. 41) but only on the representations that come along them (art. 46).

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

⁴⁹ One could say that Henry's shift, from Biran's concept of "will" to the concept of "power", is explained by this power's primordial *pathos* or passivity. Likewise, Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*, criticizes the identification between will and freedom: Will, as opposed to passions, is only a possible manifestation of a primordial choice that does not chose itself. Henry's thesis of the power's passivity or Sartre's thesis of freedom's facticity diminishes will's significance—at least in its Cartesian definition as an action of the soul, opposed to its passions. But this critique of will only reinstates it at a lower level, as a fact or a pathos, *as* this primordial choice, act or power that can only be such. The concept of "body" is not central in Sartre's explanation of freedom's facticity (this is why we did not develop it here). But one can still say that, in Sartre as well, the body is only experienced through this primordial and necessary choice. Sartre even says that freedom's *facticity*—or facticity's *freedom*—is nothing but "the body as a point of view on the world" (See Sartre 1978, p. 487). The body's fatigue for instance can only be experienced from my primordial project. And, if my body is revealed as weak by my inability to scale a rock, this weakness still depends on a free choice (i.e. lack of training added to a sportive life, etc.). The way Sartre always retrieves freedom within the body's apparent facticity, suppresses as well any possible experience of a corporeal involuntary.

⁵⁰ See Henry's critique of the "I can" in the Sections 34 and 35 of *Incarnation*. The human body does not get its power from itself but from God's Absolute Life and Power. And it is "a transcendental illusion of the ego" to think himself at the origin of his own power. In fact, this critique of the "I can" is less a critique of a primordial power of the body, than a critique of its autonomy. If the body does not get its power from itself, it is powerful anyway.

⁵¹ Université catholique de Louvain, Plateforme technologique "Fonds Alpha", Fonds Michel Henry, Ms A 026,116: "Impossibilité du corps de différer de soi = sa possibilité d'agir".

⁵² Henry (1975, p. 123).

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 58. If Biran seems to maintain an irreducible resistance, Henry who acknowledges this irreducibility, still thinks the possibility to overcome this resistance—i.e., through culture in *Barbarism*.

⁵⁴ Merleau-Ponty (1968b, p. 59).

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

⁵⁶ Merleau-Ponty (2002, p. 159).

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

⁵⁹ Merleau-Ponty (1964, p. 166). This expression is to be found in "The Philosopher and his Shadow", but Merleau-Ponty also uses the expression of "exploratory movements" in the

Phenomenology of Perception and in the *Visible and the Invisible*.

⁶⁰ Merleau-Ponty (2002, p. 115).

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

⁶² Ricœur (1966, p. 6).

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 203. See also, p. 41: “An intention is an authentic decision when the action it projects appears to be within the *power* of its author”; p. 48 (p. 72 of the French edition): “It is myself who wills, it is I who is able to (*Moi qui veux, je peux*). It is myself who decides to be, who can do (*Moi qui décide de faire, je suis capable de faire*).”.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 202. See also p. 201: “THE WILL IS A POWER of decision only because it is a power of motion”.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 87–88.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 9–10.

⁶⁸ Ricœur criticizes for instance Biran’s translation of the voluntary effort into these physiological terms of an “hyperorganic force” (*Ibid.*, p. 220), or his pretention to ground the possibility of knowledge upon a philosophy of the will (*Ibid.*, p. 424).

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 14. “the Cogito is broken up within itself (“Le *cogito* est intérieurement brisé”, p. 32 of the French Edition).

⁷⁰ Ricœur in the introduction asserts “*the reciprocity of the voluntary and the involuntary*”: “Need, emotion, habit, etc., acquire a complete significance only in relation to a will which they solicit”; “This reciprocity of the voluntary and the involuntary leaves no doubt even about the direction in which we must read their relations. Not only does the involuntary have no meaning of its own, but understanding proceeds from the top down, and not from the bottom up. Far from the voluntary being derivable from the involuntary, it is, on the contrary, the understanding of the voluntary which comes first in man. I understand myself in the first place as he who says ‘I will’.” (*Ibid.*, pp. 4–5).

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 12. (p. 30 of the French Edition).

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 85.

⁷³ Henry (1975, p. 217). See also p. 219: “Thought of as subjective, this existence is then recognized as an absolute existence, *even when it would be the existence of our body*”.

⁷⁴ See Barbaras (2019) and Romano (2016, 2019).

⁷⁵ The history of this practical idealization of the body from the concept of will, should be traced back long before Husserl, at least from the beginning of the nineteenth century—in France (as, for instance, in Maine de Biran), but also in Post-Kantians and German Idealism (as in Fichte or in Hegel and, at least partially in Schelling or in Schopenhauer).

⁷⁶ Freud (1946, p. 161).

⁷⁷ See Descartes’ letter to Mesland (May 1644) where he distinguishes *abstraction* from *exclusion*, claiming that the idea of the soul is not only obtained by *abstraction*, but by *exclusion* of the body.