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## WHAT IS A BODY?

There are  
Physical bodies,  
Solid, liquid, gaseous bodies  
Animate and inanimate bodies,  
Living and dead bodies,  
Material and immaterial bodies,  
Terrestrial and celestial bodies,  
My body and other bodies,  
My body and the world,  
Corpus Mundus  
Ego, space, time...

### I. The physical body

#### 1. Classical Physics

In physics, particularly in classical mechanics, a body is simply an object. It is an identifiable and contiguous collection of matter, which has a certain mass, velocity, momentum and electric charge. As such it has a certain extension and may be more or less constrained to move together by translation or rotation, in three-dimensional space.

A body in common understanding is defined by its boundary, which is usually the visible or tangible surface of the object. This boundary may also deform and change over time. In the same way an object has not always to consist of the same collection of matter. Parts or atoms of an object may change, while its identity is still maintained.

Physical bodies may assume different states of aggregation. When talking of bodies we usually think of solid bodies, yet there are also liquid, gaseous and even plasmatic bodies. While solid bodies are supposed to have a certain shape, fluidic bodies such as liquids and gases are thought as being formless, assuming the

shape of their vessels. In weightlessness liquid bodies assume a spherical shape, similar to celestial bodies like planets or stars that may consist of matter in a solid, liquid, gaseous or plasmatic state as well.

## 2. Quantum mechanics

The description of classical mechanics is basically valid for macro size objects. For micro size objects such as fundamental particles the quantum mechanical description applies, which in certain parts conflicts with common understanding and everyday experience.

According to quantum theory a physical object has no properties (such as a certain momentum or location) unless these properties are being measured. Besides these properties can only be measured with an irreducible uncertainty – if the momentum is determined precisely, the location can only be determined very imprecisely and vice versa. Unless being measured, the state of a quantum object can be described as a superposition of alternate possibilities. Moreover, a quantum object can alternatively appear as a particle, which usually is considered as having no extension, or as a wave form, which extends in space and may produce interference patterns as known from electromagnetic or mechanical waves. And finally, particles that have interacted at a certain time stay entangled, so that measuring one particle instantly affects the properties of the other particle without any exchange of information between them on a local plane.

In quantum field theory particles are treated as excited states of underlying physical fields. The extension of a force that an object radiates around itself in space (such as the gravitation of celestial bodies or the magnetic field of electrically charged particles) is here regarded as the object itself. In contrast to quantum mechanics, quantum fields are said to possess an infinite number of degrees of freedom, which means that they can have a specific value for each single point in space-time.

## II. The Body in Philosophy

### 1. Socrates

In Plato's dialogue *Philebos* Socrates argues that all existing things are compounded out of two elements - the infinite or unlimited, and the finite or limited. By giving shape to the unlimited through any kind of limitation, all things come into true being, effected by the measure the limit introduces.<sup>1</sup>

Socrates regarded the body of the cosmos as of the same nature as the body of a living being. As our body can also be seen as a compound of earth, water, air and fire, and all these elements can likewise be found in even purer and richer form in the whole cosmos, they must have come from thence to us. And as we also have a soul, which may be seen as the basis of wisdom (*sophia*) and intellect (*nous*), Socrates concluded that also the body of the cosmos must have a soul as well as wisdom and intellect, which he identified with the universal mind of Zeus, the cause of all beauty and order in the universe.<sup>2</sup>

Like many of their antecessors and contemporaries throughout the greaeco-indian world, Socrates and Plato believed in the idea of reincarnation, which is based on the assumption that the soul of a living being experiences an endless succession of lives by ever returning within a new body, when the previous one has died.<sup>3</sup> This process more or less implies the continuity of a personal identity even when all material components of a body are being replaced.

### 2. Plato

In his dialogue *Sophistes* Plato speaks of a *gigantomachia* (a war of giants and gods) between two different schools within the philosophic tradition, that are fighting with each other about the nature of essence: While the followers of first one obstinately maintain, that only those things have being or essence, which can be touched or handled, as they define being and body as one, the others hold on the opinion that there is also something, which has no body, moreover - that true essence consists of certain intelligible and incorporeal ideas.<sup>4</sup>

For Plato, obviously representing the latter group, the body belonged to the material world and therefore was mortal, while the immaterial soul belonged to the world of forms (or ideas, patterns), and thus was considered as immortal. Being united with the body through lifetime, the soul would return to the world of forms after being separated at death. In its incorporeal state it gains access to the universal truth of the ideas, which may be remembered in the following incarnation as a kind of latent knowledge. These ideas were regarded by Plato as unchangeable and transcendent to space and time, representing a higher level of reality than all objects within the material world, that were seen only as imperfect copies of them.

Thus Plato established the tradition of occidental metaphysics, with its hierarchic evaluation of the soul (as well as mind, spirit etc.) over body and matter. Based upon a wordplay on the similarity of the Greek terms *soma* (body) and *sema* (grave), Plato considered the body as the grave of the soul.

### 3. Aristotle

Aristotle, who may be considered as Plato's opponent in the mentioned *Gigantomachia*, denied the idea of an immortal soul as well as that of an independently existing world of forms altogether. To him all nature was movement and change, therefore all physical things were subject to a process of becoming and decay, which implied a development from potential to actual being.

According to Aristotle, all natural bodies consisted of matter (*hylé*) and form (*morphé*), whereby matter was seen as without any specific properties, and form as that cause which made it to a specific thing or being. The composition of both (matter as potency and form as actuality) constitutes the essence of all natural bodies.

The soul was regarded by Aristotle as the form of a natural body, which potentially has life within it. Form was here not only understood as the visible shape, but rather as the general conception of a being. As essence is actuality, the soul is defined as the first actuality (*entelecheia*) of a natural body, which has the potential to organic life. It is that, which makes an organism to what it is (*ti en einai*), the cause of its being, its essence (*ousia*). As such the soul cannot be separated from the body, in the same way as a figure cannot be separated from the wax it is made of.<sup>5</sup>

According to Aristotle all living bodies are characterized by certain powers, which he named as self-nutrition, sensation, thinking, and motivity.<sup>6</sup> Some living beings have all of them, others have some, and some beings have only one of them. Consequently, he assigned a soul also to plants, yet denied it for celestial bodies, which he thought as invariant and not subject to becoming and decay.

As general determinations of a natural body Aristotle specified that:

it is limited by its surface<sup>7</sup>,

it is somewhere and has a special place<sup>8</sup>,

it is capable of movement and has a tendency to move to its proper place<sup>9</sup>,

it contains a certain space (which coincides with the body itself) and is itself contained in another surrounding body, which is being touched by it at the place of its boundary.

It is limited in its extension, as there can't be a body with limitless extension, yet

it can be divided – at least potentially – ad infinitum.<sup>10</sup>

#### 4. Jean-Luc Nancy

In his work *Corpus* Jean-Luc Nancy presents a contemporary interpretation of the Aristotelian position. To him, the body is not a space within boundaries, not a mass limited by its surface. The body is rather a place of existence, taking place at the limit, being exposed to an outside:

"Bodies aren't some kind of fullness or filled space (...): they are open space, (...), a space that could also be called a place. (...) Bodies are places of existence. The body makes room for existence. More precisely, it makes room for the fact that the essence of existence is to be without any essence. (...) The body *is* the being of existence."<sup>11</sup>

"As being existence, the body is the being-exposed of the being.<sup>12</sup> A body is being exposed. And to be exposed, it has to be extended."<sup>13</sup>

For Nancy bodies are both open and infinite. "As being exposed to an outside, they are open to touch and being touched. Bodies delight in touching and being touched. The delighted body delights in itself. Delighting / being delighted, touching / being touched, spacing / being spaced make here the essence of the being."<sup>14</sup>

The body exposes not only the essence of being, but is also a breakthrough of sense. In writing, at the edge of articulated language, the body touches sense and thus creates the body of sense. Sense, as the incorporeal, the beginning and the end, is floating at the limit, which is the body. The body exposes a breakthrough of sense, constituted absolutely and simply by existence. (...) The body is the architectonics of sense.<sup>15</sup>

Nancy never gets tired of emphasizing that there is no soul apart from the body, no subject except the body itself. He quotes Freud's posthumous note: "Psyche ist ausgedehnt; weiß nichts davon". The psyche's extended: knows nothing about it." The "psyche," in other words, is body, and this is precisely what escapes it, and its escape (...), or its process of escape, constitutes it as "psyche," in a dimension of not (being able/wanting)-to-know-itself.<sup>16</sup>

So for Nancy the soul doesn't represent *anything other* than the body, but rather the body outside itself.<sup>17</sup> What's been thought under the name of soul is nothing other than the experience of the body. Not as an experience among others, but as the sole experience. The soul is a name for the experience that the body is.

This experience of the body is an act of "self-sensing," of touching upon the self.<sup>18</sup> A body touches on the outside, but at the same time (...), it touches itself as outside. A body accedes to itself as outside.<sup>19</sup> The soul's the being outside of a body, and it is in this being outside that it is its inside.<sup>20</sup> In other words, the

soul is the difference from itself that makes the body, which to Nancy equals with the Aristotelian definition of the soul as the form of a living body.<sup>21</sup>

### III. Anatomy in Space-time

#### 1. The Metabolism of Chaos

*Hoc est enim corpus meum* (“...for this is my body”) – Nancy begins his treaty with this word of Christ and continues to repeat it throughout the whole work like a mantra, evoking the image of a body that is presented, set into a distance as something foreign, and feared to be touched. It’s the pale and sacrificed body of God, elevated to demonstrate the central enigma our culture is obsessed with – that there is an absolute, that has a body, or is a body, and that this body is the absolute itself.<sup>22</sup>

*Hoc est enim corpus meum* – Nancy quotes this word of Christ, yet he never cites the quote in full, which reads: *Accipite et manducate ex hoc omnes: hoc est enim corpus meum, quod pro vobis tradetur*. (“Take this, all of you, and eat it: this is my body which will be given up for you.”) Apart from its interpretation in Christian theology, where this formula of transsubstantiation is the central mystery of the missal sacrifice, the transformation of bread and wine into the (real) blood and body of Christ, symbolizing, in Nancy’s wording, “the immanence of an absolutely mediated transcendence”<sup>23</sup>, the whole sentence reveals a fundamental mystery of the life process in its totality: It is the fact, that bodies are not only touching, but rather consuming each other permanently as the basic condition of their existence. There is a permanent exchange of matter between bodies – bodies are incorporating, swallowing, devouring and digesting each other in an endless process which constitutes the material circuit of life.

*Accipite et manducate ex hoc omnes*: this means that God’s body, the divine substance, of which this universe consists of, is permanently shared by and exchanged between all bodies that exist as parts of this process. Moreover, bodies are not only devoured and digested by other bodies, bodies are also born out of bodies. They emerge from bodies and merge with other bodies. We are made out of the dust of celestial bodies and return to the dust of celestial bodies, and in between we consume bodies transforming them into the mass of our own bodies, from which we produce the energy to move around as discrete beings in space.

The life process in its totality, as a material event in space and time, involves not only a permanent and ongoing exchange of matter by all individual bodies, but at the same time implies a permanent and ongoing evolution of these forms, which continuously change and multiply themselves by division or reproduction up to an incomprehensible multiplicity of bodies and life forms. These cannot only be seen as an adaption

to biological needs and environmental conditions, but at the same time express an infinite superabundance of aesthetic extravagances of chaos itself. As neither matter nor form of any being remains constant, individual identity can – if ever - only be traced by the continuity underlying any transformation as it is given by individual experience.

This process, that is itself embedded in the development of the physical universe (if it's not in fact identical with it), thus represents the contextual framework, of which each singular body – be it fundamental particle, organic life form or celestial body - is an infinitesimal small part. In order to understand what a body is, we therefore always have to consider the body not as a single object, but as one of many, out of an infinite multitude of more or less similar bodies, that represent one kind of material existence being in a permanent exchange with all other kinds of bodies. The evolutionary process in its totality, as a single movement in space-time, a cosmic wave, that produces myriads of bodies, life forms in infinite variations, embracing the known and unknown realms of this universe, is an event that necessarily escapes direct experience and so can only remain unknown (and at its best be imagined vaguely) as far as its true extension in space and time is concerned.

## 2. Metaphysics as Ideology

Socrates and Plato, Aristotle and Jean-Luc Nancy, four philosophies of the body, four prominent positions within the western metaphysical tradition, that were developed out of each other either by confrontation or advancement, how to deal with them? Is there any sense that we can make out of their arrangement? Is there any underlying structure that can shed some light on what they are really fighting for on the battleground of the body? Can we create out of their constituent elements new philosophies of the body that may overcome eventual weaknesses in their conception?

Well, the first thing to say is that all these different philosophies are mainly sets or combinations of ideas, that may be considered separately and be accepted or dismissed in each single case. We don't have to take the whole package, but can take what seems appropriate to our own understanding, based upon our individual experience. For example, we may accept the idea of reincarnation, but still deny Plato's vision of the ideas in the afterworld (it would equally possible that latent knowledge dates from experiences that had been made *during* past lives, or that the mind has the ability to gain access to such knowledge without prior experience.)

Secondly, one could say that all these philosophies present different shapings of the body as far as its extension in space and time is concerned. And, as one of the main distinguishing features, they all set the visible and invisible parts of the body in different kinds of relations to each other. This applies in particular for the relation of the material body and its immaterial functions, that we circumscribe with makeshift

terms like 'mind', 'soul' or the like, as well as for the question whether these may have the ability to exist independently of the body or not. Their respective views on the body and its relation to what is regarded as not the body, may be seen as connected with the great paradigms of thinking that emerged in different times and cultures.

The body as seen by Socrates in Plato's *Philebus* (and with him by many other presocratic philosophers) was still the oriental body, the body of the ancient sages. The human being, understood as a mixture of elementary components like any other natural being, was part of the cosmos and in accordance with its movement, like the stars following an eternal return. The body was the vehicle of the soul on its journey through eternity, being replaced each lifetime, forming an endless line of differentiated experience that was usually thought as serving the purpose of individual perfection.

In his attempt to rationalize the ancient beliefs, Plato tried to develop a comprehensive theory, explaining the occurrence of repetitive patterns that may be recognized in that experience, yet he seemed not to have the underlying vision that would have given him the empirical knowledge to create such a theory. We may say that his *theoria* was constructed rather than experienced, therefore it produced inconsistent results. Plato did not shorten body and soul in their timely duration – the body was still the material representation of an immortal soul, finite in its materiality, yet embedded in an endless re-occurrence. The cut Plato made was to reduce the body in its general value by ascribing to the soul - as well as to the transcendental world of forms - a higher reality than to the material world that we can perceive by sensation. With this step he did not only promote an otherworldly orientation of existence, but at the same time introduced a moral devaluation of everything material and corporeal which was successively assimilated by Christianity and is deeply inscribed in the thinking of the western world.

For Aristotle the body, not the soul, was the essence of the being. The timely extension conceded to an individual existence was shortened to the span of a lifetime. Infinity was accessible only as the possibility of an interior division. The soul was forced into being the form of a living body, and as such its perpetual existence was abolished forever. Instead of being the immortal core of any individual being, the soul became associated with the mental, emotional and perceptive functions of the body, thus establishing a notion that still corresponds with our current use of the term 'psyche'. Aristotle removed all transcendental glitter from the body and relieved it from its inappropriate imaginations regarding its own extension in space and time. With Aristotle, the oriental body of the ancient sages died, and the occidental, the rational and scientific body, saw the light of day.

Jean-Luc Nancy basically follows the Aristotelian conception, though – as his discourse on the body is also culturally connoted (as expressed by his continuous reference to the central formula of the Christian liturgy) – it still carries (and be it only as some kind of neglected phantasm) a certain flair of platonic transcendentalism with it. His body takes places at the limit, touching the material world and equally a

world of sense, that is permanently produced by the body in articulating itself.<sup>24</sup> For Nancy philosophies of the body belong as much to the body as blood, flesh and bones.<sup>25</sup>

Psyche and body are one and the same, the body is for Nancy even the unconscious<sup>26</sup>. By this move of adding the psychic dimension to the body, of making the body the absolute, which has nothing beside it, Nancy's body is both material and immaterial, it appears to be light and almost transparent - a spiritual, a holy body.

In contrast to its infinite openness in the dimension of space, Nancy's body is limited sharply in its timely extension: "There is no place before birth or after death, no before/ after."<sup>27</sup> Ironically speaking, this would mean there is no place for an embryo or corpse in Nancy's philosophy.

Cut off from its own pre- and afterlife, Nancy's body shows the stigmata of a crisis, as it has deliberately confined itself to an immanence that is haunted by its discarded transcendental grounds. It's the occidental body, the body we invented and constructed for ourselves, the body that western religion, science and philosophy have left over to us. It is sacrificed, but not redeemed, suspended between life and death, as it still has not yet fully unravelled the mystery of its own being, which is imposed on us by the finite nature of the body and its relation to the infinite.

One problem that arises with Nancy's conception of the body is that it is essentially counterintuitive and conflicts with the common use of language. A body is always a body of something or somebody. A body can be my body, your body, or the body of someone else. I can love my body, hate my body, change my body according to my will. What Nancy denies – that there is a kind of subject prior to the body, is constantly affirmed by our self-sensation as well as our use of language. Nancy is well aware of such contradictions, and suggested to substitute the expression "my body" by the term *ego corpus*, yet this twofold term seems to reflect the split nature of our psycho-physical existence even more – as it seems it's not so easy to get rid of duality.

Apart from their different approaches, contents and backgrounds, their possible inconsistencies as well as their ability of simultaneously inspiring and deceiving the mind, all these philosophies have one thing in common: they are, as any other philosophy of the body, and probably as any philosophy as such, different mappings of the body – or better to say body-mind-complex - and its extension in space and time, differing mostly in their views on how far this extension reaches, how it is structured in regard to its material and immaterial aspects and which kind of part the subject of a sentient being is considered to play in this context. They draw the shape of the body within the framework of a four-dimensional space-time, that somehow necessarily has to correlate with a subject that perceives or imagines the events happening therein – given that it itself is a part or the whole of this continuum, that can be considered either as 'ego' or 'world'. That zone, which we cut out from this continuum by identification as being 'me', that we define

as the material basis of our existence and inhabit as the centrum of our environmental experience, as a means of interaction with our environment, is what we call a body.

If we consider such outlines of the body as nothing but metaphysical theory without practical relevance, we may easily overlook their profound political impact: By demarcating the line between I and not-I, they split the continuum of reality into two realms – a privileged zone that is protected, preserved and facilitated to further development and extension, and a discarded zone that will be dominated, exploited, destroyed and its substance finally incorporated. (For example: If we accepted the possibility of a future rebirth, we would treat our environment differently, and if we define ourselves by the range of our nervous system, we will not be affected by the pain of others.) As a general rule one could say here that the smaller the circumference of the body (as defined by such philosophies), the bigger the outer world that has to be subdued.

Thus the great metaphysical drafts of humanity reveal themselves as ideologies that are fighting on the battleground of the body for sovereignty, determining the sphere of its influence and responsibility, as well as limiting its possibilities to a clearly defined area in which the body is allowed to act and move around freely. They define its boundaries by imaginations that arise from the edges of existence, imaginations that make us fear to face the whole of life's cruel metabolism – the fear of losing one's identity or material foundation, or to experience one's own bodily disintegration while being eaten by flies and worms. The questions, to which such grand narratives provide answers, can neither be decided by means of science or philosophy. They usually are considered as belonging to the domain of faith and religion, where such answers, based upon out-of-body and near-death experiences, past life memories and other borderline experiences of a few, are combined with sets of ideas that may give relief from fear, set up moral standards or make people walk in a common direction.

As far as personal metaphysical experiences conflict with such common assumptions, the body can in fact be experienced as being bound, tortured, torn apart or being robbed of its limbs and organs, as it happened with countless visionaries throughout the times.

### 3. The Body without Organs

At this point we inevitably come to the great anatomist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Antonin Artaud, and his passionate call for a body without organs, as proclaimed in his radio play "To Have Done with the Judgement of God" (1947). After having proclaimed that "space, time, dimension, becoming, future, destiny, being, non-being, self, non-self" are nothing to him in view of his bodily suffering, he suggests to create a new anatomy for the body:

“By placing him again, for the last time, on the autopsy table  
to remake his anatomy.

I say, to remake his anatomy.

Man is sick because he is badly constructed.

We must make up our minds to strip him bare in order to  
scrape off that animalcule that itches him mortally,  
god,  
and with god  
his organs.

For you can tie me up if you wish,  
but there is nothing more useless than an organ.

When you will have made him a body without organs,  
then you will have delivered him from all his automatic reactions  
and restored him to his true freedom.”<sup>28</sup>

As we can see, also Artaud realized that the main fault in our construction of the body lies in its relation to  
the infinite. Given two options, man simply had made the wrong choice:

“Two paths were open to him:

that of the infinite without,

that of the infinitesimal within.

And he chose the infinitesimal within.

Where one need only squeeze

the spleen,

the tongue,

the anus

or the glans.”

So, considering Artaud’s diagnosis of the body, how would you remake your anatomy?

Which kind of setup would you chose to satisfy your desires?

How would you place your limbs, your invisible parts?

Can you imagine to change your body when it’s worn out?

Can you imagine to be a cyborg, your organs successively being replaced until nothing of your natural substance is left?

Can you imagine to be nothing but information?

A field of energy?

A waveform?

A sound?

Silence?

Or an eternal living mystery?

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<sup>1</sup> *Philebos* 23c – 26d.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* 28d-30e.

<sup>3</sup> *Phaidon* 69e – 80e.

<sup>4</sup> *Sophistes*. 246a – 248a.

<sup>5</sup> *De Anima*, II.1, 412 ab

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, II. 2, 413 b

<sup>7</sup> *Physics*, III.5, 204b

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, III.5, 205a

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, IV.1, 208b

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, III.5 208a

<sup>11</sup> *Corpus* (New York: Fordham University Press 2008), p. 15.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134f

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 128

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126

<sup>22</sup> *Corpus*, p.3

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, P.19

<sup>24</sup> *Corpus*, p. 17.

<sup>25</sup>

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 156.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.

<sup>28</sup> "To Have Done with the Judgment of God" in *Selected Writings*. Susan Sontag (ed). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1976, p. 571.