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The Paradoxical Body. The Tensegrity of Corporeality in Sartre's Phenomenology

1. *Introduction*

Corporeality is a common theme in both classical and contemporary phenomenology. While the modern age brought about the separation between man and the world, phenomenology has instead brought attention to the unprejudiced description of lived experience, without the imposition of external explanatory frameworks or conceptual schemes from the empirical sciences, introspection, common sense, folk psychology, etc.¹ The body is reconsidered via the phenomenological method and understood as a bridge that can explain and fill the gaps between consciousness and the world, subject and object, and spirit and matter; in this sense, the world can only be revealed by the sensory and motor skills of the body, and the subject can only experience the world in an embodied way. Recently, some phenomenology- and pragmatism-inspired theories from contemporary cognitive science (e.g., enactivism and the 4E cognition movement in general) have also maintained that the body is the fulcrum of the relationship between the mind and the world; thus, empirical investigations of the dynamics of sensorimotor, physical and adaptive processes of the body have become the alleged solutions for various philosophical and psychological issues, including the functioning of consciousness, the unity of mind and body, as well as the structure of intersubjective, empathic and semantic relationships among individuals².

¹ D. Moran, *What is the Phenomenological Approach? Revisiting Intentional Explication*, in «Phenomenology and Mind», 15 (2013), pp. 72-90.

² D.D. Hutto, E. Myin, *Evolving enactivism: Basic minds meet content*, MIT Press, Cambridge (MA) 2017; A. Newen, S. Gallagher, L. de Bruin (eds.), *The Oxford handbook of 4E cognition*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2018.

Despite some recent enthusiastic reactions such as those mentioned above, the body is far from being completely understood due to its complexity. The focus on the body introduced by the phenomenological tradition has shown its complexity and pluralistic nature. The body is both object and subject of experience, that is, the body is the set of anatomical parts that constitute our biological organism, and also the phenomenal dimension that defines ourselves as experiencing subjects within a world. We are our bodies, but at any moment the body can be thematized (e.g., categorized) and thus placed in more or less wide proximity to us: I am the hands that are typing on the keyboard right now, however, if I observe my moving hands with sufficient concentration, I can alienate them outside of me, almost as if they were a foreign pieces of flesh (which, for example, happens when an arm has gone numb). Nevertheless, understanding how these dimensions of corporeality are related to each other is an enterprise that has involved and still involves phenomenology today³. Indeed, corporeality refers to conceptual dynamics – the physical body, the objectified body, the body as subjectively lived, the intersubjective body, etc. – whose main characteristic is absolute irreducibility. In other words, any attempt to assimilate one dimension within the other seems problematic, if not impossible.

This existential and phenomenological complexity of the body is presented by Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*⁴. Authors like Scheler, Husserl and, most of all, Merleau-Ponty are better known for their phenomenological accounts of the body, indeed some of Merleau-Ponty's major works are specifically dedicated to the body⁵, and have to some extent overshadowed Sartre's account of bodily consciousness, which was developed in the third part of the second chapter of *Being and Nothingness*⁶. However, while Sartre is often depicted as an old-fashioned – Cartesian style – philosopher⁷, his

³ S. Gallagher, D. Zahavi, *The Phenomenological Mind*, Routledge, London 2020.

⁴ J.-P. Sartre, *L'Être et le Néant*, Gallimard, Paris 1943 (transl. by H. Barnes, *Being and nothingness*, Philosophical Library, New York 1956).

⁵ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Le primat de la perception et ses conséquences philosophiques*, in «Bulletin de la Société française de philosophie», XLI (1947), n. 4 (transl. by J. Edie, *The Primacy of Perception: And Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History, and Politics*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 1964); *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Gallimard, Paris 1945 (transl. by D. Landes, *Phenomenology of perception*, Routledge, New York 2013).

⁶ J.S. Catalano, *The Body and the Book: Reading Being and Nothingness*, in K.J. Morris (eds.), *Sartre on the Body*, Palgrave Macmillan, London 2010, pp. 25-40.

⁷ For example, see S. Cremaschi, *Il concetto di natura in Sartre*, in «Rivista di Filosofia Neo-Scolastica», 67, 1 (1975), pp. 43-59; J.B. Stewart (eds.), *The Debate Between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 1998.

phenomenological analysis of corporeality is articulate on different levels and allows to understand the phenomenological exceptionality of the body as something characterized by tensions and paradoxes that go beyond a dualistic view of corporeality.

2. Sartre's phenomenological ontology

Before focusing on the body as such, it will be useful to briefly introduce the phenomenological-ontological analysis Sartre developed in the first few chapters on *Being and Nothingness*. In a nutshell, Sartre distinguishes between two irreducible modes of being: «being-in-itself» (*être-en-soi*) and «being-for-itself» (*être-pour-soi*). The former is the pure being of the phenomenon, brute existence, pure plenitude of being; it manifests in the series of its appearances to being-for-itself – the nature of consciousness – which in contrast is nothing but transcendence towards the manifestations of being-in-itself. Sartre is undoubtedly influenced by the French Cartesian tradition, but it is important not to confuse this distinction between modes of being with a substance dualism or a reality-appearance dualism⁸. These terms – in-itself and for-itself – are used by Sartre to stress the «indissoluble dyad»⁹ of being and nothingness, i.e., the intimate relation of consciousness to matter, and man to the world. There are not two substances; there is only the «monism of the phenomenon»¹⁰ as it is manifested.

Consciousness – the being-for-itself – has no content, and is, instead, pure directedness towards the world¹¹. This means that every consciousness is structured by intentionality («being conscious of something»), which is not a process of cataloguing objects inside the mind but the openness to and the

⁸ «One can see why Sartre is often described as a Cartesian dualist but this is imprecise. Whatever dualism pervades his thought is one of spontaneity/inertia. His is not a “two substance” ontology like the thinking thing and the extended thing (mind and matter) of Descartes. Only the in-itself is conceivable as substance or “thing”. The for-itself is a no-thing, the internal negation of things. The principle of identity holds only for being-in-itself. The for-itself is an exception to this rule» (T. Flynn, *Jean-Paul Sartre*, in E.N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Metaphysics Research Lab - Stanford University, Stanford 2013).

⁹ J.-P. Sartre, *Being and nothingness*, cit., p. 120.

¹⁰ *Ivi*, p. xlv.

¹¹ J.-P. Sartre, *Une idée fondamentale de la phénoménologie de Husserl: l'intentionalité*, in «La Nouvelle Revue française», 304 (1939), pp. 129-131 (transl. by J.P. Fell, *Intentionality: A Fundamental Idea of Husserl's Phenomenology*, <https://www.stephenhicks.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Sartre-JP-Husserl-Intentionality.pdf>).

encounter with the world¹². This is why Sartre cannot be described as a mere interpreter of Cartesian philosophy; rather, his account of the in-itself-for-itself relationship leads to an anti-substantial and anti-idealist account of consciousness¹³, but also to an ontological proof based on the transcendence and transphenomenality of being rather than on the reflectivity of cogito¹⁴. Being-in-itself is the foundation of being-for-itself and is independent of consciousness nevertheless, the phenomenon of the world and the plenitude of the being-in-itself must not be confused; as for a concrete world to appear, both being and nothingness – being-in-itself and being-for-itself – are required. On the one hand, there is no consciousness of something without a world, as consciousness depends on it like the existence of a hole depends on the thing that has that hole (the for-itself is a «hole of being»¹⁵); on the other hand, the world is revealed as a set of possibilities, projects, meanings, and intentional objects by the pure activity of consciousness towards the world¹⁶, i.e., intentionality.

Furthermore, the concept of “pre-reflective consciousness” is useful for understanding the Sartrean attempt to overcome Cartesianism. Sartre argues that every positional consciousness (being conscious of something) involves a non-positional consciousness of that act (i.e., every consciousness is pre-reflectively, non-intentionally aware of itself). So, it is not a kind of knowledge/reflection, on the contrary, it is the non-reflective consciousness, which grounds any subsequent reflection; with the fact that «there is a pre-reflective cogito which is the condition of the Cartesian cogito»¹⁷, i.e., that knowledge first implies the consciousness of knowledge, Sartre already avoids the Cartesian reflective starting point. Thus, he opts for an account of consciousness that ontologically depends on the relationship with the transcendent being, rather than on the hypostasized intuition of the thinking subjects, which con-

¹² M. Rowlands, *Sartre, consciousness, and intentionality*, in «Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences», 12, 3 (2013), pp. 521-536.

¹³ J. Duncan, *Sartre and Realism-All-the-Way-Down*, in «Sartre Studies International», 11, 1-2 (2007). See J.-P. Sartre, *Conscience de soi et connaissance de soi*, in «Bulletin de la Société Française de Philosophie», 42 (1948), pp. 49-91.

¹⁴ J.-P. Sartre, *Being and nothingness*, cit., pp. lx-lxii.

¹⁵ J.-P. Sartre, *Being and nothingness*, cit., p. 79.

¹⁶ «There is nothing in it but a movement of fleeing itself, a sliding beyond itself. If, impossible though it may be, you could enter “into” a consciousness, you would be seized by a whirlwind and thrown back outside, in the thick of the dust, near the tree, for consciousness has no “inside”. Precisely this being-beyond-itself, this absolute flight, this refusal to be a substance is what makes it be a consciousness» (J.-P. Sartre, *Une idée fondamentale*, cit., p. 130).

¹⁷ J.-P. Sartre, *Being and nothingness*, cit., p. liii.

founds knowledge and consciousness¹⁸. The distinction between pre-reflective non-positional consciousness and reflective positional consciousness subsequently takes shape in the discrepancy between the first and second bodily dimensions, which respectively refer to the non-positional and pre-reflective vs. the positional and reflective consciousness of the body.

Proceeding from the most general to the most concrete, Sartre needs to define how consciousness develops in relation to the objects of the world, i.e., how intentionality works. Temporality and spatiality develop from the embodied and embedded nature of consciousness; thus, they are not to be seen as physical time and space, the building blocks of nature, or the homogeneous and pure extension of Cartesian *res extensa*, but rather as dimensions of «nihilations» of being-for-itself towards being-in-itself. Spatiality is the organisation of the relations between external objects: not understood as an abstract, centreless, independent space (a «world without men»¹⁹) but as the «hodological space», i.e., a lived situation as a field of forces of the experiencing subjects in relation to the world²⁰. Similarly, consciousness is not simply given in time like a mere thing; it is the «original synthesis»²¹ of temporalisation, since our experience is the act of relating things together with us through temporality, which is neither a universal, Newtonian container, nor an extrinsic law of nature; rather, it is how a bodily consciousness relates in the present with the past and the future.

In sum, «hodological space» is a pre-reflective way of transcending towards the world relative to our centre of reference («the glass on my left»), while «original temporality» is the pre-reflective mode of intentionality in which we unify all the different appearances of things: not into a series of «nows» and «heres» (psychic temporality and spatiality), but into an «organised structure» of an «original synthesis» of past, presents and future²². Via this synthesis, the body plays the role of necessary centre of reference, the objects of experience are temporally and spatially extended and embedded in a wider spatio-temporal field. This synthesis is not, however, a container of past, present and future contents of consciousness, rather it is a mode in which consciousness makes manifest the world and itself («we

¹⁸ J.-P. Sartre, *Conscience de soi et connaissance de soi*, cit., p. 62.

¹⁹ *Ivi*, p. 307.

²⁰ «For human reality, to be is to-be-there; that is, “there in that chair”, “there at that table”, “there at the top of that mountain, with these dimensions, this orientation, etc.”. It is an ontological necessity» (*ivi*, p. 308).

²¹ *Ivi*, p. 107.

²² *Ivi*, p. 159.

are the temporalization»²³). Taken together, our being-in-the-world is every time given according to spatial and temporal modes of the body. Thus, we always temporalise and spatialise the things we apprehend from the world and ourselves, and this is possible only via a body that, according to Sartre, is one of the fundamental structures of human reality, and thus is far from being a Cartesian machine.

3. *The necessary contingency of the body*

So far, I have explained how Sartre moves from the description of the fundamental modes of being to the presentation of the structures of consciousness as intentionality, temporality and spatiality. These dimensions – defined as «ekstatic» (from Greek, meaning «standing outside») – are used by Sartre to expel things from consciousness and to re-establish a true connection with the world. This connection can only happen via our bodily being. As Dermot Moran notes, the chapter titled “The Body” in *Being and Nothingness* is dense, difficult, confused, original, insightful, and brilliant, and somehow it reflects the subtle, complex, many-layered account of the body presented²⁴.

According to Sartre, consciousness and body are not merely conjoined by some kind of nexus (e.g., physical, psychophysical, phenomenal, etc.). Rather, for Sartre, consciousness is nothing but bodily consciousness, i.e., there is no difference between the intentional acts and the processes of the body such that to speak of «embodied consciousness is not to say that consciousness happens to ride around inside the body»²⁵. However, it would be a mistake to confuse this intrinsic relationship between the body and consciousness with the identity of the two, as if Sartre wanted to pursue a behavioural approach towards consciousness or a unification of two different dimensions²⁶.

²³ *Ibidem*.

²⁴ D. Moran, *Sartre on embodiment, touch, and the «Double Sensation»*, in «Philosophy Today», 54 (2010), pp. 135-141; Id., *Revisiting Sartre's Ontology of Embodiment in Being and Nothingness*, in V. Petrov (ed.), *Ontological Landscapes: Recent Thought on Conceptual Interfaces Between Science and Philosophy*, Ontos, 2011.

²⁵ G. Cox, *Sartre: A Guide for the Perplexed*, Bloomsbury Publishing, London 2006, p. 54; see also J.-P. Sartre, *Being and nothingness*, cit., p. 309: «The body is nothing other than the for-itself; it is not an in-itself in the for-itself, for in that case it would solidify everything. But it is the fact that the for-itself is not its own foundation, and this fact is expressed by the necessity of existing as an engaged, contingent being among other contingent beings».

²⁶ «In one sense therefore the body is a necessary characteristic of the for-itself; it is not true

The body is not just a physical object, it is the «psychic object; *par excellence*», thus, «the perception of it cannot be of the same type as that of inanimate objects»²⁷. A rock is *in-the-midst-of-the-world* (*au milieu du monde*), i.e., an inert presence as a passive object among other objects, while bodily consciousness is *in-the-world* which implies the involvement with a world that has to be engaged, revealed and differentiated, temporally and spatially speaking²⁸. Furthermore, body and consciousness are respectively interpreted by Sartre as the «sign» and the «meaning». From this perspective, meaning is expressed through a sign without being reduced to the expression of the sign itself; following this interpretation, there is no consciousness (meaning) without the body (the sign).

This led Sartre to use the formula «consciousness (of)» – which indicates the pre-reflective cogito – also in terms of «consciousness (of) the body», i.e., the «lateral and retrospective» awareness of oneself as a body that grounds our experience with the world²⁹. However, as meaning exceeds the sign through which it is expressed, so is bodily experience structured in ways that go beyond mere physicality.

In this sense, the body is simultaneously conceived «as the necessary condition of the existence of a world and as the contingent realization of this condition»³⁰. This is one of the most important dynamic figures that characterize the Sartrean body. To exist is to be a body in contingent situations that one did not choose to be in, and these situations give one a limited and contingent perspective on the world (i.e., I have a particular point of view, and therefore I exclude all the others in relation with certain objects, actions, projects, and possibilities³¹). However, it is necessarily the case that

that the body is the product of an arbitrary decision on the part of a demiurge nor that the union of soul and body is the contingent bringing together of two substances radically distinct. On the contrary, the very nature of the for-itself demands that it be body; that is, that, its nihilating escape from being should be made in the form of an engagement in the world» (J.-P. Sartre, *Being and nothingness*, cit., p. 309).

²⁷ *Ivi*, p. 347.

²⁸ «I can not say either that I am here or that I am not here, in the sense that we say “that box of matches is on the table”; this would be to confuse my “being-in-the-world” with a “being-in the midst of the world”. [...] People consider that we exist first as contemporary with this chair or this table, and they work out the meaning of the temporal by means of the world. But if we thus place ourselves in the midst of the world, we lose all possibility of distinguishing what no longer is from what is not» (*ivi*, pp. 60, 110).

²⁹ *Ivi*, p. 330.

³⁰ *Ivi*, p. 328.

³¹ M.G. Weiss, *Il corpo infelice di Sartre. Fenomenologia del corpo in L'essere e il nulla*, in N. Pirillo (ed.), *Sartre e la filosofia del suo tempo*, Università di Trento, Brescia 2006, pp. 110-125.

one exists contingently and has a contingent point of view determined by the body since one cannot exist except in this contingent way. Sartre calls this «twofold contingency» that paradoxically embraces a necessity the «facticity of the for-itself», and the body is the «contingent form which is assumed by the necessity of my contingency»³².

The concept of facticity is fundamental to understanding how Sartre's ontology goes beyond Cartesianism, exemplified instead by the mind-body, spirit-matter dualisms³³. We are not rarefied spirits, but flesh-and-bone bodies with physical needs. We are also not mere objects in-the-midst-of-the-world; rather, connecting the notion of «being-in-the-world» (*être-dans-le-monde*) with the concept of facticity and human finitude³⁴, Sartre stresses our embodied-being-in-the-world, as Moran argues³⁵. Thus, contrary to the accusation of Cartesian intellectualism, for Sartre, we can only realize the world by existing in it in an embodied way³⁶; this means that the world is certainly manifested through the body – we can perceive it, feel it, observe it, etc. – but the body itself, in turn, is «indicated» by things and instruments around us³⁷.

Therefore, the subject cannot but be incarnated³⁸ and there is no way to escape from the body because we never cease to be in facticity, but at the same time, we constantly try to «surpass» and «transcend» our body, to directly experience the world. In some sense, the body is everywhere in the world³⁹, but every time is brought back into his contingent and situational

³² J.-P. Sartre, *Being and nothingness*, cit., pp. 308-309.

³³ W.D. Melaney, *Sartre's Postcartesian Ontology: On Negation and Existence*, in A.-T. Tymieniecka (ed.), *Phenomenology and Existentialism in the Twentieth Century*, Springer Netherlands, Dordrecht 2009, pp. 37-54; K. Wider, *The Bodily Nature of Consciousness: Sartre and Contemporary Philosophy of Mind*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1997.

³⁴ «The concrete can be only the synthetic totality of which consciousness, like the phenomenon, constitutes only moments. The concrete is man within the world in that specific union of man with the world which Heidegger, for example, calls "being-in-the-world"» (J.-P. Sartre, *Being and nothingness*, cit., p. 3).

³⁵ D. Moran, *Revisiting Sartre's Ontology of Embodiment in Being and Nothingness*, cit.

³⁶ J.-P. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, cit., p. 318. «It would be impossible for me to realize a world in which I was not and which would be for me a pure object of a surveying contemplation. But on the contrary it is necessary that I lose myself in the world in order for the world to exist and for me to be able to transcend it».

³⁷ *Ivi*, p. 325.

³⁸ B.P. Marosan, *Sartre's radical reduction to the incarnated subjectivity. The metaphysics of contingency*, in «Phainomena», 19, 74-75 (2010), pp. 139-167.

³⁹ «[My body] is over there in the fact that the lamp-post hides the bush which grows along the path, [...] or that the woman who is crossing the street appears smaller than the man who is sitting on the sidewalk in front of the café» (J.-P. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, cit., p. 318).

perspective. According to Beauvoir, the misunderstanding of the notion of facticity precisely leads Merleau-Ponty to consider the Sartrean account of the embodied consciousness not as open to the world and yet distinct from it, but merely co-extensive with it⁴⁰. For Sartre, the body itself is «co-extensive with the world, spread across all things»; nonetheless it is a sort of non-place, as «at the same time it is condensed into this single point which all things indicate and which I am without being able to know it»⁴¹. Thus, the concept of a disembodied consciousness⁴² that would perform the transcending without the body completely misses the point.

4. *The tripartite structure of corporeality*

It is now possible to grasp the tension and dynamic complexity that characterize Sartre's phenomenology of the body. The body is the contingent yet necessary condition of human consciousness, through which we always find ourselves «in situation». In this sense, the body is both the condition of possibilities and the limit of our consciousness of the world, i.e., our intentionality. We have a world only because we have a body, and the body is constantly revealed to us through the relationship with things⁴³. Against any kind of simplistic dualism, this being-embodied-in-the-world implies a duality without dichotomy⁴⁴, wherein «man and world are relative beings, and the principle of their being is the relation»⁴⁵. While he considers the body

⁴⁰ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Adventures of the Dialectic*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 1973, p. 197n. See S. de Beauvoir, *Merleau-Ponty and Pseudo-Sartreanisms*, in J.B. Stewart (ed.), *The Debate Between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty*, cit., p. 450: "What Merleau-Ponty simply fails to grasp here is the theory of facticity, one of the foundations of Sartrean ontology. My consciousness can only go beyond the world by engaging itself in it, that is by condemning itself to grasp the world in a univocal and finite perspective, and therefore to be perpetually overwhelmed by it: this is why there can be only an embodied consciousness".

⁴¹ J.-P. Sartre, *Being and nothingness*, cit., p. 318.

⁴² J. Slatman, G. Widdershoven, *An Ethics of Embodiment: The Body as Object and Subject*, in D. Meacham (ed.), *Medicine and Society, New Perspectives in Continental Philosophy*, Springer Verlag, Berlin 2015.

⁴³ «To come into existence, for me, is to unfold my distances from things and thereby to cause things "to be there" But consequently things are precisely "things-which-exist-at-a-distance-from-me". Thus the world refers to me that univocal relation which is my being and by which I cause it to be revealed» (J.-P. Sartre, *Being and nothingness*, cit., p. 308).

⁴⁴ M. Whitford, *Merleau-Ponty's Critique of Sartre's Philosophy: An Interpretative Account*, in J. Stewart (ed.), *The Debate Between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty*, cit., pp. 48-63.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*. See also J.S. Catalano, *The Body and the Book: Reading Being and Nothingness*, cit., p. 30. «This interdependence reveals that the world exists independently of our concepts

one of the necessary structures of human reality and recognizes its essential role in overcoming modern dichotomies, Sartre nonetheless understands the multidimensionality of the body as the source of elusive and irreducible figures of corporeality. Indeed, once the Sartrean dynamics between in-itself and for-itself, me and others, and reflected and reflecting are applied to the bodily experience, we can identify a series of concrete examples of the complexity of the body.

As stated in the introduction, the body can be conceived of as both the object and the subject of experience, i.e., as both having and being a body. Almost all the phenomenological traditions have tried to deepen the distinction and complementarity of the *Körper* (the anatomical and physical body, approached from without) and *Leib* (lived and situated body, viewed from within). Sartre reinterprets the distinction, developing three dimensions of corporeality: the body-for-itself, the body-for-others and the so-called «third dimension», namely the body-in-itself-for-the-others. These dimensions imply peculiar manifestations of corporeality not only in an epistemic sense but also in the ontological-phenomenological sense.

The body-for-itself (*le corps-existé*) is similar to Husserl's and Merleau-Ponty's lived body and is not something of which one is constantly conscious; rather, it is «surpassed», i.e., nihilated, towards the world. For our everyday-experience, we are unaware of our bodies because we are immersed in things in the world through the body itself, which is only pre-reflectively, non-positionally present to us. The body-for-itself «is never a given which I can know. It is there everywhere as surpassed; it exists only in so far as I escape it by nihilating myself»⁴⁶. Therefore, it is nothing but the unseen condition of possibility of being-in-the-world, the point of view that is necessarily «surpassed», «transcended», «passed by in silence» towards the world, but upon which I cannot have a point of view⁴⁷. The body-for-others, instead, is the body seen and known as an object from an external point of view. It is the contingent, «anatomical and spatial» condition of the for-itself, thematized as «the center of reference indicated emptily by the instrumental-objects of the world»⁴⁸. In other words, a body as an object perceived by others, categorized as a physical object in the empirical sciences; it can also be something

about it, but not independently of the advent of human consciousness within matter. This interdependence between bodily consciousness and the world is real, although it is not a reciprocal relation. Here we touch upon a real difference between the thought of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty [...].

⁴⁶ J.-P. Sartre, *Being and nothingness*, cit., p. 309.

⁴⁷ *Ivi*, p. 330.

⁴⁸ *Ivi*, p. 339.

observed by me, for instance, when I see the other's body⁴⁹, or when I reflect upon specific parts of my own body from the perspective of the other. Lastly, the third dimension characterizes the body as recognized by me as objectified by the other, and this opens to the dimension of intersubjectivity, which is an inescapable and primary element of corporeality. Despite Sartre presents these three figures starting from the body as subjectively experienced, the encounter with the other is prior to the self-recognition as a subjective body (interestingly, the chapter on the existence of others precedes the chapter on the body in *Being and Nothingness*, and is included in the third part of the book on the «being-for-others»). As I will present below, the body-for-itself is often passed by in silence, and what we know about our own body strongly depends on what we perceive of the other's body⁵⁰.

4.1. *The binarity between the body-for-itself and the body-for-others*

For Sartre there is an unbridgeable gap between these two dimensions. The body is a polarization process in which the body-for-itself and the body-for-others are mutually exclusive. When I look at myself in the mirror or dwell on my bodily sensations, I am not concentrating on the lived body, because when I reflect on it, I have already objectified it in a similar way to the body-for-others. The body-for-itself is still there as a presence-absence (i.e., present but elusive) but immediately surpassed as an object of reflection. «I cannot see the sensitivity of the hand or even the “mineness” of my hand»⁵¹ because we always perceive things as in the world even when those things are my body parts; therefore, we do not perceive the lived body as such, which instead is invisible and integrated within the world, but we can transform it into an object in specific situations⁵², such as reflection or ill-

⁴⁹ This does not mean that the body-for-others is only seen as a corpse, contingent flesh, or a mere tool; rather, I usually perceive the others in situations, i.e., in relation with actions, objects, projects, intentions, etc., such that «[n]othing is less “in the flesh” than a dancer even though she is nude» (*ivi*, p. 389).

⁵⁰ *Ivi*, pp. 218, 358.

⁵¹ D. Moran, *Revisiting Sartre's Ontology of Embodiment in Being and Nothingness*, cit., p. 275.

⁵² «In Sartre's methodology, a direct, expository approach to the body would effectively mean that we examine our body as an object. It would not help to claim, “Look, I want to consider the lived body”. If these are the first words that the phenomenologist utters about the human body, then, for Sartre, he or she unknowingly enters within the conceptual and linguistic framework that already accepts the body as an object. Our body is first out in the world» (J.S. Catalano, *The Body and the Book: Reading Being and Nothingness*, cit., p. 32).

ness and other psychosomatic situations (e.g., when the body appears as an obstacle and therefore becomes an object of my consciousness).

In this sense, Sartre considers the problem of the unification of mind and body, i.e., the mind-body problem, to be a false problem; instead of proposing a solution to it or claiming that it cannot be solved, Sartre argues for its dissolution. He shows how the attempt to coalesce embodied experience and the material body – the body as lived (*le corps-existé*) and the body as seen (*le corps-vu*) – is absurd, as it would entail unifying two ontologically – and not merely epistemically – different dimensions⁵³. This does not mean that we have two bodily substances since we are embodied beings from the start of our experience, and we cannot lack a physical body⁵⁴. Sartre's «phenomenological ontology» must be understood as the study of the nature of being (ontology) of phenomena as they present in experience (phenomenology). When Sartre speaks of different «orders of reality»⁵⁵ (*ordres de réalité*), he means that the subjective body and objective body are phenomena experienced in an irreducible and incompatible way; although it is impossible to perceive the body-for-others except through the lived (and surpassed) body, and any knowledge (whether awareness or acquaintance) concerning my own body comes indirectly from the perspective of the body-for-others⁵⁶.

⁵³ «The problem of the body and its relations with consciousness is often obscured by the fact that while the body is from the start posited as a certain thing having its own laws and capable of being defined from outside, consciousness is then reached by the type of inner intuition which is peculiar to it. [...] Actually if after grasping “my” consciousness in its absolute interiority and by a series of reflective acts, I then seek to unite it with a certain living object composed of a nervous system, a brain, glands, digestive, respiratory, and circulatory organs whose very matter is capable of being analyzed chemically into atoms of hydrogen, carbon, nitrogen, phosphorus, etc., then I am going to encounter insurmountable difficulties. But these difficulties all stem from the fact that I try to unite my consciousness not with my body but with the body of others. In fact the body which I have just described is not my body such as it is for me» (J.-P. Sartre, *Being and nothingness*, cit., p. 303).

⁵⁴ «Of course the physicians who have taken care of me, the surgeons who have operated on me, have been able to have direct experience with the body which I myself do not know. I do not disagree with them, I do not claim that I lack a brain, a heart, or a stomach. But it is most important to choose the order of our bits of knowledge. So far as the physicians have had any experience with my body, it was with my body in the midst of the world and as it is for others. My body as it is for me does not appear to me in the midst of the world. Of course during a radiology I was able to see the picture of my vertebrae on a screen, but I was outside in the midst of the world. I was apprehending a wholly constituted object as a this among other thises, and it was only by a reasoning process that I referred it back to being mine; it was much more my property than my being» (*ibidem*).

⁵⁵ *Ivi*, p. 304.

⁵⁶ «Furthermore the body – our body – has for its peculiar characteristic the fact that it is essentially that which is known by the Other. What I know is the body of another, and the essential facts which I know concerning my own body come from the way in which others see it» (*ivi*, p. 218).

For similar reasons, Sartre rejects the ontological cruciality of the «double sensation» – as exposed by Husserl and Merleau-Ponty – which entails the intertwining between the perceived and perceiving body parts, for example, the touched and touching hands⁵⁷. The idea of double sensation is often used to show how Husserl and Merleau-Ponty overcame both Cartesian dualism and the mechanistic view of the body. However, Sartre’s critique of the double sensation should not be considered as an adherence to the Cartesian view. Sartre acknowledges that «[o]f course when I touch my leg with my finger, I realize that my leg is touched. But this phenomenon of double sensation is not essential: cold, a shot of morphine, can make it disappear»⁵⁸. Thus, the double sensation, instead of showing the ontological unity of the touching-touched dyad, it shows that the body-for-me and the body-for-others are two different intentional objects⁵⁹; when I focus on the finger that is touching the leg, I am not experiencing the finger as living/operating, rather I reify the subjective body into an object, and when I immediately shift my attention to the felt leg, I thematize it as an object⁶⁰. Therefore, I always perceive the body as an object, while the subjective body – the body-for-itself – is retrospective, diaphanous, and present but elusive. As the nature of consciousness is «being what it is not and not being what it is»⁶¹, a fortiori the nature of bodily consciousness is also this double movement of nihilation; while the unthematized body is truly lived in the present, and lost in the encounters with the world, as soon as it becomes something (as it does in self-reflection), it becomes being-in-itself, thing-like, a past. This does not imply any return to Descartes, rather it offers an original answer to the mechanistic approach and it focuses on the irreducibility and diasporic nature of the dimensions of corporeality; on the other hand, while eluding the

⁵⁷ D. Moran, *Sartre on embodiment, touch, and the “Double Sensation”*; Husserl, *Sartre and Merleau-Ponty on Embodiment, Touch and the “Double Sensation”*, in K.J. Morris (ed.), *Sartre on the Body*, cit., pp. 41-66.

⁵⁸ J.-P. Sartre, *Being and nothingness*, cit., p. 304.

⁵⁹ D. Moran, *Revisiting Sartre’s Ontology of Embodiment in Being and Nothingness*, cit.

⁶⁰ «It remains to describe what we shall call an *aberrant* type of appearance. In actuality I can see my hands, touch my back, smell the odor of my sweat. In this case my hand, for example, appears to me as one object among other objects. It is no longer indicated by the environment as a center of reference. [...] This appearance of my hand means simply that in certain well-defined cases we can adopt with regard to our own body the Other’s point of view or, if you like, that our own body can appear to us as the body of the Other. [...] Similarly the hand which I grasp with my other hand is not apprehended as a hand which is grasping but as an apprehensible object. Thus the nature of our body for us entirely escapes us to the extent that we can take upon it the Other’s point of view» (J.-P. Sartre, *Being and nothingness*, cit., pp. 357-358).

⁶¹ *Ivi*, p. lxxv.

Cartesian substance dualism, this phenomenological-ontological distinction between subjective and objective body is related to an unbridgeable gap between my body and the body of others, as I will now explain through the third dimension of corporeality.

4.2. *The body-for-itself-for-others*

This «paradoxical binarity»⁶² between modes of manifestation is accompanied by another stage of bodily complexity, i.e., the so-called «third dimension» of the body, or the body-for-itself-for-others⁶³, which characterizes the body as experienced under the gaze of the other and therefore belongs to the order of intersubjectivity. From the beginning, each body is located in a context with other bodies that relate to one another, and within this context, I can experience myself as a body thematized and classified by the other. In other words, in some situations, my body appears to me as seen and known to the other, such that I am forced to recognize that I exist not only as my centre of reference and orientation towards the surrounding world (body-for-itself) but also as an object in the situation for the other. If I can thematize the body of the other, I can recognize that the other can do it too, transforming me into a themed object within his own experiential horizon and situation. This means that my body can progressively become «alienated» and «expropriated», as a tool for others, or a sensitive organ perceived by other sensitive organs (e.g. during a medical examination), in a world that is no longer mine. All the so-called «social emotions», such as shyness, embarrassment, and shame, depend and derive from this dimension of inter-corporeality.

The other is a crucial figure in Sartre's phenomenological investigation since, from the beginning, the body is an intercorporeal entity⁶⁴, so much so the encounter with the body of the other happens phenomenally before the experience of my own body⁶⁵. When I start knowing myself as a body,

⁶² M. Doyon, M. Wehrle, *The Body*, in D. De Santis et al. (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy*, Routledge, London 2020.

⁶³ M.C. Dillon, *Sartre on the Phenomenal Body and Merleau-Ponty's Critique*, in J. Stewart (ed.), *The Debate Between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty*, cit., pp. 175-186.

⁶⁴ B.P. Marosan, *Sartre's radical reduction to the incarnated subjectivity. The metaphysics of contingency*, cit.

⁶⁵ «Now the body, whatever may be its function, appears first as the known. [...] Thus the nature of my body refers me to the existence of others and to my being-for-others. I discover with it for human reality another mode of existence as fundamental as being-for-itself, and this I shall call being-for-others. [...] Again it is necessary that the child begin the learning process with the

I am already under the gaze of the other, which reveals me to myself, such that «it is, paradoxically, the other who assists me in constituting myself for myself»⁶⁶. This implies a form of proto-sociality that immediately reveals the body-for-others, which then reveals the existed body to the subject itself; in other words, the third dimension, despite being described after the other two, embodies the conflictual dialectic presented by Sartre in the chapter dedicated to the encounter with the other, which ontologically precedes the recognition of any subjective corporeality. This subject-other relationship does not take place through mutual and harmonious recognition, but by forcing the subject to acknowledge the absolute, transcendent, and unattainable presence of the other⁶⁷; in this sense, Sartre's social ontology struggles to account for socially positive intersubjective structures, since intersubjectivity is mainly presented as the fight of consciousnesses, without the possibility to build an authentic intertwining from subject to subject⁶⁸.

Nevertheless, while the body as lived and the body as seen belong to different ontological levels (*plans ontologiques*)⁶⁹ and cannot relate to each other, in rare cases the relationship between my body and the other's body can reveal a deeper level of corporeality, namely the flesh. The flesh (*chair*)⁷⁰ is the living body in its pure contingency, where I find myself in the body that I did not choose but that I necessarily have in this form. Strictly related to facticity, the flesh has to do neither with the isolated body comprised of tissues and organs and studied by the empirical sciences nor only with the naked body («Nothing is less “in the flesh” than a dancer even though she is nude»⁷¹); rather, it is the «pure contingency of presence»⁷² that is usually hidden behind the meanings of actions, gestures, expressions, objects, etc.,

Other's body. Thus the perception of my body is placed chronologically after the perception of the body of the Other» (J.-P. Sartre, *Being and nothingness*, cit., pp. 218, 358).

⁶⁶ D. Moran, *Revisiting Sartre's Ontology of Embodiment in Being and Nothingness*, cit., p. 267.

⁶⁷ See also the objectifying power of the Look of the Other described in J.-P. Sartre, *Being and nothingness*, cit., pp. 252 ss.

⁶⁸ See, for example, C.C. Cloutier, *Love as Seeing in Truth: Sartre and Stein on Self-Constitution*, in «Lumen et Vita», 8, 2 (2018).

⁶⁹ J.-P. Sartre, *Being and nothingness*, cit., p. 305.

⁷⁰ D. Moran, *Husserl, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty on Embodiment, Touch and the “Double Sensation”*, cit., p. 42, «Crucially, Sartre introduces the very notion of “flesh” (*la chair*), which is now more usually associated with Merleau-Ponty, and develops the flesh as that where intercorporeity is possible. For Sartre, flesh is the locus of contingency and intercorporeity».

⁷¹ J.-P. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, cit., p. 389.

⁷² «I never perceive an arm raised alongside a motionless body. I perceive Pierre-who-raises-his-hand» (*ivi*, p. 346).

i.e., by the body in a situation. However, as Sartre describes, «in the course of long acquaintance with a person there always comes an instant when all these disguises are thrown off and [...] there are instants when I achieve in the face or the other parts of a body the pure intuition of the flesh»⁷³. It is important to note that, when it is addressed to me or some body parts of the other, this kind of pre-reflective apprehension of the flesh is experienced as «nausea», an ontological unease with having a contingent body, i.e., facticity⁷⁴. However, the specific relationship of the desire of the other is the attempt to make the other exist as pure flesh, stripped of its movements as of its clothing.

In desire, during some transient moments, we stop fleeing from our contingency towards situations in the world, and abandon ourselves to our purely sentient body being – a pure being-there – and we desire that the other do the same. In such moments, we neither apprehend the body as an instrument nor do we want to possess the other's body as a thing, but we want to be at once with our body and with the other's body. «This “incarnation” of the other's body that I desire as pure flesh has an ontological sense, since through our bodily relationship I do not merely reveal something that already stays behind the clothes and movements, but rather I make it exist»⁷⁵. Sartre here emphasizes the act of the caress as the emblem of a «double reciprocal incarnation»⁷⁶. The caress is the expression of the desire as language is of thought⁷⁷; this unifying process of incarnation disappears as soon as the desire turns into sexual pleasure, which brings the relationship back into the order of movements, means, and ends⁷⁸. Nevertheless, this crucial point of Sartre's theory of corporeality expresses the importance of intercorporeality; while Husserl and Merleau-Ponty particularly emphasize the self-experiencing unity of the touched-touching body, Sartre instead em-

⁷³ *Ivi*, p. 343.

⁷⁴ «This perpetual apprehension on the part of my for-itself of an insipid taste which I cannot place, which accompanies me even in my efforts to get away from it, and which is my taste—this is what we have described elsewhere under the name of Nausea. A dull and inescapable nausea perpetually reveals my body to my consciousness» (*ivi*, p. 338).

⁷⁵ *Ivi*, p. 391.

⁷⁶ «The caress is the ensemble of those rituals which incarnate the Other. But, someone will object, was the Other not already incarnated? To be precise, *no*. The Other's flesh did not exist explicitly for me since I grasped the Other's body in situation; neither did it exist for her since she transcended it toward her possibilities and toward the object. The caress causes the Other to be born as flesh for me and for herself. [...] I make her enjoy my flesh through her flesh in order to compel her to feel herself flesh» (*ivi*, pp. 390-391).

⁷⁷ *Ivi*, p. 390.

⁷⁸ *Ivi*, p. 396.

phasizes the pre-reflective – albeit ultimately unsuccessful – union with the flesh of the other, so that it is the inter-corporeality that underlies the bodily self-awareness, not vice versa⁷⁹.

5. *Complexity instead of reductionism*

Sartre's account of corporeality has sometimes been interpreted as a failed attempt to overcome the Cartesian ontology and the mind-body problem, instead producing an anthropological schizophrenia in the human body⁸⁰. As I have tried to explain, Sartre does not propose the return – or the confirmation – of the Cartesian dualism, rather he investigates the complexity of the body, highlighting its existential aporias. For Sartre, the distinction between the subjective and objective body is an important merit of phenomenology, but one should not take their union for granted; indeed, it is important to stress that the peculiarity of the human body does not lie in the ambiguous union between subject and object at once – as Merleau-Ponty would argue⁸¹ – but in the paradoxical and incessant alternation of the tripartite structure of the body. The body as for-itself (first dimension) is lived as a silent nothing, a non-objectual point of view, or the translucent subjectivity in-the-world; then, the body seen as for-the-other (second dimension) becomes a quasi-object (e.g. in pain or upon reflection), a tool or a thing in-the-midst-of-the-world, or an idealized abstraction produced by the sciences; but only inter-corporeality (third dimension), through the gaze and touch of the other, reveals the body as pure contingent flesh.

These various bodily figures are not merely juxtaposed with one another; rather, they are structured in a dynamic process of attractions and oppositions, such as in the dimension of the body-for-itself-for-others. Metaphorically speaking, we could interpret the Sartrean structure of corporeality as an integral tension or «tensegrity», to use an engineering term. The principle of tensegrity describes a system in which the integrity of the structure is maintained by the balance of the components in continuous tension⁸². Similarly,

⁷⁹ D. Moran, *Sartre on embodiment, touch, and the "Double Sensation"*, cit.

⁸⁰ M.C. Dillon, *Sartre on the Phenomenal Body and Merleau-Ponty's Critique*, cit.

⁸¹ S. Gallagher, *Lived Body and Environment*, in «Research in Phenomenology», 16 (1986), pp. 139-170; M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of perception*, cit., pp. 95, 98; J. Slatman, G. Widdershoven, *An Ethics of Embodiment: The Body as Object and Subject*, cit.

⁸² See, for example, the gravity defying sculptures of Kenneth Snelson (K. Snelson, *The Art of Tensegrity*, in «International Journal of Space Structures», 27, 2-3 (2012), pp. 71-80).

the body, according to Sartre, is not a stable and unitary whole; nonetheless, it is precisely the irreducibility and opposition between the different elements of the body that allow the dialectic of a complex and constantly changing bodily structure to carry on without destroying it, which accords with our bodily experiences⁸³. Thus, far from proposing again a rigid dualism between subject and object, between mind and matter, these existential and phenomenological figures reaffirm the kaleidoscopic and paradoxical nature of the body, as a «non-thingly living flesh, neither pure object nor pure consciousness»⁸⁴.

In this sense, the Sartrean phenomenology of the body could offer new interpretative perspectives concerning the investigation of the body in contemporary philosophy of mind, which has recently been supported by some authors⁸⁵; however, it could also be useful to dampen unjustified enthusiasm with some scientific approaches to the body in particular on the brain, which reveal a reductionist attitude concerning the complexity of bodily experience. As I have argued elsewhere in more detail⁸⁶, the 4E cognition (embodied, embedded, enactive and extended) is a field of interdisciplinary research based on the idea that mental/conscious activity is structured by dynamic interactions between the brain, body, and environment (in both the physical and social sense). This approach has the merit of opposing the classic representationalist, computationalist and internalist views of mind and consciousness, focusing instead on how the body as a whole interacts with the environment. Although the focus of 4E cognition on the body and its relationships with the environment offers a broader perspective than certain neuro-centric and internalist interpretations, an excessively physicalist language fails to grasp the phenomenal richness of bodily experience. Indeed, their contribution is limited to the dimension that Sartre defines as the body-for-others,

⁸³ In this regard, we could interpret various mental disorders related to the body as the polarizations and disruptions of the balance between bodily dimensions. C. Tewes, G. Stanghellini (dir.), *Time and Body. Phenomenological and Psychopathological Approaches*, Academic Press, Cambridge (MA) 2020.

⁸⁴ D. Moran, *Revisiting Sartre's Ontology of Embodiment in Being and Nothingness*, cit., p. 266.

⁸⁵ S. Miguens et al. (dir.), *Pre-reflective consciousness: Sartre and contemporary philosophy of mind*, *Pre-Reflective Consciousness: Sartre and Contemporary Philosophy of Mind*, Routledge, London 2016; M. Rowlands, *Enactivism, intentionality, and content*, in «American Philosophical Quarterly», 50, 3 (2013), pp. 303-316.

⁸⁶ F. Zilio, *The Body Surpassed Towards the World and Perception Surpassed Towards Action: A Comparison between Enactivism and Sartre's Phenomenology*, in «Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy», 28, 1 (2020), pp. 73-99.

as an object idealized by the empirical sciences. This perspective could be completed and enriched by the two other ontological conditions of the body elaborated by Sartre, namely the body-for-itself and the third ontological dimension, and by the pre-reflective relationship between consciousness and the body understood as «meaning» and «sign»⁸⁷.

Abstract

The body is the core of our internal and external experiences. The existential and phenomenological complexity of the body is presented by Sartre in Being and Nothingness, and his multidimensional approach to corporeality has sometimes been interpreted as a failed attempt to overcome Cartesian ontology and the mind-body problem. This paper aims to reconsider the Sartrean approach not as a return of Cartesian dualism, but as an investigation of the irreducible dynamics of corporeality, which not only overcome Cartesianism but also offer an original answer compared to other phenomenological approaches. First, I analyse the intrinsic relationship between consciousness, the body, and the world in Sartre's phenomenological analysis. Then, I present the three existential dimensions of corporeality, the body-for-itself, the body-for-others, and the body-for-itself-for-others, and argue that Sartre aims to stress the «tensional integrity» of bodily consciousness, through its paradoxical and multidimensional nature. This many-layered complexity is far from proposing a rigid dualism between the subjective and the objective body; rather, it represents a dynamic and dialectical process of attractions and oppositions. Lastly, I argue that the phenomenal richness of bodily experience developed by Sartre can offer a non-reductive interpretation of body for contemporary cognitive science.

Keywords: Sartre; Body; Consciousness; Phenomenology.

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⁸⁷ I thank the anonymous reviewer for the careful reading of my manuscript and her/his insightful comments and suggestions.