

Embodiment in Early Heidegger: Between Platonic Ascetism and Nietzsche's Critique of Metaphysics

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Introduction

In continental philosophy, the issue of embodiment and the notion of the body as a site for philosophical inquiry has typically been associated with the phenomenological thinking of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, later extended in notable essays such as Iris Marion Young's *Throwing Like a Girl*. Alternatively, the analysis of the body leaves phenomenology entirely, as exemplified by Deleuze's recasting of Spinoza's notorious thesis "no one has yet determined what the body can do"¹ in chapter eleven of *Expressionism in Philosophy* aptly titled "What Can a Body Do?" With the rise of critical disability studies, the influence of Deleuze, as well as other post-structuralist thinkers such as Foucault, regarding contemporary perspectives on the body, has only increased, and is particularly present in the work of scholars such as Braidotti.² However, the role of the body in the thought of Martin Heidegger has not yet been the subject of extensive discussion. It is thus the goal of this article to take seriously the proposition of Heidegger as a thinker of the body. I intend to achieve this by first turning to an analysis of philosophers I characterize as thinkers against the body, which will include extended commentary on Plato's *Phaedo* to illustrate traditional schemes of opposing the mind to the body. Then, shifting to a discussion of Heidegger's unique position as an anti-metaphysician, I

¹ Benedictus de Spinoza and Edwin Curley, *A Spinoza Reader: The Ethics and Other Works* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 155.

² C.f., Braidotti, Rosi, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

will construct a Heideggerian response to such denigrations of the body. Lastly, I look toward Heidegger to build a theory of the body through his concept of dwelling.

The Disrespected Body

Philosophy, in its broadest sense, has long since held a distrust of the body, or at the very least, a skepticism towards it. By “philosophy,” I am referring to its “post-Platonic” form and development, or what Nietzsche would call philosophy in a “grand mixed character.”³ Against what he notes as singular investigations, post-Platonic inquiry seeks system, synthesis, and unification. In other words, it is philosophy in pursuit of the *whole*. In this sense, various theological enterprises, including scholastic and mystical traditions, cannot be denied from this conception of philosophy. The notion of the body as the “prison” of the soul, as merely a vessel in which we inhabit prior to transcendence, can be found across a multiplicity of philosophical systems, usually manifesting from some conviction of an afterlife. The material body encloses itself around the soul and it is the task of philosophy, or devotion, to aid in its liberation (or, rather, as a guide towards its liberation). Here, the body is not simply a meditative or transitional sheath but a distinct substance that actively entraps and imprisons the soul: the body as vilified substance. This disconnected view of matter and soul could be examined in a multitude of thinkers over the past two millennia; however, for the purposes of this article, I want to focus on how this manifests in Plato, as he serves, perhaps, as the most explicit subordinator of the body to the soul, and his mind-body dualism will help in illustrating how Heidegger circumvents this problem some two thousand years later.

³ Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *The Pre-Platonic Philosophers* (Urbana, Ill: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 5.

Plato's Asceticism

When Heidegger writes that the question of the meaning of Being “has long since become trivialized,”⁴ we are faced with locating the temporal moment of this trivialization. However, we may also ask when was the question of the meaning of the body trivialized? It is my contention that we ought to begin this genealogy with the Platonic corpus. If we, in fact, accept David Claus’ characterization of the non-universality of an eternal soul in fifth century Greece, then the arguments found in the *Phaedo* and the *Republic* for the soul and its immortality can essentially serve as a genesis for the body as a vilified substance.⁵ The following will confront two assertions: Plato’s disdain for the body is an asceticism and this is intrinsically linked with his views on the afterlife and what I characterize as a “Platonic dualism.”

Concerning Plato as an ascetic, the *Phaedo* acts as the archetypal text. Following the *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, and *Crito*, the *Phaedo* chronicles the final day of the life of Socrates before his execution. The dialogue, distinctively belonging to Plato’s middle period, and thus before the *Republic*, notably stands as one of the earliest examples of the theory of the Forms. For this reason, commentaries have usually focused on its co-development of the theory of the Forms and the immortality of the soul. However, for our purposes, the passages regarding the soul’s relationship to the body will emerge as the most relevant for establishing asceticism as an imperative and ethical good in Plato’s normative system.

Early in the dialogue, there is a conversation between Socrates and Simmias of Thebes, wherein we receive a summary of his derision for the body:

⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: Harper Perennial/Modern Thought, 2008), 21.

⁵ David B. Claus, *Toward the Soul: An Inquiry into the Meaning of Ψυχή before Plato* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1981), 68.

There is likely to be something such as a path to guide us out of our confusion, because as long as we have a body and our soul is fused with such an evil we shall never adequately attain what we desire, which we affirm to be the truth. The body keeps us busy in a thousand ways because of its need for nurture. Moreover, if certain diseases befall it, they impede our search for the truth. It fills us with wants, desires, fears, all sorts of illusions and much nonsense, so that, as it is said, in truth and in fact no thought of any kind ever comes to us from the body. Only the body and its desires cause war, civil discord and battles, for all wars are due to the desire to acquire wealth, and it is the body and the care of it, to which we are enslaved, which compel us to acquire wealth, and all this makes us too busy to practice philosophy.⁶

Although this comes at a rather initial moment in the dialogue, there is much we can extract from this portion. Setting aside—for a moment—the notions of bodily pleasure which so often dominate discussions of ascetism, I want to prioritize the body’s “need for nurture.” The search for truth is first distorted, seemingly, from the body’s physiological composition. The body, in its organismic makeup, seeks nourishment and care. It must be fed, clothed for the appropriate climate, and it requires a modicum of rest every night. These functions have no reciprocity with the soul; rather, they obfuscate its vision, clarity, and goals. The body, unlike the soul, lacks any such teleology or normativity. It is unthinking matter, non-emotional flesh that only has a “pursuit” insofar as the organism strives for self-preservation. This division helps to clarify Socrates’ previous point that “the body confuses the soul,”⁷ since Plato retains a subject within the body that must act as a catalyst for the fulfillment of such biological “needs.” The acquisition of wealth, for example, is a pursuit for the body; however, it is the soul that must be preoccupied with such a pursuit.

Plato’s solution is clear: the soul, then, also must seek to free itself from the flesh.

Equally, his ascetism becomes explicit:

⁶ Plato, *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett, 2009), 57.

⁷ *Ibid.*

[W]e must escape from the body and observe things in themselves with the soul by itself. It seems likely that we shall, only then, when we are dead, attain that which we desire and of which we claim to be lovers, namely, wisdom, as our argument shows, not while we live; for if it is impossible to attain any pure knowledge with the body, then one of two things is true: either we can never attain knowledge or we can do so after death. Then and not before, the soul is by itself apart from the body. While we live, we shall be closest to knowledge if we refrain as much as possible from association with the body and do not join with it more than we must, if we are not infected with its nature but purify ourselves from it until the god himself frees us. In this way we shall escape the contamination of the body's folly.⁸

The philosopher—those lovers of wisdom—must separate the soul from the body. Beyond the dissociation of substances, there is a fundamentally normative command towards purification, whereby the soul can be protected against the virological flesh that threatens to afflict a sickness upon it. The ascetic tendencies go further still, seeking to deny both sustenance and sexual pleasures.⁹ To practice philosophy is to disregard the body, to overcome it. For Plato, the soul is “forced to examine other things through [the body] as through a cage.”¹⁰ The imagery of an imprisoned soul, looking from behind bars, undoubtedly reflects Socrates’ own predicament throughout the *Phaedo*. His inevitable confrontation with death is mediated by a final monologue about the afterlife; however, he insists this is not a literal account. Instead, he suggests the pious man ought to “risk the belief” to put his anxieties at ease. Here, I want to focus on Socrates’ notion of “judgment” in the afterlife. This sorting schema of “good and bad lives” begins with the death of the physical body, so that the soul can be judged for its piety and righteousness. If the philosopher succeeds in his ascetism, in his renunciation of the body, he will be rewarded: “those who have purified themselves sufficiently by philosophy live in the future altogether without a body; they make their way to even more beautiful dwelling places.”¹¹

⁸ Ibid., 58.

⁹ C.f., 64-D.

¹⁰ Ibid., 72.

¹¹ Ibid., 97.

The Body Resuscitated: Nietzsche, Plato, and Metaphysics

As already established, the conception of “Post-Platonic” philosophy I have been working with is explicitly borrowed from Nietzsche’s lexicon, notably used in his Basel lectures. As useful as the term proved to be, including Nietzsche in this genealogy cannot be mistaken for superficiality, since he acts as an intermediate figure between the metaphysical dualisms of Plato and Descartes and Heidegger’s fundamental ontology. Nietzsche, however, in his earliest manifestations, still retained a residue of dualistic thinking; therefore, the following will consider such implications and how Nietzsche would come to correct this misstep in his later work. The text taken to be exemplary of Nietzsche’s early epistemology is *On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense*, while the corrective effort can be found in the “How the ‘Real World’ at last Became a Myth” section of *Twilight of the Idols*.

Although not published until 1896, *On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense* would be composed in 1873, ultimately placing him closer to Schopenhauer’s neo-Kantianism than the anti-metaphysical thinking that colors the late work. This epistemic “neo-Kantianism” is precisely the latent issue that is festering throughout the essay. In some ways, Nietzsche’s account of truth combats the Kantian view, seeing its development as a linguistic social contract of agreed upon metaphors, devoid of any origin to a thing-in-itself. However, this says nothing of denying a phenomenal/noumenal distinction outright. Take, for instance, when he writes of our engagement with objects, “[Man] proceeds from the error of believing that he has these things immediately before him as mere objects. He forgets that the original perceptual metaphors are metaphors and takes them to be the things themselves.”¹² For Nietzsche, we have deceived

¹² Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense,” KTH Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm, accessed January 31, 2022,

ourselves into thinking these linguistic tropes correspond to some essence of things. Inversely, we are left with mediating through cognition, representation, linguistics, and the world as a “mass of images.”¹³ It is difficult to appoint this as a proper Kantianism (even with an ambiguous “neo” prefix), but one cannot overlook the implicit dualism between subject and object in Nietzsche’s analysis.

While we can see a proto-genealogical method in *Truth and Lie* that makes some connection to his mature work, the essay seems fundamentally disconnected to a late text such as *Twilight of the Idols*, especially after cleansing his conscience of any Schopenhauerian proclivities. An early influence he retains, however, is Wagner, as the title is a double entendre on *Twilight of the Gods*, the fourth and final movement in Wagner’s Ring cycle. The shift from gods to idols may, initially, appear arbitrary; however, a closer investigation of their etymology will aid in revealing the importance of this alteration. Wagner’s *Götterdämmerung* implicates the end of God, or gods, whereby humanity is freed from its repressive grasp. Nietzsche’s *Götzen-Dämmerung* explicitly relocates humanity’s restrictions from gods to idolatry. In other words, it considers the worship and fetishization of iconography, imagery, the appearance of God: a false god. What Nietzsche finds the most incredulous false god (or idol) is metaphysics.

In “How the ‘Real World’ at last Became a Myth,” we observe a clear example of Nietzsche as an anti-metaphysician. Comprised of six short aphorisms, the first four summarize all that has happened thus far: the real world as attainable to the wise and pious man, the real world as unattainable but promised to the pious man, the real world as consolation, and the real

<https://www.kth.se/social/files/5804ca7ff276547f5c83a592/On%20truth%20and%20lie%20in%20an%20extra-moral%20sense.pdf>, 5.

¹³ Ibid.

world as unknown.¹⁴ Here the figures of metaphysics (Plato, Descartes, Luther, Kant) are all present, to which he responds “the ‘real world’ [...] let us abolish it!”¹⁵ The abolition of the real world is the first movement to correct the error of metaphysics, the second comes from the sixth and final aphorism: “what world is left? the apparent world perhaps? ... But no! *with the real world we have also abolished the apparent world!*”¹⁶ A shift to a post-metaphysical era is now in motion, and the reciprocal dynamics of separation that dualistic theories rest on are subsequently a fabrication.

Additionally, in “The Problem of Socrates,” Nietzsche makes an excellent observation concerning Socratic asceticism. He notes Socrates’ appearance for his ugliness, which allows us to trace an interesting parallel to the discussion of judgement in the afterlife from the *Phaedo*.¹⁷ The soul is judged singularly, once the body has begun decomposition. We may keep our optimism about judgment, since we know both exterior hideousness and beauty alike are non-categories. But why should we accept Plato’s fable? Is it because we ourselves are ugly and wish our high moral virtues to make judgment painless? Is it because we believe we deserve better than what was attained in the material world? The inversion of morality Nietzsche identifies in the theologian appears to already be explicit in Plato. Moreover, we see Nietzsche’s condemnation of Plato for turning his back on reality as early as in *Daybreak*: “[I]f we are not to lose our *reason*, we have to flee from experiences! Thus did Plato flee from reality and desire to see things only in pallid mental pictures.”¹⁸ These life-denying, ascetic tendencies are perhaps the most despicable actions to Nietzsche at this point in his life, which helps illuminate his statement

¹⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols and the Anti-Christ* (London, England: Penguin Books, 2003), 50.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 40.

¹⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 188.

in *Twilight of the Idols* “Was Socrates a Greek at all?”¹⁹ The Greeks, for Nietzsche, represented strength, an imposing of your will to power, while Socrates’ meekness constitutes a proto-Christian concern with rhetoric and dialectics that he retaliates against in the *Genealogy of Morals*.

Heidegger’s Dissolution of the Subject/Object Distinction

While this section intends to discuss Heidegger’s efforts in attacking the subject/object dichotomy, it would be ignorant to conclude he does so in isolation. Of course, we have shown Nietzsche to be prefiguring—or at least setting the stage—for Heidegger; however, the groundwork done in phenomenology, particularly by Edmund Husserl, becomes indispensable for grasping Heidegger’s alteration. Before moving to an exposition of Heidegger’s notion of Being-in, a preliminary note on Husserlian phenomenology will be undertaken. A complete appreciation of Husserl is, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this exercise; nonetheless, we can sketch the relevant points for Heidegger, the subject, and its relation to objects.

One of the most integral concepts we find in phenomenology is intentionality. Coupled with starting from first-person experience, the intentionality, or directedness, of consciousness denotes a classically phenomenological enterprise. This directedness signifies a towards something, an experiential interaction with objects. In this sense, phenomenology seeks to understand the relationship between consciousness and the world. Because the phenomenological consciousness (subject) is always a consciousness of something (object), there is an always-already quality and unity between subject and object.

¹⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols and the Anti-Christ* (London, England: Penguin Books, 2003), 40.

Heidegger builds on this approach in significant ways, particularly in Dasein's Being-in-the-world. For Heidegger, there is not simply a reciprocity between subject and object, rather the unity of Dasein and the world is a constitutive state of its Being.²⁰ To express the fundamentality of Dasein as Being-in, Heidegger states: "'Being-in' is thus the formal existential expression for the Being of Dasein, which has Being-in-the-world as its essential state."²¹ This connectedness or unification with the world that Heidegger identifies reveals itself as something more than mere facticity, instead he refers to this phenomenon as akin to residing or dwelling. This notion implores us to find ourselves as at home in the world, wherein we do not view the world as a constant other but interact alongside it as participant. Consequently, Dasein lacks a dichotomy between interior and exterior substances. Heidegger does not deny that subject and object are still relational to one another, but that in Dasein primordially there is ultimately unity.

The Heideggerian Body: Dasein's Ontic-Ontological Status and Embodiment

Of these relational characteristics, Dasein's ontic-ontological structure discloses one aspect of Dasein as material body. In breaking down the ontic-ontological, we must begin with distinguishing the ontical from the ontological. If the ontological is reserved for the inquiry into the meaning of Being, then the former, for Heidegger, encompasses all the other structures Dasein encounters in the world. The ontic is often misread as fundamentally negative; however, for Heidegger, we spend most of our time dwelling in ontic encounters, since we are almost always certainly experiencing these realities more often than their underlying—ontological—structures. Therefore, although Heidegger remains noticeably quiet about the body throughout *Being and Time*, we can infer a present body from these processes. Additionally, we can begin to

²⁰ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: Harper Perennial/Modern Thought, 2008), 78.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 80.

note which features of Dasein implicitly posit a body. Given Dasein's ontic-ontological structure, coupled with Being-in as constitutive as neither reduction to subject nor object, conceptualizing a Heideggerian notion of "embodiment" remains in limbo. In forming a proper enterprise of embodiment, we cannot revert to vulgarized Cartesian beliefs. In other words, Dasein's corporeality is not dependent upon being a "ghost in the machine." Since we must think of Dasein's Being-in as neither enclosed by a material body nor a deeper layer of materiality (lest we return to a Platonic soul), we have to look toward the provocation of "*Da-sein*" itself. To avoid crude anthropomorphisms, "being-there" cannot be a mere synonym for human existence, instead we must go further still in the direction of thinking embodiment as activity. In this sense, embodiment is not granted via passivity, but an act constituted through expressivity.²² Our Being-in-the-world, then, could be re-termed "acting-in-the-world," as embodiment becomes an issue of animation.

The Physicality of Dwelling

In *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, Heidegger states, "[Dasein] finds *itself* primarily and constantly *in things* because, tending them, distressed by them, it always in some way or other rests in things."²³ This notion of resting in things themselves bears a striking resemblance to the prior conception of dwelling. In fact, we see Heidegger almost repeat himself when speaking of dwelling decades later, "dwelling itself is always a staying with things."²⁴ One of the most astute observations Heidegger makes in *Building Dwelling Thinking* is that not all

²² As Heidegger will later note in *The Question Concerning Technology*, contemporary biophysical, cybernetic, and information sciences reduce Being to a "standing-reserve." In other words, a passive actant which is acted upon as opposed to acting itself.

²³ Martin Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 159.

²⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings: From Being and Time (1927) to the Task of Thinking (1964)* (New York, New York: Harper Perennial Modern Thought, 2008), 353.

buildings are necessarily ideal for dwelling. In one sense, we could call the world in which are dwell a building; however, Heidegger insists that in this context we limit ourselves to conceiving of building as a construction.²⁵ Therefore, “building” here is a component of our Being-in-the-world. How, then, might we locate a proper way of building? Heidegger will use the metaphor of the bridge, wherein there is a gathering that turns into an establishing. The gathering of disparate materials which when synthesized together establish a new entity in the bridge. The creative act of gathering culminates in the establishment of new structures such that man has a space to dwell. Yet, what is meant here by “space,” is more than its colloquial usage. The purpose of dwelling, insofar as it implicates building, reorients Being away from the model of inquiry and toward how Being unconceals itself.

Further still, Heidegger is quick to remind us that this is not a dualism:

When we speak of man and space, it sounds as though man stood on one side, space on the other. Yet space is not something that faces man. It is neither an external object nor an inner experience. It is not that there are men, and over and above them space; for when I say "a man," and in saying this word think of a being who exists in a human manner—that is, who dwells.²⁶

The unity of man is found in his dwelling, where his relation to the world is intentional and constructed for his ownmost identification with ecological dwelling. Here, Heidegger rises his analysis above anthropocentric conceptions of one’s relationality to a spatial modality.²⁷ He neither pure subject removed from the externalities of the material world, nor is his flesh a mere mound of matter. The conclusion which we can draw from the lineage of the body from Plato

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings: From Being and Time (1927) to the Task of Thinking (1964)* (New York, New York: Harper Perennial Modern Thought, 2008), 358.

²⁷ By 1951 (the date Heidegger gave *Building Thinking Dwelling* as a lecture), we could attribute his anti-anthropocentrism to the abandonment of Dasein, conceptually, (and arguably traditional philosophy) post-*Kehre*. Alternatively, however, Heidegger may have restricted his language due to his audience being mostly professional architects.

through Nietzsche and Heidegger is one of ever evolving and shifting relations to a metaphysics of the body. What Heidegger allows us to think is a relationality between corporeality, incorporeality, and our ecological terrain of inhabitation in a uniquely synthetic paradigm. Dasein as a figure of bodily action remains a conception of the subject oriented toward an understanding of Being that transcends and transgresses dualistic notions of relationality between subjecthood and objecthood.

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