

The Skin of Perception:

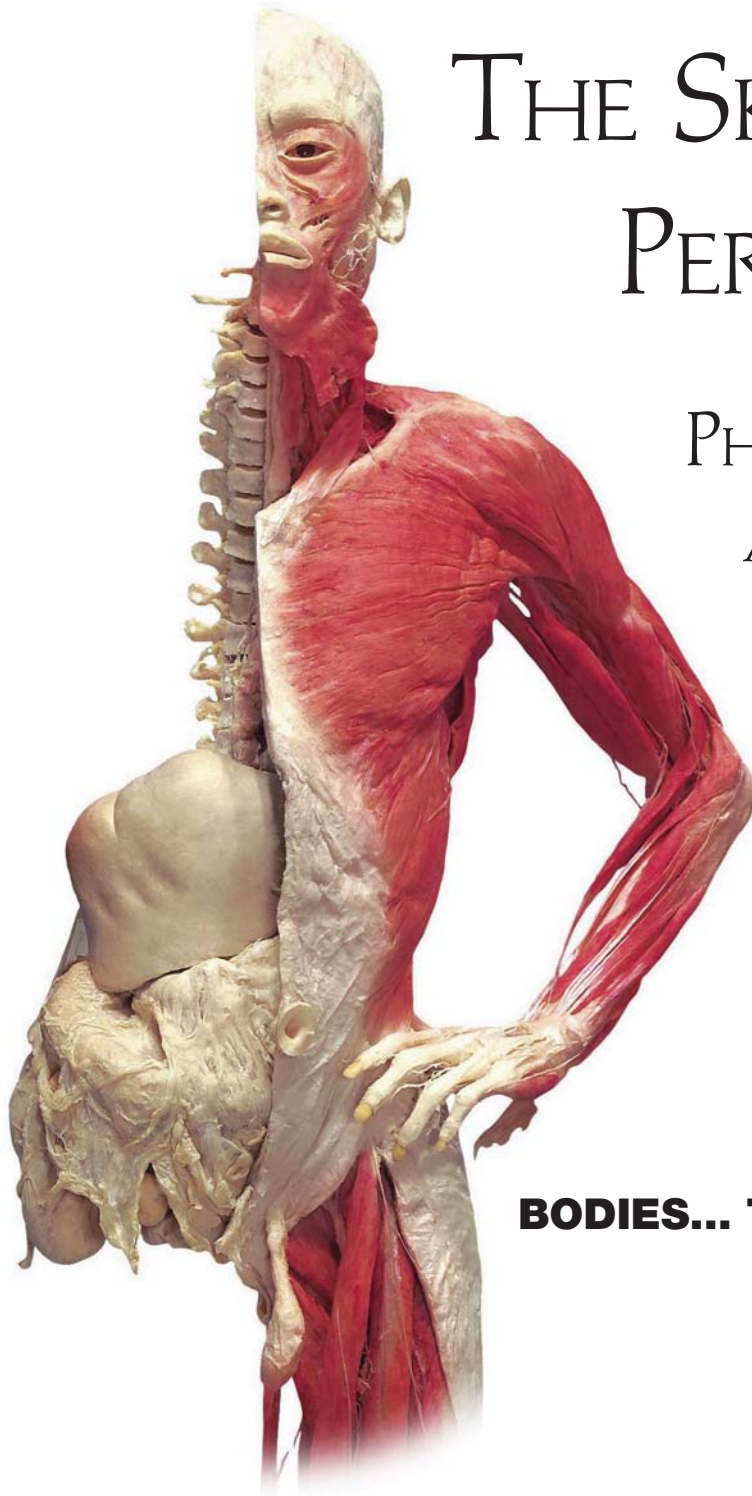
Phenomenology as a Cartesian Proposition

by Mark Daniel Cohen

BODIES. . . The Exhibition

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HYPERION:
ON THE FUTURE OF AESTHETICS



THE SKIN OF PERCEPTION

PHENOMENOLOGY
AS A CARTESIAN
PROPOSITION

BODIES... The Exhibition

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Current Venues:

South Street Seaport Exhibition Centre, New York

Auditorio de Medicina del ITESM, Hospital San José, Monterrey, Mexico

The Shops at Sunset Place, Miami, through Mar 25, 2007

800 Pike St., Seattle, through Mar 31, 2007

Beurs van Berlage Concert and Conference Hall, Amsterdam, through Apr 14, 2007

(Note: Not all venues list closing dates.)

“

Man is only man at the surface. Remove the skin, dissect, and immediately you come to machinery.

—Paul Valéry

“

Webster was much possessed by death
And saw the skull beneath the skin;
And breastless creatures under ground
Leaned backward with a lipless grin.

—T. S. Eliot, “Whispers of Immortality”

“

When you look at yourself from a universal standpoint,
something inside always reminds or informs you that there are
bigger and better things to worry about.

—Albert Einstein

Our destruction, if we bring it, will not be indefinite. It will be a definite thing indeed, and in deed. Decimation cannot be minced by the power of undecidability, not when it is the house of undecidability that will be decimated. As we ensconce ourselves in ruminations on the undecidable nature of speculation and encounter, as we amuse ourselves by focusing our thoughts on the ever-retreating objective of indeterminate specification draping all we can know and all we can experience, all that is phenomenal, in a shroud of indistinction and pride ourselves on our inability to hold back the tide of deconstruction from anything it is possible for us to know, we find ourselves in a place of growing absolutes. The shadows are gathering all around us and pool into a darkness that is inescapable—the absolute of eventuality. What we are about to do to ourselves falls outside the perimeters of what is in our power to control. If there is an undecidability, it is our inability to decide, for our thoughts are bringing us death, and it appears there is nothing we can do about them.

In his essay “On the Use and Abuse of History for Life,” Nietzsche warned us of the time in the life of the mind in which we live. The will falters with the awareness of history; it folds with the glance in the mirror, with the sense of the self as actor—it is subject to the law of Hamlet, doomed to the fate of Macbeth. We live in an awareness of history unfolding, for history has come to consume the present as well as the past. We see ourselves as agents in a story, even as we act as agents in the story. As Sontag wrote in the beginning of “‘Thinking Against Oneself’: Reflections on Cioran” (in which, in an act of audacious phrasal synonymy, she virtually rewrites the opening section of Nietzsche’s essay), “The human mind possesses now, almost as second nature, a perspective on its own achievements that fatally undermines their value and their claim to truth. For over a century, this historicizing perspective has occupied the very heart of our ability to understand anything at all. Perhaps once a marginal tic of consciousness, it’s now a gigantic, uncontrollable gesture—the gesture whereby man indefatigably patronizes himself.”

The intrepid risk of “the historicizing perspective,” committed as an intellectual “gesture,” is getting behind the curve, and that intrepidity is now harrowing. We are entering a fresh historical period: the era of universal nuclear capability, if it can maintain itself long enough to become an “era.” Given that there seems to be nothing that will withhold it, functionally, meaningfully, we are already there. And we have come to no pertinent determinations of what we will do about it, of how we will survive it. With every statement by a public official or political commentator concerning the number of years necessary for Iran to complete its nuclear program or for North Korea to build a rocket able to reach the contiguous states, we demonstrate our failure to comprehend just where we are. What matters is not the lead-time but the inevitability. It is as good as done. And we have thought of no answers.

And more is coming, for we have invented far more than nuclear power. Our risks are the results of the achievements of our minds, and our failures are the results of the shortcomings of our ability to think. As our technological ingenuities proliferate, the power of decimation disseminates. Increasing degrees of damage can be done by groups of diminishing size, and so by increasing numbers of people, and eventually it will be possible for any one person to destroy every last person. The lead-time does not matter—functionally we are there now. It would be unwise to suggest scenarios, but one need only look at several recent films to construe a sense of the general possibilities: *The Peacemaker*, *The Siege*, *Outbreak*, *12 Monkeys*.

And so, as is always the case, we are always thinking about the wrong thing, and in the wrong way. We all cut our teeth on the self-enveloping intricacies of deconstructive principles, of the protocols of ineradicable indeterminacy, of the implausibility of absolutes of any species, and if we do nothing wise, and if we do not do it shortly, our fate will be soon be decided absolutely. For the first time in history, we have the capability of destroying ourselves utterly. And at just the right moment, we have devised the incapability to see such a thing is

possible. We have surreptitiously postulated our own immortality, for we have become incapable of conceiving of our thorough, universal demise. The timing is perfect.

But we should know this, for it is by principle that we are always thinking wrong. If we recognize the broad applicability of the distinctly Heraclitean proposition of the *enantiodromia* of C. G. Jung (and a solid Nietzschean he), a proposition it appears more broadly applicable than even Jung thought, we should recognize that a time in which we are absorbed by the cutting-edge theorizations of indeterminacy must be a time in which adamantine implications are facing us, a time in which we confront eventualities that, once occasioned, cannot be corrected. Our thoughts convey by their “gestures” precisely the opposite of what they say—this is our nature, at least, our nature when we gather together in sufficient numbers and then attempt to think. For we should know that when enough people agree, the idea must be wrong. An individual may be possessed of insight; a congregation will delude itself. This is the true implication of the herd instinct—when the euphuism of the time leans to fathomless degrees of intricacy, a stark fate is looming.

And it is not a faltering of the will that is the issue at hand, for it is not that we cannot act, but that we do not see. The face in the mirror does not mesmerize; it obscures. We know not where we are; we know not what we do; we know not what we think, for there are structural patterns in thought that preclude our grasping our dilemmas, that put us at the mercy of ourselves.

For there is a gulf, there is a gap in the seal of perception. As much as our awareness of the world is determined by the laws that pertain to the epistemological conditions of knowing, as much as laws of thought rule the manner in which we may know and the decisions we may think to enact—knowledge and decisions that may well be capable of infinite parsing, of interminable splitting into ever subtler shades of indistinction, that may well refer to phenomena of ultimately indecipherable aspect—we commit actions that occur not among phenomena but in the world, that are as real as is the world without the range of our perceptions, and whose ramifications obey the laws not of thought but of objective reality, of physics: that are not implications but eventualities. For we are minds, but we are as well bodies, objects in a world of objective facts—facts among an ocean of facts. If the world is beyond our capacity to know with perfectly defined accuracy, with precision, so are our bodies, so are we, and so are the actions we devote. If our knowledge cannot be perfect, then our knowledge of ourselves must be imperfect, for we are, in the end and as Nietzsche knew so well, each of us a piece of nature. And unless we are incapable of surprise, unless we are competent to live through only what we can conceive, we will do to ourselves what we cannot predict. However uncertain our knowledge is, we are bodies and subject to absolutes, for as physical realities, the surest thing we are capable of is death, and death cannot be diced.

For finally, we live and, ultimately, we die not in the “world” we perceive

but in the world, and the world has the power to eradicate phenomena—to eviscerate our minds of every perception and thought, to extirpate our minds themselves—not just the phenomena of decimation but the very potency of conceiving phenomena itself. The world is apart from our power to encounter it, for the world will remain when we have erased ourselves from it. The scorched earth will be left behind when we all are gone, and the power that will flame it to a cinder is found at a level of magnification beyond the range of our senses, outside the precincts of the phenomenal. We will call down the thunder from a source we cannot conceive, but it will come as a result of what we will have created.

Such thoughts enter the mind when viewing “BODIES... The Exhibition,” not merely because the exhibition space is filled with what seem to be, and essentially are, coagulated renditions of what we are about to turn ourselves into, but because the experience of observing the quasi-scientific specimens of human remains itself invokes a pointed instance of the essential anomaly of our position as creatures of the world and as knowers of the world, as those who know ourselves as particles of the earth no better than we know the world of which we are fragments.

The exhibition in New York is only one installment of an enterprise of entertainment presentations—not quite art exhibitions and not quite science museum shows—continuing to arrive in a series of cities around the world. “BODIES... The Exhibition,” as seen in New York, presents 22 whole-body human specimens and 260 organ and partial body specimens preserved through the use of liquid silicone rubber. The technique involves the dissection of human bodies to expose inner structures and the substitution of the bodies’ water with a liquid silicone mixture that hardens to transform the remains into permanently preserved specimens with the texture of rubber and the appearance of the originals, meaning the appearance of authentic cadavers, which these apparently are, in that the original tissues evidently are transformed but not removed. The body parts are displayed with palpable sobriety, and the full-body specimens are opened to reveal muscles and organs and are posed: running with muscles streaming off in the seeming breeze, sitting in the posture of Rodin’s *Thinker*, playing football, and committing other such pantomimed antics. *

For those who will not make it to any of the venues: The alter-ego version of the New York exhibition (refer to the note at the end of this text) serves as one of the sets in *Casino Royale*, providing a reasonably clever reflection of the biological Calvinism that establishes the underlying value system for the Bond stories and that hasn’t been seen in the film series since the middle of *Thunderball*.

There have been expressions of shock and outrage over the exhibitions. Directors of the Seattle Museum of the Mysteries issued a statement declaring the exhibition demonstrates “a gross disrespect for the dead” and labeling it “a violation of basic human rights and dignity.” In England, Tory MP Teddy

Taylor remarked, "This will only appeal to ghoulish groups in our society. What possible benefit can a normal person gain from looking at dead bodies?" Also in England, a spokesperson for the Nuffield Foundation, a charitable trust in the United Kingdom, announced, "Human tissue should not be bought and sold or otherwise treated as an object of commerce. Body parts, anatomical specimens or preserved bodies should not be displayed in connection with public entertainment or art." A spokesperson for the British Medical Association said, "We feel uncomfortable with the money aspect of it." In Austria, the Dean of Mannheim objected that the exhibitions violate the sanctity of the human body for the purposes of commercial art. And from the art contingent, there has been little support forthcoming—David Lee, editor of *The Jackdaw*, an English newsletter on the visual arts, stated, "I will go and thousands of others will go too. But in the end it is a freak show."



It is notable that none of the objections quoted here, nor those observed by this writer elsewhere, give reasons for the outrage. The ghastliness is taken to be self-evident, which is to say that the arguments are made by fiat—without reasoning. Yet, there does seem to be something if not reasonable then at least predictable about such expressions of dismay. It seems as if one should not be surprised by them—it seems sensible that one would be shocked by this visual material, even if one cannot specify what there is in it that is shocking. There is the suggestion of something purely reactive here, something deeply rooted and not deliberate. And it is as in all things, the reactive is a mental lock, a willfulness not to think, a willfulness not to see. It is the vacuum gap of the mind.

So the question establishes itself: What about the viewing of preserved human corpses is shocking, shocking in a way that the viewing of manufactured models of the same structures would not be?

It is clear at the first degree of consideration that these specimens invoke

in the thoughts the mind / body dichotomy—they are virtually, in perhaps a reverse application of the contemporary meaning of the word and reflective of the near ambulatory postures into which the complete bodies have been maneuvered, a dramatization of the essential dilemma. As the chafing reactions make equally evident, a certain position with regard to the mind / body dichotomy is necessary to our equilibrium. The stability of the equation with which the two concepts are contemplated determines our stability in contemplating them—if the balance of halves is recalibrated, the balance of large numbers of people is disturbed. A nerve is being touched, which is to say a need is being disdained.

The reason for the sensitivity is clear: We die. More precisely, we know that our bodies die, and unless the dichotomy is maintained, and maintained as a parallel dispensation—such that the two do not intersect, do not coincide at any point, but retain each a status independent of the other, even given the need for a principle of interaction across the distance of categorical difference—we die with them. What is touched by the very suggestion of the mind / body dichotomy is not just a nerve, but the nerve, for as Schopenhauer observed in a remark that sets the “fulcrum absolute,” the discretionary fixed point of speculation without which speculation is not possible (and in this case, not so discretionary), to philosophy: “Indeed, without death there would hardly have been any philosophizing. . . . All religions and philosophical systems are directed principally to this end, and are thus primarily the antidote to the certainty of death which reflecting reason produces from its own resources.”

The reported responses from von Hagens to the outrage his version of the exhibition has provoked indicate a lack of awareness of the intrinsic sensitivity. His explanations regarding what he claims are the educational values of the exhibitions, the effort on his part to dispel the elitism of the medical profession and return to a time, as he sees it, in which the function of scientific inquiry was to promote the general enlightenment and during which dissection arenas held public examinations of the dead, possess a touch of blithe insouciance—in short, he gives little indication that he gets it. The tone of it all resembles the responses we often encounter from contemporary artists when they manage, as they seem to do with diminishing frequency now, to outrage the general sensitivities. (One may consult a list of Turner Prize winners for a typical roster; other line-ups will do as well.) They often respond with a “who, me?” attitude, as if not quite aware of what all the fuss is about. Their defenses and explanations are unconvincing, mere excuses tailored to the audience, the dropping of words that appear suitable for forgiveness, a vocal pantomime of penance, and particularly so in that their statements so often seem off the point—a deliberate or unconscious shifting of the question, discussing their intentions in place of their unwitting insults or abuses, coupled with a tone of naïve astonishment, which might entirely be sincere, that anything seems wrong to anyone. Other than in their implicit testimony to the insularity of the art world society—an inadvertent diagnostic, an unintended confession—these sensitive souls defend themselves by claiming a complete lack of comprehension of how anyone else feels: a distinctive confession on the part

of anyone claiming to be an artist.

There is testimony to a severe lack of conviction in this. The simple fact that they are not prepared to outrage, that they claim not to get it, distinguishes them from those who have in the past found the need to outrage to make a crucial point. Think of the Surrealists, the Futurists, even the Dadaists—they knew precisely what they were doing. And of course, we know how this situation arises, how such a falling-off is there: like professionals in any field, artists now follow the money, they do what the industry asks them to do, they attempt to master the game they wish to play in order to get along in the world, to make their way, to make their living. Young artists appeal to established expectations, knowing frequently nothing of them other than that they are established expectations. The dedication is circumstantial, a commitment to whatever standards and expectations presently prevail, to whatever it is that will get them into the sub-society in which they wish to dwell. Unlike the truly dedicated, who are not slaves to circumstance but the authors of it, elsewhere they would do or have done differently. Had they been born in another place, at another time, they would have done what would have served there and then, they never would have fallen upon what they now dedicate the only life they will ever have to accomplishing. Here is the herd instinct in full flower.

Of course, one has no business speculating about the personal motives of specific individuals, von Hagens or the organizers of the exhibition under consideration here—one cannot possibly know. It is sufficiently difficult to know one's own motives. However, the apparent tone of these defenses, the touch of blithe if bemused unconcern that seems to be there, is not anomalous—it is authorized by the age.

We live in a time of philosophical oblivion. In fact, we are in the business of philosophical smugness. We find the inherited dichotomies and the questions they entail to be quaint, as if we are smarter than the entire tradition of philosophical inquiry, as if we were naturally capable of out-thinking, by dint of our historical position, many of the greatest minds who have bequeathed us their most ardent intellectual efforts. Several months ago in these pages, I wrote about the naivety of disregarding Pascal's horror at the infinite spaces in which we figure so little, about the continuing, the permanent pertinence of his observations. The same should be said of Descartes and his conception of the *res cogitans* and the *res extensa*. The mind / body distinction is not so easily dismissed, not so easily relegated to the scrapheap of historical reflection, not so readily dispelled with posturings about the folly of dualistic thinking, which, like poised cadavers, strike a pose of pretended intellectual animation but fail to argue an alternative formulation. To disregard out of hand Descartes' dichotomy is comparable to shrugging off Pascal's dread. It is simply obtuse, and, like our art, fails to comprehend how other people feel. Descartes speaks to a perception that not only has a certain self-evidence—the most rudimentary examination of the quality of circumstance demonstrates that the aspects of the mind are all categorically alike, as are the aspects of the body, and each group is categorically different from the other. Further, his perception



Right Left Anatomy
BODIES... The Exhibition

appears to be a necessary view of the species regarding its own condition.

The recognition of the mind / body distinction is not only necessary—necessary by all appearances to the emotional equanimity of the typical person—it is necessarily religious. For the Cartesian position postulates this world and then another world beyond this one, it posits something outside this world. And, as an intellectual formulation that requires a parallel arrangement of equal status, the dichotomy collapses, for the localization—the identification of my mind as *my mind*, tied to *my body* and no other, and vice versa—necessitates an intersection that violates the conditions of the formulation, and as a result, one of the two worlds becomes paramount. This world becomes a dependent of the other world—the mind, or what is now the soul, possesses the body as an attribute, until it doesn't, when it is free to waft to its proper environment. The mind becomes essence. In the end, the other world becomes the truth, this world the veil of appearances, and we have the core religious proposition, and the core metaphysical proposition, as Nietzsche employed the word. Thus, the

complaint concerning the violation of

the sanctity of the body, a complaint that ought to be a contradiction in terms, for the body is the mundane portion of the pairing. But the body obtains its sanctity from the mind, from that of which it is an attribute, from that which provides it its nature. And thus the shock at seeing the body opened to reveal mere machinery, immediately below the surface.

And as a religious proposal, the dichotomy is reactive, or if one likes, an article of faith. One can argue it forward to tease out the implications, but one cannot argue it backwards, to work through the premises upon which it rests. There

are no reasons behind it for there is no reasoning underlying it. It is a posture, an attitude, a willfulness not to think. As an article in the life of the mind, it is lifeless.

One can see this collapse throughout the exhibition. There, one is a mind, gazing upon bodies, as if we thinking, living beings—living beings among not mere models of us but actual cadavers, beings authentically like us but inanimate—were witnessing the bodies as existing elsewhere, in some other realm, as if on earth whereas we, the ones seeing them, are viewing them from the realm of truth, knowing them for what they are. We are at the eyepiece of the microscope; the body is on the slide, beneath our gaze. There, we look upon bodies as we would look upon anything else—from outside, from above, subject to our examination.

And so, with the inevitable collapse of the dichotomy—with the recognition that there must always be a collapse in the dichotomy, for the positing of a dichotomy implies a relation, a continuum of identity, an alignment of each half of the dichotomy exclusively with the other, a principle of alternatives as opposed to irrelevances, a hole in the wall between—philosophy breaks down. Thought resorts to thoughtlessness, to the refusal to reason out the conundrum. Something is wrong with the formulation.

The error is, as it must be, in the unexamined assumption. The assumption in the Cartesian dichotomy that goes uninquied is that of existence. In the initial position, each half of the dichotomy, both mind and body, is assumed to exist and to exist in a degree comparable to the other. Both are, and each is as thoroughly as the other is. The one quality both minds and bodies share is existence, and in that, and in that one attribute alone, they share an identity. The moment one recognizes the distinction between the two, one asserts the reality of each alone. Such is taken for granted, and the automatic proposition has implications, for it connotes that both mind and body are capable of existing alone, each independent of the other, if it could depend only from its own terms of constitution. Hence, the space is cleared for the supposition, at minimum, that the mind may well come to exist on its own terms, divorced of its body once it must be, that it may survive the body's death. But this assumption of factual circumstance does not denote demonstrable fact. We see in this exhibition and could see elsewhere bodies divorced of minds, but we have never seen living human bodies that are mindless, nor have we witnessed minds apart from bodies. The alternatives are hypostatized, and there is a literalism in this—proposed as separate, the mind and body are taken to be potentially extant as separate entities, taken for granted to be in fact as proposed in theorization, and that is not the same thing. Facts are not theorizations. There is a categorical difference.

Theorizations are values and variables in a developing line of thought and need no more be capable of reification than is the square root of negative one, as long as the ultimate result of the line of thought is an illumination of a heretofore inexplicable state of affairs. The dichotomy of mind / body is

credible and is not directly resolvable. Clearly, an approach differing from immediate reification is required.

An approach is available, for it presents itself upon the rejection of another unexamined assumption: that the mind / body dichotomy is a special circumstance, a problem unlike any other. Assume, rather, it is not. What we have then is a distinction between formal patterns of examination, two ways of viewing that which is not self-revealing and appears to possess contradictory qualities—two ways of mapping a problem.

Congenitally, we approach, conceive, and deliberate about our circumstances by two different strategies, what may be termed two different geometric models: we think laterally, and we think in depth, or vertically. The results of these alternate approaches are so different that we may be said to as much as live in two different worlds, for they render for us perceptible realms of utterly unlike entities, processes, calibers of existence, and principles of causal linkage whereby what we do and suffer, and the ways in which these matters come about, can be instigated, and can be prevented, are thoroughly in discrepancy.

We as much as live two lives, if it can be said under this consideration that we live at all. Much of our confusion, much of our standard disputation, can be traced to a category confusion, tracked back to an attempt to blend or reconcile the explanatory strategies of one realm with those of the other. Much of our misunderstanding occurs in the borderland between the two lives we live.

There are two worlds we simultaneously occupy, and which we can take with equal sobriety, with equal seriousness: the world of theorization and the world of sentiment; the world of facts and the world of emotional significances, of emphases, of values, of degrees of importance; the world of logical implications and the world of moods; of argument and of narrative; of what things mean and of what things mean for us. We are, perhaps by our very nature, incapable of seeing these two realms as thoroughly divorced from each other. At minimum, we take a moment of attention in one as signifying or symbolizing some moment of attention in the other. Generally, we take them as inextricably linked together, as superimposed if not as identical. Yet, they have little in common—they are not identical, not mutually intricately. They are parallel and of divergent provenance. They are the worlds of lucidity and sentimentality.

Theorization is thought in depth, vertical thought, the attempt to build models of underlying structures of causality that are capable of accounting for the ways in which observable events come about. The principle of explanation seeks its answer in unobservable recesses, taking the approach that the motivating factors for results in the world lie within, in the heart of the event. The theory builds on the basis of hypothesis, proposing a formulation of potential causal arrangements, a geometric arrangement of interacting parts, supposing a reason for what can be seen, and appropriately refusing to

assume a literal fidelity to what cannot be observed—as noted, not requiring a capability of literality regarding the internal machinery of causation. The causation is mechanical and efficient—mechanical in the sense of geometric analysis, even if the elements are immaterial rather than physically stabilized forms, and efficient in that what is proposed is a conditional necessity of inner events undirected by an intended result. The model proposes that, once the hypothetical is set into action, what would happen must happen. It is like attempting to explain the capabilities of a clock one has discovered and cannot pry the back from—one can build various dispositions of gears and pendulums and springs, but it would be folly to presume that any one of the workable constructions accurately reflects the inner workings of the found clock or the comparable turnings of the sun and moon and stars that, gauged by an accurate timepiece, have enabled sailors to navigate out of sight of land. Any supposition regarding the machinery of nature is a permanent hypothesis.

Sentiment is the thinking of emotional investment, and it is lateral. It works across the panorama of appearances, along the line of what our senses bring us, and it assumes what we witness interact with each other, thereby bringing about results. Of course, any explanatory approach will note interaction between different elements apparent to the senses, but what counts as an apparent element and as an apparent principle of interaction among the appearances of elements is dependent upon which approach is taken. The lateral approach can be termed thinking along the skin of perception. What it takes as apparent is that which appears to the uninflected human senses, primarily human sight, and the appearance that is paramount is the individual, independent, self-directed human being—the human being as an unimpeachable unit.

The human being thus becomes the measure of all things, the reference for all meaning. Things mean what they mean for us, they mean what they do to us, and how we value them is among their implications, principal among their implications. Thus, the causation sought for explanation is final—things are moved by the purposes they serve, the ends toward which they are aimed. And the principle of causation is energeticist rather than mechanical—there is a motive force directing eventualities; the automatic falling of dominos is not the issue of significance. Thereby, all perception serves as the foundation of value judgment, and all value judgment is determined by the import of things and events for our desires and purposes. The world is *our story*. This view of things works across the surfaces of what it observes, rather than digging for the inner machinery, an hypothesis of which would redefine by amplification the roster of accepted facts. Thus, the human being is not a set of organs and organization of tissues—when the focal length of the microscope is changed and the body dissolves into a colony of cells, something is wrong: the sanctity of the body has been violated, the soul is suddenly unapparent. Meaning is thus construed by identification, by projection, by anthropomorphization. We can recognize what there is to the degree we find it to be somewhat like us.

The roots of this approach to the world can be traced back to Aristotle, in

his definition of the soul as “the form of a natural body having life potentially within it. . . . it is ‘the essential whatness’ of a body.” Of course, what Aristotle means by “soul” is something closer to our sense of “identity”: that which makes a thing, in this case a natural thing, what it is, and thus an aspect that is an essence, what would be lost were that thing fashioned as something else. Yet, it is to the point that his immediate example is an axe, supposed as a natural body. Were it not fashioned by its nature as an axe, it would in fact not be an axe, but it is important to note that the entire proposition depends on an example of something that is defined by its human use—only we use axes and they are axes only in the orbit of our use of them and for them. From the supposition of a natural object with an innate human use tumbles a series of remarkable implications of thought, but that is a subject for another time. What matters here is that this approach is quite different from Plato’s geometric analyses of the laws by which, among other things, the stars and planets operate—the music of the spheres. As is so often the case, the two giants lay our options open before us.

It should also be noted that this is precisely the view of things that Nietzsche assaulted, in numerous places but perhaps nowhere so clearly as in section 142 of *Daybreak*. It is the human identification with the world that is the source of error. He tells us we are like the Danish king who “was wrought up to such a degree of warlike fury by the music of his minstrel that he leaped from his seat and killed five people of his assembled court: there was no war, no enemy, rather the reverse, but the drive which *from the feeling infers the cause* was sufficiently strong to overpower observation and reason.” Like the king, we infer the cause of things from the feeling we have of them, and the feeling comes from identification, what we now call projection: “Man has even applied this interpretation of all movements and lineaments *as deriving from intention* to inanimate nature—in the delusion that there is nothing inanimate.” We sense motives and monsters everywhere around us; we sense ourselves everywhere around us. In this view, the universe is us.

The difference between the lateral and the vertical approach is the difference between emotion and thinking, the first being implicitly projective and the other coolly analytic. It is the difference between the Romantic and the Classical in art, the first presenting the drama of the universe aimed at the isolated individual and the other a colder, more sophisticated, more reserved response to a depth of perception, which often struggles with a complexity to things beyond our comprehension and that labors to move the sympathies beyond an easy identification with anything observable, a “self-overcoming” that begins to appear not as an instruction to surmount our weaknesses of will and endurance but an attempt to leave behind our, so far, congenitally human-centered view of the world, what in some quarters is termed the “anthropocentric” view, to move beyond the sense that the feeling we have for things discloses their intrinsic causes and that the inanimate universe is staring back at us, that it is staring specifically and solely at we who stare at it—that that is the story we live. And it can be argued, in the beginning of an accounting of why so many Modernist artists claimed to be Classicists,

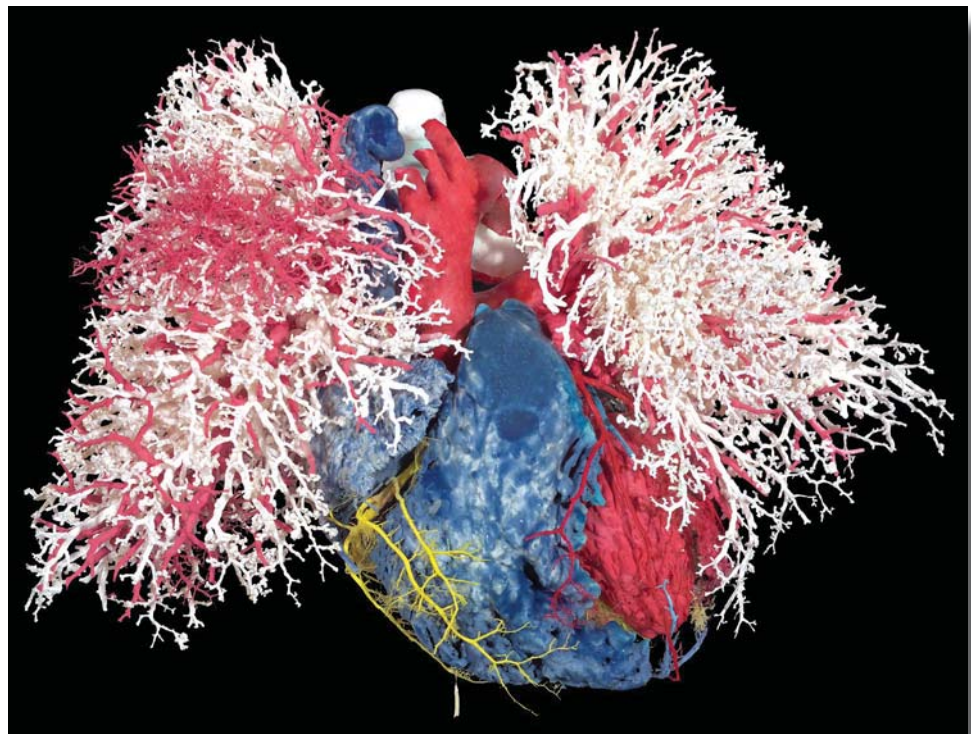
that Modernism was, or is, an attempt at the same self-overcoming, possibly instigated in many instances by the influence of Nietzsche. Abstract painting can be seen as the try at presenting the world beyond the vision through human purposes and the interpretation by human needs. And abstract literature can make often the same claim. The literary equivalent of the human proposition is the technique of anthropomorphization—the animation of the inanimate for the sake of a vibrant, animated portrayal. It is the stock-in-trade of mediocre writing, for all its appearances in works of excellence. The primary Modernist examples would come from Joyce: *Ulysses* can be viewed as a novel finally withdrawing all central dependence on anthropomorphization, and *Finnegans Wake* a proposition that the aesthetic inflection of portrayal and the animation of the inanimate is a strange dream, an endless nightmare.

It is the difference between culture and science, for science is the search for credible—meaning workable, serviceable—hypotheses of deep structures, and culture is the world we construct around us, the world of human purposes and imports: a credible proposition so long as one takes nothing of it as fact, which is the purview of the scientific approach. (Fate is not a fact; it is a feeling.) And it is the difference between Heideggerian Phenomenology and philosophy. Like science, and in the areas science leaves for it to operate, philosophy is the search for hypothetical deep structures. Phenomenology, as the identification of the nature of things with their self-presentation within the range of human perception, on the stage of the human drama—as *Dasein*—is the anthropocentric view, the vision of the universe as a human event, for, as has been argued in these pages before, it locates the range of objective facts (if they can be said in this view to exist at all) within the circle of human perceptions rather than localizing perception within the confines of the objective world. It is we who envelop the universe, and the error becomes clear when psychology is introduced into the considerations: This is the error of narcissism, of failing to recognize where one's mind ends and where the world begins.

Thus, the lateral view of things, the human-centered view, is a fairy tale, because it does not work, and it does not work because, to put it simply, facts are facts. We may perceive as we perceive, and claim ourselves the denizens of the world as we perceive it, but our bodies exist beyond that perimeter, we exist beyond that perimeter, and our actions can involve consequences that impinge upon our perceptions. They can alter the world of perception; they can decimate it, and us. We can know what we know, but we cannot be what we know, for a dichotomy is installed, entailed because the world of perception cannot be hermetically sealed. We exist beyond it, and the decisions we make, acted out in a world that is, in fact, not of our making, are capable of intruding upon what we perceive, of reconfiguring for us what we perceive. That is the lesson regarding Phenomenology—it cannot save us from ourselves, and in establishing the dichotomy between what our minds perceive and what our bodies commit as action, in separating the body from the mind such that the body is in a position for its actions and their results to invade the mind's world of perception, to breach that "world," Phenomenology is a Cartesian postulate.

And thus, Phenomenology leaves us to recognize that there is an entire world that feels real, and is not.

And it is a fairy tale, and a proposal of the comfort of religion—it is a version of the religious impulse itself—because it is the proposition of our very existence. Under the microscope, we cannot find ourselves. At one level of magnification, we are individual bodies. Change the focus and there are colonies of cells, or geometric associations of molecules, or something more vaporous still. We are a choice of magnification, which makes us a discretionary appearance, one among many possible in the same localization of space and time. That is the vertical view. The lateral view renders us in that it renders everything as being about us—we exist only in reference to ourselves, only as an arbitrary proposition. We are a circular argument.



The alternative to the naïve assumption of individual human presence, and thus to Phenomenology, is the conception of something existing that must, presumably, believe it is us in order to survive. *I think, therefore something is, and that something thinks it is me.* Or, as I once wrote in some other context: *I sometimes think the brain is a parasite living inside an animal over which it deludes itself into thinking it has control.*

Nietzsche saw this, as well. The realization that not only are we not the focus of the story of things, but that we do not exist in any unqualified sense, runs throughout his work. It is the tragedy in *The Birth of Tragedy*—the recognition of the impossibility of our own existence as individual beings, the recognition

of the inadmissibility of the *principium individuationis*, of the existence of any individual thing—and it more soberly, and far less soberly, emerges in the first section of *The Gay Science*, in which Nietzsche realizes the folly of all our tragedies, our values, our ideals, our seriousness, and sees the human comedy as a comedy serving the preservation of the species. “Even laughter may yet have a future. I mean, when the proposition ‘the species is everything, one is always none’ has become part of humanity, and this ultimate liberation and irresponsibility has become accessible to all at all times.” For Nietzsche, the animal, the beast, that must believe it is us is the species, and it can be complained this is a step too literal. (What unimpeachable facts do we have that even the species is real? Because we see there is one? And what makes it *one*?) But the point is much the same. The human dramas we live through as individuals serve a purpose of something other than us as individuals. And the force of the argument, the thrust of fact that demonstrates an achieved point to it all, is, unironically, a Cartesian one, again a revision of “I think, therefore I am”: “Still it is proven that [the most amazing economy of the preservation of the species] has preserved our race so far.”

And so the two approaches of the human-centered and the theoretical, the lateral and the vertical probe of hypothetical depths, are not revelations of two aspects of reality but two modes of comprehension, both inadequate to the challenge of the real, even of our own reality, or the reality of that which proposes us to ourselves. They are the mark of the inaccessibility of the real, and by them, considered in recognition of each other, we come upon not the limits of the world but the limits of our ability to conceive the world—modes of thought revealing of the edges and the characteristics of thought. It is all a Kantian exercise in the end, and a communication to ourselves that, as perceiving and thinking creatures, at least to all appearances, we live in a bell jar of hypotheses and delusions, and the world, including us, is somewhere else.

We cannot hypothesize and hypostatize simultaneously, or we will not continue to live. We exist now at a remarkable historical confluence. It is the folly, one among many, of cutting-edge philosophical thought, of Postmodern thought (if that term retains any meaning), that the Age of Reason is far in the past. But it is not. Reason as a common practice—theorization as, if nothing else, a tempering influence on the impulse to hypostatize our feelings about the world, to infer innate cause from feeling—is far from well rooted. The Age of Reason has barely begun, and we are clearly living through a surging of the Age of Faith. Perhaps the Age of Faith is in its death throes, but it is evident that we now exist at the intersection of the two, and a battle is raging.

It is a war between the opposing components of the dichotomy—the dichotomy in our means of understanding. It is the Cartesian moment writ large, as potentially an historical cataclysm. It is what we see in “BODIES... The Exhibition,” in the posed display of flayed cadavers—for in the final analysis, that is what we have—poised to pretend to be us and exposed to reveal what underlies us and is not us: the skull beneath the skin, the

machinery below the surface. It is a vision that throws us onto the cusp in our ability to think, hurls us into the gap in our understanding. To see it is to be possessed by death, for each side in the essential discrepancy is death to the other. The God vision is the self-reflection in a mirror grown to concave, and it is become an enormity. It is become a fury from within, for we have become capable of hypothesizing our own non-existence, and we may get it. That which Nietzsche thought proven is about to be tested, finally, and the result may be the tragedy he saw first.

* It should be noted that the series of exhibitions titled “BODIES... The Exhibition” is, according to press materials, unrelated to a series of similar exhibitions titled “Body Worlds” that are on display in other cities and are connected to Gunther von Hagens, who claims to have devised an at least similar-sounding technique for preserving human remains, a technique called “plastination.” The press materials for “BODIES... The Exhibition” call its preservation technique “polymer preservation,” claim the exhibition has been organized by Premier Exhibitions, Inc., of Atlanta, Georgia, and identify Dr. Roy Glover, professor emeritus of anatomy and cell biology at the University of Michigan, as chief medical director for the New York exhibition. Their precise statement: “Premier Exhibitions, Inc. is not affiliated with any other organizer of human anatomy exhibitions, including Gunther von Hagens, Gerhard Perner, or Genlife Biomedical. BODIES...The Exhibition should not be confused with ‘Body Worlds,’ ‘Body Exploration,’ ‘The Universe Within,’ ‘Bodies Revealed,’ or any other human anatomy exhibition.” This writer has been unable so far to locate a public accounting of the precise relationship between these two series of exhibitions or between these two business enterprises. In addition, it should be mentioned that the specimens used in “BODIES... The Exhibition” are reported in the press materials to come from Dalian Medical University Plastination Laboratories in the People’s Republic of China, a fact, or at least claim, that has caused some controversy since there are reports that the facility accepts unidentified bodies as well as body parts from executed Chinese prisoners. The organizers of the exhibition have denied these charges and asserted that all the bodies and body parts come from voluntary donors.

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