

THE BODY AS LANGUAGE

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Ludwig Wittgenstein remarks in his *Philosophical Investigations* that if you want to see the soul, you should take a look at the human body. He means, one assumes, the body as a form of practice, not as a material object. Practice constitutes the life of the body rather in the sense that meaning is the life of the sign. As for bodies as material objects, the ultimate objectification of the body is known as death, though it is notable that Thomas Aquinas refuses to use the word 'body' of a corpse. He speaks instead of the remains of a body, as we sometimes do ourselves today. It is just part of the damage inflicted by a Cartesian tradition that when we hear the phrase 'the body in the library', the last thing that springs to mind is an assiduous reader.

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Bodies as material objects are not greatly in fashion in these dogmatically culturalist days. Even so, it is worth pointing out that whatever else human beings are, they are in the first place natural lumps of matter, and that anything more sexy or glamorous they can get up to can go on only within this constraining context. If men and women are more than just parcels of matter, it is not because they harbour within themselves a mysterious entity known as the mind or soul, but because they are parcels of matter of a highly specific kind—a specificity is, in fact, precisely what mind-language or soul-language is trying to account for.

Like Aristotle, Wittgenstein regards the soul as the 'form' of the body—as its animating principle or uniquely particular mode of self-organisation. And this is not an especially mysterious affair. It is perfectly open to view. You can see someone else's soul, just as you can see their grief or rage. It is not particularly helpful to speak of our emotions as being 'inside' us. Howling or snarling or emptying bottles of Scotch over other people's heads is not an internal affair. If nobody in the world had ever witnessed grief behaviour, we would not be able to use the word 'grief'. How would we know in our own case that this was the name of what we were experiencing? In these

situations, our consciousness is inscribed on our bodies as the meaning is present in a word. It is true that we can conceal our emotions, but this is a complex social practice that we have to learn, just like lying.

We can see that Hoovers and hat stands do not have souls simply by looking at what they do, or rather at what they don't do. We do not need to peer into their innards to establish this fact. Indeed, to claim that they do not have souls is to claim that they don't have such innards—that they lack of the kind of complex interior depths observable in the behaviour of Colin Firth or Judi Dench, though less evident in the case of Mel Gibson and Sarah Palin. It is important to recognise, however, that if Colin Firth has internal depths, it is by virtue of his participation in a set of social and material forms of life. Consciousness just is such a form of participation. It is not something one can achieve all alone. How do I know that what I am feeling is fear rather than envy? It would be enough to say that I belong to a public language which provides me with the concepts by which I can discriminate between the two states.

- 12 The idea that I can spontaneously or intuitively know that I am furious is absurd. An infant cries because it is wet and hungry, but it does not know that it is. Nor does an adult know that he or she is wet, hungry or in pain, since our relationship to our bodily experience is not a question of knowledge. An adult, however, can reflect that what she is feeling is pain or dampness or jealousy, as an infant cannot. And this is because she is a body that has become articulate by being incorporated into a culture.

Wittgenstein professed himself to be puzzled by the way other philosophers spoke constantly of the 'external world'. External to what? was perhaps what he had in mind. Certainly not to ourselves. Because we are fleshly, incarnate creatures, we are in the world as surely as a tornado is, not peering at it contemplatively from some elusive location inside our skulls. The body is a mode of being in the world, a point from which a world is provisionally organised. It is a medium of signification, a project or form of praxis, a constant traffic with our surroundings, a mode of agency, a form of communion or communication with others. It is this, not the fact that it bears the marks of gender or class or ethnicity, that makes a human body what it is. And it is these properly universal, material features of it that make the postmodern culturalists so unreasonably nervous.

If we had had a sufficiently subtle, phenomenological understanding of all this, we might perhaps not have needed soul-language in the first place. Those who regard the body rather as they regard a corpse are likely to feel the need to add to it some extra, spectral entity if it is to be galvanised into action. Minds or souls of this kind are attempts to compensate for the crudities of mechanical materialism, and are always at risk of being reified. 'Whereabouts in the body is the soul?' is a classic instance of such fetishism, as though one were speaking of some ghostly liver or invisible kidney. It is a prime example of what Wittgenstein would call a confusion of language games. For Aristotle, however, and later for Thomas Aquinas, the soul just is the specific life-form of a being. It refers not to the way the body is organised and activated by some principle distinct from it, but to the way it organises and activates itself. In this sense,

badgers have souls, even though the farmers whose cattle they infect do not generally consider them to be among the higher spiritual beings. To claim that a human body is active, expressive, self-realising, communicative, relational, world-producing, self-transcendent and the like just is to say that it has a soul, though the possessive verb here is profoundly misleading. I do not have a soul as I have a radio. Who, for one, would be having it?

If the soul or mind is the form of the body, then it follows from the fact that we do not 'have' it that one does not 'have' a body either. My body is not my private property, to be disposed of as I please. There may be some sound arguments for abortion, but that one is the sole proprietor of one's body is not one of them. It is true that I can speak of using my body, which makes it to that extent distinguishable from myself, as when I stretch it selflessly across a stream so that you can scramble across my spine without getting your feet wet; but one does not deploy one's body as an instrument from some point of proprietorship or manipulation beyond it. One is present in one's body as a meaning is present in a word, not as a soldier squats inside a tank. This, one should note, does not imply that one is always *luminously* present in this way. The fact that we are desiring animals, for example, tends to hollow our bodies into equivocation and ambiguity, turning them into enigmatic texts. All the same, if an activity does not involve my body, it does not involve me. To speak to you on the phone is to be bodily present to you, though not physically present. Physical presence would involve sharing the same spatial and temporal coordinates.

Wittgenstein also famously remarks in the *Investigations* that if a lion could speak, we would not be able to understand what it said. Why not? Couldn't we get hold of a translator, some brainy colleague fluent in lionese? How about using earphones? For Wittgenstein, however, a lion's body, and consequently its material form of life, is just too different from our own for dialogue between us to be possible. It is a quasi-Nietzschean claim, though it is highly doubtful that Wittgenstein, who disliked philosophy intensely and preferred to spend his time watching cowboy movies and reading second-rate detective stories, had actually read Nietzsche. Nietzsche, who is a materialist in his own idiosyncratic style, sees that consciousness is shaped by the kind of animal one is—or as Wittgenstein puts it in his work *On Certainty*, that it is what we do that lies at the bottom of our language games. Aquinas was another who believed that we think the way we do because of the kind of bodies we have. Because we are sensory creatures, our material existence is discursive, in the sense of unfolding in time, and so therefore is our thought and language. The mode of knowledge of angels, by contrast, is traditionally thought to be non-discursive. If an angel could speak, we would not be able to understand what it said.

Because of their shared corporeal nature, two individuals who cannot speak each other's language can nonetheless cooperate in pulling an endangered third party from a river. This is because they share certain tacit understandings by virtue of their common anthropological life. It is harder to cooperate with a squirrel in this endeavour. A certain translatability is in this sense founded in the universal nature of the

species—in our *Gattungswesen* or species-being, as Marx calls it. To be human is to belong to a particular species by virtue of one's body, which is a necessary but not sufficient condition for being a person. Being a person is something one has to work for. It is a project we need to get good at, like playing the trombone or tolerating bores at sherry parties, and there are those who never quite get the hang of it. Those who are extraordinarily proficient at it, the Tiger Woods and the Pavarotti of personhood, are known as the saints. (That, I imagine, is the only occasion in which the words 'Tiger Woods' and the concept of saintliness have appeared in the same sentence.) Unless one of the faces around the cradle speaks to the infant, it will never become a person at all, though it will of course remain human.

A small child who is yet to acquire speech reaches out to grab a toy, and the gesture itself is inherently meaningful. It belongs, one might claim, to a layer of somatic, pre-verbal signification inscribed in our very flesh. The meaning is implicit in the action, like the lining in a sleeve, even though the infant has yet to acquire the linguistic resources which will enable it to be *self*-interpreting. Even so, it is not just a question of the interpretation of the spectator. Any theory of meaning or interpretation which does not begin from this point is bound to court the dangers of idealism.

We need, in short, to re-capture the truth that human rationality is an animal rationality. Reason is not where we are least animal, but where we are most so. A rationality which does not ground itself in our sensory life is not simply an incomplete form of reason; it is not authentically rational at all. A rationality unhinged from the sensory constraints of the body is a kind of madness, as King Lear discovers. One traditional name for this form of rationality is the aesthetic, which first sees the light of day in the mid-eighteenth century not as a discourse of art but of the body. It represents an attempt on the part of a perilously abstract Enlightenment reason to address what one might call the logic of the senses, incorporating the vital (if inferior) business of sensory existence into the lofty domain of reason itself, and thus smuggling the body back into a form of rationality that had for the most part expelled it.

If this project was important, it was largely for political reasons. From Plato onwards, talk of the relations between reason and the senses is always in some oblique fashion talk about the relations between men and women, or between the rulers and the masses. If the dominant mode of reason fails to grasp from the inside the sensory existence of those over whom it holds sovereignty, it will fail to be hegemonic or consensual, find itself resorting to coercion and thus suffering a massive loss of political credibility. For Schiller, Arnold and a good many others, reason must therefore install itself within the senses, as a kind of fifth columnist within their unruly, potentially anarchic ranks.

Yet there is also a utopian dimension to this encounter of reason and the body. The aesthetic does not give up on the universality of reason, unlike some of the more militant brands of Romantic or postmodern particularism. Instead, it seeks in an audacious move to redefine the relations between universal and individual, the total-

ity of an artefact or social order and its constituent parts. What it produces is nothing less than a revolutionary new notion of totality, in which the law or structure of the whole is nothing more than the complex interrelation of its sensory components. It is this that Marx has in mind when he comments in the *Communist Manifesto* that the communist order will foster the free development of each in terms of the free development of all. The work of art accordingly steers a judicious course between being a mere mob of particulars, and rigorously subjecting each of its features to some monolithic logic. As such, it is an idealised image of the cooperative commonwealth, in which each constituent or individual is self-determining, but self-determining on the basis of its relations with all other individuals. It is thus that socialism differs from liberalism, and the aesthetic from some more fragmentary or monological discourse. Friedrich Schlegel speaks of poetry as republican speech, in which all the various features, like free citizens, have, as it were, the right to vote.

The commodity form, so Marx argues in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, is indifferent to the material properties of an object, and as such plunders men and women of their sensuous richness. So, too, does what Marx calls abstract labour; and the same goes for bourgeois democracy, in which individual citizens are abstractly equal and exchangeable. If we wish to experience our bodies again, then, we have to change our politics. It was this that Bertolt Brecht had in mind when he expressed his wish for a society in which thought could become a real sensuous pleasure.

The aesthetic, then, is a species of rationality, as stringent in its own way as the philosopher's logic; yet it is also a form of reasoning otherwise, one which works in and through its fleshly incarnations or sensory instantiations, and as such as much at war with some more reified or abstract brand of reason as it is with a mere myopic particularism. Moreover, if the work of art is that which, like God, carries its ends, grounds, origins and *raison d'être* within itself (and almost all aesthetic terms are secularised theological ones), it is a form of praxis, in the sense of an activity whose goods are internal to it, inseparable from its tangible performance or self-enactment. Its end is not to be seen as lying outside itself, which is to say that it represents a powerful critique of instrumental reason. Like virtue in a certain classical lineage, its ends and principles are internal to it. Its reward, if one can speak in such crassly utilitarian terms, is its own perpetual self-delight. As such, it offers a paradigm of how men and women could themselves behave in transformed political conditions, once they are free from being utilised as tools of power or profit and able to realise their powers and capacities as delightful ends in themselves. This is the ethics of Karl Marx, as it is of Oscar Wilde.

There are various forms of practice that human beings engage in for their own sake, as opposed to more tediously utilitarian activities such as flossing their teeth or clearing ice from the car windscreen. These kind of activities—art, love, humour, sexuality, dance, music, laughter, joking, conversation, giving birth, festive celebrations, drinking yourself under the table, collecting insanely expensive porcelain

vases and so on—are generally the most precious. All of them involve some form of instrumental rationality, a form of reason which is by no means to be demonised and without which we would be lost. It is just that activities of this kind subordinate the instrumental to a more delicate, complex conception of human action. Bringing up children, for example, has no particular point, not least (since they do not work) it is hard to say exactly what they are for. The fact that they seem bereft of all *raison d'être* may be one reason why the Victorians regarded them either as angelic or demonic, both evil and saintliness being essentially non-utilitarian phenomena. It comes as no surprise that Oscar Wilde was so fond of children, and penned various covertly revolutionary tracts for them known as children's stories, since as a dedicated aesthete he relished things which had no obvious purpose.

- 16 What allows the body to be at its finest, then, is not the suspension of practice, as a certain kind of anti-utilitarian thinker imagines, but the suspension of certain forms of practice, of a cause-and-effect kind. For a long time, art has been one name for this self-grounding, self-constituting, self-validating form of activity, and virtue has been another. Indeed, a cynic might consider that in modern civilisation virtue had better be its own reward, since it is unlikely to receive any other. There is an honourable doctrine, writes Henry Fielding in *Tom Jones* that the good will obtain their reward in this world—a doctrine which has only one defect, namely that it is not true. It is a disquieting thought that one of the few places in modern societies where the virtuous are showered with gifts and the vicious packed off empty-handed is that surrogate form of providence, the realist novel. If we are reliant on our fiction for justice, our situation must be dire indeed.

We do not normally think of making love or art as reasonable. But there is a case to be made that such activities represent reason in its deepest, most subtle forms. It is also true, to be sure, that reason does not go all the way down. There are rationalists for whom human experience is essentially reducible to reason, and sceptics or fideists for whom the two are fundamentally at odds. But think of the relations between reason and love. Love is neither reducible to reason nor independent of it. Unless you can provide some reasons why you love someone, it would be hard to see how you yourself could know that you did. One must always be able to come up with persuasive descriptions of one's love object in this respect: that she has an enormous amount of money, that she is remarkably tolerant of shiftless, narcissistic men, that she makes Kate Winslet look like John McCain and so on. But it is possible for a third person to feel the force of these reasons while not being in love with the woman himself. Reason is not wall to wall. It is just that without it, we perish.