

SELF-IDENTITY FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE BODY

One of the persistent puzzles of philosophy concerns our self-identity. We assume that we persist in time as the same self. In Hume's words, "we feel [the self's] existence and its continuance in existence; and are certain, beyond the evidence of a demonstration, both of its perfect identity and simplicity." Yet, what is the basis for this view? As Hume asks, "from what impression could this idea be derived?" "[T]here is," he remarks, "no impression constant and invariable" that we can point to. In fact, the "self or person is not any one impression."¹ Regarding it, we find only a multitude of changing contents. Given this, the notion of a perfect self-identity, he concludes, must be a "fiction."² Husserl, in affirming our self-identity, takes the opposite tract. In his view, the self cannot be some lasting content. To identify it with such is to make it objective rather than subjective. These two categories, however, are very different: Objects are things that appear; subjects or egos are those to whom they appear. Objects—as the German word, *Gegenstand*, indicates—stand against us. We are the subjects against which they stand. Thus, rather than being some objective, lasting content of consciousness, the self is the place where contents appear. It has its identity as such a place. Husserl thus avoids Hume's problem of identifying the self with "any one impression."

Doing so, however, he falls into the opposite difficulty. Having acknowledged the shifting character of our experiences, he affirms that the self or ego is "something absolutely identical in all actual and possible changes of experiences." As identical, he adds, "it cannot *in any sense be taken as an immanent [reelles] component or moment* of the experiences."³ In fact, it must transcend these; in Husserl's words, it must be "*a transcendence in immanence.*"⁴ The problem lies in defining this transcendence—that is, giving it a positive character. According to Husserl, the ego or self "gives up all content" in the change of experiences.⁵ This means that it "does not

possess a proper general character with a material content.”⁶ But, in the absence of such content, how can we know or describe it? In fact, Husserl calls the ego that stands over against objects “anonymous.”⁷ The suspicion thus arises that while we may claim that we know *that* the self is, aside from the bare fact of existence, we cannot say *what* it is.⁸

Faced with these difficulties, it seems natural to follow Merleau-Ponty and turn to the body as the anchor of our self-identity.⁹ The advantage here is that our embodiment persists through our changing perceptions. Through its sense organs—eyes, ears, skin, etc.—the body is the place of appearing. As Merleau-Ponty expresses this, “our flesh lines and even envelops all the visible and tangible things.”¹⁰ Doing so, it provides measures “for being, dimensions to which we can refer it.”¹¹ In other words, through our flesh, we can refer to the sensible aspects of being. We can measure it along the axes or dimensions of its sights, sounds, tastes, smells, roughness and smoothness. In providing a place where these qualities can appear, the body, unlike Husserl’s self or subject, is not devoid of all content. It is, itself, available to our senses. We can see, feel, taste, touch and smell it. In addition, we can through our sense of proprioception, apprehend the kinesthesia that accompany our movements. It, thus, seems to present us with not just a place of appearing, but also with something that appears. With it, we encounter something that is both subjective and objective.

Does my body, in its persistence of being *my* body, solve the problem of self-identity? Is it a place of appearing that, unlike Husserl’s ego, is not “anonymous,” but rather has “a proper general character with a material content”? In what follows, I am going to explore this possibility. I shall examine the body’s role in our sense of possessing a unique identity. I will also spell out the consequences of its being both subject and object for our attempts to grasp who and what we are.

The Uniqueness of the Embodied Self

Husserl remarks that “[a] subject whose only sense was the sense of vision could not have an appearing body.”¹² As visually present, his body would not distinguish itself from other appearing objects. To distinguish it as my own, I need the sense of touch. When I touch other objects, I feel their tactile qualities—their hardness, softness, etc. I do not, however, feel *their* being touched. Only my body affords me this possibility. Thus, touching my forearm, my hand feels its warmth, the hair on it, and so on. But my forearm also feels the hand that touches it—it feels, for example, its qualities of roughness or smoothness. Without this ability, I would be like the patient that the neurologist, Oliver Sacks, describes who, on waking, attempts to make room for herself by shoving her own leg out of bed.¹³ Unable to feel herself being touched, she reacts to and moves her body part like a foreign object. My ability to feel myself being touched thus marks out the boundaries of my embodied self. I am the only object whose being touched I can experience directly.¹⁴

Behind this uniqueness is the fact that I am, qua embodied, both subject and object. The touching hand, for example, functions as a subject. It has its localized sensations that spread across the surface that is in contact with an object. When it is touched by the other hand, then it, itself, assumes the position of an object. It is now seen to afford localized sensations to the hand that touches it. As Merleau-Ponty describes this, “When my right hand touches my left hand while [the left hand] is palpating the things, ... the ‘touching subject’ passes over to the rank of the touched.” It “descends into the things, such that the touch is formed in the midst of the world.”¹⁵ Thus, the touching hand that functioned as a subject assumes the position of an object. Unlike other objects, however, it can feel itself being touched. Doing so, it does not just declare itself to be within the boundary of my body; it also reasserts itself as a subject. It experiences the

“double sensation” of both feeling itself being touched and feeling the qualities of the hand that touches it. Open to both, it is an object that is a subject in the sense of being a place of appearing.

The uniqueness that characterizes me as both subject and object persists as long as I am capable of self-touch and, hence, of the aforementioned “double sensation.” It, thus, underlies the sense of my persisting self-identity. Part of this involves my sense of being able to move my body directly. I do not move my body as a foreign object. The kinesthesia afforded by my sense of proprio-perception give me the sense of its being moved. Thus, the moved arm is sensed as both mover and moved. As such, I have a sense of *moving it immediately*. As Husserl writes: “the body as a field of localization is ... the precondition for the fact that it is taken as ... an organ of the will,” that is, as “the one and only object which, for the will of my pure ego, is moveable immediately and spontaneously.”¹⁶ The immediacy comes from my being both subject and object. As the former, I am the actor. As the latter, I am acted upon. Crucial here is the body as “a field of localization” of sensations. The kinesthesia localized in the arm that I move play a double role. Again there is the “double sensation” that we saw in the hand’s both feeling itself being touched and feeling the touched hand. Behind this double sensation is a two-fold interpretation of the same sensations. When, for example, I press my hand against the table, “the same sensation of pressure,” Husserl writes, “is at one time taken as a perception of the table’s surface (of a small part of it, properly speaking) and at another time, with a different direction of attention and another level of interpretation, it results in sensations of my fingers pressing on it.” The same holds when I touch a cold object and feel both “the coldness of the surface of a thing and the sensation of cold in the finger.”¹⁷ It also applies when I move my arm. The same sensations give

me both the sense of moving it and the sense of its being moved. The ease by which I shift from one to the other allows me to conflate the two and see my movement as spontaneous.

Since it is based on the functioning of our body, the uniqueness of our persisting self-identity implies its privacy. The kinesthesia that allow me to take my body as immediately moveable are private. I cannot experience another person's sense of moving himself, nor he my own. As felt and moved by me, my body is thus a unique singular. Only I experience it and I do so in only one example. This uniqueness should not surprise us. It characterizes our organic functioning. Thus, our proprio-perception, like our sensing in general, is marked by the privacy of such functioning. Just as no one can experience your kinesthesia, so no one can breathe for you, eat for you, sleep for you or perform for you any of your bodily functions. This is the truth behind Heidegger's remark that each of us must die our own death.¹⁸ No one can do this for another person. Death, as the cessation of our organic functioning, is as private as this functioning itself.

The Anonymity of Bodily Self-Identity

There is here a certain analogue to Husserl's anonymity of the functioning ego. For Husserl, the ego that stands over against what appears cannot, as such, itself appear. In giving up all content, it offers nothing to appear. By virtue of the double sensation that the body affords us, the body escapes such anonymity. The finger that senses the cold object is not anonymous. As I cited Husserl, along with "the coldness of the surface of a thing," it also exhibits itself through the sensation of cold in the finger. There is, nevertheless, a certain anonymity on the conceptual level, one that follows from its uniqueness. As unique, its ontological status is not that of being one among many possible instances, each of which is essentially substitutable for another—like, for example, the apples that we see in a store. Having many instances of this fruit, we can draw

from them a number of common features and express them with common meanings. This, however, is not possible with the lived body. It is experienced, as noted, in only one example. Ontologically, it exists, not as one among many, i.e., as a countable singular, but rather as uniquely one. So regarded, it cannot be defined in Aristotle's sense. We cannot understand it in terms of species and genus. We can only sense it.¹⁹ It is, in fact, inexpressible in the common meanings of our language, which, by definition, apply to more than one object.

One can, of course, reply to this that the body is, in fact, definable. Definitions of its functioning occur in all the medical textbooks. Far from being unspeakable, that is, inexpressible by the meanings of language, it is, in fact, a frequent topic of our conversations as we compare our own appearing body with those of others. All of this is true, but it does not affect our embodiment as lived. As lived—that is, as internally experienced—it is incapable of being objectively presented. The sense of cold in my finger, for example, is something that only I can perceive. It is not a public object. What is public are things that, through the functioning of my senses, do appear. Thus both my body and those of others are visible. As such, they can be contrasted and compared. I can draw from them their common features and describe them using common concepts. What escapes this is my body understood as a place of appearing: the body that I experience as I sense myself and other objects. This can be put in terms of Husserl's conception of the anonymity of the ego. Husserl writes, "the actively functioning 'I do,' 'I discover,' is constantly anonymous."²⁰ This implies, according to Rudolph Bernet, "the invisible absolute consciousness must borrow its visibility from that which it makes visible ..."²¹ It has to grasp itself in terms of the world that its functioning makes present. The same holds for the body as a place of appearing. Objectively, it can only appear as part of what its organic functioning makes apparent. Subjectively, of course, it does sense itself. It feels its thirst, its hunger. It en-

joys the sense of warmth as it basks in the sun. But this appearing remains irremediably private. The same holds for the persisting self-identity that our body in its uniqueness affords us. It is something that we can claim, but not conceptualize. It can never appear as a public object.

The Alterity of Bodily Self-Identity

The privacy of the subjective sense of self-identity is such that it excludes all others. I never, in my functioning, confuse my identity with someone else's. This, however, does not mean that this functioning does not, itself, harbor alterity. The alterity comes from the fact that the embodied self is both subject and object. The two, however, can never be grasped together. As I cited Husserl, there is always "a different direction of attention and another level of interpretation" when I move from interpreting the same sensations as pertaining to myself—for example, the coldness in the finger—and take them as pertaining to the object I touch with my finger. The same holds when I touch myself. As hand touches hand, I can attend to one hand as a sentient subject, but then I lose it as a sensed object. I cannot grasp it simultaneously as both.²² Merleau-Ponty describes this inability as follows: "If my left hand is touching my right hand, and if I should suddenly wish to apprehend with my right hand the work of my left hand as it touches, this reflection ... always miscarries ... the moment I feel my left hand with my right hand, I correspondingly cease touching my right hand with my left hand."²³ As he elsewhere writes, what we face here is "an ambiguous set-up in which the two hands can alternate in the function of 'touching' and being 'touched.'"²⁴ There is "a sort of dehiscence" or bursting open that "opens my body in two," splitting it "between my body looked at and my body looking, my body touched and my body touching."²⁵ This "dehiscence" is caused by the switch of interpretations. In attending to "my body touching," I take the sensations I experience as pertaining to

me—that is, to myself as a place of appearing. When I turn my attention to “my body touched,” I take these sensations as pertaining to myself as an object that appears.²⁶

The fact that we cannot do both at the same time constantly bedevils our attempts to pin down what we mean by our self-identity. Is our identity subjective, as Husserl thought, or is it, as Hume believed, something objective? As the former, it is essentially private. Each of us must admit that, as a place of appearing, we experience the world from a single, private perspective. No one can see out of our eyes or share the sensations we experience when biting into a fresh peach. We encounter this limitation every time we search for words to express our experiences.²⁷ The common meanings that they convey somehow miss the uniqueness of our experience. The situation is different when we focus on ourselves as appearing objects. As appearing, our bodies can be compared with those of Others. The common features that they share can be conceptualized and expressed in language. So can their organic functioning, which can be studied and displayed in medical text books. Pursuing this line, we can see our identity in terms of the brain, the nervous system and other functioning organs. We can speak of our identity in terms of our physiological integrity. This objective view of our selfhood can be expanded to include our public presence. For example, a person’s identity can be taken to encompass his or her relations with Others. Here, we focus on the person’s words and deeds taken as public objects. With this, we can speak of narrative identity—the identity of the story line of a person’s life. What aids us in this endeavor is the fact that we rely on language to share what we experience. Clothing what we see with linguistic expressions, our private perceptions assume the commonality of the language used to describe them. Here, the temptation is to forget that the objects of our discourse are common precisely as linguistic entities. They are what are present to us in common rather than any particular visual presence. Such commonality is a matter of shared meanings, which, as

such, always apply to more than one object. What draws us back from applying this objective view to embodied individuals is the privacy of our organic functioning. In spite of our ability to study and describe the functioning, say, of the stomach, it remains a fact that no one can eat for another. The fact that someone else has had his breakfast does not assuage my hunger. The same holds for someone else seeing for me, i.e., experiencing the qualia that make vision actual. His description of what he sees cannot really compensate for my lack of vision. Such facts point to the fact that our entrance into the world involves the privacy of our embodiment. The language that we employ fails when we attempt to conceptualize or define this aspect of our identity.

Concretely considered, both the objective and subjective views of our identity are one-sided. Our uniqueness, I have stressed, comes from our being both subject and object, both private and public, both a place of appearing and an appearing object. Thus, the fact that we can both touch ourselves and feel ourselves being touched is what sets originally the boundaries of our embodied selfhood. We are the only object that we encounter that can feel itself being touched. This ability to sense ourselves is also behind the uniqueness of our body as an organ of our will—i.e., of our body to appear alternately as an actor and as something acted upon. As was noted, the same sensations give us the sense of moving it and the sense of its being moved. Since, however, this depends on a shift in our interpretation, our sense of moving directly is not an original apprehension, but rather based on the conflation of these two senses. Conflation is required since one sense points to us as a subject, while the other takes us as an object. Our uniqueness involves both, but we can focus on one only at a time. When we focus on ourselves as subjects, we escape objective representation. This becomes possible, when we attend to our-

selves as objects. We cannot, however, combine the subjective and objective to form a unified view of our bodily action.

All this points to the paradox of self-identity when we understand it in terms of embodiment. So understood, it involves our being both a subject and an object. The uniqueness of our persisting self-identity is built upon this fact; yet we cannot grasp both together. Innumerable philosophic conundrums are built upon this impasse. We cannot, for example, see how the mind or consciousness can relate to the body. Taking it as the place of appearing—the place of qualia or experienced sense qualities—we are unable to see how it can be integrated with the body understood objectively—i.e., understood in terms of the physical functioning of its sense organisms and nervous system. Similarly, we cannot see how our body can function as an organ of our will. Objectively, the notion of the will's originally initiating an action makes no sense. Objectively, every event is causally linked to a previous event, which itself is initiated by a previous event. Subjectively, however, we experience our bodies as “immediately and spontaneously” moved by our will. Such problems, I would like to suggest, are built into our flesh. At their root is the paradoxical fact of our self-identity. Such self-identity is based on alterity that both makes us what we are and makes it impossible to grasp ourselves in a unified concept.

Endnotes

- 1 *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Bk. 1, Part IV, sect. 6, ed. L.A. Selbey-Bigge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 251.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 252.
- 3 *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie, Erstes Buch*, ed. R. Schuhmann [The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976], p. 123. This text will be cited as *Ideen I*.
- 4 “Verbleibt uns als Residuum der phänomenologischen Ausschaltung der Welt und der ihr zugehörigen empirischen Subjektivität ein reines Ich (und dann für jeden Erlebnisstrom ein prinzipiell verschiedenes), dann bietet sich mit ihm eine *eigenartige—nicht konstituierte—*Transzendenz, eine *Transzendenz in der Immanenz* dar” (*Ideen I*, p. 124).
- 5 Ms. E III 2, Sept., 1921, p. 18. I am grateful to the Husserl Archives of Leuven, Belgium for permission to quote from Husserl’s unpublished manuscripts.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 In Husserl’s words, “the ego which is the counterpart (*gegenüber*) to everything is anonymous. It is not its own counterpart as the house is my counterpart. And yet I can turn my attention to myself. But then this counterpart in which the ego comes forward along with everything which was its counterpart is again split. The ego which comes forward as a counterpart and its counterpart [e.g., the house it was perceiving] are both counterparts to me. Forthwith, I—the subject of this new counterpart—am anonymous” (Ms. C 2 I, Aug. 1931 in *Späte Texte über Zeitkonstitution (1929-1934), Die C-Manuskripte*, ed. Dieter Lohmar [Dordrecht: Springer Verlag, 2006] p. 2).
- 8 Can we maintain this position? If we cannot say what the self is, can we even say that it is? Hume raises this doubt with regard to God. He argues that if we cannot say what God is, i.e., what the object of our belief is, then can we say that we believe in anything at all? Thus, in his *Dialogues*, he has his protagonist, Philo, ask how those “who maintain the absolute incomprehensibility of the Deity, differ from Sceptics or Atheists, who [also]

assert that the first cause of all is unknown and unintelligible?” (*Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* [New York: Hafner Publishing Co., 1966], p. 32). Hume maintains a similar skepticism with regard to the self, understood as the mind. Having stated that “the mind is a kind of theater, where several perceptions successively make their appearance; pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations,” he immediately corrects any impression that the notion of a theater has any ontological content. He writes: “The comparison of the theater must not mislead us. They are the successive perceptions only, that constitute the mind” (*A Treatise of Human Nature*, Bk. 1, Part IV, sect. 6, p. 253). This means that there is no existence of a self or subject other than that of a “bundle or collection of different perceptions” (*ibid.*, p. 252).

- 9 In saying this, I do not mean to imply that Husserl has no answer to the question of what a self is. For a concise account of his position, see, for example, James Mensch, “What is a Self,” in *Husserl in Contemporary Context: Prospects and Projects for Phenomenology*, ed. B. Hopkins, Dordrecht: Kluwer Press, 1997, pp. 61-78.
- 10 Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. A. Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), p. 123.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 103.
- 12 *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie, Zweites Buch*, ed. Marly Biemel (Martinus Nijhoff: The Hague, 1952), p. 150. This text will be cited as *Ideen II*.
- 13 Oliver Sacks, *The Man Who Mistook his Wife for a Hat and Other Clinical Tales*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986, p. 55. As Sara Heinämaa writes, there is here a clear “difference between Husserl’s phenomenological concept of embodiment and the naturalistic concept dominant in physiology and bio-sciences.” Thus, phenomenologically, “a paralysed limb does not belong to the system of living organs but constantly remains on the margin of one’s life.” For the biological sciences, however, it remains part of our physiological identity (“The Body,” in *The Routledge Companion to Phenomenology*, ed. Sebastian Luft and Søren Overgaard [New York: Routledge, 2012], p. 227.
- 14 As Rudolf Bernet puts this: “it is one and the same flesh (and only mine!) that is and that simultaneously feels itself touching and touched ... In the hand that touches and in the hand that is touched, my body simultaneously explores itself from the outside and feels

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- itself from the inside” (“The Body as a Legitimate Naturalization of Consciousness,” *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 72 [July 2013], p. 50).
- 15 *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 134.
- 16 *Ideas II*, p. 152.
- 17 *Ideas II*, p. 147.
- 18 “Keiner kann dem Anderen sein Sterben abnehmen” (*Sein und Zeit* [Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1967], p. 240).
- 19 “But when we come to the concrete thing, e.g. ... one of the individual circles ... of these there is no definition, but they are known by the aid of intuitive thinking or of perception; and when they pass out of this complete realization [of being perceived] it is not clear whether they exist or not” (“Metaphysics,” 1036a, trans. T. D. Ross, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon [New York: Random House, 1941], p. 799).
- 20 Ms. A VII 11, p. 92.
- 21 “Book Review of J. C. Evans, *Strategies of Deconstruction: Derrida and the myth of the Voice*,” *Husserl Studies* 11 (1994-5), p. 208
- 22 Derrida denies this simultaneity, writing: “The local coincidence that is important for Husserl in the touching-touched pair is grounded in a temporal coincidence meant to give it its intuitive plenitude, which is to say its dimension of direct immediacy. ... if one questions this absolute simultaneity of the touching and the touched-and the active and the passive-for an immediate and direct intuition, this whole argument [of Husserl’s] risks becoming fragile” (Jacques Derrida, *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*, trans. Christine Irizarry, [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005], p. 172). As Robin Durie points out, this insistence on “absolute simultaneity” ill accords with the shift of attention required to go from the hand as touching to the hand as touched (Robin Durie, “At the same time, Continuities in Derrida’s readings of Husserl,” *Continental Philosophy Review* (2008) 41, p. 81). He explains Derrida’s puzzling interpretation “of temporality as immediacy, as punctual instantaneity” as Derrida’s attempt to continue the analysis of *Speech and Phenomena* (ibid., p. 87).
- 23 *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 9.

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- 24 *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), p. 93.
- 25 *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 123.
- 26 Bernet writes with regard to this difference. “This suggests that the event of this non-coincidence of the two hands and, more generally, of the touching and the touched – that is, of this distance in proximity, of this separation of the inseparable, of this in-between—is the most original experience of a bodily spatiality” (“The Body as a Legitimate Naturalization of Consciousness,” p. 51).
- 27 For a description of this, see James Mensch, “Social Change and Embodiment,” *Phainomena* XXVI, November 2017, pp. 131-139. This limitation, according to Mensch, opens up the possibility of the new. He writes: “we are embodied and such embodiment, in its particularity, can be felt, but not defined. It falls, as it were, through the semantic net that our language casts on the world. We feel this contradiction as we struggle to express ourselves. This struggle witnesses our attempt to express the unique, to make speakable the unspoken basis of our lives. This disturbance of the speakable results in the new. It recasts the semantic net. It unsettles the pragmatic activities and disclosures that are at the basis of our thought” (ibid., pp. 138-39).