I am body entirely, and nothing besides; and soul is only a word for something in the body

Frederic Nietzsche

Chapter 1

Body in Western Philosophy: A Survey
In this chapter, an attempt is made to understand various philosophical perspectives on the question of body. We focus our attention on the question how body is being conceptualized in different traditions of western philosophy, especially of ancient, medieval, modern and the so called ‘post modern’ periods. It is often argued that, in the history of philosophy, the mind is given a privileged status, and body is being treated as an obstacle to pure rational thought. Our discussion here is centered on this problem drawing special attention to the status of the body in relation to the traditional dichotomy between ‘physical’ and the ‘spiritual’.

1.1. Ancient perspectives

The first fully articulated account of the relationship between soul (psyche) and body (soma) in western literature can be traced to the works of Plato, whose works are unique on a number of accounts. But, however, even in the pre-Socratic thinking, there was a tendency to separate the soul from body. It is noted by many that, by the sixth century BC, with the advent of Orphism into certain sectors of Greek thinking, the psyche or soul started to be seen as having a better claim than the title of one’s real self. Not only was it held to survive the body, it was deemed to be that whereby we are both physically alive and also alive as rational hence responsible agents.
The ontological status of soul was related to the quality of the life lived. It was the potential subject of eternal reward or punishment for the quality of the life. Status of bodily existence is relegated to some sort of temporal way station. For Socrates, soul had a stronger claim than body. Soul was self evidently more important than body. For this reason soul has a much greater care than the body. Indeed, “the care of the soul” has been defined as the very heart of Socratic philosophy.” As for its nature, Socrates seems to agree with Pythagoreans, Heraclites and others that soul is the ground for our rational and moral as well as our biological self.

Plato’s Dialogues are filled with lessons about knowledge, reality and goodness. Most of the lessons carry with them strong praise for the soul and strong indictments against the body. According to Plato, the body, with its deceptive senses, keeps us away from real knowledge. It rivets us in a world of material things which is far removed from the world of reality. It tempts us away from the virtuous life. It is in and through the soul that we can have knowledge.

Only the soul can truly know because only the soul can ascend to the real world, the world of the ‘forms’. That world is the perfect model. The imperfect or particular things are mere approximates of this perfect or real
world. It is a world which is invisible, unchanging and not subject to decay. To be good, one’s soul must know the Good, that is, the Form of Goodness. This is impossible while one is dragged down by the demands and temptations of bodily life. Hence, bodily death is nothing to be feared, immortality of the soul not only is possible, but greatly to be desired.

Socrates, in Plato’s *Phaedo*, maintains that, anyone who has the spirit of philosophy will not fear death. He says “the body fills us with all kinds of lusts, desires, fears, phantoms and a great deal of nonsense, with the result that we really and truly never ever get a chance to think about anything at all.”

The body and its desires are entirely responsible for war, fiction and fighting. Since it is the acquisition of money which is responsible for all wars it is the body which compels us to acquire money. We are slaves in its service. For all these reasons the body gives us no time for philosophy. Worst of all, if it does give us any time off, and we do get a chance to enquire into anything; the body keeps cropping up at every point in our enquiry. It causes chaos and confusion and so preventing us seeing the truth. Socrates says, “it has been well and truly proved to us that if we are ever going to gain pure knowledge of anything, we must get rid of the body. And we must look at things themselves with the soul itself.”
In Plato’s *Phaedo*, Cebes expresses doubt as to the survival of the soul after death and urges Socrates to offer arguments. The first argument is that, all things which have opposites are generated from their opposites. Life and Death are opposites, and therefore each must co-exist with the other. It follows that souls of the dead exist somewhere, and come back to earth in due course. It is some kind of a continuum.

The second argument is that knowledge is recollection, and therefore the soul must have existed before birth. The theory that knowledge is recollection is supported chiefly by the fact that we have ideas, such as absolute equality, which cannot be derived from experience. We have experience of approximate equality only as absolute equality is never found among sensible object. And yet we know what we mean by absolute equality. Since we have not learnt this from experience we must have brought the knowledge with us from a previous existence. A similar argument, he says, applies to all other ideas. Thus the existence of essences and our capacity to apprehend them proves the pre-existence of the soul with knowledge.

The soul is eternal in the contemplation of eternal things, that is, essences. But the soul is lost and confused when it contemplates the world of changing things as in sense perception. Using the body as an instrument of perception
the soul is dragged into the region of the changeable and it wanders and is confused. In *Phaedo*, Plato says that the soul passes into the other world, the region of purity, eternity and immortality. This state of the soul is called wisdom.

Plato firmly believed that the body was like a prison or tomb for the soul which longed to be set free from it to fly back to the world of Ideas. So philosophy is a kind of “preparation for death”⁴, and is aimed at making the soul stay for ever in the world of Ideas, in other words, be emancipated from repeated rebirth.

In short, one can understand the nature of knowledge, reality, goodness, love, or beauty if he becomes aware of the distinction between soul and body. One has to work hard to free the soul from the lazy, vulgar and hoodwinking body for attaining any of these true realizations. A philosopher is someone who is committed just to that. And that is why philosophers go willingly unto death. It is, after all, only the death of their bodies. Once their souls are released from their bodies, their philosophical realization is considered to be attained.
1.2. **Aristotle on body**

Aristotle’s remarks on the soul and its relationship to the body are quite stimulating to the contemporary philosophy of mind and the cognitive sciences. He regards the soul as bound up with the body and ridicules the Pythagorean doctrine of transmigration. Let us try to have a brief exposition of his account.

Body and soul according to Aristotle, are related as matter and form. “The soul must be a substance in the sense of the form of a material body having life potentiality with it. But substance is actuality, and thus soul is the actuality of a body.” To put in other words, soul is the ‘essential whatness’ of a body. To ask whether the soul and body are one is as meaningless as to ask “whether the wax and the shape given to it by the stamp are one.”

According to Aristotle, neither matter exists without the form, nor does form without matter. In this context soul is the form of the body and they are always found inseparably together in man. Aristotle rejects the views of his master Plato, with regard to the final destiny of human soul.

First of all, Aristotle regards soul as the function of the body just as walking the function of legs. As soon as legs are amputated, walking ceases.
Similarly, if eyes are destroyed there can be no sight. In the same way when the body dies its function in the form of the soul disappears. In this sense, we may say that Aristotle does not accept the Platonic teaching of the immortality of soul.

For Aristotle, all living things are ‘ensouled’. This does not mean that they are made up of two distinct and separable types of entity, soul and body. The matter which they are composed has a certain form or organizational principle, and the soul is simply the form of a natural body. This form enables a given set of materials to perform their function. For example the way the iron is shaped and placed on its handle enables a tool to function. It does not mean that the form could exist ‘on its own’ apart from matter. Soul stands to body in the same way as form stands to matter. Soul cannot act apart from the body.

Aristotle says: “We have now given a general answer to the question, what is soul? It is substance in the sense which corresponds to the account of a thing. That means that it is what it is to be for a body of the character just assigned. Suppose that a tool, e.g. an axe, were a natural body, then being an axe would have been its essence, and so its soul; if this disappeared from it, it
would have ceased to be an axe, except in name.” Aristotle expresses the same idea by means of another example. “Suppose that the eye were an animal-sight would have been its soul, for sight is the substance of the eye which corresponds to the account, the eye being merely the matter of seeing; when seeing is removed the eye is no longer an eye, except in name – no more than the eye of a statue or of a painted figure.”

In the medieval period, body has been conceptualized more or less as a seat of unreason, passion and desire. In Christianity the contrast between mind and body is expressed as the opposition between spirit and flesh. The flesh, i.e. the body was symbol of moral corruption which threatened the order of the world. Christianity saw flesh as the symbol of Fallen Man and irrational denial of God.

St. Augustine, following Plato, treats soul as superior to the body. Soul uses organs of senses as its instrument. He says man is the crown and roof of things created by God. Man has a soul and body as one unitary entity. Soul is immaterial and far superior to body. As a matter of fact soul uses body as its instrument. It is the soul which moves any part of the body, but not vice-versa, for the soul is superior to the body. Body is placed at the intersection of good and evil, life and death.
In dealing with the concept of body St. Paul begins from the Body of Christ. For St. Paul, God created body and soul. The soul is assigned to the divine realm, and body, as a prison, holds the soul back from God. For St. Paul it is not the materiality of the body that is the source of the evil and yet what is evil can come to take up its reign in that very body. This diagnosis is intertwined with a remedy. Christ’s death here functions to terminate the reign of sin and death; his resurrection to initiate the new order of life. In becoming identified with Him the believer is placed in that same.

Concept of body as found in the Christian scriptures is significantly different from what we find in Plato and Aristotle. The body, as Saint Paul argues, is not reducible to a material object or bio-physical entity, for it belongs to the moral and spiritual universe as much as it belongs to the physical world. As such it is flesh. In the final analysis the New Testament does not argue for a rejection of the body but for its redemption and its transformation into a site of moral and spiritual disclosure. This account alone would indicate how far we are from the theory of the body found in Platonism.

1.3. Descartes and Spinoza on body

It was Descartes who, for the first time in the history of thought,
clearly distinguished the life functions of the body from the thought functions of the soul. For Descartes body is understood as an independent presence. He considered body as a substance which is distinct from the mind. In the *Meditations on First Philosophy* he argues that mind is not just distinct from the body, but entirely opposite in nature. The body is extended and divisible. Mind is un-extended and indivisible. Body’s attribute is extension and for mind it is thought. Particular shapes, sizes and motions are modes of body, and particular ideas, volitions and passions are modes of mind.

Descartes maintains that we do indeed have both mind and bodies. The soul is a thinking thing. Its nature, essence and principal attribute is to think. This makes possible all of its modes. Each of the soul’s modes is a thought or a disposition towards a thought. There is no vegetative or sensitive soul. The soul is simple, or indivisible. The soul is distinct from the body. Descartes says “An attribute is included in a substance’s essence when that substance cannot exist without it. In that sense my entire essence is simply to think. I am then a soul, and I cannot exist without thinking.”

For Descartes there is a real distinction between the soul and every body or corporeal substance, including the human body and each of its parts: “if you count a soul and a body, the right answer is always ‘two’ never one.”
Descartes regards body as a kind of machine. The body is a thing essentially similar to other things in the world. In his *Description of the Human Body*, for example, he took issue with those who had attributed functions ‘such as moving the heart and arteries, digesting food in the stomach’ to the soul. For, according to him, these ‘do not involve any thought, and are simply bodily movements’. He argued that thought functions such as understanding, willing, imagining, and sensing are to be ascribed to the soul. Against those who considered the soul to be the source of the life functions in the body, Descartes argued that ‘the heat in the heart is like the great spring or principle responsible for all the movements’ of the body. In so doing, he claimed to be giving a purely mechanical description of the basic motive force of the body.

For him, human body was merely a machine and driven by mechanical causality and susceptible to mathematical analysis. Body is the locus of sense perception and is considered as the source of deception. One’s own thinking yields the first certainty on which all other truths must rest. Through rational intellect the truth is revealed. Descartes’ affirmation of the separation of mind from the body reflects not merely a metaphysical position, but a technological as well, since it implies the objectification and instrumentalization of the body through its reduction to a mechanical device - a machine.
Descartes’ conception of mind and body represents significant departures from the conceptions of both notions in the late scholastic thought in which he was educated. For the late scholastics, working in the Aristotelian tradition, body is composed of matter and form. Matter is that which remains constant in change, while form is that which gives bodies the characteristic properties that they have.

For Descartes, however, all body is of the same kind, a substance that contains only geometric properties. The characteristic properties of particular forms of body are explained in terms of the size, shape and motion of its integral parts.

On the Aristotelian view, as we have seen, the soul is the principle of life, which distinguishes a living thing from a dead thing. It is also taken to be the form that pertains to the living body. For Descartes, the majority of the vital functions are explained in terms of the physical organization of the organic body. As John Write, in his book *Psyche and Soma*, comments, “the mind, thus, is not a principle of life, but a principle of thought ……. It involves reason, as does the rational soul of the Aristotelians, but it also involves other varieties of thought, which pertains to other parts of the Aristotelian soul. Further more, it is a genuine Substance, and survives the death of the body naturally.
and not through special invention.”11 We will be discussing Descartes’ concept of machine-body in great details in the third chapter.

Spinoza’s philosophical project was to overcome the dualistic thinking. Spinoza says that body cannot be understood something as different from mind. Spinoza’s notions of relations between mind and body centers on the familiar seventeenth century concept, that is, the concept of ‘idea’. But, the seventeenth-century implications of mental content and also the older connotations drawn from Greek philosophy are resourcefully intertwined in his use of the term. His version of ‘ideas’ has connections with Aristotle’s concept of form- the intelligible principle of a thing.

But, between Aristotelian ‘forms’ and Spinoza’s ‘ideas’, there are crucial differences as well as continuities. The difference comes out in Spinoza’s famous treatment of the mind as ‘idea’ of the body. For Aristotle the soul is the intelligible principle like form. Knowing the form we can know the capacities of the living human being. The soul is the ‘form’ of the body. It is what we know in knowing the body. But it is not a mental object, set over against the body. It makes the body the living thing as it is.
As Genevieve Lloyd remarks, “Spinozistic minds, like other ‘ideas’, are expressions of reality under the ‘attribute’ of thought. And the same reality is expressed under another attribute – matter or extension – as finite bodies. Each attribute is a way in which the same reality becomes intelligible. Mind and body draw even closer here than in the Aristotelian framework; they are the same reality, though expressed in different ways.” Yet into this new version of mind-matter unity, Spinoza has incorporated the seventeenth-century preoccupation with ideas as mental contents.

Spinoza’s ‘ideas’ differ from Aristotelian ‘forms’ in being essentially mental items, rather than ways in which matter is constituted or determined. But the mind’s status in relation to these mental contents is not that of other seventeenth century versions of ‘ideas’. The individual mind- rather than being the storehouse of private mental contents, set over against an outer world- becomes itself an idea with the human body as its object. The mind’s awareness is not directed at some mental item from which it infers the existence of body as something external. This new relation between mind and matter is immediate. This immediacy contrasts with the mediated relation which is the characteristic of earlier Cartesian treatments of the mind-body relation. It harks back to the Aristotelian doctrine of the mind as the form of the body, the intelligible principle through which body is understood.
The relations between a Spinozistic mind and its body are imbued with the sense of a direct bodily awareness. As Lloyd rightly points out, this is one of the things that make Spinoza’s philosophy very different from later materialist theories of the mind. Spinoza’s version of the identity of the mind reduces neither mind to body nor body to mind. The apprehension of body from a first-person perspective is just as important to it as scientific facts grasped from a third-person perspective. Indeed Spinoza seems to see the scientific knowledge of body through reason as developing out of the direct awareness of body through sense and imagination.

As it is often pointed out, Spinoza’s version of the identity of mind and body has some affinities with more recent phenomenological philosophies of body centered on the concept of intentionality. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, for example, talks of a perspectival form of bodily awareness in which the body as object is not sharply separated out from the self that knows. There are echoes of Spinoza in his talk, in The Phenomenology of Perception, of a kind of knowledge, ‘underneath the objective and detached knowledge of the body’, which we have by virtue of the fact that body is always with us and of the fact that ‘we are our body.’ We will take up Merleau-Ponty’s concept of body for detailed discussion in the fourth chapter.
1.4. Nietzsche and Freud on Body

Nietzsche was determined to avoid the soul-body dualism. He says the soul is not a metaphysical entity or substance distinct from the body, but an instinctual, sub-structural modality of body. He understands soul strictly in terms of the complex function attributable to it through empirical observation. He attempts to offer an account not of the content or material of the soul, but of its form and function. He articulates a model not of what the soul is, but of what it does. He posits the existence of the unconscious drives and affects in order to model the activity and function that he attributes to the soul. In this sense we may say that what Nietzsche gives us is a functionalist account of soul.

Nietzsche’s concept of instinct reflects a mixed nature. He says in every human activity there is even an instinct. Nietzsche’s instinct is a psychological object. Human reality is based on these instinctual forces which manifested through some sort of transference. Nietzsche conceived soul “as social structure of the drives and affects.”14 Nietzsche thus would have us learned to understand ourselves and what we call our ‘minds’ or ‘souls’ in the light of a consideration of our bodily organic existence as living unities of a certain complex sort. Yet he also would have us guarded against taking for granted the validity and adequacy of those conceptions of our bodies and our physiological nature.
suggested to us by ordinary language and biological science. Nietzsche did not accept any simple minded materialistic conception of body. He suggests that “our body is but a social structure composed of many souls.”

We cannot separate the thoughtful activity, which is attributed to some inner realm of the mind, from the social and material context. This position involves rejecting the Cartesian idea of the existence of two fundamentally different realms or substances, mind and matter. Body became the axis of social relation.

We know psychoanalysis is largely oriented to analysis and interpretation of psychical activities. Also the psyche is generally considered to be allied with mind and opposed to the body. But for Freud and a number of other psychoanalysts the body’s role in psychical life was quite significant. In psychoanalytic terms, the self is not a stable or unified entity. Rather the human subject is constituted to its roots through dynamics of desire itself. So the self emerges as an outcrop of the unconscious. From this angle, we can’t really speak of the self outside desire.

Psychoanalytic theory challenges Cartesian understanding of the self as fixed indivisible and permanent whole. The self for Freud, is not something
which exists independently of sexuality, libidinal enjoyment. For Freud, the
human infant begins life in a symbiotic relation to its mother’s body. The small
infant makes no distinction between self and other, itself and the outside world.
At this point, the infant’s world comprises of a kind of merging of itself and
the maternal body, a body that gives satisfaction and pleasure to the infant.

The very distinction between subject and object, self and world,
necessarily involves a mind – shattering repression of the conscious imagination.
Human subject only comes into being through repression, splitting off libidinal
desire permanently into the unconscious. Selfhood is thus fractured precariously
between conscious and unconscious. For Freud, all of our lives are carried on
within this radical otherness of the unconscious. Human subject only comes
into being through the repressed desire for mother. This repressed desire is
bodily desire. So for Freud, self is not something which exists independent of
body.

In the Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality he argues that children
are sexual almost from the moment of birth. Freud links the genesis of the ego
in primary narcissism-the mirror stage- to two distinct but complementary
processes. First, the ego is the product of a series of identifications with and
introjections of the image of others, most especially the mother. Second, the
ego is an effect of re-channeling of libidinal impulses in the subject’s own body.

The body is thus the point of the junction of the social and the individual, the hinge which divides the one from the other. The ego is found out of blockage of libido that had circulated in an unlimited, objectless, formless, pleasure-seeking way. Until around six months the infant does not have unified concept about its body. It is not yet a subject over and above its various bodily experiences; it does not occupy a fixed and bounded space, the barrier provided by its own skin.

The child gradually becomes able to distinguish the self from the other, its body from the maternal body, its insides (bounded by the skin) from the outside. Meanwhile, the sexual drives begin to emerge and to distinguish themselves in their specificity in two levels. Firstly, according to the particular sites or erotogenic zones of the body (oral, anal, phallic, scopophilic etc.) from which they emanate; and secondly with particular sources, aims and objects. Only now do objects, including its own body, appear in space and time. The ego is not simply a condition of the separation of subject and object or self and other. It is a product of the child’s relations to its own body, the other and the socio-symbolic order.
1.5. Concept of body in phenomenology

Though much philosophical reflection on body has proceeded in terms of body-soul or mind-body distinctions, phenomenologists have developed a distinction often expressed in the German words Leib and korper. Leib is usually translated as lived body and Korper is translated as physical body or material body. Edmund Husserl used this distinction in lectures as early as 1907.

Husserl worked on the idea of the body in several different texts. But his most fruitful insights on the body are contained in his Ideas II. Husserl is not, it must be said, a philosopher of the body but a philosopher of consciousness. Moreover, the long-range goal of his work is to establish the autonomy and efficacy of reason. Thus, while Husserl is not a philosopher of the body, his phenomenology of the body envisions what no other philosophy had previously seen.

The distinction between living body and physical body is crucial to Husserl’s account of the life-world. The living body is the body qua living human organ, through which we move or act by will. As Husserl says in The Crisis of European Science and Transcendental Phenomenology “I weld my body or objects at hand, with kinesthesis of my movement.”16 By contrast, the
physical body is not living, not moving volitionally and not moving with kinesthetic awareness.

Husserl says others can perceive with their eyes the movement of our body, our living body, all in the life-world. But only we can directly experience our intentional movement. In kinesthesia we experience our volitional movement of our living body, also in the life-world. Kinesthesia itself is not in space, it is only indirectly in space. It is same as our physical body which is in space.

For Husserl, things are perceptually situated because of the orientation they have to our perceiving and moving bodies. Thus in order to account for the materiality of things, a new way of envisioning the body must come into play. The movements of the body are experienced not like the movement of ever so many things, but from within. The body that constitutes the space of perceived things is also the lived body of free movement. “The courses of kinesthetic sensations are here free courses and this freedom in our consciousness of their transpiring is an essential part of the constitution of spatiality.”

So, the body is treated as a thematic object. The characteristics that Husserl attributes to it is kineaesthetic sensations, its role in constituting the spatiality,
and thus materiality, of things, its function of bearing the soul – clearly go beyond traditional theories in that the correlation between body and world is understood as a whole with interdependent moments. Even for our initial analysis the body is something more than a mechanism; as “ensouled” or, better, as living, its involvement with things runs much deeper that Descartes could imagine.

What this leaves us with, is the idea that the materiality of perceived things requires that they be situated spatially and the idea that the space of perceived things exists by virtue of the body as a center of motility and of action. It is the very materiality of experienced things that demands that the body be characterized not as physical body but as lived-body. In fact, this bond between the lived-body and perceived things is primary and underlies the later interpretation of them using the mathematical notion of extension.

For Husserl there is a correlation between sensations of motility and sensations through which features of material things are given. What Husserl discovers in this connection, is that the very process of touching is reflexive; in touching an object “I become aware of the fact that I am being touched by it.” The very process of touching establishes a new kind of experience. It is a lived experience.
Husserl says there is a circuit running not only between the world and the lived body but also between the lived body and itself. In the very process of touching the lived-body something new enters: the object touched also becomes the object of touching. It is this unique structure of touching while being touched, of being touched while touching, which makes the lived-body palpable to it and comes to constitute it as an object. There seems to be a blending of what is felt and what is perceived.

While this dimension of Husserl’s analysis is clearly the most creative and innovative inasmuch as it integrates body and conscious life in a way never envisioned by the tradition of Western philosophy. In Husserl’s own terms, the lived body is a ‘Nullpunkt’, a point that may have a place but no extension, or, better, a point in terms of which all position, and thus extension, is defined, but which does not itself have that place or extension characteristic of the things it perceives.

The mind/body legacy of Cartesian philosophy was also fundamental to the early philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre, especially in his *Being and Nothingness*. To some extent, Sartre intensified the Cartesian division of mind and body by emphasizing the importance of intentionality of knowing. Under the influence of the phenomenology of Husserl, Sartre distinguished between
being-in-itself (en-soi) and being-for-itself (pour-soi) in order to bring out the irreducible presence of free will and intentional action as necessary features of human existence.

Given the centrality of intentional consciousness in Sartre’s existentialist philosophy, it might appear that the body has little part to play in our being-in-the-world. But, however, the problem of the body plays an important part in Sartre’s treatment of the philosophical question of the existence of other minds, in his analysis of being-for-others. For Sartre, the body is our contact with the world which constitutes our contingency.

Sartre says: “My body is not ‘for me’ like any other physical object. I do not apprehend my body in the way that I apprehend objects in the world. I have a first-person experience of my body as the basis of my action, as my centre of reference and orientation. It is part of my facticity that I always see things from a point of view.” Briefly, his argument is that we do not know other minds, but only minds as they are apprehended through the body. Sartre’s account of the body is thus closely connected with his emphasis on intentionality and this feature of his argument is illustrated by his distinction between the three ontological dimensions.
First, he drew attention to the body-for-itself. “The body is not just a physical fact for me, along side other facts - this typewriter, this chair or this paper – because my lived experience in the world is always from the point of view of my body.”

He says, in seeing the world we are not conscious of our eyes but only of a field of vision. “My body-for-itself cannot be an object to me precisely because I am it.”

Further more it is through objects in the world we apprehend our body. Our embodiment is indicated by the objects in the world.

Secondly, Sartre distinguished the ontological dimension of the body-for-others. “Whereas I cannot apprehend my body as an object but only as a body-for-itself, I apprehend the body of the other as an object about which I take a point of view and realize that my body as an object is the body-for-others.”

Sartre says that the other is perceived not as a cadaver, but as a being-in-body with intentions whose actions or gestures are goal-directed and purposeful – such as striking a match to light a fire in order to eat. This interaction of body as a subject for us and an object seen by the other leads to the third ontological dimension. “Being seen and observed by the other results in recognition of my facticity, that I am an object to the other.” The body for itself becomes objectified and alienated.
Sartre’s attempt to transcend Cartesian dualism has been criticized on a variety of grounds. These objections may be summarized in the claim that Sartre did not overcome dualism. The problem was simply transferred to a distinction between *en-soi* and *pour-soi*, a distinction which is problematic and inconsistent with Sartre’s commitment to an intentional ontology.

The consequence of these criticisms and debates in French phenomenological philosophy is a rejection of any dualism between mind and body, and a consequent insistence on the argument that the body is never simply a physical object but always an embodiment of consciousness. Further more, we cannot discuss the body without having a central concern for intentions. The objective, ‘outside’ world is always connected to my body in terms of my body’s action or potential actions on them.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty has made the most original and enduring contribution to post-Husserlian phenomenology in France, through his attempt to offer a radical description of the primary experiences of embodied human existence. In opposition to all forms of dualism, in his major work *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), he offers a phenomenological account of our ‘being-in-the-world’ as a corrective to the distorted accounts of experience found, on the one hand, in rationalism, idealism, and what he calls
‘intellectualism’, and, on the other hand, in empiricism, behaviorism, and experimental science.

For Merleau-Ponty, thinking was not the product of some disembodied mind located somewhere outside the material world, beyond time and space. It was not simply the result of a body reacting to its surroundings. Instead, thought is part of an active relationship between humans and their world. Prior to thought and representation, there is a primordial co-existence between the body and its world. Space and time are not something that the body is in, but there is a unity between the body space and time.

Merleau-Ponty not only declared the unity between the body, space-time and consciousness, but also how consciousness is always situated in a particular location. We can never attain objective knowledge of a world that exists separately from our own subjectivity. All knowledge is embodied and situated within that fundamental unity between subject and objects. We always understand the world from within an active and relative perspective. Objects are not located in a transcendental spatial frame work. They are situated in relation to the agent’s specific field of action. So there is a fundamental variable relation between the body and its objects.
The body could be said to be a thinking body and to have intentionality prior to the emergence of language and self-consciousness. The body reaching out to grasp an object is one of the basic forms of intentional action. No cognitive representation is needed for such performance. Thinking and intentional activity are therefore pre-linguistic and pre-cognitive. So, prior to the self-conscious subject, there exists the bodily subject which is its foundation.

Merleau-Ponty says that no cognitive form of apprehension of the world could exist without the bodily subject and its performance. Merleau-Ponty opposes one of the central aspects of the Cartesian thought, where thinking subject is presented as a spectator. For Merleau-Ponty we are not spectators. We are always lived in relation with world, grounded in the activity of body. Merleau-Ponty expresses the intimate relation of body and world as follows: “our own body is in the world as the heart is in the organism; it keeps the visible spectacle constantly alive, it breaths life into it and sustains it inwardly, and with it forms a system.”

However, Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of the body is not based on any notion of pre-given bodily senses. He says body that is active in the world brings together the senses in a coherent way. Then he says the basis of human
thought is not some abstract mind or cognition, rather it is the human body and its accumulated actions which form into habits.

Merleau-Ponty rejects any notion that ‘I’ is located in another dimension to the body acting in space and time. Merleau-Ponty also claims that the body is the basis of meaning and understanding and also of the ability to project ourselves into possible or imaginary situations. The symbolic function therefore rests on bodily being. So, Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of the body goes beyond biological account.

A serious problem with the scientific account of the body is that science distances the body, admitting only phenomena that can be mathematised and objectified. It ignores the body as it is lived by each of us. In response to the limitations of the scientific method, Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological method entails describing phenomena as they appear to us and are lived by us in our experiences. We will be discussing these aspects again in the fourth chapter.

1.6. Michel Foucault on body

The Post Structuralist turn in philosophy and social sciences results in a significant shift in theorizing body. Michel Foucault has a theory of the body grown in the soil of Nietzsche’s thought but with roots in Merleau-Ponty’s
shift from the concept of the body to that of the flesh. For Merleau-Ponty the flesh is understood as an intertwining of structures and forces that interact without the dominance of one above all others or the agency of a controlling center. Similarly, Foucault looks to constellations of different nexus of power (hospitals, political regimes, schools, prison etc.) as applied to the body to an account for its constitution. Such nexuses employ normalizing practices that effectively discipline the body and configure not just its appearance in different eras but even its very materiality.

In his writings, Foucault was of the view that subjectivity is shaped by the way in which individual’s bodies are acted upon by disciplinary technologies. He believed that the human body is central to the question of who the self is, because the individuals are classified in terms of these bodies and their bodily functions. This led to him in examine how the body is managed, organized and disciplined in institutions such as prisons, schools or hospitals. To explain this relation between the body and institutions, he uses the term, ‘bio-politics’.

For Foucault, the body is a discursive construction. To say that the body is a discursive construction for Foucault is not to deny a substantial corpus, but to insist that our apprehension of it, our understanding of it, is necessarily
mediated by the contexts in which we speak. The human body is always a signified body and as such cannot be understood as a ‘neutral object’ upon which science may construct ‘true’ discourses. The human body and its history presuppose each other.

One of the most striking aspects in the work of Michel Foucault is the relationship between power and subjectivity. Foucault strongly rejects the notion of psychoanalysis, that human beings are individual subjects first and social agents second. Foucault believes that such claim is far too simple.

Human beings are neither individuals nor social agents, but individualized through power. However, the power that Foucault explores does not exist in itself. Rather, it is a relationship between institutions and bodies. It functions by extracting, harnessing, destroying and creating certain forces and drives in bodies. This process changes human from physical bodies into subjects. That is not to suggest that the process of individuation is uniform and generic. The opposite is in fact true. Foucault looks at several modes of subjectification. He points out that they are not mutually exclusive, nor are entirely independent. It is important to note and examine their differences. Different methods of applying power to bodies results in different individuals being produced.
Discipline and punish expanded the scope of Foucault’s inquiries into this modern reconfiguration of knowledge. His emphasis has always been on the structure of discourse. “Discourse is used to describe individual acts of language, or ‘language in action’- the ideas and statements that allow us to make sense of and ‘see’ things.” Foucault’s genealogical studies emphasize the essential connection between knowledge and power. The genealogist is a diagnostician who concentrates on the relations of power, knowledge, and the body in modern society. Genealogy is a process of analyzing and uncovering the historical relationship between truth, knowledge and power.

Foucault suggests, following Nietzsche that knowledge and truth are produced by struggles both between and within institutions, fields and disciplines and then presented as if they are eternal and universal. Power and knowledge are not external to one another. They operate in history in a mutually generative fashion. Neither can be explained in terms of the other, nor reduced to the other.

This concept has made a significant contribution to feminist thinking on the body. Of all poststructuralist work on this theme, Foucault’s theory has received probably the widest acceptance because of his insistence on the body as a historical and culturally specific entity.
One of the most important contributions that Foucault’s theory of the body has made to feminist thought is a way of conceiving of the body as a concrete phenomenon without eliding its materiality with a fixed biological or pre-discursive essence. The problem of conceptualizing the sexualized body without posting an original sexual difference is one that has preoccupied feminist theorists. On a fundamental level, a notion of the body is central to the feminist analysis of the oppression of women because it is upon the biological difference between the male and female bodies that the edifice of gender inequality is built and legitimized.

The idea that women are inferior to men is naturalized and, thus, legitimized by reference to biology. This is achieved through a twofold movement. Firstly, women’s bodies are marked as inferior by being compared with men’s bodies, according to male standards. Secondly, biological functions are put together with social characteristics. In many respects, masculine characteristics can be seen to be related to dominant perceptions of the male body, i.e. firmness, aggression, strength. However, man, unlike women, is understood as being able to transcend being defined in terms of his biological capacities via the use of his rational faculties.
Post-Structuralist feminists have worked to redefine the body itself as a product of cultural meaning. Judith Butler critically takes up Foucault’s analysis of the body. Judith Butler argues that we can never conceive of a body even in its materiality that is prior to cultural inscription, signification and form. Body’s materiality for Butler, is a discursive construct. There is no body which is free from cultural inscription.

Butler says that “the body is not an abiding natural ground, an ‘immediate given’, but is always already a cultural sign.”26 It is not a ready surface awaiting signification, but a set of boundaries, “a surface whose permeability is politically regulated and established, for instance through prohibitions.”27 For Butler, naturalness of the body is illusory and thoroughly culturally produced. Body is a cultural surface, inscribed by cultural significations and masquerading as natural. Butler goes too far in her ‘denaturalization of the body’. The danger in her Post-Structuralist analysis as it is pointed out by many is its complete abandonment of nature and support to purely cultural determinants in the construction of body.

2.7. **Relevance of Merleau-Ponty’s notion of body**

Carol Bigwood, in her paper ‘Renaturalizing the body’, says “if we reduce the body as a whole to a purely cultural phenomenon, then we are unwittingly
perpetuating the deep modern alienation of our human being from nature.”

By reducing body as a whole to cultural phenomenon, we are reinforcing the anthropocentric, and the androcentric worldviews. These views see everything only in the light of human cultural use. Such alienation and anthropocentrism cripple our sentience to the extent that we are able to contact only ourselves and our own products. Bigwood says, we cannot take the broad lines of existence fully into our cultural hands and bend them as we will. This is not because history is predetermined or that our biology is our destiny. But because the way life articulates it has as much to do with the response of other nonhuman beings.

What is needed at this Juncture, as Bigwood sees it, is to ‘renaturalize’ the body, i.e. to release the body from a dichotomized nature and culture. There is a need to work out a new natural-cultural model of the body that goes beyond both the fixed, biological body and the post-structuralist culturally inscribed body. As deep ecologists have pointed out, our human being takes place within a natural-cultural relational field. It is not only involved in cultural fields of forces but also a part of interconnected relations with the nonhuman.

Body is neither the result of biological determinants nor purely cultural construct. With the help of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of the body,
Bigwood attempts to recover a non-cultural, non-linguistic body that accompanies and is intertwined with our cultural existence.

As we have seen, Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of body goes beyond biological account. Merleau-Ponty describes body as a sentience that is born together with a certain existential environment. Body has a unique sensitivity to its environs. It genuinely experiences rather than records phenomena. Body is participated in the constitution of sensory experience. It has a pre-cognitive level of experience. Experience shows that as living body we are sensibly attuned to, and harmonized with, our surroundings through a “latent knowledge” that is present before any effort of our cognition.”

The post structuralist’s culturally inscribed body is disembodied and ‘lacks terrestrial weight and locatedness’. Like both empiricist and idealist accounts of the body, it has left out this aspect of the body’s incarnate situation. Bigwood says that our existence is always indeterminate to varying degrees, and also ambiguous. Because the primary sensory meanings that are reached through our co-existence with others and things always have several meanings. Our body is not a fixed given substance, untouched by the dominant representational system. Yet its anchorage in the world, nonetheless, consists
in an interconnected web of relations with the human and nonhuman, the cultural and natural.

Post structuralist account of the body leaves out this anonymous non-cognitive cleaving of our bodies to others and things. This non-personal perceptual existence underlies and intertwines with our personal cultural and intellectual lives. This is what Merleau-Ponty calls a natural body. It runs through us, providing possibility of phenomenal presence. Every perception takes place in this ambience of generality and is presented to us anonymously. Merleau-Ponty says, “just as birth and death are non-personal horizons, so is there a non-personal body, systems of anonymous functions, blind adherences to beings that I am not the cause of and for which I am not responsible.” He says, “I am ‘connatural’ with the world through no effort on my part.”

This ‘connatural’ body that continually finds its way into the core of our most personal lives and enunciates our communications to others and things. The ‘connatural’ body is neither empirically nor logically prior to the cultural body, but is existentially a co-determinant of the body. So, it can be distinguished abstractly from cultural determinants. We are in communication with an inexhaustible sensory world that we do not possess and that takes place anterior to ourselves. For Bigwood and others, this fresh model of the body helps us to
realize that we exist simultaneously in cultural and natural ways that are inextricably interwoven.

We do not want to elaborate on the implications of this model here. What Bigwood and others learn from Merleau-Ponty is that his thought provides us with a conceptual platform to rethink body in a radically new direction. By this, we are able to evolve a new model which resists two tendencies: 1) the tendency of reducing the body to a machine; 2) the tendency of reducing it to a ‘cultural construct’.