

29 The *Körper-Leib* Distinction

Jenny Slatman

History, Semantics, and Translation

Most contemporary phenomenologists who work on the theme of the body or on embodiment draw on the distinction between *Körper* and *Leib*. From a phenomenological perspective, the two concepts refer to two different ways in which a person's body can appear (*erscheinen*). Because in phenomenology the "way of appearance" (*Erscheinungsweise*) is directly related to meaning or sense (*Sinn*), we can also say that the *Körper-Leib* distinction refers to the fact that the body can have different meanings. *Körper* refers to the body as an object, something to which physical qualities can be attributed. *Leib*, by contrast, implies the body as a subject, a zero point for perception and action. In this entry, I will first show why the articulation of this distinction in the beginning of the twentieth century has been so important for the development of phenomenology of the body. Subsequently, and seemingly paradoxically, I will explain why a careful interpretation of the phenomenon of *Leib* may lead to the obliteration of the distinction.

In contemporary German, both *Körper* and *Leib* are used to refer to the body, and in their everyday usage they are virtually interchangeable. It was observed, however, that in everyday language the usage of *Körper* is increasingly preferred, in particular because its connotation of being instrumental is more in line with the contemporary worldview according to which bodies can be manipulated, repaired, and used.¹ Still, everyday German preserves some interesting uses of the term *Leib*, such as in the distinction between *Unterleib* (lower part of the body) and *Obenkörper* (upper part of the body) and in the sayings *mit Leib und Seele* (passionately), *Leib und Leben darstellen* (taking high risks, perilous), and *auf den Leib geschnitten sein* (fitting like a glove).

1 In philosophy, the conceptual distinction between *Körper* and *Leib* has been devel-
 2 oped notably in the beginning of the twentieth century by German philosophers such
 3 as Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), Max Scheler (1874–1928), and Helmuth Plessner
 4 (1892–1985). Husserl’s interpretation is most well-known. The reason for this is that
 5 Husserl’s analysis—his then still unpublished *Ideas II* in particular—has been invigorated
 6 by Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961), and it is exactly the work of this French philosopher
 7 that has been, and still is, of vast importance for contemporary studies on the body and
 8 embodiment in philosophy, anthropology, and sociology; in gender, queer and race
 9 studies; in disability studies; and even in the more practical field of health and nursing
 10 studies.

11 Before diving into the philosophical analysis of the *Körper-Leib* distinction, we first
 12 need to look briefly into the etymology and semantics of both German words. *Körper*
 13 stems from the Latin *corpus* and refers to bodies as physical entities, including celes-
 14 tial bodies, geometrical entities, and dead bodies, corpses. *Leib*, by contrast, is related
 15 to the verbs *leben* (to live) and *erleben* (to experience, to go through) and the adject-
 16 tives *lebendig* (animated, lively) and *leibhaft* (in person, in the flesh). As such, *Leib* refers
 17 to the body as it is experienced or lived instead of the body as it can be measured or
 18 quantified. Unfortunately, the English language, like the French, has only one word to
 19 denote the physical existence of human beings: “body.” To preserve the phenomenolog-
 20 ical nuance that comes with the *Körper-Leib* distinction, various translations have been
 21 proposed. The translator of Husserl’s *Ideas II*, for example, translates *Körper* and *Leib* as
 22 “body” and “Body.” To define *Leib*, Merleau-Ponty in *Phenomenology of Perception* uses
 23 the French terms *corps vécu* (lived body), *corps propre* (one’s own body), and *corps sujet*
 24 (body as subject or subjective body).² Current English translations of the *Körper-Leib*
 25 distinction therefore include the following twin concepts: “physical/material body”
 26 versus “lived/animated body” or “objective body” versus “subjective body.” As we will
 27 see, *Leib* is more a pre-intentional, pre-objective, or nonintentional object, or even a
 28 “non-thing,”³ than an intentional object.

31 The *Leib* as a Conditioned Condition

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 33 The *Körper-Leib* distinction comes to the fore for the first time in Husserl’s analysis
 34 of the different ways in which transcendental consciousness gives meaning to what
 35 appears. In *Ideas II*, which was written in 1912 but first published posthumously in 1952,
 36 Husserl describes how the constitution of *Leib* (which belongs to animated animal [*Ani-*
 37 *malische*] nature) differs from the constitution of *Körper* (which belongs to material
 38 nature). It is clear here already that, according to Husserl, neither *Leib* nor *Körper* is
 39 given as such. They are both constituted by consciousness. Or, to put it differently, they
 40 involve two different ways in which the body appears to consciousness. The difference
 41 between the two becomes clear if we concentrate on the experience of one’s own body.
 42 Husserl takes the example of one’s hands touching one another to explain the difference.
 43 If one touches one’s left hand with one’s right hand, the left hand can be experienced in
 44 two different ways. First, it can be experienced as a thing with a certain extension and
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with certain properties. In this case, the left hand is the “physical thing left hand,” or a *Körper*. It is the intentional correlate of the right hand’s touching. But second, the left hand is also experienced as the localization of sensations (*Empfindungen*). The moment of touching one’s left hand is accompanied by a series of touch sensations (*Tastempfindungen*) in this hand, and since these sensations do not constitute physical properties such as smoothness or roughness, they do not constitute the physical thing “left hand.” Rather, they constitute the experience that I feel in my left hand, that it is touched. This experience, which affirms the “me-ness” of one’s body (I feel at once that the touched body is undeniably mine), constitutes the *Leib*.

The *Leib* is thus constituted through sensations that are localized in the organ of perception; i.e., touch sensations are localized in the touching “organ.” Husserl coins the term *Empfindnisse* (“sensings”) to indicate these localized sensations. Other examples of “sensings” include sensations of warmth and cold, proprioceptive and kinesthetic sensations, and pain. Visual sensations, by contrast, are not localized in the organ of perception, i.e., in the eye. Nonlocalized sensations, such as those provided by visual perception, constitute the body as extended thing, or *Körper*. As is well-known, the idea of adumbrations (*Abschattungen*) lies at the heart of the phenomenological theory of appearance. Phenomenal reality appears as a reality with real properties. It is not given at once; rather, it is always given through manifold adumbrations and sensuous schemes. This means that one and the same thing is presented in different horizons and perspectives, and that no single perspective can exhaust the possibilities of appearing. If we perceive a table, for example, there is always one of its sides that we cannot actually perceive, and yet we still perceive one and the same table. The perceived table is never fully present to consciousness: its rear sides are only co-present (or “appresent”). The same holds for one’s hand. If one’s left hand appears as the thing “left hand,” it appears through the constantly changing, manifold adumbrations. The “sensings” (*Empfindnisse*) of one’s left hand, however, are, according to Husserl, not given through adumbrations or schematization. One’s body as one’s own, as *Leib*, is given without any perspective and is thus entirely present. Consequently, Husserl argues that the *Leib* comprises the “zero point” of all orientations, its spatiality being characterized as an “absolute here.”

Here we see that Husserl’s description of *Leib* involves some ambiguity. Whereas he understands *Leib* as something constituted by transcendental consciousness, it simultaneously constitutes a “zero point.” Elsewhere he writes that the *Leib* is, “in the first place, the medium of all perception; it is the organ of perception [*Wahrnehmungsorgan*] and is necessarily involved in all perception.”⁴ Here we thus see that *Leib*, next to being constituted, should be understood as a condition of possibility for the constitution of the spatiotemporal world. This “circle of constitution,” which remained tacit in Husserl’s work, has been explicitly addressed by Merleau-Ponty. Taking seriously the double bind between transcendental and worldly experience, he conceptualized subjectivity as embodied. The *Leib* thus takes the place of the transcendental subject, and the “I think” is substituted by the “I can.” But since the *Leib* is constituted by means of sensations, it is not a pure transcendental condition. The circle of constitution—the *Leib* disclosing the world, while it is constituted by worldly sensations—marks the limits of transcendental reasoning indeed.

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From the *Körper-Leib* Distinction to Phenomenological Materialism

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty described this ambiguous structure of the lived body as the condition for world disclosure by the concept of being in/to the world (*être au monde*): the body is part of the world while, simultaneously, being directed and related to the world. In his later work, *The Visible and the Invisible*, he uses the term “flesh” (*chair*) to indicate that the body for which the world appears is made of the same worldly fabric.⁵ Here we see that if we take seriously the circle of constitution that is at stake in the *Leib* constitution, a strict distinction between *Körper* and *Leib* is not really tenable. The specific aspect of the *Leib* is first of all that it concerns the body that experiences itself as undeniably “here” and “mine” (so not as a thing). At the same time, however, this experience is never fully separate from the body’s being a thing, its *Körperlichkeit*. *Leib* is thus not a sensing entity only, but a sensing entity that is embodied (*verkörpert*). As I have elsewhere explained in great detail, it is due to the embodiment or materialization of the *Leib* that embodied self-experiences—the embodied experience of “me-ness”—always go together with experiences of strangeness or otherness.⁶

Even though *Leib* should rather be understood as *Leibkörper* instead of some entity opposed to *Körper*, it is still helpful to preserve the *Körper-Leib* distinction as an analytic phenomenological tool. Indeed the distinction can serve to analyze the different dimensions and layers of embodiment in various contexts.⁷ It is remarkable, however, that phenomenological studies that aim at criticizing the instrumental and objectified view of the body, such as in contemporary medicine, tend to use the *Körper-Leib* distinction as a “lived body” versus “objective body” contrast.⁸ To employ the *Körper-Leib* distinction in such a way is to risk reestablishing dualism. Also, as the contemporary French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy claims, phenomenological readings of the example of the two touching hands, which according to Husserl produces the *Leib* experience, run the risk of returning to a “primary interiority.”⁹ Indeed, if the “sensings” produced by touch sensations are merely considered as a zero point for world disclosure, one ignores that one needs to be in “exteriority,” to be “outside” oneself, in order to touch oneself.

In his criticism of phenomenology Nancy mainly targets the transcendental aspirations still palpable in most phenomenological work, including that of Merleau-Ponty. Whereas phenomenology considers giving meaning or sense (*Sinngebung*) as a process that stems from individual sense-giving subjects, individual beings-in-the-world, Nancy claims that the origin or beginning of sense-making consists of the worldly, nontranscendental fact of bodies, human and nonhuman ones, that coexist next to one another. Human existence is, according to him, conditioned by a fundamental *être-avec* (being-with) or *être-ensemble* (being-together). And this “being-with” involves the being with bodies, all kinds of bodies, whether they be inanimate, animate, sentient, speaking, thinking, having weight, and so on.¹⁰ What all bodies have in common is that they are material and are extended: they occupy a certain place, which at that very moment cannot be occupied by another body. Bodies that are with one another therefore exist in the mode of what Descartes had called *partes extra partes*. They are next to one another, outside one another. As such they do not fuse or coincide but remain different.

Since Nancy considers the ontological “being-with” in terms of *partes extra partes*, his ontology entails a materialist view. But it is crucial to underline that he distances himself from mainstream materialism. For him, matter is not the same as substance or mass. Matter as substance or mass involves that which is self-containing and coinciding with itself. By contrast, Nancy writes, “‘Matter’ is not above all an immanent density that is absolutely closed in itself. On the contrary, it is first the very difference through which something is possible, as thing and as some.”¹¹ In line with this, Nancy differentiates between a body belonging to a crowd (*foule*) and a body belonging to a mass, immediately adding that a body as mass is not worth the name “body.”¹² The body as mass is the body of a mass grave; it is the body as cadaver; it is the body that does not sense anymore—the body as substance or self-coinciding mass. It is clear, then, that Nancy, like all phenomenologists, rejects the idea of the body as substance, yet at the same he claims that the body is material. The body is matter, but not in the sense of substance. It is matter in the sense of noncoincidence.

We could say that the plurality of material bodies that differ from each other forms the condition of possibility of a singular being in the world, even though Nancy would not use the term “condition of possibility,” since he wants to employ only an “empirical logic, without transcendental reason.”¹³ While its incongruity had already surfaced in Husserl’s analysis of the *Leib* and Merleau-Ponty’s elaboration of the “circle of constitution,” Nancy finally cancels transcendental reasoning altogether. In order to understand the singularity of sensing subjects, we should take seriously the materiality of given bodies. It is difference (or *différance*) that “constitutes” individual existence. Difference and noncoincidence are given with the *extra* of the *partes extra partes*. It is also through the *extra*, the being distinct of bodies, that world disclosure, and thus sense-making, takes place. For Nancy, world-disclosure is like a creation *ex nihilo*; there is no fundament for this creation other than the plurality of bodies that differ from each other. Therefore he claims, “The world no longer has a sense, but it *is* sense.”¹⁴ The world is sense for us, not because we are intentionally related to it but because we, embodied beings, are part of a plurality of bodies. As a self-declared critic of phenomenology, Nancy does away with the *Körper-Leib* distinction together with transcendental reasoning.

I believe, however, that Nancy’s approach remains phenomenological since his descriptions of embodiment do justice to the different ways in which bodies exist. The only form of appearance that he does not acknowledge is the body as zero point for world disclosure. All bodies appear as material and extended. His thought, therefore, paves the way for a new position in phenomenology, which I call “phenomenological materialism.”¹⁵ It is because of his materialist focus that Nancy can do away with mainstream phenomenology’s “neutral” view on the body. A material body is always marked, classed and, in our time of global markets, often “marketed”: “a Bengali body bent over a car in Tokyo, a Turkish body in a Berlin trench, a black body loaded down with white packages in Suresnes of San Francisco.”¹⁶ Nancy’s materialism thus allows for social-constructivist-(and Marxist-)oriented analyses of embodiment. But unlike social-constructivism, his materialism always remains attached to *experience*.

Material bodies touch one another. Being a (human) body therefore means being touched (*être touché*). In his autobiographical text *The Intruder*, Nancy nicely describes the different ways in which he experiences his “own” material body during the course

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1 of a chronic disease (heart failure) and during the recovery period after his heart trans-
 2 plant. This text shows the different ways in which he was touched by “strangeness.” Of
 3 course, there is the strangeness that comes with the strange donor heart. But there is
 4 also the strangeness of the diseased heart—an organ that does not function anymore
 5 and that one might want to spit out. After the transplant, self-estrangement had to be
 6 induced by immunosuppressant drugs. Ironically, in Nancy’s case, this suppression of
 7 his immune system led to the development of a cancerous tumor—yet another stranger
 8 or intruder. Even though the case of a heart transplant is an extreme one, Nancy uses
 9 it only to make clear that our material existence always comes together with various
 10 dimensions of strangeness and estrangement, even when we are completely healthy:
 11 “The intruder is nothing but myself and man himself.”¹⁷ Whereas phenomenology that
 12 maintains the *Körper-Leib* distinction prioritizes experiences of “ownness,” phenome-
 13 nological materialism enables a focus on strangeness and otherness. As such, it is in a
 14 better position to analyze and describe what happens when bodies are *touched by* joy or
 15 pain, by happiness or misery, by prosperity or misfortune.

18 Notes

20 1. T. Fuchs, “Körper haben oder Leib sein,” *Scheidewege: Jahresschrift für skeptisches Den-*
 21 *ken* 41 (2011): 122–37.

22 2. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), trans. C. Smith (Lon-
 23 don: Routledge, 1962).

24 3. B. Waldenfels, “Körper-Leib,” in *Esprit/Geist: 100 Schlüsselbegriffe für Deutsche und*
 25 *Franzosen*, ed. J. Leenhardt and R. Picht (Munich: Piper, 1989), 342–45.

26 4. Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological*
 27 *Philosophy, Second Book* (1952), trans. R. Rojcewicz and A. Schuwer (Dordrecht: Kluwer
 28 Academic, 1989), § 18.

29 5. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. A. Lingis (Evanston, Ill.:
 30 Northwestern University Press, 1964); see Donald Landes’s entry on the flesh in this volume.

31 6. Jenny Slatman, *Our Strange Body: Philosophical Reflections on Identity and Medical*
 32 *Interventions* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014).

33 7. Jenny Slatman, “Multiple Dimensions of Embodiment in Medical Practices,” *Medicine,*
 34 *Healthcare and Philosophy* 17, no. 4 (2014): 549–57.

35 8. For example, J. Bullington, *The Expression of the Psychosomatic Body from a Phenome-*
 36 *nological Perspective* (Berlin: Springer, 2013).

37 9. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, trans. R. A. Rand (New York: Fordham University Press,
 38 2008), 128.

39 10. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne E.
 40 O’Byrne (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000).

41 11. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, trans. J. S. Librett (Minneapolis: University of
 42 Minnesota Press, 1993), 57.

43 12. Nancy, *Corpus*, 124.

44 13. Nancy, *Corpus*, 53.

45 14. Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 8.

15. Jenny Slatman, "Is It Possible to 'Incorporate' a Scar? Revisiting a Basic Concept in Phenomenology," *Human Studies* 39, no. 3 (2016): 347–63.

16. Nancy, *Corpus*, 109–11.

17. Nancy, *Corpus*, 170.

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