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Heidegger's Polymorphous "Body"

Abstract: The aim of the present paper is to advance a polyphonic reading of Heidegger's ways of thinking, notably concerning his notion of body and corporeality. Despite the talk of Heidegger's neglect of the body, I show that there are at least two distinct voices in Heidegger's discourse about corporeality: the phenomenological voice and the retractive voice. The first one is marked by the so-called neglect of the body, while the later aims to recoup it. I support the lack of a definite take on human embodiment in Heidegger's works by pointing at some hermeneutical ambiguities regarding corporeality. Finally, I conclude with some remarks about the necessity of a polyphonic reading of Heidegger's works.

Keywords: Corporeality, Polyphony, Heidegger, Ducrot, Argumentative Semantics.

It was a common place in 20th century phenomenological scholarship to argue for Heidegger's so-called neglect of the body—as, for example, Sartre or De Waelhens had done—and, moreover, this idea is still perpetuated today (Aho 2009, 36). Others have even contended that there is nothing to neglect, since the body doesn't play a significant role in the constitution of meaningfulness whatsoever. Such is the view that Kevin Aho holds, namely that corporeality cannot take part as an ontological moment in the structure that grounds the phenomenality of the world and therefore neglecting it is not a big deal. His chief argument is that temporality, unlike corporeality, has an ontological priority when it comes to the meaning of being. The body itself, its discovery and functioning, presupposes the temporal opening of the world in which we can find ourselves in the first place. Therefore, the body is merely an ontic phenomenon, which can be reduced to a more primordial, temporal dimension of the human experience (Aho 2009, 27). However, I claim that this argument is methodologically flawed.

I will contest these readings and advance instead (1) a polyphonic interpretation of Heidegger's ways of thinking and therefore (2) I will distinguish between a phenomenological voice and (4) a retractive voice in which the embodiment is thematized. The first is marked by the so-called neglect of the body, while the later aims to recoup it. In (3) I will support the lack of a definite take on human embodiment in Heidegger's works by

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pointing at some hermeneutical ambiguities regarding corporeality. (5) Finally, I will conclude with some remarks about the necessity of a polyphonic reading of Heidegger's ways of thinking.

1. Heidegger's Hinting Voices

In the following, I will take Heidegger at his word when he places *Wege, nicht Werke*—ways, not works—at the forefront of *Gesamtausgabe*. That is to say, if there are no works, there is no author. From a hermeneutical point of view, the author is a superfluous hypothesis that rather impedes the reading of such a polymorphous body of work that Heidegger had left: phenomenological treatises, lecture courses, letters, journal notes, autobiographical remarks, interpretations and self-interpretations and so on. How are we to read them? The great part of Heidegger's scholarship assumes that all of these ways are confined within a unified totality that represents the thinking of the author, as if the author produced the meaning of his saying and left it to be recovered.¹ Nothing is farther from the idea that language is the one which speaks and not ourselves—i.e. the empirical subjects that we may call *authors*—than this assumption of an autonomous subjectivity that gives meaning to what it says. But first of all, let us have a methodological digression in order to elaborate the reading that we propose of Heidegger's notion of the body.

I will follow Oswald Ducrot's claim that "words don't mean anything" (Ducrot 2009, 13) and, as a special case of this thesis, I will contend that Heidegger's words—like *Dasein, Sein, Ereignis*—don't mean anything either. That is to say, words don't convey in a cyphered speech, meant to be decoded, a piece of information regarding us, the being and the respective co-occurrence. Rather, we have to seek the intelligibility of Heidegger's conceptuality in an argumentative context in which his words play different roles. The same goes for the body and its cognate terminology. First of all, in order to make clear what do I mean by a polyphonic interpretation I will take one of Heidegger's notorious sayings—"This question has today been forgotten" (Heidegger 2001a, 2)—and will ask a presumably naïve question: who is speaking here?

We find this sentence at the beginning of *Being and Time* and therefore we will not err to say that it is Heidegger who utters this sentence, because obviously he is the one who wrote the book. Heidegger for sure wrote each of these words, but is he the only one who speaks within them? At a closer look, we find that our sentence opens the first paragraph of *Being and Time*, which bears the title *The Necessity for Explicitly Restating the Question of Being*. The one who is speaking is the one who is aware that the question of being has been forgotten. He wants to remind us that we forgot a question of utmost importance and to bring into the foreground the obvious fact that

we are not puzzled anymore by not knowing what being means. We? Of course, he is referring to us who have forgotten the question of being and henceforth have to be reminded about it. Therefore, one could ask: does Heidegger speak to us and, furthermore, does he speak to us today? In order to hone this question, we will ask: Does the meaning of this sentence hinges on the reader of today? And is it bereft of meaning with the vanishing of the reader from the past? Suddenly, the author dwindles away in front of *us*, as if the presumed intention of the author can't stand the intentionality of the reader. In "This question has today been forgotten" there is of course Heidegger's hand, but there are at least two distinct voices, which echo each other autonomously, as though having a life of their own, regardless of their reader and their writer. On the one hand, there is the voice that explicitly states the forgetfulness of being and, on the other hand, there is the voice that is responsible for this forgetting. This other voice within Heidegger's polemical (or polyphonic) sentence bears the name of metaphysics, i.e. the manner of speaking that is oblivious towards being.

There are many linguistic operators that can be used to cast our attention on different voices within a certain discourse. Ducrot's favorite example is the conjunction "but," which displays both a thesis and its opposite: "it's pretty outside, but I won't go out" means „*I like* how it is outside, but *I don't like* it that much." In order to spot Heidegger's philosophical voices, we need stronger operators than the usual, linguistic ones. I will call these philosophical operators *tropes*, i.e. points of conceptual articulations and argumentative strategies that orient thinking on a path. It is not the task of the present paper to disentangle Heidegger's voices, but we will surely speak of some of them as far as corporeality is concerned, notably we will speak of his phenomenological and his retractive voices, which clearly show the polyphonic dimension of Heidegger's thinking.

2. Corporeality in Heidegger's Phenomenological Voice

Let us now lend an ear to Heidegger's voices that speak about the body. It is well known that Heidegger's *Being and Time* is regarded as greatly neglecting the body.² This critique rests on the assumption that if corporeality isn't treated explicitly, then it is lacking altogether. That is to say, if something is not thematically present then it doesn't exist or has an all too meager of a being to count. This sort of a fallacy falls short even of the required attentiveness to the body that one claims to have. To argue for the great significance of the implicit, non-thematic, operative dimension of human experience that the flesh has and then to disregard the same implicit, non-thematic, operative flesh-words that Heidegger frequently uses is a strange way to self-sabotage your own argument. I will not dwell on this.

There are plenty of places where Heidegger employs a body-oriented terminology in *Being and Time*, to say the least. It seems that one cannot talk about the existential structure of the human being without relying at least implicitly on its corporeality. The fall (*das Verfallen*), the things ready-at-hand (*Zuhandenheit*), the moment of vision (*der Augenblick*), the whence of Dasein (*das Woher*), its flee (*die Flucht*): all of these terms are definitive of a corporeal situatedness. And yet, there is no much to say about the body itself in *Being and Time*. In order to get a handle on this paradox of an implicit presence of corporeality and an explicit neglect of it we have to make a distinction between *downplaying* and *omitting* the body. The word “neglect” that Aho uses harbors such an ambiguity. Heidegger does indeed omit the body from his temporal ontology, but that doesn’t imply an underestimation of it. Much of the reason for this omission is strictly methodological. This is precisely what Heidegger claims in his phenomenological voice (Heidegger 1997a, 269-270):

However far one is willing to allow corporeality to have influence upon the factual possibilities of the mind, a philosophical knowledge of the human being, as a conceptual knowledge, will always have to have its center in the mind—at least, to be quite cautious, as long as no one has yet succeeded in putting forth the functioning, for example of stomach juices, as an interpretation of being human.

Now, if the connection between time and apperception becomes visible on the basis of temporality, then the methodical priority must inevitably be placed on temporality itself, which is now no longer on the side of sensibility and receptivity.

Heidegger explicitly states that corporeality has to be put aside—even if it “hides a whole problematic of its own” (Heidegger 2001a, 143)—for the simple reason that no one succeeded to understand the human condition by analyzing its gastric life. Alluding to Plato’s cave allegory, the methodological remark is also clearly stated: “From the lightness of the concept and with the help of the concept all conceptually genuine knowledge aims at what is pre-conceptual. I can only interpret and understand by returning from light into darkness.” (Heidegger 1997a, 269). Because temporality is forthrightly given to one’s phenomenological *mind*, it will take the lead when the thinker embarks on the path to illuminate our preconceptual understanding of being, as well as our embodied selves.³ Although temporality in its internal consciousness was supposed to make for a conceptual clarity, Heidegger wasn’t exempt from some fundamental ambiguities, which impelled the abandonment of *Time and Being*, the incumbent reversal at the end of his phenomenological project.

All in all, Aho doesn't distinguish between this methodological, that is phenomenological omission of the body and its ontological downplaying. Therefore, his argument is methodologically flawed. This can be clearly seen when he quotes *Zollikon Seminars* in favor of his thesis, namely that the body is an ontic phenomenon (Aho 2009, 44)⁴, even though, precisely there, as we will see, Heidegger unmistakably refers to embodiment as *ontologically* constitutive of human existence.

3. Some Hermeneutical Ambiguities

Before we analyze Heidegger's retractive voice regarding corporeality, I will elicit some of his remarks about the body in order to prove that there isn't a clear-cut notion of an embodied subjectivity in Heidegger's thinking. In this section, I intend to extract some passages that display the ambiguities of the body. This phase of the argument is especially important because it brings to the light some of the equivocations of the body-terminology that Heidegger employed. We will follow three consecutive stages of Heidegger's thinking: (1) his phenomenological interpretation of Kant from the late 20's, (2) the interpretation of Plato from the beginning of 30's and, finally, (3) his writings from the period of *Beiträge*.

First of all, Heidegger (1997b, 121) claims in his phenomenological reading of Kant's *Critique* that:

To human finitude belongs sensibility, meaning the intuition which takes things in stride. As pure intuition, i.e., pure sensibility, it is a necessary element in the structure of transcendence which distinguishes finitude. Human pure reason is necessarily a pure sensible reason. This pure reason must be sensible in itself, it does not first become sensible in this way because it is tied to a body. Rather, the reverse is true: the human being, as finite, rational creature, can thus only "have" its body in a transcendental (i.e., a metaphysical) sense because transcendence as such is sensible a priori.

Here we find one of Heidegger's tropes at work, which I will call *the ontological primacy*: the sensibility doesn't pertain to us because we have a body, but rather we have a body because sensibility pertains to us. However, this pure sensibility is pure insofar as it is non-corporeal: "Pure sensibility [...] is time."⁵ Even though Heidegger speaks, for instance in *Being and Time*, about the ontological (or existential) spatiality (*Räumlichkeit*), he nonetheless thinks of it in temporal terms.⁶ "Spatiality" is therefore a word that harbors a derivative sense of the body, rather than heralding its pivotal role. Despite talking about an intrinsic unity of spatiality and being-in-the-world—which is constitutive of Dasein—, the body itself remains only an ontic

phenomenon and plays no role in this existential structure. Given a direct demand to explain what Dasein means, Heidegger (1997a, 203) tellingly replies to Cassirer:

What I call Dasein is essentially codetermined—not just through what we describe as spirit, and not just through what we call living. Rather, what it depends on is the original unity and the immanent structure of the relatedness of a human being which to a certain extent has been fettered in a body [Leib] and which, in the *fetteredness*⁷ in the body, stands in a particular condition of being bound up with beings.

What could reveal more strikingly a unity of space (or, as Heidegger says, *the living*) and temporality, but not of embodiment and temporality, than this reply? Because talking about *fetteredness* implies a non-essential property, almost an accident, we can clearly hear the ontological conjunction of *time-space* within the constitution of a disembodied Dasein. And yet, later on, Heidegger acknowledges the necessary link between the body (*Leib*) and the temporal understanding of being and therefore recasts this unity, this time, with a penchant for corporeality. I will supply this thesis with two closely related examples: a passage from the notes pertaining to his lecture course on Plato from 1931/32, as well as from the 1933.

In his reading of Plato's cave allegory and *Theaetetus*, Heidegger states:

GA 34 (129/177-178): "Soul" serves to name the relationship to being (presence of the look) and thus to unhiddenness. The body and its physical constitution is admitted into this relationship, a relationship within which the historical human being is. [In dieses Verhältnis eingelassen sind der Leib und das Lebewesen, worin der geschichtliche Mensch ist.]⁸

GA 36/37 (224/297-298): Soul: name for the relation to Being. (Body and living thing are let into this relation—if the Greek human being is. Not soul inspired into the body, but bodying let into the soul. [Seele: der Name für das Verhältnis zum Sein. (In dieses Verhältnis eingelassen sind Leib und Lebewesen— wenn der griechische Mensch ist. Nicht: Seele eingeblasen dem Körper, sondern Leiben eingelassen in die Seele.]

Indeed, in 1931/33 the body has acquired an ontological significance, which it didn't have back in 1927/29, when Heidegger wrote *Being and Time* and debated Cassirer in connection with the proper reading of Kant's *Critique*. Note that the body is no longer described in terms of *fetteredness*, but rather in terms of *letting-be*. However, this is not the end of the story.

In stark contrast to the way that body plays out in Heidegger's reading of Plato from the beginning of 1930's, we find in later Heidegger, that is

around 1934/36—when Heidegger addressed Ernst Jünger and worked on *Beiträge*—a strictly metaphysical understanding of *Leib*.

That is what we find in the volume GA 90, *Zu Ernst Jünger* (Heidegger 2004, 43):

28. Zu Jüngers Grundstellung
Subjektivität—Humanismus—Anthropologie
Ἀνθρώπος: ζῶον λόγον ἔχον
Homo: animal rationale
Homo—sapiens
Homo—faber
Homo—ludens
Homo—natura. Nietzsche. | Leib—
homo—natura faber militans. Ernst Jünger.

Here, *Leib* is only a moment within the history of metaphysics and it is borne out by Nietzsche's so-called philosophy of life. We can find the same metaphysical use of corporeality (*Leiblichkeit*) in Heidegger's *Contributions to Philosophy* (Heidegger 2012, 43).

Whether personality is understood as the unity of "spirit-soul-body," or whether this hodge-podge is reversed and, merely assertorically, the body is placed first, nothing changes with regard to the confused thinking which rules here and which evades every question.

Furthermore, Heidegger explicitly talks about "the concealed metaphysics of 'body' and 'sensitivity,' 'soul' and 'spirit,'" that "remains here presupposed and unquestioned"⁹. From the body as an ontic phenomenon (in his phenomenological reading of Kant), via the body as constitutive of our relationship to being (in his reading of Plato), to the body as an unquestioned metaphysical assumption (Nietzsche-*Beiträge*): here is a journey that epitomizes the lack of a clear-cut position regarding corporeality. The body is as much downplayed as it is privileged and we cannot get a handle on these ambiguities as long as we seek a final meaning that is granted by the authority of the author. Rather, we will listen to one more of Heidegger's voices where he clearly states the ontological status of the flesh.

4. Corporeality in Heidegger's Retractive Voice.

By Heidegger's retractive voice I mean his late self-interpretations as well as his search for a reconciliation with the intellectuals of 20th century. I will take two examples that are most relevant to our topic: Heidegger's dialogue

with Eugen Fink and *Zollikon Seminars* delivered to the Swiss psychiatric community (gathered around figures like Boss and Binswanger). In his discussion with Fink, Heidegger (and Fink 1979, 145) makes a very interesting remark:

Heidegger: Body is not meant ontically here...

Fink: ...and also not in the Husserlian sense,...

Heidegger: ...but rather as Nietzsche thought the body, even though it is obscure what he actually meant by it.

Therefore, body has to be understood in an ontological way, for it “is not meant ontically”, and that is the way that can be traced back to Nietzsche. Because what Nietzsche meant is not clear, there can be a metaphysical interpretation of the body (as Heidegger held in the 30’s) as well as an ontological one (as Heidegger held in the 60’s). Moreover, Heidegger is alluding again to the intimate relationship between having a body and being alive: “A human is embodied [leibt] only when he lives [lebt]. The body in our sense is to be understood thus. Thereby, ‘to live’ is meant in the existential sense.” In any case, the shift in Heidegger’s interpretation is clear: now (in 1966/7) the body is understood ontologically.

In order to back up this claim, the same ontological reading of embodiment can be found in Heidegger’s *Zollikon Seminars*. In his lecture from May 11, 1965, Heidegger retrieves the trope of *the ontological primacy* from *Being and Time*, which we’ve touched on, and claims that “Da-sein is not spatial because it is embodied. But its bodiliness is possible only because Da-sein is spatial in the sense of making room” (Heidegger 2001b, 81). Then, he says that “We will now try to move somewhat closer to the phenomenon of the body.” To my mind, this moving “somewhat closer” implies an overcoming of the *ontological-primacy*-trope from the period of *Being and Time* that didn’t do justice to the full phenomenon of the flesh. If anything, to move closer to the phenomenon entails a previous state of being farther from it. And this is precisely what we find later on. Heidegger doesn’t characterize anymore the body as a subsidiary phenomenon which pertains to spatiality. Rather, we find a different trope at work, this time, that characterizes the body in an ontological sense. When Heidegger speaks of serious matters it is well known that he employs a sort of an *ontological tautology* in order to say that a certain phenomenon is too deep to even say that it is. Therefore, we must say that it acts as itself: *die Zeit zeitigt, die Welt weltet, das Nichts nichtet*, only to point to some of the famous instances of this trope. And corporeality—ontologically understood—makes no exception: “We find ourselves reverting to the question we have already touched on: How is the human being in space insofar as he is bodying forth [*leibt*]?” And

again, Heidegger says: "the body is only as it is bodying forth [*Der Leib ist nur insofern er leibt*]" (Heidegger 2001b, 87). We find not only a change in the tropes—from *the ontological primacy* of the space to *the ontological tautology* of the body—, but also a change in the hierarchy of these phenomena: only insofar as Dasein bodies forth it is spatial. This reversal of body and space is more obvious when Heidegger says about embodiment what he could have said previously about spatiality: "With this you see how bodiliness has a peculiar 'ecstatic' meaning." And again: "Bodying forth [Leiben] always belongs to being-in-the-world. It always co-determines being-in-the-world, openness, and the having of a world." *Bodying* as definitive of being-in-the-world involves a different meaning of the body than those previously touched on. But most importantly, this polymorphous body spawns a polyphony of voices, which Heidegger harbors within his ways of thinking and neither of which can take the lead and assume the one and only pivotal intention of the author.

5. Where Does the Body End?

In *Zollikon Seminars* Heidegger addressed the question of the limits of the body: "Where does the body stop?" (Heidegger 2001b, 85). Just like the human thinking, the body itself is characterized by a range of possibilities and is never at rest. Therefore, we can point neither to the limits of body, nor to the limits of thinking. We cannot trace the specific concept of the body back to Heidegger's intentions as an author. All we can do is to put forth distinct ways of talking about the body, its multifarious meaningfulness within a polyphony of voices.

If we don't differentiate distinct voices within Heidegger's works, then we will stumble across intractable and inconsistent claims. For instance, in Kevin Aho's view one shouldn't interpret Dasein as a concrete human being: "it is important to understand that Dasein does not fundamentally refer to an individual" (Aho 2009, 18). And yet, let us recall Heidegger's voice that protests against such a misinterpretation: "Because Dasein has in each case mineness [*Jemeinigkeit*], one must always use a personal pronoun when one addresses it: 'I am', 'you are'." (Heidegger 2001a, 68). And this sort of incoherencies is an essential part of Heidegger's ways of thinking. Dasein indeed "refers to a historical space or clearing of meaning" (Aho 2009, 20), but at the same time it is always in each case mine. The way I propose to face this sort of ambiguities is by distinguishing different voices within Heidegger's philosophical discourse, that is by transforming the contradiction into a conceptual counterpoint. Just like two melodies don't contradict each other even though they are completely different, the human thinking also may play out in a harmonious way on different levels. Our task is to write down the *notations* that thinking follows.

I used certain *tropes* in order to point out different changes within Heidegger's discourse: the *ontological primacy* and the *ontological tautology* are only two of them, although their number is indefinite.

We saw how Heidegger employed the trope of an *ontological primacy* in order to state that we are embodied because we are spatial and not vice versa, which gave rise to the whole scholarship that sung the song of "Heidegger's neglect of the body." But at the same time, we found another trope at work, the *ontological tautology* of *der Leib liebt*, which confers to the body the clear status of an ontological phenomenon. Furthermore, after analyzing different ambiguities that the *body* had across Heidegger's life-time, we conclude that the meaning of the notion changes with the *voice* that carries it.

Therefore, when talking about different terms like *Dasein*, *Sein* or, in our case, *Leib* we must always bear in mind the question: which Heidegger is speaking here? Heidegger's famous late self-interpretation has a clear voice in its own right. Nonetheless, the mesh between disparate viewpoints that Heidegger held across his lifetime brings nothing but cacophony.

We may freely ask ourselves questions like: isn't body only an empirical, and therefore accidental condition of possibility for the unfolding of time? Or does it indeed have a say in the temporal ontological constitution of meaningfulness? But we shouldn't make a further step and pretend that Heidegger had a theory about these things. Heidegger's thinking is, first and foremost, a polyphony of ways (not of works, theories, or ideas), which I call *voices*, that speak in different, harmonious or polemical manners. The point of this paper was to articulate the contrapuntal movement of his thinking regarding corporeality, which also can be done with other fundamental concepts of Heidegger's thinking.

Notes

¹ Take for instance Thomas Sheehan's search for the one and only thing—*die Sache selbst*—that was on Heidegger's mind (Sheehan 2013, 382): „The first step is to realize that Heidegger's work was phenomenological from beginning to end. This entails that his work was focused not on 'The being of beings' (*Sein*) but on 'the meaning of the meaningful' (*Sinn, Bedeutung*).”

² “But in *Being and Time* one does not find thirty lines concerning the problem of perception; one does not find ten concerning that of the body.” (De Waelhens 1963, xix)

³ Part of this project is the so-called *metontology* that Heidegger articulated in the late 20's.

⁴ Aho states the following: “I want to suggest that the analysis of the body in the Zollikon seminars is an example of regional ontology, one that identifies and describes the essential attributes of a particular being, in this case the lived-body.”

⁵ One cannot object that Heidegger is talking here about Kant and not so much in his own name, for we find a similar line of thought in *Being and Time* (2001a, 412): “Neither may *Dasein*'s spatiality be interpreted as an imperfection which adheres to existence by reason of the fatal 'linkage of the spirit to a body'. On the contrary, because *Dasein* is 'spiritual',

and only because of this, it can be spatial in a way which remains essentially impossible for any extended corporeal Thing.”

⁶ Heidegger (2001a, 369): “*Only on the basis of its ecstatico-horizonal temporality is it possible for Dasein to break into space.*”

⁷ The underlining is mine.

⁸ The relationship between body (*Leib*) and life (*Leben*) is not visible in the English translation.

⁹ One cannot accuse us of cherry-picking here. Even upon first glance, Heidegger's *Contributions* is clearly replete with a metaphysical understanding of the body.

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