The Ecstatic Body

What [“consciousness”] does not see it does not see for reasons of principle, it is because it is consciousness that it does not see. What it does not see is what in it prepares the vision of the rest (as the retina is blind at the point where the fibers that will permit the vision spread out into it). What it does not see is what makes it see, is its tie to Being, is its corporeity, are the existentials by which the world becomes visible, is the flesh wherein the object is born.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, The Visible and the Invisible, Working Notes, May 1960

It is through the bodily surface that I first engage the world. Only because my eyes and ears lie on the surface of my body are they capable of disclosing the events taking place around me. My hands, in order to explore and work upon the world, must extend outward from my corporeal “extremities.” My expressive face can form a medium of communication only because it is available to the Other’s gaze. No organ concealed in the hidden depths of the body could actualize intersubjectivity in this way. It is thus necessary that our perceptual, motor, and communicative powers cluster at or near the body surface. The surface is where self meets what is other than self.

In this first chapter I will focus exclusively upon the sensorimotor surface of the body, seeking the structural principles that govern its operation. Methodologically, I will also begin on the surface; that is, I will commence with an artificially simplified analysis, only gradually working my way to more in-depth models. An examination of the visual field considered in isolation will form my initial point of entry.

Perception

Out on a country walk, I pause to lean against a picket fence. My attention is drawn to a large sycamore that dominates the surrounding countryside. This tree becomes the central focus of my visual field. However, it is always placed within and articulated against a background of which I am peripherally aware—the sloping, grassy hill upon which the tree grows, the blue sky mottled with clouds. This structure of figure-ground complementarity which typifies any perceptual field has been extensively investigated by Gestalt psychologists and will not be discussed at length here. Instead, I will concentrate upon the
role of the body vis-à-vis this field. I note that my own body may make an appearance within the visual panorama. Out of the corner of my eye I catch sight of my foot extending between the fence posts, my elbow jutting out. I can shift my head to gaze directly upon these. Regions of my body may thus present themselves as part of the background or the central focus of my visual field.

However, this is not the case for the entirety of my body. Barring for the moment the question of mirrors, I find I cannot gaze upon large portions of my back side, especially from the waist up. Furthermore, I cannot see, with the exception of a protruding tongue or nose, most of my face. As Merleau-Ponty writes, "my body as given to me by sight is broken at the height of the shoulders and terminates in a tactile-muscular object."¹ Nor can I rectify this deficiency by simply shifting position to get a better view. While this strategy works with external objects, the body naturally limits attempts to get a new angle upon it. Wherever I go to gaze at it, it comes with me as itself the source of the gaze.²

I find that the disappearance of bodily regions is directly related to their proximity to this source. The head is absent insofar as it immediately surrounds and underlies the eyes such that the eyes cannot achieve a perspective upon it. As I approach the center point and origin of vision I lapse into an invisibility no less certain than that which takes hold of objects increasingly distant. My eyes themselves never appear within their visual field except indirectly via reflective surfaces. It is not that I perceive a sort of gap or darkness where my eyes should be; the visual field simply begins and ends in front of them. As the origin of vision, the eyes are also its terminus.

Yet, while I do not directly see these eyes, they maintain a pervasive presence in the experienced world. The objects I do see refer back to my eyes in a series of implicit modes. I know that the very existence of this visual spectacle rests upon my power of sight. Furthermore, that place from which sight originates constitutes an orientational center for the optical field.³ Everything stands to the right or left of my eyes, above or below, near or far from them, and it is in this way that things take up a determinate relation to one another. The location of my eyes floods throughout the visual world, organizing and giving it sense as the vanishing point organizes every brushstroke of a Renaissance painting. My eyes themselves are the prototype of this vanishing point, an implicit omnipresence nowhere to be seen.

This absence is intrinsic to the perspectival nature of embodiment. As Merleau-Ponty writes, "to be situated within a certain point of view necessarily involves not seeing that point of view itself."⁴ To be a perspectival being also means that things can only present themselves from a particular angle and through a limited set of profiles. There will necessarily be aspects of any perceptual object, hidden sides, concealed depths, that elude one's gaze. The absence that haunts the perceived world is thus correlative with that of the perceiver.⁵ Moreover, this absence is not simply a deficit but a constitutive principle of the real. The inexhaustible depth of the perceptual object, ever promising more than I now see, is precisely what lends it the texture of reality, distinguishing it from the flat image or hallucination.

Thus, we can understand neither the origin, orientation, nor texture of the perceptual field without reference to the absent presence of the perceiving body. This constitutes the necessary supplement to the Gestaltist figure-background description of perception. As Merleau-Ponty writes:

one's own body is the third term, always tacitly understood, in the figure-background structure, and every figure stands out against the double horizon of external and bodily space.⁶

Referring, as does Merleau-Ponty, to the body as part of a double horizon risks obscuring a crucial divergence between two sorts of phenomena. The external visual horizon that stretches behind the thematized figure retains a vague and peripheral visibility even while fading into indistinctness. My eyes are more definitively invisible, showing nowhere in my field of vision. And whereas the horizon fades by virtue of its indefinite stretch, becoming imperceptible as it expands behind and away from the figure, the converse is true of my own eyes. It is as space gathers itself together, converging from all angles into a nodal point, that a visual terminus is reached.

Thus, in place of the term horizon, I will utilize the Husserlian notion of the nullpoint (Nullpunkt).⁷ (My use of this term is provisional, for I will later come to criticize it in certain ways.) In Ideas 2, Husserl observes that my lived body (Leib) always constitutes a nullpoint in the world I inhabit. No matter where I physically move, and even in the midst of motion, my body retains the status of an absolute “here” around which all “theres” are arrayed. In his work on lived embodiment Husserl had not fully broken with objectivist characterizations.⁸ The “nullity” of the nullpoint suggests geometrical terminology wherein the center of any Cartesian coordinate system is defined as zero. Yet this term also expresses the experiential paradox hitherto discussed. Precisely as the center point from which the perceptual field radiates, the perceptual organ remains an absence or nullity in the midst of the perceived.
Admittedly, this absence can be partially circumvented. I can see my eyes and face via the use of mirrors and other reflective surfaces. Yet as Husserl, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty have all pointed out, there is a crucial incompleteness to the mirror phenomenon. When I catch sight of my eyes in a mirror what I see are constituted objects in the world. I can take note of their color and shape but, as Sartre notes, "I cannot see the seeing;" that is, I can not apprehend it in the process of revealing an aspect of the world to me. The eyes-as-seen intertwine, but never phenomenologically coincide, with the eyes as the agent of sight, which involves that invisible power that gives rise to and orients the visual world. Within the world thus disclosed my eyes-as-seen can secondarily appear. Yet these lidded green orbs strangely beg the question. In Merleau-Ponty's words:

when I try to fill this void by recourse to the image in the mirror, it refers me back to an original of the body which is not out there among things, but in my own province, on this side of all things seen. The visible eyes cannot fill up or nullify vision's nullpoint.

The body need not rely on external mirrors in order to reflect but can turn its own powers back upon itself, utilizing one organ to examine another. Yet once again, a noncoincidence reigns between perceiver and perceived. This can be illustrated with an example that has played a crucial role in phenomenological discussion of the body from the early Husserl to the late Merleau-Ponty, that of one hand touching another. When my right hand reaches out to touch, I "exist" it as a power of sensing. I do not attend to the hand as physical thing but employ it as that through which I explore the world. Yet I can also reach out with my left hand to touch the right. Can I not then capture at one and the same moment the right hand as touching and touched, thereby filling in the nullpoint, uniting the "subject body" and the "object body"? Not exactly. A careful examination shows that insofar as one attends to the right hand as an object under the touch of the left, one no longer experiences the right hand qua the power of touching. Within the tactile field reorganized around the left hand, the right hand now makes its appearance as a soft fleshy mass. But I cannot "touch it touching" anymore than I could "see the seeing." As soon as the right hand recaptures its power, becoming that with which I feel and explore, it disappears to a degree as thematic object. Within touch, no less than vision, the phenomenon of the nullpoint occurs.

It is thus possible to state a general principle: insofar as I perceive through an organ, it necessarily recedes from the perceptual field it discloses. I do not smell my nasal tissue, hear my ear, or taste my taste buds but perceive with and through such organs. This is not to deny the significant distinctions between sense modalities. Erwin Straus, for example, has explored the very different experiences of spatiality, temporality, and self-object relations that characterize the various senses. Similarly, each mode of sensing involves a different apprehension of one's embodiment. In a distance-sense like sight, one has little or no experience of physical effort or forceful interaction with the perceived object. As such, one's corporeality recedes more than in touch, whose reciprocity and feeling of impact calls one back to the corporeality of the body with its object. In taste, the experience of world and body is perhaps most closely interwoven; the act of perceiving involves the literal incorporation of the perceived.

Yet for all that distinguishes them, the senses share an essential structure. They all open up upon a world, that which Straus terms the Alton (Other). My perceptions are never lived as bare concatenations of sense-data but reveal what is Other, a realm of external objects. If I were to apprehend all perceptual events simply as modifications of my body located within the perceiving organs, I would have no experience of an outer world, and thus, ultimately, even of my own body as a worldly thing. My being-in-the-world depends upon my body's self-effacing transitivity.

The From and the To

In order to shed further light upon this phenomenon I will employ an admirably simple and ontologically neutral set of terms provided by Michael Polanyi. He writes of a "from-at" or "from-to" structure, which characterizes experience in general. In any act of attention we not only attend to a thematic object but from a set of cues and conditions. (Polanyi also refers to these respectively as the "explicit" and "tacit," the "focal" and "subsidiary," the "distal" and "proximal," terms of experience.) That is, in order to perceive any explicit object I must make use of means, clues, and information that are themselves un-thematized and of which I may have little or no direct awareness.

For example, I recognize a soda can sitting in front of me only by virtue of utilizing, perceiving from, a vast set of perceptual particulars. I am not explicitly aware of the gradually transforming color shades that help indicate to me the three-dimensionality, materiality, and cylindrical shape of the can. I might be able to shift my attention to these bare color shades themselves, especially if I were a painter or photographer. But I would then begin to disrupt my perception of the soda can itself. I perceive the overall object insofar as the visual cues I am employing re-
main to a degree unthematized. To take a very different example, for you, the reader, the physical appearance of the words on this page tends to recede from focal awareness. The reader attends from these black marks to the meanings they reveal. An over attention to the shape of the letters themselves would only interfere with their function as signs. (I will analyze this phenomenon more extensively in chapter 4.)

Many of Polanyi’s examples are borrowed from Gestalt psychology and refer to the subliminal use of perceptual particulars in the recognition of any object or meaning. However, this does not encompass the fullness of the “from” structure he describes. There is, as well, that body with which I perceive. As I reach out to touch the soda can in front of me there are tactile sensations and a stream of kinesthesis that course through my fingers. I am not usually aware of these as such, for they are precisely that from which I feel the hardness and solidity of the can. Normally one utilizes one’s body in this subsidiary fashion, attending from it to an external world. As Polanyi writes:

> Our body is the only assembly of things known almost exclusively by relating on our awareness of them for attending to something else. . . . Every time we make sense of the world, we rely on our tacit knowledge of impacts made by the world on our body and the complex responses of our body to these impacts.19

It is because we experience from the body that it constitutes a nullpoint in the perceptual field.

As Polanyi recognizes in passing, elements of the “from” structure can be tacit in different ways and to different degrees.20 The kinesthesias of my feeling hand exhibit what Polanyi calls a “marginal” presence;21 I may be consciously aware of these sensations in an obscure fashion and could directly attend to them via a shift of focus. However, I can also utilize what Polanyi calls “subliminal” clues22 such as the contractions of my eyelid muscles. While making use of such information when judging depth, these contractions are unavailable to any direct apprehension. I simply cannot bring them to explicit consciousness. Ultimately, Polanyi extends this category of the subliminal to include all neurophysiological bases of perception.23 When gazing at a soda can I not only see from my eyes per se, but from my retinal nerves, my visual cortex. While an experimental scientist might attend to these nerve firings, they are necessarily that of which I am unaware. The from-to analysis thus exposes the fallacy involved in treating the subject as pure introspective self-presence. On the contrary, one’s own grounds of experience may be more available for thematization by another.

Polanyi’s terms not only illuminate the nullpoint phenomenon but the noncoincidence characteristic of reflective modes. The eye that lies at the source of the gaze experientially diverges from its mirror image. Yet this divergence is none other than that between the “from” and the “to.” As that from which I perceive, my eyes play a different structural role vis-à-vis the experiential field than the reflected eyes to which I attend. Similarly, when I use my right hand to touch, it is absorbed within my structure of tacit means. Only in this way can it reveal an outer world. To say one cannot “see the seeing” or “touch the touching” is simply to recognize the noncoincidence of the “from” and the “to.”

This leads to what might be termed, in analogy to physics, an “uncertainty principle” of embodiment. Just as Heisenberg recognized theoretical limitations on knowledge that could not be overcome by technical advance, such is our condition relative to lived embodiment. We simply cannot see our seeing no matter what reflective means are employed. In the case of quantum physics any attempt to measure the position and momentum of a particle necessarily changes these parameters leaving an ineluctable uncertainty. Our case bears a certain similarity; in thematizing a part of the body we necessarily change its phenomenological status. It no longer functions as part of the tacit “from” structure. But this tacit structure lies at the heart of corporeal ability. As that which operates via self-effacement, the lived body can never be a fully explicit thing.

Motility

I have derived the principle of from-to transitivitiy exclusively from an examination of perception. Yet in order to reconstruct the full unity of the lived body and to see whether this principle applies to it as a whole, I now take up motility and goal-directed action.

As Straus, among others, has argued extensively, the classical distinction between perception and movement is in fact highly artificial, dividing in reflection what is always united in lived experience.24 I touch by reaching out and running my hand over the surface of an object. To see, I turn my head and let my eyes scan the landscape. Perception is itself a motor activity. Moreover, that which is perceived is always saturated by the implicit presence of motility. The spatial depth of the perceived world, the experience of objects as there, near or far from my body, is only possible for a being that moves through space. This is true as well of the qualitative nature of the perceived. As Straus notes, from the start we experience things about us as “alluring” or “frightening,” beckoning toward us or repulsive.25 We see chairs that offer up the prospect of rest, food that may be eaten, a cold rain that bids us stay inside.
The sensory world thus involves a constant reference to our possibilities of active response. Given this deep interpenetration of perception and motility it should not be surprising to discover within the latter the same from-to structure that characterized the former. I will illustrate this point first in relation to a simple example: the act of taking a bite out of an apple. On reflection one can distinguish two poles of this activity: that which does the biting and that which is bitten. This is homologous to the distinction within perception between the seeing eye and the field of objects seen. And as the eye necessarily disappears from its field of endeavor, so too do the teeth while biting. That is, my teeth open up what might be termed an actional field. They are capable of biting not only an apple but other sorts of food, as well as fingernails, clothing, or most anything that comes within their province. But within this world revealed as thing-to-be-bitten, there is one thing I cannot thereby bite: my own teeth. My mouth cannot swallow itself, my foot kick itself, my hand grasp itself. In each case I act from these organs to the affected object or the action performed. As the very means whereby I act, these organs constitute a nullpoint within their actional field.

Admittedly, motor activity, like perception, has certain reflective possibilities. For example, one might claim that my hand can, in a sense, grasp itself, as when I clench my fist. However, self-coincidence is never total. In this case it is a question of the fingers folding back upon the palm. The hand can only achieve a full grip upon an object that spatially diverges from itself. But what of corporeal actions whose object and intent seem purely self-reflective? For example, I may clench and unclench my fist, not with the intention of gripping an external object but of building up my own hand strength. My hand seems to act upon itself. Yet there still remains a divergence between the body from and to which I act. Here noncoincidence takes a temporal rather than a spatial form. I act from my current physicality toward the ideal body, stronger and more muscular, that yet awaits me. In the structure of desire that animates action, the present condition becomes a means for achieving futural goals. Thus, most actions manifest what I will term a physical telos directed away from one’s own corporeal base. One acts from the here-and-now body to spatially or temporally noncoincident objects. Furthermore, this is usually accompanied by an attentional telos outward. One’s body is rendered subsidiary, not only as a physical means to an end but within the accompanying structure of attention. As Ricoeur writes:

Actually, when I act I am not concerned with my body. I say rather that the action "traverses" my body... I am concerned less with my body than with the product of the action: the hanged picture, the strike of the hammer on the head of a nail.25

My actions are motivated and organized by outer-directed concern. In order to strike the nail properly I must look at it, not my swinging hand. In deciding where the picture is to be hung I survey the walls, the colors, the spaces of my house, and contemplate the effect I am trying to achieve. My body, as the sensorimotor means of such surveying, yet recedes before this experiential primacy of ends.27

Admittedly, in some situations attention will shift so as to reside within the body here-and-now. For example, I may be thrust into an experience of my physical presence if, standing tiptoe on a chair, I begin to lose my balance. At once I become painfully aware of my precarious and rapidly deteriorating position. In doing my hand exercises I may find it more pleasant to forget the ideal body yet to come and simply experience my current sensations. A Zen master may follow his breathing with one-pointed attention, ignoring sensory enticements and futural goals.

Yet such experiences are not the primary ways in which most of us live out the body. They can best be understood, to use Heidegger’s term, as “deficient” modes of our usual concern with the world.28 This notion of “deficiency” has no pejorative overtones; there may be great aesthetic and contemplative benefits in attending directly to bodily activity. However, this term indicates that such modes are derivative, involving a suspension of the body’s ordinary from-to telos directed away from itself. Almost from birth the infant begins to track faces and soon reach out for objects, utilizing the body as an unthematized substratum from which the world is acted upon. This transitive nature of the body is essential, inherent, a corporeal primitive. It is not something that could be secondarily added on or developed out of a field of simple presence. On the contrary, self-presencing arises from modifying this norm of transitivity.

Moreover, the self-presence we can achieve is limited, no less in action than in perception. I cannot thematize even a single movement in its entirety. Though I may concentrate on the rhythms of walking, most of the physiology of the act remains resolutely hidden from my awareness. Hume took note of this curious lacuna:

we learn from anatomy, that the immediate object of power in voluntary motion, is not the member itself which is moved, but certain muscles, and nerves, and animal spirits, and, perhaps, something still more minute and more unknown, through which the motion is successively propagated, ere it reach the member itself whose motion is the immediate object of volition. Can there be a more certain proof, that the power, by which this whole operation is performed, so far from being directly
and fully known by an inward sentiment or consciousness, is, to the last
degree, mysterious and unintelligible.29

I have a tacit command over my body, accomplishing without the
slightest difficulty actions I could not begin to comprehend or carry out
in a reflective fashion. If I attempted to walk by consciously manipulat-
ing all the proper muscles I would soon find myself incapacitated. And,
taking it further, if I tried to initiate my stroll by explicitly sending out
certain nerve signals from the cerebral cortex, I would not even know
how to begin. All our scientific knowledge does little to change this situ-
tion. The physician still utilizes his or her body in a tacit fashion even
while objectifying the body of another.30

Thus, in addition to its physical and attentional telos outward, action
manifests what I will term a functional telos. In pursuing my explicit
goals, I act toward the world from an unthematized functional power.
As Merleau-Ponty writes, employing a Husserlian locution, “Consci-
sciousness is in the first place not a matter of ‘I think that’ but of ‘I
can.’”31 I can walk, run, reach, grasp, speak, gesture, along with a thou-
sand other intricate acts, though the source of these abilities remains
unknown. In Merleau-Ponty’s words, “The relationships between my
decision and my body are, in movement, magical ones.”32 I tend to forget
this magical quality precisely because it is a taken for granted base from
which my actions spring.

The lived body thus constitutes a nullpoint in motor activity no less
than in perceptual modes. I have described a threefold telos of motility
wherein the body plays a subsidiary role. Physically, we act from a sur-
face organ that itself is a lacuna in its action field. In attentional terms,
we ordinarily focus upon the goal of activity, not our corporeal means
of accomplishment. Functionally, we rely upon a set of abilities we cannot
fully thematize. Insofar as perception is itself a form of action and deep-
ly intertwined with motility, we can retrospectively identify the same
threefold disappearance. For example, in seeing, we physically act
from the eye; we attend from it to the objects of its gaze; and this vision
rests upon an unknown but unproblematic “I can.” Perception and
motility are modulations of a singular power, the from-to structure of
bodily engagement.

Ecstasy and Absence

This structure manifests itself through a broader series of variations
than I will seek to trace out here in detail. For example, the body as
ground of expression and communication also operates according to a

from-to logic. One’s gestures, facial movements, and sounds do not call
for explicit thematization by self or Other—they phenomenologica-
ly recede to permit access to the message they convey (see chapter 4). Mood
and emotion exhibit their own forms of transivity. As Heidegger and
Solomon indicate, moods and emotions are world-disclosive.33 In
Ricoeur’s words:

When I am moved by emotion, I do not think of my body at all.
Being afraid does not mean feeling my body shake or my heart beat; it is
to experience the world as something to shun, as an impalpable pre-
sence.34

Similarly, such corporeal states as hunger, thirst, and sexual craving are
not simply “internal” twinges but modes whereby the environment stands
forth. Such biological urges color the perceived world, channeling
attention and activity toward potential sources of gratification. The
lived body is thus first and foremost not a located thing but a path of
access, a being-in-the-world. As Sartre writes, the body is “perpetually
the surpassed.”35

This power of transcending its own confines has formed a central
theme for phenomenological authors who have labeled it with different
names. Erwin Straus writes of “distance” as the “spatio-temporal form
of sensing.”36 Only by projecting across a spatial and temporal distance
can the sensorimotor body open up a world. Hans Jonas refers instead to
a principle of “mediacy” that sentence, emotion, and motility all exhib-
it.37 He cites this mediacy between subject and object, between urge and
attainment, as the crucial feature that differentiates animal from vege-
tative life. Merleau-Ponty, influenced by Husserl, refers to a “basic” or
“operative” intentionality founded in the body and prior to explicit
judgments.38

Yet the notion of intentionality brings with it unnecessary philosop-
hamical baggage. It was predicated by Brentano as precisely that trait which
distinguished mentality from the physical39 and has at times implied
reference to an inexistt object immanent within the subject’s mind.
Such connotations are directly opposed to the corporeal world-related-
ness I have been exploring. While free of such resonances, terms such as
“distance” and “mediacy,” seemingly mundane and unproblematic, fail
to highlight the radical paradox of the present-absent body. In their
place, I will choose a term derived from the Greek, and more recently
employed by Heidegger: ecstatic. This word includes within it the root

ek meaning “out,” and 

sais, meaning “to stand.” The ecstatic is that
which stands out. This admirably describes the operation of the lived
body. The body always has a determinate stance—it is that whereby we
Phenomenological Investigations

are located and defined. But the very nature of the body is to project outward from its place of standing. From the "here" arises a perceptual world of near and far distances. From the "now" we inhabit a meaningful past and a futural realm of projects and goals.30

In this ecstatic nature of corporeality can be discovered the first reason that the body is forgotten in experience. Heidegger writes, "There are coverings-up which are accidental; there are also some which are necessary, grounded in what the thing discovered consists in."31 I have been discussing the latter sort of covering-up. The body conceals itself precisely in the act of revealing what is Other. The very presencing of the world and of the body as an object within it is always correlative with this primordial absence.

In exploring this intertwining of presence and absence, etymology can again play a suggestive role. The word absence comes from the Latin esse, or "being," and ab, meaning "away." An absence is the being-away of something. The lived body, as ecstatic in nature, is that which is away from itself. Yet, this absence is not equivalent to a simple void, a mere lack of being. The notion of being is after all present in the very word absence. The body could not be away, stand outside, unless it had a being and stance to begin with. It is thus never fully eradicated from the experiential world. Otherwise I would not even know I had a body.

In this context, my employment of the Husserlian metaphor of the nullpoint was provisional and potentially misleading. The body is not a sheer nullity either within the field of action or awareness. To clarify this point I will pause briefly to summarize the modes of presence one's own body retains. This will enable me both to criticize and supplement the notion of the nullpoint and to arrive at a more complex model of embodiment.

Presencings

I have already touched on several ways in which the body, even when unthematized, remains indirectly or marginally available to experience. Though it may be nowhere manifest within the perceptual field, my body is indicated as the orientational center in relation to which everything else takes its place. As a result, I come away with as precise a reading of my own location within the environment as I do for any appearing object. I experience myself as always situated here, not spread throughout existence like a god or pure mind. Precisely insofar as the corporeal nullpoint is like a point it could not be a total nullity; a point is that which has definite location.

The body is also defined through its actional fields. The use-qualities and accessibility of surrounding objects always refer back to my corporeal powers. To see something as reachable and thereby open to my use is to implicitly experience my body's capacity of reach. If I become weakened or paralyzed, the quality of the world is equivalently transformed; objects now recede, mock me, proclaim my inability.

Nor is all reference to the body indirect, routed through an external world. My body is always a field of immediately lived sensation, Empfindnisse, to use Husserl's term.32 Its presence is fleshed out by a ceaseless stream of kinesthesias, cutaneous and visceral sensations, defining my body's space and extension and yielding information about position, balance, state of tension, desire, and mood. Oliver Sacks describes the case of a woman with a rare form of polynuretitis who had lost the proprioceptive sense of her body.33 While she was capable of employing visual, auditory, and vestibular cues, the internal feel of embodiment was missing. She experienced her body as dead, de-realized, not her own, looked for her arm in one place and was surprised to find it elsewhere. In her words, "I feel my body is blind and deaf to itself . . . it has no sense of itself."34 This experience of loss illuminates, by way of contrast, the subtle coenesthetic presence the body maintains even when ecstatically caught up in the world. Moreover, such coenesthesias can be explicitly thematized either through choice or involuntary changes. As I will discuss in chapter 3, situations of extreme pain, fatigue, or other organic disturbances especially draw attention to our bodily states.

In addition to this coenesthetic awareness, we have access to multiple modes of self-observation mediated by outer-directed senses. I can employ the reflective surfaces of the world: mirrors, bodies of water, photographs, etc. The gaze of another also initiates self-reflection. I apprehend myself as embodied and defined when I look into the eyes of another looking at me (see chapter 3). And, as Merleau-Ponty points out, such intersubjectivity draws upon an intersubjectivity implicit within my own body.35 In gazing upon or touching itself, my body actualizes "a sort of reflection."36 Though there is no absolute coincidence between the observing and observed body, there is no absolute division either. These are dimensions of a single lived body.

This folding back of the body upon itself is only possible because the body is an extended structure containing within it a multiplicity of parts and powers. Thus, my sensorimotor capabilities can reflect one upon another; my eyes can look down upon my hands, my hands can touch each other or reach up to touch my eyes. If the body were simply a point source, an eye at the moment of sight or a fingertip at the moment of touching, I could not gain this perspective on self.

Hence, the metaphor of the body as nullpoint requires dual supple-
The Corporeal Field

As Richard Zaner points out (referring to the work of Kurt Goldstein), the use of any organ necessarily involves the enlistment of the rest of the body in a "background attitude." When I gaze at a landscape I dwell most fully in my eyes. Yet this is only possible because my back muscles hold my spine erect, my neck muscles adjust my head into the proper position for viewing. My feet, my legs, my arms, all lend their support. My other perceptual senses flesh out the scene I witness with sound and warmth, even if my attention is centered on visual characteristics. My whole body provides the background that supports and enables the point of corporeal focus. As such, the body itself is not a point but an organized field in which certain organs and abilities come to prominence while others recede.

We can thus employ the notion of the figure-ground gestalt to characterize not only the body's field of experience but the structure of the experiencing body itself. The figure-ground relations inherent in the body are typified by a high degree of complexity. Within any given corporeal gestalt there may be, and often is, more than one prominent focus from which we act. For example, in driving a car I am constantly relying upon my gaze. At the same time, my arms and hands steer the wheel in immediate, unreffective response to the road. My feet play across the accelerator and brake, modulating my speed appropriately. My very life depends on this prethematic synthesis of eyes, hands, feet, a series of linked corporeal foci.

In addition, at any given time the bodily field is capable of embracing more than one actionable gestalt. For example, while driving I may turn on the radio and soon find myself singing along. My ears and mouth here act as the linked foci of a corporeal gestalt elicited by the music. This second structure does not interfere with that involved in driving because of a certain intergestalt fit. While focal in relation to the music, the ears and mouth are relegated to an insubstantial role in driving. Conversely, the eyes, hands, and feet so central to driving play a background role relative to listening to music. This complementarity of figure-ground demands allows the two gestals to coexist harmoniously. (This would not be the case if I tried, for example, to watch television while driving: competing focal demands would be placed on one set of eyes, causing disruption of one or both activities.) While maintaining their independence, coexisting gestals may yet interpenetrate through pre-reflective corporeal syntheses. I may find myself accelerating when a fast song comes on the radio; the very temporality and spatiality of the road are altered by different sorts of music.

Thus, at any given time the body manifests a gestalt structure. But within the gestalt of a single activity there may be several corporeal foci drawn together. Furthermore, the general corporeal field may include several perceptual or actional gestals coexisting and exerting mutual pulls. As has been suggested, this complex field structure allows for more modes of corporeal self-presencing than if the body were simply a point, a nullpoint. The diverse powers available to me allow me to reflect back upon my body from a multitude of discrete perspectives. However, this field structure also allows for a more complex pattern of absence than previously analyzed. To explain, I will return to the main theme of this chapter: the self-effacement of the surface body.

Forms of Disappearance

My discussion of the body's figure-ground relations implies the existence of at least two complementary forms of absence: not only that adhering to the body's focal organs but that characterizing the background of the corporeal field. To illustrate, I will go back to the example with which this chapter began. I noted that when looking across an open space toward a tree in the distance, my eyes nowhere appeared within my visual field. I went on to explore that one fact in depth. But that hardly constitutes a full description of the self-effacement operative in that moment. In such a situation I would likely be relatively unaware not only of my eyes but of my legs and feet, the back muscles supporting me, my torso at large. Unused sensory capacities such as taste would similarly recede from apprehension. These corporeal regions and powers are forgotten not because they are focal points from which I act and experience but because at this moment they are precisely not bodily foci. Dwelling within the power of sight as my primary mode of world-disclosure, I relegate much of my body to the status of neutral background. This corporeal background, even more than the background of a perceptual field, tends to disappear from explicit awareness.

The corporeal background is itself a highly complex phenomenon...
composed of different functional elements. Certain aspects of the background will operate to provide crucial support for bodily foci of action or perception. The muscle groups that support the head, enabling vision, are an example of this. Elements of the corporeal background can also be utilized in activity irrelevant to the attentional center. I may, for example, keep tying knots in a piece of string while concentrating on the visual spectacle. Though it constitutes a second actional focus, this knot-tying gestalt remains a background in terms of the overall field of attention.

In other cases organs and powers are simply put out of play so as not to interfere with the primary locus of engagement. To take a better look at the tree I may have stopped walking and ceased a distracting conversation with my companion. My mouth and legs fall still, permitting attention to flood out through my eyes. For me to engage in any activity there are a countless number of other actions I must cease, skills and motor schemas I leave unused, corporeal regions I render quiescent. Those regions and actions nonetheless remain a part of my corporeal background understood in the broad sense. They belong to my bodily "I can," available for use at the appropriate moment.

Having characterized the corporeal background, I can now identify the two complementary forms of self-concealment that mark the surface body. One I will call focal disappearance. This refers to the self-effacement of bodily organs when they form the focal origin of a perceptual or actional field. An example is the invisibility of the eye within the visual field it generates. I have spent the bulk of the chapter describing modes of focal disappearance and their "from-to" or "ecstatic" structure. In contrast, I have recently been discussing what I will now term background disappearance. Bodily regions can disappear because they are not the focal origin of our sensorimotor engagements but are backgrounded in the corporeal gestalt: that is, they are for the moment relegated to a supportive role, involved in irrelevant movement, or simply put out of play.

I here employ the term disappearance rather than absence, for I have given the latter a more general significance. Absence, according to its etymology, refers to all the ways in which the body can be away from itself. One manner is simply through disappearing from self-awareness. Disappearance is thus a form of absence. It is not, however, the only form. As I will discuss in chapter 3, certain modes of experiential appearance are marked by paradoxical self-opposition, and hence their own sort of being-away or "absence."

In addition, my technical use of the term disappearance should be distinguished from its ordinary sense. Customarily, disappearance implies the vanishing of something that was originally present to the gaze. This is not the case with the phenomena I am discussing. For example, it is not a matter of the eye once having appeared in its visual field, only subsequently to vanish—it is simply that which never shows itself for structural reasons. Disappearance, in my usage, trades on the frequent use of dis- as a straightforward prefix of negation. To "disappear" in this sense is simply to not appear.

My characterization of the two modes of disappearance should not obscure the important experiential dissimilarities between them. Just as there are different forms of presencing, so things can absence in very different ways. To use an example adapted from J. H. van den Berg, as I climb a mountainside, straining, searching for my footing, my legs and feet manifest a focal disappearance.49 I do not attend to them, but from them, feeling for the slippery rocks, seeking a toehold. My consciousness spreads out from my lower extremities, and they disappear in this ecstatic movement. This is quite different from when I sit quietly reading, my legs lying still. My legs are then enveloped in a background disappearance; awareness is simply withdrawn from their situation. Or there is my previous example of gazing toward a tree, eyes in focal disappearance. If I were to shut my eyes to better hear the sounds of nature, sight would now enter a background mode. In the former case my eyes disappear in the act of lighting up the world. But in the latter case they disappear into darkness; I have abandoned their disclosive abilities.

The Complemental Series

The structural relationship between these two modes of disappearance can be described by employing a concept used by Freud, the complemental series. In examining the origin of neurosis, Freud refused to choose between constitutional or experiential factors as the exclusive etiological mode. He writes:

As regards their causation, instances of neurotic illness fall into a series within which the two factors . . . are represented in such a manner that if there is more of the one there is less of the other.50

Certain patients, lacking any clear constitutional predisposition, fall ill as a result of a strongly detrimental environment. At the other end of the spectrum, Freud asserts that neurosis can arise in patients with an inherent developmental tendency in this direction "however carefully their lives had been sheltered."51 In addition, there are less clear-cut instances that show differing degrees of both factors in operation. A complemental series, as described by Freud, exhibits a full range of intermediate exam-
ple, as well as those of the polar extremes. Yet there is a certain summative constancy at work. In all cases, "the diminishing intensity of one factor is balanced by an increasing intensity of the other." In producing neurosis, for example, a lesser constitutional predisposition must have been counteracted by an increase in environmental stressors. A complemen- tal series is characterized by the origin of a certain result through the balanced operation of two different causal factors.

The phenomenon under discussion fits well the model of a complemen- tal series. A certain result, the disappearance of the surface body from thematic awareness, arises from the operation of two different etiological factors: focal and background disappearance. Moreover, these two factors stand in an inverse relationship whose necessity surpasses that of Freud's example. That is, a strongly detrimental environment in no way assures that the neurotic does not also have a powerful constitutional predisposition at play. The increase of one factor is not structurally and necessarily linked to the decrease of the other. However, in the example I gave it is. Insofar as a part of my body is taken up focally, it can no longer play a background role relative to that activity, and vice versa. As I close my eyes, their absorption into a background disappearance entails their simultaneous removal from focal operation. In my ongoing use of the notion of the complemen- tal series, I will thus slightly modify Freud's original formulation. I define a complemen- tal series as the emergence of a phenomenon from the balanced operation of two etiological factors, wherein the rising of one is necessarily cor- relative with the other's decline.

In relation to the body surface taken as a whole, not just a specific organ, both etiological factors will always play a role. As a functional gestalt, the body maintains an ongoing figure-ground structure and will thus exhibit both forms of disappearance. It is possible, though, to recognize certain sorts of activities in which one or the other mode predominates. For example, when taking an early morning walk in the forest I am caught up in the sounds and smells of this world. Striding vigorously down the trail, I pause to pick wildflowers and dip my hand into a nearby brook. It is as if I dwelled fully within my corporeality, existing its sensory powers and reawakening its muscles. My body is taken up primarily in its focal disappearance as a variegated mode of disclosing the world. This would be particularly refreshing if the previous week had been spent at the typewriter. There, thoughts and fingers alone in motion, I ignore all sensory allurements that might distract me. I perch in a chair for hours suspending large portions of my corporeal existence in order to proceed with my specific task. This body is largely placed into background disappearance though I still use lim-
world-relation they permit or encourage. My distinction between organs that naturally lend themselves to a focal versus a background disappearance is but the crude beginning of such a mapping. Nor is this anything like a complete survey of corporeal absence, the subject to which I restrict myself in this work. For example, I have dealt so far only with the disappearances adhering to the bodily surface. There are, as well, disappearances characteristic of the inner body. As I will discuss in chapter 2, visceral organs manifest their own pattern of withdrawal from personal awareness and control.

Incorporation

Before turning attention toward these corporeal depths, my model of the surface body requires a further supplementation. In commencing a phenomenological anatomy, I have moved from the simple to the progressively more complex. Beginning with the perceptual taken in isolation, I have introduced the body as seat of motility and praxis. The model of embodiment as nullpoint, based on the functioning of individual organs, has given way to a recognition of the corporeal field. Nonetheless, the body I have so far portrayed remains largely a static one. That is, I have operated as if the body were composed of a fixed mass of organs and abilities, only shifting its patterns of use to foreground or background a particular region. But in fact, the body as a whole is always shifting. As Leibniz writes, “all bodies are in a state of perpetual flux like rivers, and the parts are continually entering in and passing out.” This flux of parts can be understood not only in a physical but a phenomenological sense. The lived body constantly transforms its sensorimotor repertoire by acquiring novel skills and habits. In its use of tools and machines the body supplements itself through annexing artificial organs. A phenomenological anatomy cannot then be thought of as fixed over time, or even confined by the physical boundaries of the flesh. It must take account of the body as living process.

Skills

Once again, the concept of disappearance provides a key for understanding these corporeal transformations. To illustrate this point I will begin by examining the acquisition of a skill. The initial stages of mastering a new skill usually involve a complex series of schematizations. If, for example, I am learning to swim, I pay explicit attention to certain rules of performance. I am told to cup my hands, lift my arms from the water, and breathe to one side. Moreover, I attend to the examples provided by others. As Ryle and Polanyi have pointed out, to “know how” to do something need not imply that one intellectually understands or can explain all that one does. Watching others swim may teach me more than their words. Finally, even this watching must give way before the body’s need for direct performance. I imitate the swimmer’s gestures and at last, with misgivings, take the plunge myself. As I try to swim I consciously monitor my own movements, making sure I am kicking and breathing correctly. The problematic nature of these novel gestures tends to provoke explicit body awareness (see chapter 3).

Yet the successful acquisition of a new ability coincides with a phenomenological effacement of all this. The thematization of rules, of examples, of my own embodiment, falls away once I truly know how to swim. I no longer need think about cupping my hands or the right style of breathing. This now comes without conscious effort, allowing my focus to be directed elsewhere.

Such a process of progressive experiential disappearance characterizes the acquisition of higher cognitive skills, not merely those of an immediate physical nature. For example, the learning of a new language involves its own structure of copious thematization. I study rules of grammar, memorize the conjugation of verbs, pore over lists of vocabulary words. I learn where to move my tongue to pronounce the proper sounds; my body is again rendered perspicuous by difficulty.

Yet, as with swimming, when the language is truly learned, all this apparatus can fall away. I find myself actually reading a book with comprehension. I can attend to the story line itself rather than my own halting efforts at translation. Where before the words were opaque, their foreign look and sound consciously thematized, I now experience to the meaning they disclose (see chapter 4).

This skill acquisition is accomplished via a process I will term incorporation. From the Latin corpus, or “body,” the etymology of this word literally means to “bring within a body.” A skill is finally and fully learned when something that once was extrinsic, grasped only through explicit rules or examples, now comes to pervade my own corporeality. My arms know how to swim, my mouth can at last speak the language. This embodied aspect is already suggested by the etymological root of the word language in the word for tongue----when I finally master a foreign language, it is as if all the instruction, study, and practice finally have sunk right into my tongue. A skill has been incorporated into my bodily “I can.”

If absence lies at the heart of the lived body, then any extension of its sensorimotor powers must necessarily involve an extension of absence. This then explains the experiential disappearance that accompanies the incorporation of skills. The unproblematic use of a skill coincides with
its participation in the body's focal disappearance. Whereas in the stage
of learning I act to the skill qua thematized goal, in mastery it becomes
that from which I operate upon the world. I experience from my com-
mand of a new language to the works of literature it allows me to read.
Having learned to swim, it is now the taken-for-granted means whereby I head out for the other side of the lake.

Moreover, when not actively in use, an acquired skill participates in
background disappearance. It recedes as a part of my bodily repertoire
temporarily put out of play while I employ different schemas. Thus, on
a cold day I "background" the possibility of swimming. Like other
structures in background disappearance the mastered skill yet remains
a part of the "I can," exerting its subliminal field of force. The lake out-
side my window still looks different than in my preswimming days,
when it could not be crossed and offered no access.

These bodily transformations are not accomplished via an intel-
lectual "flash of understanding" but through something akin to a sedi-
mentary process. Over time, that which is acted out, rehearsed, and re-
peated seeps into one's organismic ground. As Ricoeur points out, this
sedimentation could never take place by a sheer act of will. The will
"can only activate or hinder a specific formative function which we
might well call involuntary: practice is what has this 'spontaneous'
power." 

Incorporation thus has a temporal significance. The body masters a
novel skill by incorporating its own corporeal history of hours and days
spent in practice. I act from not just my present organs, but a bodily past
that tacitly structures my responses. As Ricoeur writes, "What once
was analyzed, thought, and willed drifts bit by bit into the realm of that
which I have never known or willed." In Polanyi's terms, the "to" over
time can become the "from." This process of temporal self-incor-
poration can give rise both to novelty and stasis. As discussed, incorporation
is the very means whereby new abilities are acquired, unlocking novel
aspects of the world. However, it is also via incorporation that abilities
sediment into fixed habits. As a result of ongoing patterns of action, the
body can develop automatic tendencies to repeat. I may fall into unreflec-
tive habits concerning waking up and going to sleep, conducting
myself on the job, interacting with colleagues, exercising, or relaxing.
The vast reach of the "I can" contracts into the "I do," that region of
body possibility I actually use. Nor, because of the nature of incorpora-
tion, is it easy to excise or even recognize such habits. Over time they
simply disappear from view. They are enveloped within the structure of
the taken-for-granted body from which I inhabit the world.

The Ecstatic Body

Technologies

Incorporation manifests not only a temporal but a spatial reach. The
body is capable of incorporating within its phenomenological domain
objects that remain spatially discrete. This is evidenced by the example
of the tool, whose existential significance was emphasized by Heideg-
ger. The tool, he writes, is something "ready-to-hand" (auhanden),
part of an equipmental structure that tends to withdraw from our
explicit attention. We concern ourselves primarily with the work or
product "towards-which" we labor.

Though Heidegger does not explicitly refer to the body in this fa-
mous discussion, his terminology is highly suggestive. This notion of
the "ready-to-hand" refers us implicitly back to the hand itself. As we
have seen, one's own hands, as the means with which one works upon
the world, themselves withdraw from explicit thematization. The dis-
appearance of the hand-held tool is none other than an offshoot of
bodily disappearance closing over the incorporated instrument.

This is illustrated by the example of the blind man's stick, referred to
by Polanyi and Merleau-Ponty. When first employing such a stick
one experiences it as an external object exerting impacts upon the
hand. Yet as the tool is mastered one begins to feel through it to the
experiential field it discloses. As Merleau-Ponty writes:

The blind man's stick has ceased to be an object for him, and is no longer
perceived for itself; its point has become an area of sensitivity, extending
the scope and active radius of touch, and providing a parallel to sight.

The stick thus enters into focal disappearance, becoming part of the
"from" structure of the body. This occurs as well with more complex
instruments; for example, I do not attend to the telephone but to the
person with whom it enables me to speak. My natural organs are modi-
fied and supplemented via the incorporation of such artificial
extensions. This internal relation of bodily organ and tool is suggested
by the Greek usage of one word, organon, to refer to both. Nor is this
relation severed when I abandon an instrument, for example, laying
down the telephone receiver. The apparatus yet retains the marginal
presence characteristic of background disappearance. That is, while
momentarily put out of play, instrumental capabilities, no less than the
skills indigenous to my body, remain a part of my corporeal "I can." I
can speak with my friend across the country through the amplified
voice and hearing the telephone provides. Even if I choose to back-
ground this possibility, refusing to call for long stretches of time, there is
yet a significance to my very holding back. Our relationship unfolds in
the space created by our technologically supplemented bodies, not
merely that of our natural flesh. [$^7$] [Note: an asterisk is used to mark
footnotes which take up significant issues not treated within the main
body of the text.]

The term “incorporation” seems to imply an absorptive process operat-
ing in a unilateral direction. Via a phenomenological osmosis, the
body brings within itself novel abilities, its own temporal history, and
tools that remain spatially discrete. However, incorporation is the re-
sult of a rich dialectic wherein the world transforms my body, even as my
body transforms its world. Why did I first learn to swim? Because the
lake outside my window invited me to do so. I acquired a new language
because it was called for by the appearance of books I had to read. The
demands and solicitations of the world gradually lead me to reshape the
ability-structure of my body.

This is true as well in the case of technologies. We build machines
because the resistance of the world demands a supplementing of our
physical powers. For example, the sheer distances we encounter, incom-
mensurate with the structure of our legs, call forth our technologies of
transportation and communication. This dialectical body-world rela-
tion is concretized even in the simplest of instruments. Ordinarily, any
tool will have one end specifically adapted to our human anatomy; the
handle of a saw is designed to fit the hand. However, the other end is
adapted to the world upon which we act. The sawteeth must “fit” the
wood if they are to cut properly. The line, sinker, and bait must fit the
fish. To incorporate a tool is to redesign one’s extended body until its
extremities expressly mesh with the world. [$^8$]

Thus, the from-to movement of the ecstatic body opens us to re-
ciprocal exchange. I go from my tacit embodiment to a thematically
present world. However, the world I discover leads me to redesign the
body itself. Just as the “from” incorporates what once was “to,” the “to”
rebounds to transform the “from.”

Given this fluidity of body-world relations, the disappearances dis-
cussed in these pages constantly overrun the limits of our flesh. As
Elaine Scarry points out, the very house in which one dwells is both a
reconstruction of the surrounding world to fit the body and an enlarge-
ment of our own physical structure. [$^3$] Its walls form a second protective
skin, windows acting as artificial senses, entire rooms, like the bedroom
or kitchen, devoted to a single bodily function. As such, the experience
of one’s own house will be marked by corporeal effacement. As I gaze
through the windows they are in focal disappearance, the means from

which I look upon the world. The bedroom, forgotten during the busy
afternoon, recedes into a sort of background disappearance.

As I go through the day, my extended body ebbs and flows, now ab-
sorbing things, now casting them back onto shore. I do not notice my
body, but neither do I, for the most part, notice the bed on which I sleep,
the clothes I wear, the chair on which I sit down to breakfast, the car I
drive to work. I live in bodies beyond bodies, clothes, furniture, room,
house, city, recapitulating in ever expanding circles aspects of my
corporeality. As such, it is not simply my surface organs that disappear but
entire regions of the world with which I dwell in intimacy.