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# THE EXPERIENCE OF THE BODY AND CLASSICAL PSYCHOLOGY

[a. The “permanence” of one’s own body.]

- 119 When classical psychology described one’s own body, it already attributed “characteristics” to it that are incompatible with the status of an object. It first claimed that my body is distinguished from the table or the lamp because my body is constantly perceived, whereas I can turn away from these other objects. Thus, my body is an object that is always with me. But then, is it still an object? If an object is an invariable structure, this is not in spite of the change of perspectives, but rather in this change, or *through* it. The always new perspectives are not, for the object, a simple opportunity to manifest its permanence or a contingent manner of appearing to us. It is only an object in front of us because it is observable, which is to say, situated at our fingertips or at the end of our gaze, indivisibly overthrown and rediscovered by each of their movements. Otherwise, the object would be true in the manner of an idea and not present in the manner of a thing. In particular, the object is only an object if it can be moved away and ultimately disappear from my visual field. Its presence is such that it requires a possible absence.

Now, the permanence of one's own body is of an entirely different type: it is not to be found as the result of an indefinite exploration. In fact, my own body defies exploration and always appears to me from the same angle. Its permanence is not a permanence in the world, but a permanence on my side. To say that my body is always near to me or always there for me is to say that it is never truly in front of me, that I cannot spread it out under my gaze, that it remains on the margins of all of my perceptions, and that it is with me. Of course, external objects themselves never show me one of their sides without thereby hiding from me all their other sides, but I can at least choose the side I want them to show me. They can only appear to me in perspective, but the particular perspective that I obtain from them at each moment is merely the result of a physical necessity, a necessity I can use, but also one that does not imprison me. From my window, only the steeple of the church can be seen, but this constraint simultaneously assures me that from elsewhere the entire church could be seen. It is true that if I were a prisoner, the church would be reduced for me to a truncated steeple. If I never removed my clothes, I would never see their inside, and we will in fact see below that my clothes can become appendages of my body. But this fact does not prove that the presence of my body is comparable to the factual permanence of certain objects, or that the organ is comparable to an always available tool. On the contrary, it shows that the actions in which I habitually engage incorporate their instruments and make them participate in the original structure of my own body [*le corps propre*]. Moreover, my own body is the primordial habit, the one that conditions all others and by which they can be understood. Its near presence and its invariable perspective are not a factual necessity, since factual necessity presupposes them: for my window to impose on me a perspective on the church, my body must first impose on me a perspective on the world, and the former necessity can only be a purely physical one because the latter necessity is metaphysical. Factual situations can only affect me if I am first of such a nature that there can be factual situations for me. In other words, I observe external objects with my body, I handle them, inspect them, and walk around them. But when it comes to my body, I never observe it itself. I would need a second body to be able to do so, which would itself be unobservable. When I say that I always perceive my body, these words must not be understood in a merely statistical sense, and there must be something in the presentation of one's own body that renders its absence, or even its variation, inconceivable.

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What might this something be? The tip of my nose and the contours of my eye sockets are all that I see of my own head. I can, of course, see my eyes in a three-faced mirror, but these are the eyes of someone who is observing, and I can barely catch a glimpse of my living gaze when a mirror on the street unexpectedly reflects my own image back at me. My body, as seen in the mirror, continues to follow my intentions as if they were its shadow, and if observation involves varying the point of view by holding the object fixed, then my body escapes observation and presents  
 121 itself as a simulacrum of my tactile body, since it mimics the tactile body's initiatives rather than responding to them through a free unfolding of perspectives. My visual body is certainly an object when we consider the parts further away from my head, but as we approach the eyes it separates itself from objects and sets up among them a quasi-space to which they have no access. And when I wish to fill this void by resorting to the mirror's image, it again refers me back to an original of the body that is not out there among things, but on my side, prior to every act of seeing. And despite appearances, the same holds for my tactile body, for I can palpate my right hand with my left while my right hand is touching an object. The right hand, as an object, is not the right hand that does the touching. The first is an intersecting of bones, muscles, and flesh compressed into a point of space; the second shoots across space to reveal the external object in its place. Insofar as it sees or touches the world, my body can neither be seen nor touched. What prevents it from ever being an object or from ever being "completely constituted"<sup>1</sup> is that my body is that by which there are objects. It is neither tangible nor visible insofar as it is what sees and touches.

The body, then, is not just another external object that could offer the peculiarity of always being there. If it is permanent, then this has to do with an absolute permanence that serves as the basis for the relative permanence of objects that can be eclipsed, that is, of true objects. The presence and the absence of external objects are only variations within a primordial field of presence, a perceptual domain over which my body has power. Not only is the permanence of my body not a particular case of the general permanence of external objects in the world, but moreover this latter can only be understood through the former. Not only is the perspective upon my body not a particular case of the general perspectives upon object, but rather the perspectival presentation of objects itself must be understood through the resistance of my body to every