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Viewing the body as an (almost) ageing thing

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Abstract
This paper examines the role of the body in the social and psychological study of ageing. Drawing upon the phenomenological tradition, it argues that the body occupies a halfway house between materiality and subjectivity, unsettling those social psychological and biological frameworks by which age and ageing are traditionally understood. While offering no simple resolution of this ambiguity, the paper highlights the intrinsic nature of this dilemma. After reviewing recent research and writing concerning body awareness, body ownership and body affordance, the thesis is proposed that much of what constitutes bodily ageing can be seen as a series of 'normal abnormalities'. These result in our experience of bodily ageing pivoting uneasily between an object and a subject position. This dialectic is incapable of synthetic resolution but still, to varying degrees it preoccupies many in later life. It is rarely confronted in its full complexity, however, in ageing studies. The phenomenological tradition provides an under-utilised framework for future investigations in this field.

Keywords Ageing · Being-in-the-world · Corporeality · Later life · Mask of ageing · Normal abnormality

1 Introduction

While ageing can be studied as a social as much as a biological process, there is rarely any escaping its corporeality (Laz, 2003: 503). Nor conversely can ageing bodies escape their inscription in the social world. Despite the intimacy of such linkage, ageing studies and (social) gerontology have tended to de-centre the body and the experience of age associated bodily changes, ignoring or reifying them through innumerable indices of health, functionality and well-being (Öberg, 1996). Even those studies which claim to directly explore older people's experience of their body do so largely through the external mediation of ills, pills, procedures and prostheses

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(Barrett & Gumber, 2020). The result is what Martin and Twigg have called "a paradox within ageing studies" such that "whilst the ageing body is central to the everyday lives of older people, it is relatively absent from gerontological and sociocultural discourses" (Martin & Twigg, 2018: 2). This paper seeks to explore this paradox through the perspective provided by phenomenology.

The adoption of such a philosophical approach to the ageing body highlights the duality of both having and being a body. This duality, sometimes framed as the body's co-existence as both object and subject, becomes more noticeable with age as we conceive ourselves as ageing or becoming aged through the body. Moreover this awareness arises more through the body as an 'external' object than through our 'internal' embodied self. The branch of philosophy that has been most concerned with this paradox of 'being-in-the-world' as both embodied agent and corporeal object is phenomenology. Pursuing these issues through the ideas developed within phenomenological philosophy, I suggest, can illuminate the problematic nature of corporeal ageing in ways different to, and arguably more productively than, the traditional approach of contrasting measures of 'subjective' versus 'objective' age' or in empirical studies contrasting how 'old' people report feeling or thinking they are with how 'old' they really are (e.g.Diehl et al., 2015; Kotter-Grühn et al., 2016; Montepare, 2009).

Roberto Esposito's recent book, *Persons and Things* provides a useful starting point (Esposito, 2015). In it, he suggests that the body can be thought of as a halfway house, whose epistemological status lies midway between that of a person and that of a thing, "protruding into both categories" (Esposito, 2015: 103). While the body never fully embodies its owner, in the sense that the person is equally embodied through practices and relations beyond his or her corporeal boundaries equally it resists being relegated to the status of an owned possession. Esposito starts by outlining the classical Roman tradition, defining and distinguishing in law between persons and things and the possibility that the body may transform a person into a thing (e.g. as a slave). Turning from such legal definitions of persons and things to the philosophical tradition concerning the nature of being – as persons, bodies and things, he notes the critical distinction between mind and body that was articulated by Descartes. This posits an 'insurmountable' separation between persons and bodies (Esposito, 2015: 109). But while Descartes sought to frame distinct and separate understandings of minds and bodies, his distinction also acknowledged their inseparability in constituting persons as human beings (Descartes, 1998: 41). Subsequent formulations of the relationship between selves, bodies and persons developed by phenomenological philosophy have attempted, in various ways, to bridge this seemingly inseparable gap.

A common thread has been the distinctiveness and the inseparability of mind and body, whose objective and subjective natures constitute what Heidegger called the unified phenomenon of "being-in-the-world" (Heidegger, 2010: 53). While debates on the nature of being have long existed at a level of abstract ontological discussion, Maurice Merleau-Ponty's work was notable in opening up a phenomenology of personhood that engaged more deeply with and indeed actively incorporated findings from clinical science (specifically what we would now call the neurosciences) and observation. The anomalies of bodily awareness, self-consciousness and the sense

of embodied agency presented by such clinical phenomena as 'anosognosia', 'depersonalisation' and 'phantom limb syndrome' provided him with examples of how our being-in-the-world is caught up in and realised through our bodies as part of the world, such that, as he put it, "to be born is to be simultaneously born of the world and to be born into the world" (Merleau-Ponty, 2014: 480).

Neuroscience has provided further perspectives from which to consider how bodies are objectively and subjectively realised. Although these perspectives have rarely focused upon ageing, they have potential to illuminate our understanding of the body as an 'almost' ageing thing. At more or less the same time, a further vector in such understanding emerged from sociology's engagement with the body as an ageing 'thing' – and as a marker of social identity. This is evident in the notion of 'the mask of ageing', a term used by two British sociologists, Mike Featherstone and Mike Hepworth, to highlight the contrast between the subjectivity of a seemingly ageless self and the objective aspect of the self-same aged body as seen by others (Featherstone & Hepworth, 1989). They argued that such objective bodily ageing is experienced personally as if it were "a mask or disguise concealing the essentially youthful self beneath" (Featherstone & Hepworth, 1989:148). This mask of agedness, they suggested, does not constitute our personal self, but serves as a persona imposed upon us by the other's gaze. The observable changes of our ageing body, so easily noted by others, contrast with the unchanging self by which persons feel themselves to be the person that they are, have been, and will continue to be. Bodily changes in adulthood, the focus of most biomedical and much social gerontology, seem to take place along quite different vectors from those through which we understand personal change, creating a disparity between our physical and our personal being.

Featherstone and Hepworth's focus upon the ageing body as a socially objective fact that fails fully to map onto the sense of an inner, personal self has been critical. The analogy of the 'mask' they introduced has since been extended (and contested) across a wide range of themes in cultural and social gerontology. It has been applied to the world of fashion; to the embodied performances of master athletes; the marketing of male and female anti-ageing cosmetics; to age-defying dietary regimes and to the expanding practices of self-care (Allain & Marshall, 2017; Bergquist, 2009; Calasanti et al., 2016; Dionigi, 2017; Marshall & Katz, 2002; Tulle & Dorrer, 2011; Twigg, 2013). In widening the range of topics covered by the metaphorical separation of the outward corporeal persona from inner personhood, longstanding concerns over the epistemological relationship between human beings and their bodies have been passed over in favour of a purely cultural focus upon what might be called the (social) performativity of age (Swinnen & Port, 2012). The result is that the turn to the body in the social sciences has privileged processes of *embodiment* rather than the insertion of human *corporeality* into the social world The materiality of ageing has become a matter of performativity rather than "a physical, flesh, and blood reality" (Calasanti, 2005: 9).

The argument of this paper is that ageing studies and social gerontology need to engage with the ageing body, less in its representation as a metaphorical mask, or in its status as authentically versus embodied agedness, but as something in between, apart from and yet a part of the experience of selfhood, subjectivity and social being

in later life.[1] In proposing a more phenomenologically informed position concerning the nature of bodily ageing, this paper seeks to represent the ageing person as neither an aged body nor yet a disembodied subject perceiving but not being his or her body, but as a being hovering between becoming and unbecoming, within "that special relationship between a mind and the bodily relationship which bears it" (Merleau-Ponty, 1993: 34).

2 Phenomenology and the Cartesian legacy

Outside of medicine, human bodies are rarely considered separately from their embodiment as persons. Yet, as Esposito notes, "far from being coextensive with the person…the body was often the channel through which the person was transformed into a thing" (Esposito, 2015: 29). This transformation, he suggests, was realised by the exercise of power, originally through capture, enslavement and enforced labour and later by the abstraction and alienation of wage labour. The ease with which bodies can turn persons into thing-like objects is not however simply the consequence of society's dominant mode of production. An ever-present ambiguity exists in how persons and bodies are framed and understood that resides as much in human development as it does in culture, economics or social relations. This point was most powerfully framed by Descartes with his 'two substances' thesis, outlined in his '*Meditations*' (Descartes, 1998).

His distinction between mental and physical substances derived not from considerations of law or practice but from two fundamentally different forms of knowledge. Shifting the grounds from the legal/moral position of persons, established by classical and later canon law, Descartes established a philosophical tradition of treating knowledge about selves and about the world as fundamentally different. For Descartes, the point of certainty in our knowing anything lay less in our corporeal existence but in our experiencing, sentient beings – in the agency of our mental activity. He argued that such knowledge was fundamentally different from thinking about our material selves as objects of study, things no different from other non-reflexive things. The indubitability of this thinking (the 'cogito'), Descartes argued, serves as the necessary starting point from which to explore the relationship between our 'being' a mind and our 'having' a body (Descartes, 1998).

While Descartes recognised that body and mind *together constitute the person*, he argued that the mind alone – that conscious incorporeal thing – is capable of knowing itself in a way the body cannot. Devoid of mind, the body remains no more than a mere instrument or object, lacking agency and virtually identical whether dead or alive. While he acknowledged that body and mind are both "incomplete substances when they are referred to the [hu] man, which they compose; [but, he added] considered alone, they are complete" (Descartes, letter to Arnauld, cited by Hoffman, 2008: 397). While he recognised that individuals as persons are constituted of both

[1] Concepts of *authenticity* and *inauthenticity* are used here in the more or less existentialist sense of 'owning/representing' or 'disowning/misrepresenting' one's self.

body and mind, still body and mind can be considered separate things, each complete in themselves, each capable of being studied in isolation of the other, each capable of being 'other' to the 'other'.

Medicine and science form the appropriate modes by which the corporeal is apprehended as an object of study. These disciplines employ methods that are, in principle, indistinguishable whether applied to persons or to other animals, other parts of nature and other material objects. The nature of mind or consciousness and the associated subjectivity require a different approach. Descartes' meditations represented his chosen methodology for studying mental things. In so doing, he became what Edmund Husserl described as "the genuine patriarch of phenomenology" (Husserl, 1964: 3). By this, Husserl was referring to the privileged position Descartes gave to studying the thinking thing that turned living bodies into being persons.[2] For Husserl and the phenomenological tradition that followed him, the supreme object for philosophical and scientific thought was the study of 'self-consciousness' and what it revealed about *being in the world*. Unlike Descartes who went on to consider the materiality of existence outside consciousness, Husserl considered that the world should only ever be studied as an object of experience. While the body can be apprehended as both an agent and the object of experience, for Husserl this could only be in and through the embodied mind. Consciousness alone enables the body to be understood as a quality of personhood but consciousness abstracted from the body is just that – an abstraction. Only through an embodied understanding can the body come to be viewed as both an embodied agency and an objective existence, its status akin to both Descartes' '*res cogitans'* and *'res extensa'*.[3]

Heidegger took this further, pursuing the nature of the self, the body and the world through "sustained philosophical self-interrogation" (Martin, 2010: 511). Breaking away from Husserl, Heidegger shifted the focus of phenomenology from contemplating the epistemic status of the body to concentrate on exploring being as a totality, the human being as a 'being-in-the-world', a general state of being that cannot be categorised as either a corporeal thing that is "in" a being, or a being that is "in" a corporeal thing (Heidegger, 2010: 54). As several authors have noted, Heidegger gave only a secondary role for the body in realising this being, an aspect of a generic worldliness that in its sheer corporeality seems not to have concerned him (Aho, 2005:7; Cerbone, 2000: 210). Pointing more directly toward the primacy of the body as a critical epistemological pivot was his near French contemporary,

[2] Descartes argued that the ego or 'I' is "most tightly joined and so to speak commingled with it so much so that I and the body constitute one single thing" whereby "my whole self, in so far as I am comprised of a body and a mind, can be affected by various beneficial and harmful bodies in the vicinity" (Descartes, 1998: 98). At the same time, it is through the mind and not the composite of mind and body by which "the intellect" first conducts its own inquiry regarding things (Descartes, 1998: 99). In short, knowledge is less a 'personal' endeavour, than a de-corporealised, mental endeavour whether directed toward the mental or the physical world.

[3] Descartes's distinction between consciousness and the body as an object of consciousness was summarised as *'res cogitans'* versus '*res extensa'*, thinking as immaterial stuff and stuff that is extended in space (Descartes, 1998).

Maurice Merleau-Ponty.[4] His influential book '*Phenomenology of Perception*' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962/2014) served as an important bridge in bringing the body back in to philosophy indeed making it central to understanding human being. Neither bare thing nor bare consciousness, Merleau-Ponty saw human beings as continuously engaged in an encounter between the internal and the external, "mixed up with the world and with others in an inextricable confusion" (Merleau-Ponty, 2014: 481).

Engaging with this 'confusion', Merleau-Ponty's writings have exercised a major influence on the study of consciousness and corporeal experience, much more than either Husserl or Heidegger. This has been the case both in the psychological sciences and, to a lesser extent, in the social sciences (Carman, 2009; Crossley, 1995). While in psychology, his work can be seen as continuing a tradition already established by Wundt and developed particularly by members of the Gestalt school of psychology, within the social sciences, it has provided a radically new platform for what Crossley has termed an 'embodied' or 'carnal' sociology that privileges the body as a vehicle through and by which society and the social world are realised (Crossley, 1995). Social things, Crossley argues, need to be acknowledged as themselves 'constituted through the work of the body' and its 'sentient and embodied praxis' (Crossley, 1995: 43). Bodies, selves and societies are all built from common stuff. They are based on assumptions that treat as no more than two sides of the same coin, the sensible and the sentient aspects of the body, of persons and of social relations. Despite promoting a fleshier, less cerebral sociology, Crossley's proposal has had at best a limited impact on the social sciences. While 'the somatic turn' has become more evident in sociology, the body has become more a site for exploration than a means or methodology of study. The problem lies in part with Merleau-Ponty's own approach. It is after all essentially a perceptual, psychological model, focusing more upon individual than social experience. Moreover, it offers what amounts to an essentially static representation of experience – a still life look at looking as it were – rather than a dynamic examination of the objectifying and subjectifying forces operating within the framework of time and place.[5]

It is in *perception/perceiving* where "we understand ourselves not as having but as being bodies" (Carman, 1999: 208). But the temporal dimensions of corporeal experience are not the same as the effects of time on the body. Time as experience enshrines our sense of continuity; we become and continue to be ourselves because of observing (and narrating) the continuity of our self set against time passing. Time as an external phenomenon has the opposite effect – it reduces us to being subject to time – whether as past or future selves or as habitual bodies that are distinct from our current, experiencing bodily self. Merleau-Ponty is of course aware of this, when he

[4] Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) followed Husserl as professor of philosophy at the University of Freiberg in 1928, a post he left toward the end of the Second World War, not resuming it until 1951 (Harman, 2003: 13). Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908 – 1961) became Professor of Philosophy at the College de France just after Heidegger was reinstated at the University of Freiberg, during the heydays of existentialism.

[5] For example, in his essay, *the Philosopher and Sociology*, Merleau-Ponty argued for the importance of lived experience and the need to 'awaken …a consciousness of the social-which-is-mine' 'given to me in my living present' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 112).

distinguishes between "two distinct layers, that of the habitual body [*corps habituel*] and that of the actual body [*corps actuel*]" (Merleau-Ponty, 2014: 84). This distinction offers a link between the actuality of individual bodily consciousness and the 'already existing' cultural and social world whose past has fashioned that consciousness. Not so much through simply 'perceiving', the habitual body is realised unconsciously through the accumulation of the internalised habits of acting on the world. These schema are built up over time, shared in and through our own and others' bodies and serve as the 'internal necessity' for an integrated existence as a person (Merleau-Ponty, 2014: 89).

Such integration however is imperfect. Merleau-Ponty was himself fascinated by the potential discrepancies arising between these two forms of bodily consciousness, the one realising experiences as now and the other unconsciously embodying them through the sediment of past experience. This distinction is revealed dramatically in the phantom limb phenomenon, when people continue to experience their limb long after the limb itself has been amputated. For Merleau-Ponty this meant that the body "must be grasped not merely in an instantaneous singular and full experience but …under an aspect of generality and *as an impersonal being*" (Merleau-Ponty, 2014: 85, italics added). This disjunction between the general or habitual body and the singular, actual body sheds light on the problematic embodied subjectivity of the ageing body. Faced with confronting then disowning one's 'for now' vulnerable body to maintain the accustomed body through which the self-sameness of the self persists, is one way of conceiving of 'the mask of ageing'. But before exploring this further, the more general question of what constitutes 'owning' one's body should first be discussed.

3 Body ownership and neuro-phenomenology

If Heidegger was clear that "[w]e do not 'have' a body but rather we 'are' bodily" (Heidegger, 1979: 98), Merleau-Ponty was more nuanced. He recognised that we both are and have bodies, each standpoint shifting like a Möbius strip with our ways of being for the world. At the same time he argued that "I am my body" (Merleau-Ponty, 2014: 151), giving the body a centrality both to our being-in-the-world and as "our general means of having a world" (Merleau-Ponty, 2014: 147). If Heidegger's body is less distinctively corporeal, less fleshy than Merleau-Ponty's distinctly corporeal body, the latter is less socially worldly, less constitutively 'inter-subjective'.[6] His focus is very much upon the body as individualising the world, granting it a more individualised property because of its realisation in and through the individual

[6] A number of writers have stressed Heidegger's formulation of human 'being' (Dasein) "as containing an inherent form of intersubjectivity" (Stroh, 2015: 244). Of course, it would be wrong to claim Merleau-Ponty excludes the inter-subjectivity of persons. He states, for example, how "my life must have a sense that I do not constitute, there must be an inter-subjectivity" such that the 'me for myself' stands out "against a background of …'me for others' and 'others for me'". Still much of his focus is upon "man as an embodied subject" which "by being this body" exists as 'an intersubjective field" (op.cit., 478).

body.[7] In this sense these two perspectives, of both having and being a body, while 'inextricably complicated', were integrated within the domain of experience realised through the individual, narrated through the discourses of others, no doubt, but centred upon a psychology, rather than a sociology of the body.

Since then the topic of bodily ownership has moved further forward, within psychology, through a series of clinical and experimental investigations conducted during the last couple of decades (de Vignement, 2011). A collection of essays published under the title '*The Body and the Self*' marked a new beginning (Bermudez et al., 1995). Many of the book's contributors considered that phenomenological philosophy and psychology showed an excess reliance on the cerebral over the corporeal (Gallagher, 1995: 226). Brewer for example argued that the sense of 'ownership' of the body need not be framed in opposition to the sense of agency or subjectivity but rather forms a necessary part of what a self is. He wrote "in bodily experience I am aware of parts of my body precisely as physical parts of myself, the material subject of that experience" (Brewer, 1995: 306). The experience of owning a body, he argues, and the experience of being a self and agent are not disparate or separable phenomena, but rather one and the same. My body, not the thought of my body, is what makes me me, in being both mine and in being the source of my actions in the world. Another contributor argued however that Cartesian dualists are "unlikely to accept that bodily awareness is a form of introspection, for [they] will insist that body and self are distinct entities, and hence that awareness of the body is not [the same as] awareness of the self" (Martin, 1995: 283). Denying that bodily awareness is identical with self-awareness, Martin pointed out "is not to dispute that there is a close connection between the sense we have of our own bodies and the concept we have of ourselves" but that the connection warrants further exploration (Martin, 1995: 285).

An experiment known as 'the rubber hand illusion' proved critical in furthering empirical research into this problem (Botvinick and Cohen, 1998). Conducted shortly after the initial publication of the aforementioned volume, Botvinick and Cohen seated ten subjects: "with their left arm resting upon a small table. A standing screen was positioned beside the arm to hide it from the subject's view and a life-sized rubber model of a left hand and arm was placed on the table directly in front of [them]" (Botvinick and Cohen 1998: 756). Two small paintbrushes were used to stroke the rubber hand and the [real] hidden hand, in synchrony with each other. Later the subjects were asked about what they had felt. Most reported feeling "the touch not of the hidden brush but that of the viewed brush, as if the rubber hand had sensed the touch" (op. cit.). In effect, an object that was a representation of, but not the actual body was perceived as one's own. The disjunction experimentally created between the self as experiencing subject and the self as experienced object, was not one of past and present bodies, as in the phantom limb, but one created in the 'actuel' presence of the body.

[7] Heidegger was less concerned than Merleau-Ponty with resolving the 'true' role of the body in constituting 'being in the world', deferring the matter to what he considered the more crucial question, namely the nature of being, of human-ness *in its totality* (Aho, 2005: 16).

The significance this poses is that, *pace* Brewer, the sense of body ownership is not inherently co-terminous with the sense of self as subject. At best, the self as subject experiences a *sense* of bodily ownership, even if that sense does not correspond with the body as external object. We can, in short, be alienated from our body even if we fail to experience (or recognise) that alienation. Despite being objectively connected to (if not commingled with) the body, we can feel displaced by it. Indeed, we can feel no ownership of our body as subsequent experiments and clinical experience have demonstrated. Over forty pathological phenomena have been identified that illustrate potential disjunctions between the felt and the observed body, ranging from the limited alienation associated with anosognosia to the more profound alienation of the depersonalisation syndrome (de Vignemont, 2009). While such purely pathological studies rely upon rare, anomalous experiences and circumstances, studies employing virtual reality technology are now enabling researchers to artificially create the 'illusion' that a subject's view of his or her 'real body' is not their body at all, while attributing as real a virtually induced 'real body' instead (Guterstam & Ehrsson, 2012). Such phenomena reinforce what seems like a Cartesian truth, that ourselves as subjects and ourselves as bodies are neither co-substantive, co-terminous nor 'co-constructed'. Subjects, agents can be alienated from their corporeal selves, disowning some or all of their body as 'non-self'.

Arguably, our body neither serves nor embodies us, but it embodies for us the external world that like other "various beneficial and harmful bodies in the vicinity" can nevertheless affect our self profoundly (Descartes, 1998: 98). What has been called 'the mask of ageing' can perhaps be seen less as a matter of social intent than as a more fundamental duality between the body and the self, a duality moreover that waxes and wanes over the life course. Through the various experiences and realisations of becoming not just *a body*, but also *our body, we* develop a self whose material identity or boundaries are gradually exceeded by a self-identity that extends itself by embodying what has happened as a continual becoming. This embodied temporality offers a potential standpoint from which to consider the ageing body as part of our world and of us, while remaining spatially and temporarily external to ourselves even as it supports and enables our being in and of the world.[8]

4 Ageing subjectivities: bodily and personal

At this point, it is worth re-considering the 'mask of ageing' thesis (Featherstone & Hepworth, 1989). While it is possible to study the visible signs of our own ageing, both in the mirror and by directly observing our body, such observations place us as the person observing, with our body – or parts of our body – an observed thing, a part not of us as permanent perceiver but of the changing world existing around us. Esposito's focus on the body as an intermediary between the world of things and the

[8] 'In part or as a whole…' – research suggests that the othering of the body, particularly in old age, may be discursively confined to an often ill or disabled part of the body, while the remaining body retains its status as still the same body-self (Chater, 2002: 127).

world of persons opens up the possibility of bodies being two things simultaneously and successively, both a thing and a person, a personal thing and a thing-like person. Without bodies we could not be persons, could not be actors or agents in the world. Were we not persons, our bodies would not be us, not ours, but mere things, divested of identity, corpses without ownership. People can and do become mere bodies and people can and do become things, like tools to be used to turn a profit. At the same time, prolonged contact with and ownership of things can lead to their acquiring the attributes of persons – personalised things that stand in for, or in some way embody their owner (Esposito, 2015: 87–8).

This picture that Esposito draws however seems more of a still life; a *tableau vivant*. Ageing introduces the element of temporality, of bodies becoming what they once were not, and ceasing to be what they now are. Between our past and future embodiments, we realise ourselves as beings in a corporeal forever, othering our past and our future forms. When Judith Butler wrote about gender as performative, she emphasised not so much the deliberations of the actor as the interpellation of the subject by the permanencies of the world into which the subject-body is inserted (Butler, 1989). Gender is performed more than it is chosen. Some have argued that age too is like that; not a consciously chosen identity but the accumulation of the embodied habits of a lifetime, like Merleau-Ponty's '*corps habituel'* (Merleau-Ponty, 2014: 83). Ageing in this sense comes from a world that we now embody, and in that sense, ageing embodies us, becoming unnoticeably how the world interpolates old people. Wehrle puts it this way – "Oldness is an objective or relative category that belongs to the body we have…; the more we experience our being a body as an expression of 'I cannot' instead of 'I can' the more we have to attend to our body as a material object" (Wehrle, 2019: 18). This 'for now' quality of the aged body is something other than the body we grew into, the human being that was made in and through our body. Not that person we became but the person we are becoming forced to be, and at odds with the body schema and body image that embodied 'certain life stabilities' through which we came to be ourselves (Wehrle, 2019: 19). As de Beauvoir put it, 'we are obliged to live this old age that we are incapable of realizing' (de Beauvoir, 1977: 335).

The corporeality of age, the ageing flesh that realises the old person *qua* old person, is realised materially and socially as other, both by others and, reflexively, by our own self. This is the point that de Beauvoir made, when claiming that oldness is not gained but thrust upon us, an 'unrealisable' subjectivity (de Beauvoir, 1977: 491). As bodies, we are doubly othered, by ourself and by society. This observed agedness sets us apart from the body through and with which we became who we are. What makes old bodies old is not by their realisation of individual agency, not some intentionality realised through and in the self, not a distinct subjectivity, which serves as the abstract 'ego' uniting experience, but rather as, in de Beauvoir's words, as something "abstract, general and assumed from without", collectively realised and multiply materialised in the constructed figures of aged persons. Our bodies age not by our doing, not by our authorisation, but as a part of the external world, of which we are indubitably a part, but from which we remain consciously separated.

The Lockeian notion of persons unified by their memory depends less upon the photographic record that metaphorically or materially accumulates over the course

of our lives than upon the continuing sense of unity and ownership, reflected in the deeds that we do, the plans that we make and our remembering them. Confronted day by day by what we cannot do, or more particularly by what we can no longer do, this discontinuity, this disunity marks out our age. Our imagination casts us forward to a point when we fear no continuity left within ourselves, beyond the dull presence of a body that, despite occupying more or less the same space as 'ours', is no longer our space but "our prison, but also our last shelter" (Améry, 1994: 35). Lockeian identity is an identity based upon self as agent, not self as a body. It is not an identity of extension but of active making. While that perspective may change, the looking remains the same, even if both the looker and the look are changed. Identity comes from what is felt as ours, the sense of body ownership that relies less upon what is looked at, what is judged as ours, but what is felt and realised as ours – its embodiment, through its agency, of our 'mineness' (Guillot, 2016). Without the agency of the actor, the mask remains simply a prop.

5 The body in social representations of age

In her critique of the 'anti-aging' industry, Calasanti remarked that "there is a difference between trying to achieve health and trying to be 'not old.'" (Calasanti, 2005: 12). This separation between the virtue ascribed to health promotion and the vices of rejuvenation has much resonance. It links the pre-modern *moral division* between the deserving and the undeserving with the modern *clinical division* between the diseased and the merely decayed (Korenchevsky, 1961), the natural order with what is unnatural – or against nature. Gerontologists are now questioning the validity of this clinical division (Blagosklonny, 2018; Burton, 2009; Gems, 2015; Niccoli & Partridge, 2012), while the lauding of the public virtues of *health* over the private vices of *self-care* is coming to be viewed more equivocally (Becker et al., 2012; Dean, 2014; Dilts, 2011). Trying to live a long life without growing old may be no less viable a strategy as trying to grow old while staying disease free. Bodies – our bodies – are not simply the carriers of our betterment. They serve also as hosts of processes operating beyond our authority neither protecting nor preserving us as human beings: what some bio-gerontologists have called our 'disposable soma' (Kirkwood & Austad, 2000). The distinction between corporeal ageing and corporeal disease and the associated value attached to preventing the latter while venerating the former seems more an ideological position than an objective fact (Faragher, 2015; Gems, 2015). The assumption that ageing is an example of our bodies becoming ever more ourselves is surely no more tenable than its inverse, of ourselves becoming ever less our bodies.

Age problematizes the relationship between persons and their bodies. Whilst our mental and physical development confers an increasingly empowered agency, realised in and through the body (supported of course by a range of micro, meso and macro social processes) so does its antithesis, ageing, confer a gradual loss of embodied agency. From what might be termed a neo-liberal perspective, it is possible for society – and for us as social beings—to view the human body, one's own and that of others as so much human capital. Human capital theory implies that

the greater the investment in learning and health made earlier in life, the richer the returns found in working life and the larger the reserve that can be drawn down in later life (Becker, 1964, 2002). From this perspective, then, the appropriation and objectification of the body most clearly exemplified in slavery also serves as a template that places the body not as the owner but as a possession owned by the personal self or by another person (Esposito, 2015:26–7). Unlike the person of the slave however, the body is not a replaceable thing. Having invested in it, indirectly at first but later increasingly directly, there is no other foundation from which to switch that investment into another form.[9] The body remains in that sense inalienable, even as it becomes more alien to our ageing ageless self.

Some time ago, Kevin McKee coined the phrase, '*the body drop'* (McKee, 1998; McKee & Gott, 2002), referring to those critical corporeal events when the ageing body fails, in a sudden and dramatic fashion, to function as the reliable vehicle of embodied agency it had been until then. Whether as a result of a fall, a faecal faint, a stroke or an episode of incontinence, the embodied self is let down and the body fails its duties as the self's agent. Such events inevitably draw attention to the difference between the desiring subject as embodied agent and his or her unrealising, unrealisable body-in-itself. They contribute to the psychological template around which an imaginary of old age is fashioned; the reference point around which the images, interpretations and identity of an unauthored agedness coalesce. In short, the cultural imaginary of old age seems to be presaged upon a Cartesian disjunction between body and mind, self as corporeal object and self as subject, self-conscious of its object status. Whatever the ontological status of this distinction, it offers a phenomenological framing of age that separates experiencing the self as a self-conscious intentional subject while observing one's body as a belonging thing that, while fully human, never fully embodies or represents the person as 'being-in-the-world'.

Accidents and episodes of illness create similar disjunctions. But so long as they represent disjunctions which resolve or are envisaged as resolvable, whatever splits they create are capable of being sealed over, their externality to the self, maintained. The disrupted biography, to coin Bury's phrase, can be suitably revised and reconstituted, and the body, though changed, re-invested with much of its old sense of ownership, albeit on new terms (Bury, 1982). The progressive nature of corporeal change that is ageing qualifies the options for such re-branding at the same time as normalising such changes as simply "aspects of growing older rather than [as] disruptive to one's personal biography" (Hurd-Clarke & Bennett, 2013: 344). It is as if, with age, though the body that is less the 'me' that it once was, still houses me, it does so less comprehensively, less completely, than the being-in-the-world that made me subject. No wonder then, faced with their self-evidently deteriorating physical function, older people often say that at least they have their mind, their 'marbles', their wits about them, a mind if not a body that still holds past and present together, that still

[9] Of course this might conceivably change if trans-humanists imaginings are ever realised and bodies replaced by machine parts or alternative synthetic bodies, but even so, such imaginings require the abstraction of self as 'pure ego' from the body, a position unacceptable to phenomenology (Russell, 2006: 153).

confers my identity. At least, that is, unless or until the brain asserts its own externality, rendering the body more potentially alien than ever, deprived of that ready access to the normal 'affordances' that shape the mind to the world.[10] In the event of such mental failure, it falls to others, to other selves to whom an increasingly frail and failing self must cling, in order to sustain, externally at least, an inter-subjective identity. In this last act, on this last stage of all, abandoning the final freedom of the ever present otherness of one's own body, the human being turns increasingly and irrevocably to other persons' bodies, to sustain their personhood.

6 Bodily ageing: a 'normal abnormality'?

While corporeal self-alienation may be most clearly realised in the loss or addition of body parts that readily become 'things' – such as 'growths', 'hairs', 'skin' and 'teeth'—some bodily changes cannot be so easily dismissed as merely 'extraneous' things, neither necessary instruments nor supporting schema for our being-in-the-world. Instead they function as essential elements whose ageing effectively limits the realisation of our projects in and of the world. Heinämaa has put it like this:

> "My eyelids are given me now as dropped because they used to be light; my legs appear as stiff and weak because they were able to perform far-reaching movements…my present embodiment appears as faulty against the background of my previous mode of embodiment and not against a general form characteristic of humans or against a disembodied purely spiritual will" (Heinämaa, 2014: 177)

Returning to Merleau-Ponty, we can say that this disjunction, or rather the growing awareness of this disjunction between '*le corps habituel*' and '*le corps actuel*', is sensed as a form of self-othering, rendering the body-for-itself increasingly othered. An alien corporeality disrupts the habitual body schema that thus far had embodied the self and its projects, and that still, at least in part, make us the body by which we continue to realise our being-in-the-world.

Understood as 'normal abnormalities' these disjunctures between our ageing bodies and our ageless selves are embodied as limits, obstacles to our self-realisation. This evidence of performing less well, or not performing at all, those various bodily affordances that once, in one way or another, were central to our being in the world is difficult to own; is part of the uncanniness of ageing. Such constraints on self-realisation are of course encountered on various other occasions prior to what might conventionally be termed 'later' life. Peak performance in some fields of physical endeavour for example may be attained in one's twenties and thereafter fades with

[10] The concept of body affordances was developed by Gibson (1979), referring to what de Vignemont calls the means by which bodies seem automatically to order themselves toward their interaction with the external world (de Vignemont, 2016: 149). Affordances exist neither in the world nor in the body but in the relationship through which the two are aligned (for a more detailed analysis of this concept, see Chemero, 2003).

each subsequent decade. Something similar in other fields may be evident in one's thirties and, in a few arenas of embodied peak performance, in one's forties. The point is that these embodied performances reach an asymptote before falling away, without a person being recognised or as recognising themselves as 'old'. How might these differ, if at all, from the representation of bodily disjunction as ageing? Arguably, they do so by the very artificiality of their peak performance. Their overt conscious performativity renders them aspects of 'abnormal development' whose social realisation is already framed through a parabola of gain and loss outside and well in advance of everyday agedness. The affordances they realise stand above and outside those everyday embodied practices taken as indicative of normal development– like walking, running, sitting, bending and straightening one's body.

In contrast to the deliberately developed performativity of sport, these aspects of motor performance possess a certain taken-for-grantedness, an instrumental objectlessness. They constitute the basis of the more generic freedoms by which human bodies realise a potentially unlimited range of behavioural intentions – generic and distinctly human freedoms that distinguish human bodies from all other non-human bodies (cf. Fichte, 2000). Their seeming 'agelessness', their taken for granted corporeal affordances arise because they scarcely feature in our everyday awareness, in contrast to the conscious intentions they help us realise, whether in shopping, reaching for a book, cycling quickly to a meeting or hoovering the house. It is only when the otherwise unconscious bodily actions underlying such tasks cease to afford us unthinking access in realising our plans that we become conscious of not moving so well or as easily as we have grown accustomed. Such moments question the unchanging sameness of '*le corps habituel*'; we become conscious of an actualised 'otherness' that intervenes, places obstacles in realising our plans, as we find ourselves unexpectedly unable to complete some usually afforded action.

Such experiences are not only a part of ageing. They may emerge acutely or insidiously, for example, as part of the discovery of illness. However, unlike the experience of illnesses which are bounded by the likelihood of recovery (and so we accept the constraints they impose as temporary deviations of the self) or which present actionable prospects of a more serious condition requiring medical attention, agedness is realised through a more indefinite 'coming to consciousness' of corporeal constraints which may seem at first only fleetingly limited disruptions of the sameness of our self. Their more diffuse quality is interwoven by the frequent failure to be conscious of or to fully 'embody' what has changed, conferring on corporeal ageing an almost normalising otherness. This insidious otherness is reflected in the common observation that others, as much if not more than ourselves, notice our ageing body, observing a tremor at first invisible to us, or a degree of breathlessness whose consequentiality at first goes unnoticed, or the slight unsteadiness of gait that indicates to others that our body is becoming less our usual self, less the vehicle of our plans and intentions and more an ageing thing (Bühler, 1935; Kafka, 1949).

However noted, such coming to consciousness of processes normally taking place outside of consciousness can create a sense of the uncanny, of corporeal alienation, a slower and more insidious version of what was exemplified in accounts of anosognosia, when certain stroke victims report the experience of no longer feeling one's limb as one's own (Merleau-Ponty, 2014:82). It is as if, as de Beauvoir noted, we are

obliged to live an old age that is incapable of being fully realised for and within the self (de Beauvoir, 1977: 335). Corporeal ageing, in this substantive sense, is becoming other to oneself, discovering that the body one inhabits is becoming something external, something to which the individual person is being reduced, and by whose new terms he or she is increasingly confined.

Such moments of alienation between self, body and the world constitute what might be called the normal abnormalities of age. Common enough, these phenomena nevertheless are rarely analysed, unlike the many uncommon neurological anomalies that disrupt the contiguities between self and body (Moseley et al., 2012). As Hamilton has put it, there is a sense that, with age, "the body reclaims one and one becomes one's body, not …as a point at which the world meets itself…but …as intransigent materiality, as mass rather than energy" (Hamilton, 2016: 309). He cites a character from Chekov's play, *Uncle Vanya,* Serebriakow, who complains how old age has made him "an exile in his own body", a body that is "both utterly who he is and wholly alien to him", in "a homeland all the more terrible for its being foreign soil" (Hamilton, 2016: 310–11). Neither fully the self-same person nor yet reduced to having become a thing, the ageing body threatens, but never quite captures our self, nor lets itself be ever fully ours.

7 Conclusions

This paper has re-considered the place of the ageing body in gerontology and more generally in ageing studies by drawing upon the phenomenological tradition. While the distinction between bodies as things and as persons may have its roots in classical law, the phenomenological approach separating body and mind originates with Descartes' meditations. Though widely criticised, the Cartesian distinction between knowledge of our selves and knowledge of our being-in-the-world continues to problematize our understandings of human subjectivity. Nowhere is this more evident than in the experience of becoming old. While the phenomenological philosophers of the twentieth century agreed on the identity of the person with the body, research into the conscious experience of embodiment casts doubt upon the absoluteness of this identity. Evidence from clinical disease studies and from the experimental manipulation of perceptual experience shows how our sense of self can be dislocated from our experience of our body. Rather than assume that such disjunctions in later life are somehow reflections of inauthenticity, it is possible to consider them understandable, part of the normal abnormalities of human being.

As the outcome of a biological process bodily ageing facilitates such disjunctions, through the direct reversal of how during development our bodies serve as integrating processes, making us the persons or selves we become. Disparities in the identification and interpretation of one's objective and subjective age may be considered reflections of a more general problem of both being and having a body that over time and with age no longer embody our sense of self and our identity as a person. These problems can become salient at other stages of life, no doubt, but can be differentiated. The changes of development before and after puberty herald not just a new becoming but a becoming more, more in the world and more of the world and more in one's agentic capacity.

Bodily changes arising with age by contrast are associated with becoming less, less afforded and less agentic than we understood ourselves to be. While such changes might seem to present a shrinking of horizons – of being less in the world – other changes may counteract or overshadow this diminishment by the growing salience of qualities less associated with corporeal than with our social being, such as increased judgement, taste, wealth and wisdom. As such, however, they also serve to make the disjunction between self and body the more marked.

The relevance to gerontology of phenomenological inquiries into bodies, persons and selves deserves wider consideration. Since Öberg drew attention to the absence of any proper recognition of the body in gerontology, two decades ago, more attention has been paid to the body. Much of this research effort, however, has been through the prism of 'embodiment' and its realisation in social and cultural studies of the body. At the same time, other aspects of the ageing body remain more difficult to dress up in a carnal sociology and the encultured habits of performativity. They confront a sociology of the body with the ageing body's asocial otherness. Some have treated the ever-present potential for corporeal alienation so tightly bound up with ageing as if reflecting a moral flaw, as if such alienation displays a fundamental inauthenticity of personhood (Andrews, 1999). At other times, the ageing body is seen not so much as a test of authenticity or integrity but a generic signifier of social marginality, whose lack of assets and resources embodies so much (depleted) human capital.

Bodily ageing encompasses more than civics or social status. The connections between a seemingly ageless self and an evidently aged body, between the sense of ownership of, and alienation from, one's ageing body, and the complex and contingent ways by which we as ageing bodies mediate our being-in-the-world have long been recognised as sites of struggle. If, as Esposito proposes, the body can be thought to occupy a kind of intermediary status between that of persons and that of things, pursuing the subjectivity of corporeal ageing both as it is realised through social institutions and cultural practices and through personal experience offers aging studies new paradigms beyond the dominant paradigms of researching social and subjective age discrepancies or the compulsive search to establish age as an authentic experience. In so doing, the aim is not to portray age as a purely corporeal, rather demoralising affair, but to better realise the inseparable tension arising in human beings, from being and having an ageing body.

Declarations

Conflicts of interest The author declares there are no conflicts of interest arising from the publication of this ms.

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