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The Felt Body ('Leib')

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The uniquely German expression 'Leib', which in everyday language refers to the felt or living body, has gained importance in modern philosophy due to a dissatisfaction with the traditional bifurcation of the human being into body and soul (alternately mind, or mental contents). On this traditional view, the soul is conceived as a separate inner sphere that is connected to the world only by the body. While the body is plain to view to the conscious subject, it is nonetheless separated from it as an object of observation, reflection and use. Neither of these aspects is suited to explaining the immediate affectedness with which reality is encountered by human beings – the soul is too remote and encapsulated; the body is too distant. In the human being we seek an intersection for that which immediately takes hold of one, in particular also spatially, and for this we need the felt body, which in embodied affectedness is open to that which takes hold of and forces the human being to become aware of itself, be it purely by feeling or also aided by reflection. This is so because it is hit by something that throws it back upon itself. For this reason, the identification of the human being with the felt body is characteristic of the modern philosophy of embodiment, because it is through the felt body that one becomes aware of oneself.

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The uniquely German expression 'Leib', which in everyday language refers to the felt or living body, has gained importance in modern philosophy due to a dissatisfaction with the traditional bifurcation of the human being into body and soul (or mind, or mental contents). On this traditional view the soul is separated as an inner sphere that is connected to the world only by the body. While the body is plain to view to the conscious subject, it is nonetheless separated from it as an object of observation, reflection and use. Neither of these aspects is suited to explaining the immediate affectedness with which reality is encountered by human beings – the soul is too remote and encapsulated, the body is too distant. In the human being we seek an intersection for that which immediately takes hold of one, in particular also spatially, and for this we need the felt body, which in embodied affectedness is open to that which takes hold of and forces the human being to become aware of itself, be it purely by feeling or by reflection. This is so because it is hit by something that throws it back upon itself. For this reason, the identification of the human being with the felt body is characteristic of the modern philosophy of embodiment, because it is through the felt body that one becomes aware of oneself. I believe it was Gabriel Marcel who coined the well-known expression: "I have a body, but I am my felt body (*Leib*)." Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who in Germany is considered to be a main proponent of embodied philosophy, has formulated this identity as follows: "Mais je ne suis pas devant mon corps, je suis dans mon corps, ou plutôt je suis mon corps" – "I am not before my body, I am in my body, or much rather, I am my body" (Merleau-Ponty 1945: 175). (Merleau-Ponty uses the expression *corps*/body, since also in French there is no expression equivalent to German *Leib*.) However, only in conjunction with existence is the body the whole human being. Here Merleau-Ponty uses the expression 'existence' without providing a definition of his own in the sense of Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre. He writes: "L'homme concrètement pris n'est pas un

psychisme joint à un organisme, mais ce va-et-vient de l'existence qui tantôt se laisse être corporelle et tantôt se porte aux actes personnels." – "The human being is no psychism bound to a body, but a coming and going of existence, which is sometimes bodily and sometimes personal" (ibid.: 104). "Ni le corps *ni l'existence* ne peuvent passer pour l'original de l'être humain, puisque chacun présuppose l'autre et que le corps est l'existence figée ou généralisée et l'existence une incarnation perpétuelle." – "Neither the body *nor existence* can be seen as the original locus of being human, because each presupposes the other. Here the body is manifested or generalized existence and the existence a perpetual incarnation" (ibid.: 194). So, existence complements the body by adding a dynamic polarity by transcending and falling back into it. As such, it is distinct from the soul which, according to Plato, is the actual human being and which stands in a static relation to the body, as to a mere shell; Plato writes (Nomoi 959a–b): The soul is entirely distinct from the body; already in earthly life no one is anything other than their soul, of which their body is merely the external appearance (Schmitz [1965] 1982: 471). In this sense, modern philosophy of the felt body (*Leibphilosophie*) is anti-Platonic to a certain degree.

The emancipation of the felt body from being overshadowed by the soul begins with Arthur Schopenhauer in 1819. He, in line with how the expression is commonly used, interprets the expression 'Leib' as referring to the living human body, not as an appearance of the soul, but as an immediate appearance of a fundamental principle for which he chooses the unsuitable expression 'will', actually meaning an aimless drive that is satisfied by no success. As his terminology reveals, Schopenhauer interprets the entirety of emotional affectedness as shapings of this will, so the place of the soul is taken by embodied emotional affectedness, which has a far more immediate relation to the felt body than the soul. In the rejection of the dominance of the soul over the felt body he is followed by Friedrich Nietzsche, whose Zarathustra (1886) confesses that he is nothing other than his felt body (*Leib*), and wants to study the human being "along the lines of the felt body". But all this is only apparent progress compared to the traditional view, since Nietzsche only opposes the traditional idealistic supremacy with an inverted materialism or physicalism. His felt body is an agglomeration of cells on the model of the cellular pathology put forward by his contemporary Rudolf Virchow (1858). This materialism at the same time is a psychologism, because Nietzsche, according to his metaphysics, endows the smallest particles into which he dissolves the body with a will to power. But thus, nothing is gained for phenomenology. The phenomenologist Edmund Husserl is as unhelpful as Nietzsche when it comes to freeing the felt body from the fix between the soul and the material body. While Husserl does dedicate a chapter of the second volume of his posthumously published *Ideas* (Husserl 1952: 143–161) to the felt body (*Leib*), he provides a Platonic reading, i.e. as the reign of a soul in a body that in itself is dead and for which the soul is even more transcendent than for René Descartes, since it is not only non-spatial but – according to the last part of his posthumously published *Krisis*-Schrift (Husserl [1936] 1954: §62) – even transtemporal. So, from Husserl nothing is to be gained in opposing Platonic anthropology. This changes in his phenomenological fellow campaigner Max Scheler. In his major work, he dedicates six pages (Scheler [1913/1916] 1954: 408–413/1973: 398–403) to describing the felt body (*Leib*) as a distinct object between material body and soul that, at the same time, has a bridging function between the two, so that he sometimes refers to it as "Seelenleib" (the German term *Seele* meaning 'soul') or "Körperleib" (the German term *Körper* meaning 'physical/material body'). But he, couched in talk of organic proprioception though this may be, insists on the autonomy of the felt body (*Leib*) by opposing the idea that the association of mental perception with the external perception of the material body leads to the idea of the living felt body. Scheler is the first to insist on the autonomy of the felt body vis-à-vis the soul and the material body.

Scheler (1913/1916) having established the felt body as a subject of study in its own right, it has to be decided under which question precisely and in which context this subject is to be dealt with. Here there are two suggestions. The first is based on the scientific idea of the body and uses the felt body as a transition to human's fully being in the world. This approach appears natural to the French since their language has no cognate expression to the German '*Leib*' or the English

'the felt body' and they can only speak of the '*corps*' ('body'). For Merleau-Ponty, the latter has internal organs such as a lung, a hand composed of muscles, tendons and nerves and includes the scientific body, which he takes to be an aspect of natural life experience (ibid.: 403 f.). So, he glosses over the constructive additions of science, but nonetheless profits from them by basing his phenomenology of the felt body on the scientific concept of the material body. From this somewhat shaky foundation a path leads to reconstructing the entire human being via an analysis of behaviour which takes humans from their bodily foundation beyond the level of an animal. In this sense, the neurologist Kurt Goldstein, whose work is clearly presupposed by Merleau-Ponty, in his book *Der Aufbau des Organismus* (meaning the structure or organisation of the organism), written in exile in 1934, characterises normal human behaviour with respect to posture, motion and spatial perception in contrast to dysfunctionalities in brain-damaged individuals. Merleau-Ponty made no progress on this path. It is, for instance, disappointing what he says about language in *Phenomenology of Perception.* He uses the ambiguity of the French word '*parole*', which denotes both the act of linguistic communication as well as a single word, to immediately proceed from language in general to the word level, thus neglecting the most useful tool for linguistically dealing with the world: the sentence. Independent of phenomenology and the discussion of the felt body (*Leib*), in his book *Der Mensch* (1940; *Man*, 1987), however, Arnold Gehlen carries out the programme of characterizing human behaviour based on what is enabled by the shapes of mouth and hand without making recourse to material body and soul.

The other suggestion for making fruitful the subject of study opened up by Scheler, addresses the connection of felt body and subjectivity. This approach aims to make the felt body the linchpin of what is experienced as real, that which affects and takes hold of a human in such a manner that they are forced to feel and become aware of themselves, be it with or without reflection. (From this approach, direct links to philosophy of nature arise, see e.g. Böhme 2003). In this respect I have drawn attention to the felt body (*Leib*) as the linchpin of embodied affectedness. I take the felt body (*Leib*) to be the domain of embodied stirrings that someone can feel as belonging to them in the vicinity (not merely within the boundaries) of their own body without relying on corroboration by the five senses, in particular seeing and haptic perception (Schmitz 1982; 1987; 2011; Schmitz et al. 2011). This comprises the entire field of embodied affectedness. On the one hand, it consists of mere bodily stirrings such as shock, fear, pain, lust, exertion, disgust, tiredness, freshness and relief. On the other hand, it also comprises those stirrings that are embodied affectedness by atmospheres of emotion and which only become human emotions in virtue of this affectedness, for instance, joy, sadness, anger, shame, fear, love, festive sincerity, general exuberance etc. Beyond this, the felt body also has stirrings that not only occur in emotional affectedness, for instance, embodied movement and the embodied stirrings of the direction of gaze or breathing out. I have characterized the felt body in this sense with respect to its spatiality and its dynamism (the play of forces within it). In virtue of its spatial features the felt body belongs to the surfaceless spaces such as sound, silence, the wind, overpowering gravity and the weather, which one feels in one's own felt body (*Leib*) as expandedness even without looking around when one steps out of stale air into the open, furthermore the perceptual background which we uncritically lean on, the space of unfolding gestures and the space of the swimmer who presses forward or lies on his back without checking visually. In surfaceless spaces there are no points, no lines and shapes delimited by surfaces. There are also no relative locations mutually defined by locations and distances which would enable saying where something is, for positions and distances are tied to reversible connections which are only conceivable in the context of surfaces. By contrast, in surfaceless spaces there is contractedness, expandedness and directions which lead from contractedness to expandedness and structure these into areas (e.g. by arm movements). Furthermore, there is dynamic volume through the interplay of expansion and contraction and an absolute location of the felt body (*Leib*) and some of its islands in the sense to be explained in what follows. The felt body is partially populated with holistic stirrings as in weariness, freshness and fervour and partly with partial stirrings such as pain, itching, fatigue in one's legs etc. These partial stirrings can be fairly constant, but they can also come

and go in fleeting play, as in the case of head or tooth aches. In this sense the felt body is a discrete surging of diffuse islands. These are, after locational space has been established with the aid of the body schema, positionally located in body parts, just like sound in its source; neither in the case of sound nor the felt body does this contradict surfacelessness.

Embodied stirrings form a spectrum from contractedness to expandedness that is charged with the opposing tendencies of contraction and expansion. The embodied stirrings on this spectrum can be distinguished partly by the relation of forces, partly by the form of binding of contraction and expansion. The form of binding can be either compact, so that contractedness and expandedness are closely tied, or it can be rhythmical, so that their dominance alternates in a pulsating rhythm; pain and exertion, for instance, are compact while fear and lust are rhythmical. Contraction and expansion are dialogically bound in the vital drive by mutually inhibiting or driving one another. Elements of contraction can be isolated as privative contraction from the vital drive, for instance, in fright, and elements of expansion can be isolated as privative expansion, for instance, in falling asleep in a relaxed manner or in relief from worry. Embodied directionality mediates between contraction and expansion by leading from contractedness to expandedness, for instance, in gazing, in breathing out, in the irreversible directions of the embodied motor schema which triggers spontaneous movements. Apart from contractedness and expandedness, the felt body is also determined by protopathic and epicritic tendencies, to put it in the terms of the English neurologist Henry Head (Rivers/Head 1908). The protopathic tendency is the one towards softening and diffusion while the epicritic tendency is sharp and pointed. Think, for instance, of head and stomach aches. While the protopathic tendency is close to expansion and the epicritic tendency close to contraction, the two tendencies must be kept apart, as can be shown by the examples of epicritic expansion (stepping outside into the fresh morning air) and protopathic contraction (befuddlement after imbibing). The vital drive as dialogue between contraction and expansion transcends the individual felt body as a dialogue of encorporation into a shared drive both in relation to other felt bodies as well as in relation to other objects that have a presence that immediately speaks to those affected, for instance, natural objects. This is so in virtue of bridging qualities that are close to the felt body (suggestions of motion and synaesthetic characters). In encorporation, the shared drive is like a rope that is tightly and homogenously strung in solidary encorporation, as, for instance, in mass ecstatic phenomena of all types (panicked flight, upheaval, mounting rapture driven by rhythmical sounds) and like a lax rope in antagonistic encorporation in which those involved take an offensive or defensive stance while this automatic antagonism (independent of will), as in an exchange of gazes, at the same time is the organ of sensitivity that enables feeling the other in one's own felt body (*Leib*).

It is scandalous that the felt body, as intimately familiar as every human is with it every day and every hour, has been effaced from public consciousness by philosophers and their scientific and Christian accomplices, so that it has been hidden away in a remote and obscure corner of the image of the human being, for instance, as common sense insofar as it was not incarcerated in the dungeon of the soul as a suspicious inmate that had to be controlled and subordinated to reason, as has been the common view since Plato. If the felt body (*Leib*) is freed from its imprisonment and brought to the light of systematic and controlled reflection, a receptive and creative perspective arises that will enable people to embark on the reality that surrounds and affects them rather than reducing them to merely being passengers hovering over it in the prefabricated network of technical options. For this reason, the philosophical phenomenology of the felt body faces immense tasks. Contemporary with Schopenhauer, its beginning lies in the early 19th century in the work of Pierre Maine de Biran (1812), who seems to have had an inchoate notion of the vital drive as an antagonistic dialogue of contraction and expansion (as tension and swelling) when he identified active initiative against the inertia of sluggish limbs as the foundation of self-consciousness and the notion of substance. He was criticized for this by Jean-Paul Sartre (1943), as the latter did not want to permit any immanent description of the felt body, but at best treated it like a stowaway when dealing with external objects, so that he seemed, example given, to know pain in his own eye only as pain experienced when reading a book.

One should have pointed out to him the experience of breathing, in which swelling and tension, as described by Maine de Biran, are already interlocked in breathing-in without recourse having to be made to any external topics or stimuli. In Sartre's work, all that remains of the felt body (*Leib*) is a metaphysical spectre that is ubiquitous but is nowhere to be found. Michel Henry (1996) responds to this extraverted exaggeration with an introverted one and only wants to take note of the felt body (*Leib*) with closed eyes. For him, the only original evidence of the external world is the inhibition on the border of inner and outer. He shares this turn to an inward intimacy with Henri Bergson and Søren Kierkegaard, to whom he is superior in that he locates the felt body (*Leib*) in the inner. But it is still a mistake to equate subjectivity with intimacy. Embodied affectedness is subjective because it makes humans feel affected by their existence, by urging them to feel and notice themselves. For this purpose, turning to the outer in encorporation is just as suitable as affectedness in retreating into intimacy.

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