

Heidegger, the body, and the French philosophers

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Abstract. In this paper I place Heidegger in dialogue with his French philosophical critics who claimed that he failed to address sufficiently the problem of the body. While noting some similarities between Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty's analysis of bodily being, I organize his response to the French into a series of interconnected claims to demonstrate why Heidegger contended that being-in-the-world is more primordial than bodily being from an ontological perspective. Finally, even though Heidegger did not refer specifically to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological analysis of the body, I show why Heidegger's counter criticisms of the French philosophers applies to it as well.

In his book, *Existential Foundations for Medicine and Psychology*, Medard Boss, a collaborator and close friend of Heidegger's, credited the French philosophers (J.-P. Sartre, M. Merleau-Ponty, A. de Waelhens, G. Marcel, and P. Ricouer) for "pointing insistently to the necessity for reconsidering the human body."¹ According to Boss, however, the French philosophers only advanced a "half-step" beyond the natural scientific concept of the body due to their inability to escape their Cartesian heritage. Heidegger was not nearly so generous. In his lectures, *Zollikoner Seminare*² Heidegger directly confronted the French philosophers' criticism of his lack of consideration on the topic of the human body, stating that since the French lack an adequate word for 'bodily being' (das Leiben), "it is very difficult to see the real problem of the phenomenology of the body."³ According to Heidegger, "The French psychologists also misinterpret everything as an expression of something interior instead of seeing the phenomenon of the body in the context by which men are in relationship to each other";⁴ Later in his lectures, Heidegger further commented: "As to the French authors, I am always still disturbed by the misinterpretation of being in-the-world where it is either conceived as being present-at-hand or else as intentionality of subjective consciousness . . ."⁵ Obviously, Heidegger believed that the French had failed to understand the underlying thrust of his phenomenological description of Dasein and hence considered their criticisms to be unfounded. Heidegger did not, however, deal directly with the French philosophers' contentions.

In order to come to a clearer understanding of why Heidegger believed that the French had misunderstood his theory regarding the human body, it would be useful to situate historically Heidegger's reflections in light of what ultimately became an indirect dialogue and debate over primordiality between him and the French philosophers.

Sartre is well known for his criticism of *Being and Time*. He believed that Heidegger failed to adequately discuss the issue, pointing to the fact that there are barely six lines on the body.⁶ However, it was Alphonse de Waelhens who really engaged the debate when he criticized Heidegger for having neglected a suitable description of the mixture which is human consciousness.⁷ He suggested that in *Being and Time*, Heidegger oriented himself on a level of complexity which encouraged us to believe that the problem of the relation between consciousness and the world had been solved. De Waelhens argued that the projects Heidegger described, disclosed a possible understanding of everyday concrete existence which already presupposed, for example, that the subject of daily existence raises his arm, since he hammers and builds. The subject who accomplishes such ordinary everyday tasks is simply presumed to have the capacity for movement and action, his faculty of perception is simply discerned as "evident", and therefore ignored. He contended that Heidegger was guilty of completely neglecting the primordial lived-world which is always already there for us: "In *Being and Time*, one does not find thirty lines concerning the problem of perception; one does not find ten concerning that of the body."⁸ De Waelhens believed that Merleau-Ponty's investigation of the lived-body on the level of perception provided the *most primordial* description of the world and consciousness and their relation, and hence that Heidegger's analysis presupposed Merleau-Ponty's transcendental perspective.

Indeed, Merleau-Ponty wrote extensively on the existential, connected nature of the body: "The body can symbolize existence because it brings it into being and actualizes it. . . . Bodily existence which runs through me, yet does so independently of me, lies only the barest raw material of a genuine presence in the world. Yet at least it provides the possibility of such presence, and establishes our first consonance with the world."⁹ Also: "The theory of the body is already a theory of perception . . . we are our body. In the same way we shall need to reawaken our experience of the world as it appears to us in so far as we are in the world through our body, and in so far as we perceive the world with our body. But by thus remaking contact with the body and with the world, we shall also rediscover ourselves (sic), since, perceiving as we do with our body, the body is a natural self and, as it were, the subject of perception."¹⁰ Contrary to De Waelhens, however, Merleau-Ponty considered the

lived-body and existence to be *equiprimordial*: “Neither body nor existence can be regarded as the original of the human being, since they presuppose each other, and because the body is solidified or generalized existence, and existence a perpetual incarnation.”¹¹

Despite the fact that Merleau-Ponty addressed the lived body to such a degree, Heidegger’s response to the French on these points, was directed only to Sartre in his lectures, *Zollikon Seminars*.¹² It is, in fact, remarkable that Heidegger, in his extensive analysis of over fifty pages on the problem of the body, did not refer to Merleau-Ponty at all even though it is clear that he was aware of Merleau-Ponty’s work. This is especially curious given the fact that it was Merleau-Ponty who had been most positively influenced by Heidegger in his magnum opus, the *Phenomenology of perception*.

Those closely involved with Heidegger and his writings addressed Merleau-Ponty’s work. Indeed, Boss credited Merleau-Ponty with having improved on Sartre’s translation of Heidegger’s notion of Dasein. As opposed to Sartre’s *etre-dans-le-monde* which tended to reify human beings, Boss preferred Merleau-Ponty’s choice of *etre-au-monde* which underscored the sense of the directional nature of existential intentionality.¹³

Heidegger’s lack of reference is all the more interesting given that Merleau-Ponty’s account of the body came the closest (among the French existential phenomenologists) to his own descriptions in the *Zollikon Seminars*. Some of their similarities included: their analysis of bodily being viz. (a) gesture and expression,¹⁴ (b) bodily being and spatiality,¹⁵ (c) refusing to see the body as merely a corporeal, self-contained object,¹⁶ and (d) phantom limb analysis.¹⁷ Boss also made similar observations to Merleau-Ponty’s such as how injury to the brain impairs human ways of relating to the world.¹⁸ Given these convergences, William Richardson’s observation gains additional weight: “In any case, the analysis here is important and cries out for careful comparison with the work of Merleau-Ponty.”¹⁹

In light of the overlapping similarities among the French philosophers and Heidegger’s reflections on the body, the question as to Heidegger’s response to their allegations remains. First, Sartre’s reproach is, of course, true that in *Being and Time* Heidegger had very little to say about the body or perception per se. He parenthetically mentioned the (lived) body once: “(This ‘bodily nature’ hides a whole problematic of its own, though we shall not treat it here.)”²⁰ Twenty years later in his *Letter on Humanism*, Heidegger held the same perspective: “A chemical and physical approach to the body, probably hides rather than reveals the specifically human aspect of the body.”²¹ Heidegger discussed Sartre’s reproach with Boss during a vacation in 1963,²² and again in 1972²³. In the latter and in an earlier seminar on Heraclitus,²⁴

Heidegger acknowledged that bodily being is the most difficult to understand, and that he simply did not know what else to say in 1927.

What, then, was Heidegger's rejoinder to the objections raised by the French concerning his lack of treatment of the body? What, according to Heidegger, is the nature of the relationship between bodily being and existence?

Heidegger's account (echoed and developed by Boss in the *Foundations*)²⁵ is most easily understood when we see it as a series of interconnected claims.

(1) *Bodily being belongs essentially to existence.*²⁶ Man would not be able to be in relation to that which he apprehends as that which addresses him, if he did not have a bodily nature.²⁷ Bodily being is always already involved in the experience of that which is present.²⁸ Bodily being co-determines Dasein's existence as being-in-the-world.²⁹

(2) *Bodily being presupposes being-in-the-world (i.e., Dasein, as openness, as the ecstatic dwelling in the clearing of being).*³⁰ Bodily being is the necessary yet insufficient condition for Dasein's being-in-the-world.³¹

(3) *Bodily being does not encompass being-in-the-world.* Being-in-the-world includes more than bodily being, e.g., the understanding of being, the limit of the horizon of Dasein's understanding of being, etc.³² Yet it is not merely added on to bodily being.³³

(4) *The most primordial ontological characteristics of Dasein include: being-in-the-world, openness, presence, ecstatic dwelling in the clearing, etc.* Bodily-being is "founded upon" Dasein's responsiveness to the clearing.³⁴ One must begin with the basic constitution of human existence as *existence*, as a domain of the openness toward a world in light of which the significant features of what is encountered addresses man.³⁵

(5) *Bodily being is possible because our being-in-the-world always already consists "of a relatedness in which we perceive-apprehend that which addresses us out of the openness of our world."*³⁶ As the ones who are addressed, we are always already *directed toward* the given facts of the world which are disclosed. It is due to this directedness that we *are able to be* bodily beings in the first place. Dasein's existence is the precondition for the possibility of bodily being.³⁷

In order to elucidate Heidegger's account, a concrete everyday example might be useful. Consider the fact that you are currently reading this text. In order to read this text you must have bodily being, else you would not be able to relate to this journal to begin with. It is because your way of addressing the text necessarily includes a kind of directedness that you are able to distinguish between the front and back of the book, its right side from its left, its top and bottom, etc. Yet, your bodily comportment while reading this article presupposes and *does not* entirely encompass your being-in-the-world. As you

read this text, you, in your implicit understanding of being, are trying to make sense of some subtle nuances in Heidegger's philosophy. You do this against a multiplicity of backgrounds: your training in philosophy in general, your previous familiarity with Heidegger's philosophy, your physical health, your level of interest, how things are generally going in your life, etc. Hence, your reading this text is not reducible to your bodily comportment toward this text. In order for you to even see the 'text', you must already have at least an implicit understanding of being on some level. This text has meaning for your being-in-the-world because you are the kind of being which can apprehend-perceive that which addresses you out of the openness of our world. That is, you are open to and the necessary condition for the field of meaning (which includes the text with which you are presently involved and your bodily comportment toward it) in which you are immersed.

Heidegger's response to the French, then, is that while our bodily being is essential to our being-in-the-world, it is our being-in-the-world (our openness to that which addresses us in the clearing, our dwelling as ecstatic being, our understanding of being, etc.) which is *primordial* from an ontological perspective.³⁸ Heidegger, then, would no doubt have accepted Merleau-Ponty's premise that the lived-body and existence "presuppose each other", and yet deny his conclusion that neither "can be regarded as the original of the human being." He would point out that each presupposes the other in different ways. Bodily being is necessary for us to be related to the world in any situation. Being-in-the-world is necessary for there to be *any relations at all* since it is primarily an understanding of being in which anything else is possible, i.e., existence is ontologically more primordial than bodily being.

There may, in fact, be a reason that Heidegger was reticent to mention bodily being more than six times in *Being and Time*. To become too concerned with one aspect of being may have reduced his inquiry to philosophical anthropology which is precisely what he wanted to avoid. Further, to concentrate on bodily being without always recognizing its groundedness in being, tempts one to become stuck within the Cartesian dualism Heidegger accuses the French of falling into. Bodily being may be a worthy focus of inquiry, but it was not something Heidegger felt necessary to pursue.

Hence, it turns out that Heidegger's suspicions regarding the above mentioned French philosophers are born out in the case of Merleau-Ponty as well. After all is said and done, Merleau-Ponty's analysis of the lived body essentially remains on the level of subjectivity. Merleau-Ponty simply failed to truly overcome his philosophical heritage of Cartesian subjectivism.³⁹ In the working notes of his later days, Merleau-Ponty himself conceded the point: "The problems that remain after this first description (of the Phenomenology of

Perception): they are due to the fact that in part I retained the philosophy of ‘consciousness’.”⁴⁰

Notes

1. Medard Boss, *Existential Foundations of Medicine and Psychology*, trans. Stephen Conway and Anne Cleaves (New York: J. Aronson, 1979), 127–128.
2. Martin Heidegger, *Zollikoner Seminare: Herausgegeben Von Medard Boss* (Frankfurt Am Main: Klostermann, 1987).
3. See ZS 116.
4. See ZS 117.
5. See ZS 339.
6. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), 323.
7. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior* (New York: Beacon Press, 1960), xviii.
8. See SB xix.
9. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (New York: Humanities Press, 1962), 164–165.
10. See PP 203–206.
11. See PP 166.
12. See ZS 202, 292.
13. See EFMP 129.
14. Compare: Merleau-Ponty’s PP 184ff to Heidegger’s ZS 110, 115, and Boss’s EFMP 102.
15. Compare: Merleau-Ponty’s PP 100, 139 to Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 419, and Boss’s EFMP 86–93, 104, and Medard Boss, *Psychoanalysis and Daseinanalysis*, trans. Ludwig B. Lefebvre (New York: Basic Books, 1963) 43.
16. Compare: Merleau-Ponty’s PP Part I to Heidegger’s BT 419, ZS 292–293, and Boss’s EFMP 102, 127–131, PD 140.
17. Compare: Merleau-Ponty’s PP 81f to Heidegger’s ZS 277–278.
18. Compare: Boss’s EFMP 202 to Merleau-Ponty’s PP 103ff.
19. William Richardson, “Heidegger and the Doctors,” in J. Sallis, ed., *Reading Heidegger: Commemorations* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 52.
20. See BT 143.
21. Martin Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” in David Krell, ed., *Basic Writings* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 210.
22. See ZS 202.
23. See ZS 292.
24. Martin Heidegger, *Heraklit* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1970), 243.
25. See EFMP 100–105, 200, and PD 140.
26. Martin Heidegger, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 176: “As factual, Dasein is among other things in each case dispersed in a body.” Also see EFMP 105, 130: “Existence is that which bodies forth.”
27. See ZS 292.

28. See ZS 248.
29. See ZS 115, 122, 126.
30. See ZS 113, 122, 244.
31. See ZS 232.
32. See ZS 244.
33. See ZS 248.
34. See ZS 232.
35. See ZS 292.
36. See ZS 293. See also PD 140: "We see because we are world illuminating and disclosing."
37. See ZS 113.
38. It is worth noting, by the way, that Binswanger and Boss, far from being oblivious to Merleau-Ponty's analysis, raised similar criticisms to it as well. See Ludwig Binswanger, *Journal of Existential Psychiatry*, III (January 1959), 163: "Even [the] phenomenological descriptions properly outlined and developed by Merleau-Ponty fail to go far enough. [He] stops with describing phenomena and their relationships without being interested in the fundamental ontological structure of existence." Also see EFMP 129–131.
39. See Herbert Spiegelberg, *Phenomenology in Psychology and Psychiatry* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972), 341. Also see EFMP 128–131.
40. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 165–167, 179, 183.

