

SARTRE ON EMBODIMENT, TOUCH, AND THE “DOUBLE SENSATION”

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No phenomenology of life, of body and the flesh, can be constituted without basing itself on a phenomenology of touch.

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The chapter titled “The Body” in *Being and Nothingness* offers a ground-breaking, if somewhat neglected, philosophical analysis of embodiment.² Written in Sartre’s customary dialectical style, it is dense, difficult, confused, original, insightful, brilliant. As part of his “essay on phenomenological ontology,” he is proposing a new multi-dimensional *ontological* approach to the body. For Sartre, traditional philosophy has misunderstood the body because the orders of *knowing* and *being* have been conflated or inverted.³

Sartre begins from but creatively develops phenomenological discussions of embodiment found in Husserl (without direct access to *Ideas II*),⁴ Scheler,⁵ and Heidegger.⁶ In the background, of course, is an established—and predominantly French—tradition of physiological/psychological discussion of the body in relation to consciousness found in Descartes, Condillac, Maine de Biran, Comte, Bergson, Brunschwig, Pradines,⁷ Marcel,⁸ Bachelard, and others, authors with whom Sartre was familiar. Indeed, Sartre provisionally maps out much of the ground later retraced by Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) and posthumous *The Visible and the Invisible* (1964).⁹ For instance, Sartre discusses the artificiality of the psychological concept of sensation, the intrinsic temporality of experience, the Müller-Lyer illusion, the “double sensation” (one hand touching the other), Gestalt figure-ground structures, and so on.

But in many ways, especially in his discussion of fleshly intercorporeity, he goes beyond Merleau-Ponty. Indeed, Sartre introduces the notion of “flesh” (*la chair*), now more usually associated with Merleau-Ponty. For Sartre, flesh is the locus of contingency and

intercorporeity. Flesh is “the pure contingency of presence” (BN 343/410).¹⁰ More importantly, my flesh constitutes the other’s flesh, especially in the acts of touching and caressing:

The caress reveals the Other’s flesh as flesh to myself *and to the Other*. . . . It is my body as flesh which causes the Other’s flesh to be born (*quit fait naître la chair d’autrui*). (BN 390/459–60)

I have one kind of knowledge of the body within my experience and another experience of the body given from the perspective of the other: the body as it is “for me” and the body as it is “for others” or “for the other” (*pour l’autrui*). These two dimensions are, according to Sartre, “incommunicable” and “irreconcilable”:

Either it [the body] is a thing among other things, or else it is that by which things are revealed to me. But it cannot be both at the same time. (BN304/366)

The first “ontological dimension” addresses the way, as Sartre puts it, “I exist my body” (*J’existe mon corps*) (BN 351/428), the body as non-thing, as medium for my experience of the world, but also as somehow *surpassed* towards the world. This is *le corps-existé*, the body as lived, as opposed to *le corps-vu*, the body as seen from the perspective of the other (BN 58/426).

The second dimension is the manner in which my body is experienced and indeed utilized by the other (and utilized by myself occupying the role of third-person observer of my body). This includes my ready-to-hand equipmental engagement with the world and my body as the “tool of tools.”

The third dimension is more complicated: it is the manner in which “I exist for myself as a body known by the other” (BN 351/419), what Martin C. Dillon has characterized as “the body-for-itself-for-others.”¹¹ This captures the

intersubjective dimension: the manner I experience my body as experienced by others, the dialectics of which Sartre has explored more than any other phenomenologist (with the possible exception of Levinas). This is the body as I experience it under the gaze of the other, as in the case of shame or embarrassment. I experience how the other sees me, even in the physical absence of the other. I am, Sartre says, “imprisoned in an absence” (BN 363/430). This is a contested domain: “Conflict is the original meaning of being-for-others” (*Le conflit est le sens original de l’être-pour-autrui*) (BN 364/431).

Sartre begins from the concrete unity of body and consciousness, with the body as lived and experienced *from within* (although that spatial metaphor is shown to be inadequate), from the “first-person” perspective. This is neither pure consciousness nor physical thing. The lived, experienced body—corresponding to Husserl’s *Leib*—can never be construed as a transcendent object, and certainly not something purely physical. In fact, Sartre paradoxically asserts:

The body is the psychic object par excellence—
the only psychic object. (BN 347/414)

The body dominates the psyche; it is present even in dreams, and the body we experience from within is itself psychically constituted.

The material, objective body, as idealized in the sciences (physics, biology, physiology), on the other hand, is, in Sartre’s pithy phrase, the “body of others” (*le corps d’autrui*), the body of the anonymous other. Sartre distinguishes between this body understood as object in the world, seen from “the physical point of view,” the “point of view of the outside, of exteriority” (*le point de vue du dehors, de l’extériorité*) (BN 305/367), and the body as experienced from within. From within, the body as lived is invisible, impalpable, “ineffable” (BN 354/421). I do not know experientially that I have a brain or endocrine glands (BN303/365)—that is something I learn from others. Likewise, I don’t know the inner anatomy of my body. I have, as it were, a “folk anatomy”—where I “think” my stomach is. This can be more or less well informed by science, more or less accurate, but this scientific map, superimposed on the felt body, does not necessarily coincide with the body as felt. I can visualise my ulcer-

ous stomach but I live its discomfort in a different way (BN 355–56/423).¹²

There is an immediately intuited or felt body (Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenal body). However, most of the time, this felt body is non-objectified and experienced in a diffuse, amorphous and almost invisible manner (which is precisely its mode of appearing). It becomes obtrusive in illness (I become dizzy), failure (the stone is too heavy to lift), disability (the anorexic experiences her body as too gross), or, as Sartre emphasises, in the *look* of the other.¹³

Furthermore, and this is Sartre’s originality, even when I see and touch my body, I am in these situations experiencing my body from without, from the point of view of an “other”: “I am the other in relation to my eye.” I can see my eye as a sense organ but I cannot, *contra* Merleau-Ponty, “see the seeing” (BN 304/366). I see my hand, Sartre acknowledges, but only as an external thing. I cannot see the sensitivity of the hand, even its mineness:

For my hand reveals to me the resistance of objects, their hardness or softness, but not *itself*. Thus I see this hand only in the way that I see this inkwell. I unfold a distance between it and me. (BN 304/366; his italics)

I see my hand as another object in the world. In other words, my sight (and indeed my touch) manifests my body in the same way as it is available to another. Here Sartre and Merleau-Ponty disagree. Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the feeling body as a continuing presence in cases of seeing and touching; whereas Sartre maintains that our perceivings objectify what we perceive and displace the feeling onto the felt. Thetic consciousness is objectifying or reifying. Physicians and others have an experience of my body, but they experience it as a piece of the world, “in the midst of the world” (*au milieu du monde*) (BN 303/365). This is the body in its “being for others” (*être-pour-autrui*) (BN 305/367).

Sartre claims that my own body is primarily present to me in this “for-others” (*pour-autrui*) way most of the time. Despite this dominance of the “for-others” body, Sartre strongly rejects the view that our ontology of the body should begin from the third-person, “externalist” (*du dehors*) view (BN 303/365).

This is “to put the corpse at the origin of the living body” (BN 344/411). The “category mistake” of previous philosophy has been its absurd attempt to unite the first-person experienced body with the “the body of others” (*corps des autres*) (BN 303/365). Rejecting this externalist approach as hopeless, Sartre maintains one must start from the recognition that, first and foremost, our experience is not of the body at all, but rather, of the world, or the situation:

Our being is immediately “in situation;” that is, it arises in enterprises and knows itself first in so far as it is reflected in those enterprises. (BN 39/76)

And again:

the body is identified with the whole world inasmuch as the world is the total situation of the for-itself and the measure of its existence. (BN 309/372)

We are completely *in the world*:

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.” (BN 3/38)

It is because of our intentional directedness to the world that we have to overcome, surpass, transcend the body. The whole thrust of human subjectivity is to overcome or cancel itself, to “nihilate” (*néantiser*) itself by *intending* towards the world. Intentionality is world-directed. The embodied consciousness has to “surpass” itself. This “surpassing” (*dépassement*) constitutes the essence of intentionality understood as self-transcendence. This surpassing of the body, however, does not mean its elimination:

The body is necessary again as the obstacle to be surpassed in order to be in the world; that is, the obstacle which I am to myself. (BN 326/391)

For Sartre, our transcendence towards the world is part of what he takes to be our original “upsurge in the world.”

But it is we ourselves who decide these very dimensions by our very upsurge (*notre surgissement*) into the world and it is very nec-

essary that we decide them, for otherwise they would not be at all. (BN 308/370)

Sartre frequently speaks of the “upsurge” (*surgissement*) of the *pour-soi* towards the world, of the “upsurge” of the other in my world, and so on. In a sense, this upsurge is the primal situation: consciousness and world emerging together in one blow. Merleau-Ponty also speaks of the “unmotivated upsurge” (*le jaillissement immotivé du monde*) (PP xiv/viii) of the world. For Sartre, this “upsurge” has both a certain necessity and a certain contingency, this combination he calls “facticity.” For Sartre, paradoxically, while the body is that which necessarily introduces the notion of perspective and point of view, at the same time the body is a contingent viewpoint on the world. Our body exemplifies the very contingency of our being: it is a body in pain, or whatever. To apprehend this contingency, is to experience “nausea”: “A dull and inescapable nausea perpetually reveals my body to my consciousness” (BN 338/404). Being embodied brings ontological un-ease (disease).

For Sartre, as for Husserl, consciousness requires incarnation, which situates and locates consciousness, gives it a point of view, and makes it possible as consciousness. Sartre writes:

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. (BN 309/372)

Moreover, the world in which we are embodied is a world that has been humanized by us: “the world is human” (BN 218/270):

The body is the totality of meaningful relationships to the world . . . The body in fact could not appear without sustaining meaningful relations with the totality of what is. (BN 344/411)

Sartre insists on the synthetic union between body and world. On the other hand, he rejects the deep significance that Husserl and Merleau-Ponty accord the phenomenon of the “intertwining” in the double sensation.

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The “Double Sensation”

Sartre clearly distinguishes between my body as experienced (ambiguously and non-objectively) by me and the body as it is for myself occupying the perspective of another. These different “bodies” underpin different, even irreconcilable ontologies. Sartre’s analysis of the phenomenon of the double sensation reinforces this irreconcilability between these opposing “ontological” dimensions.

Although many philosophers think the phenomenon of the “double sensation” is a discovery of Husserl or Merleau-Ponty, in fact it is a recurrent theme in nineteenth-century psychology (found, for instance, in E. H. Weber¹⁴ and David Katz¹⁵). Husserl employs the term “double sensation” (*Doppelempfindung*) in *Ideas II* §36 (152–54; Hua IV 144–47), and, indeed, had already discussed the phenomenon in his *Thing and Space* (1907).¹⁶ For Husserl, when one hand touches the other, the sensations of touching can be *reversed* into sensations of being touched. Husserl calls this “intertwining” (*Verflechtung*).

Likewise in *Ideas II* §36 Husserl is interested in the manner in which the lived-body (*Leib*) is constituted as a “bearer of localized sensations.” These “localized sensations” or “sensings” (*Empfindnisse*) are not directly but only indirectly sensed by a “shift of apprehension.”¹⁷ The touching hand must make movements in order to feel the smooth and soft texture of the touched hand. Husserl says that the “indicational sensations” of movement and the “representational” sensations of smoothness to the touch in fact belong to the touching right hand but they are “objectivated” in the touched left hand. Husserl speaks of the sensation being “doubled” when one hand touches or pinches the other. Each hand experiences this “double sensation.” Furthermore, for Husserl “double sensation” belongs essentially to touch but not vision (*Ideas II*, §37); there are no comparable visual *sensings*. We see colors but there is no *sensing* color: “I do not see myself, my body, the way I touch myself” (*Ideas II*, §37, 155; HUA IV 148). All Husserl allows is that the eye is a center for touch sensations (the eyeball can be touched, we can feel the movement of the eye in the eye-socket through “muscle sensations,” and so on). Overall, in these discussions, Husserl’s employs the dou-

ble sensation to distinguish touch from vision. For Husserl (following Aristotle), it is primarily touch that anchors us in the body. He writes:

Everything that we see is touchable and, as such, points to an immediate relation to the body, though it does not do so in virtue of its visibility. *A subject whose only sense was the sense of vision could not at all have an appearing body. . . .* The body as such can be constituted originally only in tactuality. (*Ideas II* §37, 158; HUA IV 150)

Touch localizes us in the world in a way that seeing does not.

Merleau-Ponty discusses the phenomenon of the “double sensation” most fully in *The Visible and the Invisible*.¹⁸ Since his account is well known, I will not summarize it but only say that it follows Husserl closely, except that Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the continuities between seeing and touching and their interconnection. In contrast to Merleau-Ponty, however, Sartre claims that the phenomenon of double sensation does not reveal something essential about embodiment. It is contingent. It can be removed by morphine, making my leg numb and insensitive to being touched (BN 304/366). To touch and be touched reflect different orders or “levels” of being. When one hand touches the other hand, I directly experience the hand that is being touched first. It is only with a certain reflection that I can turn back and focus on the sensation in the touching hand. Sartre maintains that this constitutes ontological proof that the body-for-me and the body-for-the-other are entirely separate intentional objectivities. Merleau-Ponty’s metaphysical use of the double sensation, then, is the opposite of Sartre’s. Merleau-Ponty claims that both vision and touch have this doubleness. Sartre, on the other hand, wants to prioritize not one hand touching the other, but one body touching or caressing the other’s body. Primacy is given to the other, not to self-experience. Intercorporeity is the source and ground of self-experience.

Conclusion

Sartre’s account of the body is subtle, complex, and many layered. While not as deeply informed by psychological studies as Merleau-Ponty’s,¹⁹ Sartre’s account of

intersubjective embodied relations (e.g., the erotic caress) is equally original. Merleau-Ponty and Sartre disagree concerning the role of bodily consciousness in perception. Whereas Merleau-Ponty, following Husserl, emphasizes the ineliminability of the felt body in all perceiving; Sartre maintains that our perceivings objectify what we perceive. Hence, for Sartre, the phenomenon of “double

sensation” or “touching-touched” is irrelevant and indeed falsely described in psychology, whereas for Merleau-Ponty, especially in his late *Visible and Invisible*, it becomes the very essence of flesh and our “entwinement” in the world. For Sartre, on the other hand, it is in touching the other that we encounter ourselves as flesh.

ENDNOTES

1. Jean-Louis Chrétien, *L'Appel et la réponse* (Paris: Minuit, 1992); *The Call and the Response*, trans. Anne Davenport (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 86.
2. Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Être et le Néant. Essai d'Ontologie Phénoménologique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943); *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel Barnes (London: Routledge, 1995). Hereafter cited in my text as BN, followed by English pagination and then the pagination of the French original. Of course, one should not assume that everything Sartre says about the body is to be found in the chapter bearing that title. In fact, the body pervades the whole of *Being and Nothingness*. In particular, his discussion of hunger and desire, for instance, in the chapter on “Concrete Relations with Others,” continues the analysis of the experience of one’s own body and of the flesh of the other.
3. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre speaks variously of the “order of being” (*l'ordre de l'être*) (305/367), “orders of reality” (*ordres de réalité*) (304/366), and “ontological levels” (*plans ontologiques*) (305/367).
4. Edmund Husserl, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie. Zweites Buch: Phänomenologische Untersuchungen zur Konstitution*, Husserliana IV, ed. Marly Biemel (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1991); *Ideas pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, Second Book*, trans. R. Rojcewicz and A. Schuwer (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1989). Hereafter cited in my text as *Ideas* II, followed by English pagination, Husserliana (hereafter Hua) volume and German pagination. Sartre of course read Husserl’s published writings, but had little access to the unpublished drafts, except through conversation with his close friend Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who was receiving material from Herman Leo Van Breda, Director of the Husserl Archives in Leuven, even during the German occupation. See Herman Leo Van Breda, *History of the Husserl-Archives* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007).
5. For an interesting survey of the role of the body in Scheler’s writings, see Daniela Vallega-Neu, “Driven Spirit: On the Body in Max Scheler’s Phenomenology,” *Epoche* 9 (2004): 19–36, reprinted in idem, *The Bodily Dimension in Thinking* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2005): 43–58.
6. Before writing *Being and Nothingness* (while in the detention camp), Sartre had read Heidegger’s *Sein und Zeit* (1927), (*Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962]), the 1929 essay “What is Metaphysics?” as well as some of Heidegger’s later essays of the 1930s and early 1940s. Although, strictly speaking, the body hardly makes an appearance in *Being and Time*, Sartre interprets the facticity and contingency of Dasein’s “being-in-the-world” as referring primarily to our embodiment.
7. Maurice Pradines (1874–1958), a follower of Bergson, taught Levinas at Strasbourg. See his *Philosophie de la Sensation*, vol. I: *Le Problème de la sensation* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1928), listed by Merleau-Ponty in the bibliography to his *Phenomenology of Perception*.
8. Gabriel Marcel (1918–1993), *Être et avoir* (Paris, Aubier, 1935); *Being and Having* (London: Fontana, 1965).
9. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945); *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962). Henceforth cited in my text as PP, followed by page number of English translation and then pagination of French edition. *Le Visible et l'invisible*, texte établi par Claude Lefort (Paris: Gallimard, 1964); *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968).

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Hereafter cited in my text as VI, followed by the pagination of the English translation.

10. Sartre develops the notion of the “flesh” (*la chair*) from Husserl’s conception of *Leibhaftigkeit*, the bodily presence of the object in perception. Indeed, Sartre already talks about the “flesh of the object in perception” in his earlier 1940 study, *L’Imaginaire*, see Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Psychology of Imagination* (London: Methuen, 1972), 15. The French translation of *leibhaftig* in Husserlian texts (as also cited by Merleau-Ponty and Levinas) is *en chair et en os*, meaning literally “in flesh and bone.”
11. See Martin C. Dillon, “Sartre on the Phenomenal Body and Merleau-Ponty’s Critique,” in Jon Stewart, ed., *The Debate Between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 121–43, see especially 126.
12. Or, for example, in challenging Freudian psychoanalytic accounts of the child’s fascination with holes, Sartre claims that the child could never experience his own anus as a hole (as part of the objective structure of the universe). The child learns this through another (*Being and Nothingness*, 612–13/704).
13. In *Ideas II* Husserl too had already distinguished between “normal” or optimal cases of experiencing, and impaired ones, e.g., touching a surface with a blistered finger.
14. E. H. Weber (1795–1879), published two studies of touch: *De Tactu* (1834) and *Tastsinn und Gemeingefühl*, which first appeared in 1846 in R. Wagner, ed., *Handwörterbuch der Physiologie*, vol. III, Part 2, 481–588. Both works have now been translated in *E. H. Weber on the Tactile Senses*, ed. and trans. Helen E. Ross and David J. Murray, 2nd ed. (Hove, East Sussex: Erlbaum, Taylor and Francis, 1996). Weber and Gustav T. Fechner (1801–1887) were founders of psychophysics, the attempt to systematically relate physical phenomena, e.g., sound or weight, with the perception of them. Psychophysics can be considered the earliest form of experimental psychology in the modern sense. Weber carefully documented the different sensitivities to touch in various parts of the body, the perception of weight, heat, cold, etc., and the ability of the perceiver to distinguish when being touched by two points of a compass at the same time. In *Der Tastsinn*, for instance, Weber discusses the issue of whether two sensations arise when sensitive areas of the body touch each other. He claimed that the two sensations do not merge into one: a cold limb touching a warm limb (e.g., a hand touching the forehead) reveals both heat and cold.
15. David Katz, *Der Aufbau der Tastwelt* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1969) (first published in 1925); *The World of Touch*, trans. Lester E. Krueger (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Publishers, 1989). The German psychologist David Katz (1884–1953) studied at Göttingen under the renowned psychologist Georg Elias Müller (1850–1934) and Husserl, who was one his doctoral examiners in 1907 and whose seminars he continued to attend. Katz worked on experimental and developmental psychology at Göttingen until 1919 when he moved to Rostok. He was close to the Gestalt psychologists but was forced to leave Germany in 1933, going first to England and then, in 1937, to the University of Stockholm, where he remained. He was a major influence on the work of J. J. Gibson. See the obituary of R. Arnheim, “David Katz, 1884–1953,” *American Journal of Psychology* 66 (1954): 638–42. See also Lester Krueger, “Tactual Perception in Historical Perspective: David Katz’s World of Touch,” in *Tactual Perception: A Sourcebook*, ed. William Schiff, Emerson Foulke (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982). For Katz’s relations with Husserl, see Herbert Spiegelberg, *Phenomenology in Psychology and Psychiatry: A Historical Introduction* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972), 42–44. By his own admission Katz attended Husserl’s lectures and seminars and learned the phenomenological method of unprejudiced description from him; see Katz’s autobiography, in Edwin Boring, ed., *History of Psychology in Autobiography* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1952), 4:189–211, esp. 194. Katz also acknowledges the influence of Scheler. Merleau-Ponty relies heavily on Katz’s *World of Touch* for his account of touch in *Phenomenology of Perception*, see esp. 315–18/364–68.
16. Edmund Husserl, *Ding und Raum. Vorlesungen 1907*, Hua XVI, ed. Ulrich Claesges (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1973); *Thing and Space: Lectures of 1907*, trans. by R. Rojcewicz (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1997). Hereafter cited in my text as DR, with English and then German pagination. The reference here is to §47, 137/162.
17. Husserl famously distinguishes between “sensations” (*Empfindungen*) that are interpreted as properties of the object and the “sensings” (*Empfindnisse*) themselves which he speaks of as “indicational or presentational” (*Ideas II*, 154/146); see Elizabeth A. Behnke, “Edmund

Husserl's Contribution to Phenomenology of the Body in *Ideas II*," in *Issues in Husserl's "Ideas II*," ed. Thomas Nenon and Lester E. Embree (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1996), 135–60.

18. See Merleau-Ponty, "The Intertwining—The Chiasm," in *The Visible and the Invisible*, 130–55.
19. Merleau-Ponty is deeply influenced, as we have seen, by David Katz's studies of vision and touch, and also by studies such as Jean Lhermitte,

L'Image de notre corps (Paris: Editions de la Nouvelle Revue Critique, 1939), which introduces the idea of the "body image," which Merleau-Ponty refers to as *le schéma corporel* (translated by Colin Smith as "body image"). For further discussion of this concept, see Shaun Gallagher, *How the Body Shapes the Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), who explains Merleau-Ponty's *schéma corporel* as the "dynamic functioning of the body in its environment" (20).

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