

# CASTING SHADOWS: THE BODY IN DESCARTES, SARTRE, DE BEAUVOIR, AND LACAN

## A. Beginning

Descartes' dualism is old stuff. The idea that I am a composite of two radically distinct substances, one which is essentially me, the soul/mind, and the other which is mine but not truly me, the body, can barely find a hearing amongst contemporary thinkers immersed in the continental traditions. We teach it to our students of course, but only as a relic of a form of thought now overcome.

On closer inspection, however, we discover that the demise of the dualistic position is less than complete. Like other dying ideas it has left its legacies. They appear in most unexpected places. Heirs of Descartes' legacies reject the two substance thesis, the thought that the human body is a machine and therefore essentially other than the mind, as well as the methodology of clear and distinct ideas, the assumption that differences in thought refer to distinctions of kind which cannot be essentially related. Unlike Descartes, those thinking within his shadow reject the idea that mind and body are tenuously connected in a way that can never be clearly understood.

Having escaped the substance of Descartes' thought, his heirs remain caught in its shadows. Taking their cue from Descartes, they identify the body as a source of self alienation and link the alienating powers of the body as a source of self alienation and link the alienating powers of the body to its being a perceivable perceiver, a subject capable of experiencing itself as an object. The difference between Descartes and his Cartesian followers and a thinker thinking in the shadow of Descartes' thought is the difference between one who situates the otherness of the body on the other side of the subject and one who understands the otherness of the body as the otherness of the subject. For the

Cartesians the body is the site of an external threat to subjectivity. For those thinking in Descartes' shadow the body poses a threat from within.

Returning to the source, France, I use these pages to sketch out the suggestion that Descartes' legacy lives in the work of Sartre, de Beauvoir, and Lacan. If Wilfrid Desan's Cartesian reading of Sartre is taken into account, the idea that "Bad Faith," "The Look," *No Exit* and *Nausea* recall Descartes' dualism is not unexpected. If we remember the connections between Sartre and de Beauvoir we should not be surprised to find a Sartrean motif living in a de Beauvoir analysis. What is significant is the power of the Cartesian legacy and the difficulty of evading it. The point of this paper, however, is not to claim that we are trapped by our Cartesian legacies, but to explore the ways in which we are learning to evade them. Here Lacan is especially provocative. With Lacan the alienating claims of the body to be the subject are expressions of the subject's desire. Here, the body is the other of the subject not because it is other than the subject, but because it is the way the subject brings otherness into itself. But—and for this discussion this is crucial—the body as the other of the subject is not the immediately experienced body, but the imaged one. Lacan prods us to pursue the following questions: It is possible to escape the imaged body which bars us from the subject? Is it possible to experience our subjectivity through our immediate experiences of the body?

## **B. The Source: Descartes**

The pervasive and persistent object of the First Meditation's method of doubt is perception. The belief that perception is a source of knowledge is undermined by the usual examples of illusions and hallucinations as well as the unusual dream and evil demon hypotheses. The language and wax example of the Second Meditation, however, reveals that the intent of the First Meditation is not to dismiss perception *per se*, but only to invalidate the evidence of existential presence accorded by perception as a bodily activity and to refute the idea that perception is an exclusive operation of the body. The mind is also a perceiver. Its perceptions are fundamentally different from the perceptions of the body. The mind perceives essences, clear and distinct truths of extended things. The perceptions of the thinking thing must not be confused with those of the extended thing. As an extended thing the body appears to perceive the existential presence of objects. The evidence for this presence, being neither clear nor

distinct, is rejected. The particular body I perceive as mine may not exist. Its claim to be me is doubtful. The Sixth Meditation, under the umbrella of the benevolent God, relents a bit. Yes, the body experienced by perception does exist. Yes, its claims to be me deserve a hearing. Yes, my extended thing perceptual experiences are a source of bodily self knowledge insofar as I, as body, can be the object of pleasure and pain. But no, perception as bodily activity provides no access to essence; not to the essences of objects other than myself and not to the essence of myself. Even the benevolent God cannot break the rule of clear and distinct ideas: the self cannot be both a thinking and extended substance. The human being may be defined as a composite body and soul, but the self is the soul/mind.

The *Meditations* teach us that perception may be understood as both a mental and a bodily activity. As a mental activity it provides access to the essence of extended substance but provides no evidence for distinguishing amongst discrete particular bodies of the same type. From the perspective of the mind, my body is essentially the same as any other human body. As a bodily activity, however, perception is an experience of bodily presence. From this perspective, I experience the presence of my body differently than the presence of other bodies. My body is mine. Other bodies are present to or with me. But this experience is not sufficient to establish my body as me. If I am to understand myself, I must break perception's hold on me. Though mine, the body remains an-other.

Even as it recognizes the indubitability of the evidence of presence provided by perception, the Sixth Meditation cannot allow this presence to become a self-presence. I cannot clearly understand the evidence of this presence. I cannot understand myself as a composite body. I can only understand myself as soul/mind. This leaves an opening, one that Descartes does not (could not) pursue. There is the possibility that the self could be bodily, though it would not be able to understand itself as such so long as it remained committed to the principles of Cartesian thought. Sartre, de Beauvoir and Lacan pursue this opening.

### C. The Legacy: Sartre

The suggestion that Sartre is caught in the legacy of Descartes' attack on the body sounds perverse. Have I forgotten *The Transcendence of the Ego*? Isn't

Sartre clear? There is no transcendental point of reference. I am always and only an embodied subject. The idea that the self is a soul/mind distinct from the body is not, however, the whole of Descartes' thesis of the self. There is another component of his theory of subjectivity: the idea that the body is a source of alienation. Descartes' thesis is not simply that the body is not the self, but more complexly that the body claims to be the self and that we are lured by this claim away from ourselves. It is from this more complex claim that the echoes of Descartes find a place in Sartre's thought.

Like Descartes, Sartre recognizes the unique and intimate relationship between perception and my experience of myself as body. Because Sartre recognizes the subject as embodied he cannot take this relationship lightly. He must undertake an extensive examination of the relationship between subjectivity and perceptual experience. These examinations take two directions. There is the direction of "Bad Faith" where it is a question of how I use my perception of myself as body to escape my freedom/subjectivity, e.g. the woman in the cafe, the homosexual. And there is the direction of "The Look" and *No Exit* where it is a question of how, by being an embodied subject available to the perceptions of the other, I am vulnerable to the loss and exploitation of my freedom/subjectivity.

Where for Descartes the body alienates me from myself by substituting its otherness for my essence, for Sartre the body's powers of alienation are grounded in its being inextricably intertwined with human subjectivity. It is because the body is not an other that the other encounters me in it. It is because the body is not an other that I define myself through it. The other is able to use the availability of my body to rob me of my subjectivity as I am able to use the determinateness of my body to alienate me from my self not because the body is not me, but because the body is a mode of my being which I or the other can use to alienate me from my freedom.

In both "Bad Faith" and "The Look" the possibility of alienation is the possibility of objectification. And though the possibilities of objectification are not determined by or limited to the possibility of perceiving and being perceived, by perceiving and being perceivable I find myself drawn into objectifying practices.

"Bad Faith" describes the ways in which I use the experience of the body as object and the experience of myself as bodily to negate the fluidity of the subjectivity of the *pour-soi*. Bad faith describes the lure of the body exposed by

Descartes. Reading Sartre against the shadow of Descartes we may say that though Descartes may have been mistaken in severing the body from the subject, he was not mistaken in warning that the perceptions which inscribe us as bodies have the power to lure us away from ourselves.

"The Look" and *No Exit* draw on another Cartesian observation. Here it is not the lure of the perceived and perceivable body that is explored, but the danger of being perceived and perceivable. Descartes raises this issue as though it were the question of our access to the other. How, he asks, do we know that the robot-like objects which we perceive behaving in a mechanical fashion are human beings? No answer is given, though we are assured that it is a matter of judgment, and the question is never raised again.

Sartre places Descartes' observation regarding the way in which our perception of the other as body is a perception of the other as object in a somewhat different context. Here it is not a question of how we get from the other as body to the other as subject (for Sartre the body is not the other of the subject and therefore not something we have to travel through to get to the subject), but rather a matter of how my being as a perceivable body leaves me vulnerable to the exploitive, objectifying strategies of the other.

To experience myself as perceived by the other is to experience the power of the other's subjectivity to deny my own. The lived here-ness of my body is transformed into the other's there. There I am, an object in the other's world. I am still here of course, but my here is no longer mine. It is vulnerable to the manipulations of the other. Were Sartre a Cartesian he could deny that the body being exploited is the subject. But he is not a Cartesian, he is only an heir of Descartes. Because he is not a Cartesian he cannot separate the exploited body from the subject. Because he is an heir of Descartes he accepts the idea that the human body is perceived as an object. Though the Cartesian sequence is reversed, the effect is the same. Descartes describes human bodies that appear to be objects and wonders how we ever discover that they are subjects. Sartre experiences the subjectivity of the other as the power of reducing him/her to a body object within an alien perceptual field. Wherever we begin, we arrive at the same place. Perception draws the human figure into the category, object.

In both the theme of the lure of the body in "Bad Faith," and the analysis of the danger of the body in "The Look" and *No Exit*, we discover that the Cartesian attitude toward the body is preserved. No longer disjoined from the subject, the body remains a source of alienation. The setting of *No Exit* shows

this as clearly as any of Sartre's words. Here in the room that is both Hell and the site of possible salvation there are no mirrors. Embodied subjects are barred from seeing themselves. This route to bad faith is barred. Other routes abound. As embodied subjects, each character remains available to the eyes of the other, and this availability is exploited. But the hope of *No Exit* seems to be that if each can forgo perceiving the other as object and if each can refuse to accept the bad faith requests of the others, the absence of mirrors will make it possible for each to escape the alienations of the body.

Sartre uses the mirror in *Nausea*, however, somewhat differently. Here it becomes a site of liberation. Roquentin discovers that absenting himself from the social fabric of Bouville makes it impossible for him to recognize his face in the mirror. It is transformed from a stable object into a fluid succession of images. Here the mirror offers the possibility of a different sort of perception—an unmediated experience of the body. The suggestion that the body as perceived in the everyday world is other than the experienced body is pursued throughout *Nausea*. The hand becomes a crab claw. The body becomes elastic. Its appearance as a stable self-defined object is not the effect of a natural process, not a reflection of the immediately given, but an effect of a social construction. The body is made into an object. It is not immediately experienced as one.

The sense of these early works then is that though the body is not my other, because it is the me immediately available to/for the other, and because it is the me most amenable to the strategies of "Bad Faith," it can become, and more often than not does become, the site of otherness. We are subjects subject to the lure and danger of the body. Though caught by the shadow of Descartes' thought of the body as perceived, perceivable, perceiving and alienating, this thinking also points to a thinking that could distance itself from Descartes. In this thinking the body as immediately experienced would be a mode of being which affirms rather than alienates lived subjectivity.

#### D. The Legacy: de Beauvoir

In *The Second Sex* Simone de Beauvoir takes up the themes of subjectivity and the body with specific attention to the issue of woman. In moving from the abstractions of philosophy and the imaginings of literature to the historical concrete situation of woman de Beauvoir's case against the body is at once more complex and more ambiguous than Sartre's. Sartre's undeveloped thought that

the body-object is a socially constructed reality rather than an immediately experienced one is carefully pursued. It is not woman's immediately experienced body that closes her off from subjectivity, but the ways in which her perceived body has been given the meaning of the other and the ways in which she complies with this meaning that reduce her experienced body to a perceived object available for exploitation. Here the force of Descartes' legacy loses some but not all of its power. The link between the body and its status as a pre-given, perceptual object is weakened. The link between the body and the alienation of the subject, however, remains.

*The Second Sex* pursues two questions: How did it happen that in the struggle for subjectivity one sex, the male, came to permanently occupy the position of the subject, while the other sex, the female, came to permanently occupy the position of the other, the object? How did it happen that activities of transcendence, activities that allow us to escape the lure of the body, were made available to and demanded of the man and refused the woman? The second question directly addresses the issue of Descartes' legacy.

De Beauvoir begins by defining subjectivity as transcendence. She then ties transcendence to a specific relationship to the body, risk. Briefly, for de Beauvoir subjectivity is an achievement of an adult human being. The achievement is an affirmation of transcendence. To be human is to refuse to accept the world as given. Whether the author of the meaning of the world is seen as God, Nature, Political Authorities or Parents, the authority of the other to define and situate me within the world must be rejected if I am to occupy the place of the subject, the one who exists as the freedom of self-definition.

Because I am a human subject, an embodied subject, my affirmation of subjectivity must engage the body. Whether she is describing nomadic and agricultural communities or the situation of the contemporary adolescent, de Beauvoir insists that the challenge to authority that establishes the subject must be bodily. My body expresses my subjectivity when I risk it, i.e., when it acts in ways that reveal it is not determined by the laws of survival or mechanics. In risking my body I challenge its appearance as perceived object. Thus de Beauvoir speaks of warrior acts as humanizing, of the violence of male adolescents as humanizing, of risk taking as humanizing, and of freely allowing oneself to become vulnerable as humanizing. In each of these acts, the perceived body lives in ways that elude objectification.

The shadow of the Cartesian body takes a twist. De Beauvoir rejects the idea that biology is destiny. One is not born, one becomes, a woman. To be perceived as a female body is not to be perceived as a woman. One becomes a woman. And one may become a woman either as an embodied female who authors her subjectivity or as an embodied female who is an object for man's subjectivity. Becoming a subject always requires bodily risk. Within the current structure of patriarchy it also requires violence.

The theme of "The Look," that the body is the site of intersubjective violence, is brought to bear on the issue of patriarchy. The weakness and childbearing nature of the woman's body somehow makes it vulnerable to structural objectification. The woman becomes the body that is acted upon and that submits to what happens to it (e.g., childbearing). The man becomes the active body, the subject. De Beauvoir does not reject the patriarchal link between bodily risk, self-affirmation and violence. Her argument is with the ways in which the structures of patriarchy engage men but bar women from violent, risk-taking, self-affirmative, transcendent activities.

Again we begin to elude Descartes' shadow. The body is now more than a source of alienation; it is also a site of self affirmation. Because the body is me, it is through the body that I become me. With de Beauvoir, the alienating dimensions of the body are historical not ontological. This is not to suggest that they are not powerful but rather represents a re-alignment of the relationship between "Bad Faith" and "The Look." Where the analyses of *Being and Nothingness* seem to give priority to the alienating powers of "Bad Faith" or at least give "Bad Faith" and "The Look" equal status, *The Second Sex* suggests that the alienations of "The Look" fuel the lures of "Bad Faith."

De Beauvoir's analyses do not reject the Cartesian thought of the body as alienating. They do, however, point to a way of understanding the body as other than alienating. They suggest that though the body is/can be the alienation of subjectivity, the alienations of subjectivity are not attributable to its embodiment. Within the structures of patriarchy the escape from the Cartesian legacy is a route of violence reserved for men. Without rejecting the liberating power of violence, de Beauvoir suggests two alternatives to the patriarchal route toward subjectivity. The first route is the way of transcendence through conquest, risking the body in the world. The second is the way through vulnerability, risking the body in erotic love. Unlike the violent route of patriarchy, neither

of these routes validates the objectification of the other or favors the stronger body.

We have gone from the body as other, to the body as alienating otherness, to the body as the site of self-affirmative transcendence through risk, violence, conquest and vulnerability. But we have yet to fully leave the shadow of Descartes' body: the thought of the body as dangerous. In all of this the body remains a lure and a risk. Even when its link to subjectivity is affirmative, its power to affirm the subject is linked to its power to destroy it.

### **E. The Legacy: Lacan**

Lacan accepts the idea that the perceived body experienced as mine is not me. By exploring the dynamic by which the other of the perceived body is taken to be the subject, however, he discovers that it is not the objectness of the body that alienates subjectivity, but the desire of the subject speaking through the body that closes the subject off from itself. Or at least, this is what I take to be the implication of his discussion of the "Mirror Stage."

The account of the mirror stage is by now quite familiar. The human infant encounters its reflection in the mirror and becomes captivated by it. Unlike other animals who recognize that their reflected image is an empty double, the human infant plays with its reflected image, is fascinated by it and ultimately identifies with it. Where the animal remains rooted in the experienced body, the infant adopts the imaged body.

Lacan accounts for the infant's preference for the reflected image in the following way. In seeing itself in the mirror, the infant sees itself as it is seen by the other. This seeing is erotic, not epistemological. It is laden with desire. The other who sees it is not a neutral observer but a desiring other whose desire it (the infant) wishes to be. In desiring to be the image of itself desired by the other, and in identifying with its imaged body as desired by the other, the infant brings otherness into itself; for it is as other (the other of its bodily experience) that the image elicits the infant's desire, and it is for the other that the infant embraces its imaged otherness.

Repression finds its earliest expression here. The infant could not effect this mis-recognized identification without repressing its bodily experience. It could not be the desired of the other if it recognized the discontinuity between its experienced and imaged body. The desire of the desire to be the desired of the other asserts itself by repressing the discontinuity. As the imaged body takes

the place of the experienced body, the ego, modeled on the body image, is formed and (mis) identified as the subject.

The legacy remains. The body is mistaken for the subject. Perception plays a crucial role. But the body now casts a double shadow. As the perceived and perceivable it is not immediately given to us as one mechanical object among others but becomes objectified through the dialectic of desire. As the subject is the other of the ego, the experienced body is the other of the perceived one. And as we look more closely we are tempted to say that insofar as it is not the body which bars us from the subject but the perceived/imaged body which alienates us from ourselves, it is through a return to the experienced body that an attunement with/to subjectivity becomes possible; for Lacan's descriptions of the experienced body as discontinuous, fractured, and fragmented are as close as anything we might imagine to his depiction of the subject as an absence which escapes all fixations of desire.

As with Sartre and de Beauvoir, the body becomes the double site of the subject. It is that which fixes it the subject, thus alienating it from itself; and that which transcends the fixities invites. For Lacan, as for de Beauvoir, it is by risking the body as the embodiment of itself that the subject can engage in the project of self-recovery. The setting of *No Exit* now seems to say it all. It is not the body but the desire expressed in the image of the body that is the other of the subject. If we could renounce the appeal of the image and undo the priority of sight, if the world were without mirrors, and if the other refused to reflect us, the body would not be the alienation of the subject.

Lacan twists the legacy of Descartes almost beyond recognition. The body is still perceivable as an object and it still lures the subject away from itself. Its objective structure is not, however, a sign of its otherness but rather a mark of its complicity with the subject's desire. It is because the body is the subject that it can misrepresent the subject and get its forgery accepted as legitimate currency.

In insisting on the embodiment of the subject Lacan does more than close the gap between body and self. He transforms the meanings of the body. It remains of course the perceivable mode of the subject. The idea that it is perceived as one type of object amongst others, however, is rejected. The body with which I mistakenly identify is the imago of my desire. More dramatically, it comes to be at the insistence of desire. According to Lacan, the body which I take as mine is not rooted in my bodily experience but is a construct imposed

on experience. The perceived completed, coordinated body is substituted for the experienced unbounded, vital, excessive body because the one but not the other presents itself as the desire of the other.

## **F. Is There a Happy Ending?**

Whether the body is that aspect of me that is perceived or whether the body is that perceptual object which illicitly claims to be me is the question given to us by Descartes. Descartes' answer is clear. The body's claims to be me are illegitimate. I am a thinking, not an extended thing. His answer has been repudiated. His suspicions regarding the body have not.

These pages have sketched the ways in which questions of perception and questions of the body/self were joined by Descartes and remain related today. They have suggested that the way to escape the influence of Descartes' legacy is to distinguish amongst the various modes of perception and to identify which if any of these modes might be appealed to suggest that the body is not necessarily an alienation of the self.

Within the *Meditations* Descartes identifies three forms of perceptual experience. There are the mental perception of essence, the body perception of concrete objects, and the body experience of existential presence. Descartes questioned the relationship between mental and body perceptions and found that they were distinct. The essence of an extended substance is not encountered in our bodily experience of it. In assuming that the body perception of concrete objects was simultaneously an experience of existential presence Descartes assumed that the body perception of the human figure as object and as presence was identical. His heirs have questioned this assumption.

Remaining within the shadow of Descartes' thought, but refusing to accept the radical otherness of self and body, Descartes' heirs have explored the alienating dimensions of the body in an effort to understand the phenomenon of self-alienation. It is, I think, because they understand the self as embodied that they have come to distinguish the human figure experienced as presence from the human body perceived as object. What seems to have emerged from the thought of Sartre, de Beauvoir, and Lacan is the idea that the experienced presence of the human figure is an immediate experience of subjectivity which is covered over by an objectifying perception. Thus the body is the other of the

self only insofar as our experience of its objectivity is accepted in place of, or is allowed to repress, our experience of its existential presence.

We are left to ponder the implications of these observations. At least one seems clear. Descartes' dualism is not refuted by simply affirming the embodiment of the subject. To escape the influences of the dualism we must pursue the thought that the perception which gives us the body-object is the work of desire and not a reflection of immediate experience. For Sartre and de Beauvoir the body becomes the site of self-alienation because it is the perceived/perceivable subject. They note, however, that as the perceived/perceivable, the body can also become the site of self-expression. It can embody the self-transcending activities that constitute subjectivity. This idea is pushed to its limit by Lacan. Strategies of desire infect perception. To uncover these strategies is to discover the experienced body, the body prior to its being taken up within the dialectic of desire. This body is the clue to, rather than the alienation of, the subject. By distinguishing the experienced from the perceived-imaged body this clue directs us to explore non-imaged ways of attending to the body. It challenges us to develop a language that could describe this un-mediated body experience. It also suggests that the cohesiveness of the subject is radically other than the unity of the object, and that the embodied subject is only experienced as an object when this otherness is refused.

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