

Deconstructing the Body: A Critique of Merleau-Ponty's Universal Body Schema

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The “body schema,” a phrase coined by Maurice Merleau-Ponty is defined as the foundation upon which unified, intersensory, interspatial, and intertemporal embodied experiences are made possible. The body schema, according to Merleau-Ponty, is essential in allowing us to have the freedom of embodiment, the ability to use our bodies freely and in accordance with our own personal projects and goals. In contrast, I argue that the body schema described by Merleau-Ponty is not a proper universal definition of the body schema, as it does not incorporate the experiences of marginalized bodies. I will argue that instead the way we construct our body schema and the ways we perceive ourselves as subjects is heavily shaped by one's racial, historical, and social context. I will take a phenomenological approach in this essay, examining sources such as Frantz Fanon's “The Lived Experience,” to argue that a universal definition of the body schema must incorporate racial, social, and historical context, as one forms their body schema in relation to the bodies they are surrounded with and by the context in which they are racially and historically a part of. We will find that the body schema is inseparable from the context in which it is constructed, and the experiences of oppressed individuals show that Ponty's claim of universality is flawed, as marginalized bodies are unable to exercise the same freedoms of embodiment as normative bodies.

Keywords: Body Schema, Spatiality, Bad Faith, White Gaze, Historical racial schema, Epidermal racial schema, Disorientation.

Merleau-Ponty defines the body schema as the foundation upon which unified, intersensory, interspatial, and intertemporal embodied experiences are made possible. The body schema is the dynamic integration of the body in accordance with one's personal projects. Fundamentally the body schema is an attitude directed towards a certain existing or possible task and is the background against which other things and possibilities for action stand out, it is the darkness of the theater that is essential for the clarity of the performance. I will argue that Merleau-Ponty's notion of the body schema is not universal but deeply contingent upon one's historical, racial, and social context. I will argue that marginalized groups do not construct their body schema in the same way as their white counterparts. Through this essay, I will dive into the concept of the “White Gaze,” which is the constant subjection to judgement and scrutiny by those of white identity in an anti-black racist world, which will reveal that instead of the body schema being a background against which all else stands out, the body becomes an object in the gaze of the white world. We will find that the body schema is inseparable from the context in which it is constructed, and

the experiences of oppressed individuals show that Ponty's claim of universality is flawed, as marginalized bodies are unable to exercise the freedom of embodiment as described by Ponty as a background for which all possibilities for action stand out. In the last section of this essay, I will offer my own definition of the body schema that incorporates both bodies that are considered “ordinary” and those that are marginalized.

In Chapter 3 of *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty argues that the spatiality of the body is not the same as the spatiality of external objects. Merleau-Ponty argues that the spatiality of the body can be described as “situational spatiality,” and the spatiality of external objects can be described as “positional spatiality.” (Ponty 2018, 102). Situational spatiality describes the way that the body is never unaware of its body parts, but the body integrates the features that are deemed valuable to an organism's projects. This explains the “situational” aspect of shifting awareness from one body part to another depending on the task the body is given. Ponty states, “If I stand in front of my desk and lean on it with both hands, only my hands are accentuated and my whole body trails behind them like a comet's tail.” (Ponty

2018, 102). This example illustrates how bodily space envelops its parts in a way that the awareness of other body parts such as the shoulders or the waist do not disappear but are enveloped in the awareness of one's hands which are given the task to be leaned upon. Thus, Ponty argues that when the word "here" is applied to the body, "it does not designate a determinate position in relation to other positions or in relation to external coordinates" in the way that positional spatiality does. Rather, "it designates the installation of the first coordinates, the anchoring of the active body in an object, and the situation of the body confronted with its tasks." (Ponty 2018, 103).

The body schema reflects our ability to not only perceive objects and space but also to have situational awareness of one's body. The spatiality of the body depends on the tasks the body is confronted with, while the spatiality of external objects depends on the designation of determinate positions in relation to other positions or external coordinates. Situational spatiality requires us to be an embodied subject that can form our actions based on our body schema and whatever circumstances we find ourselves in. Thus, instead of objects within the world, the body schema entails that we are embodied subjects capable of using the freedom of embodiment in order to live in accordance with one's own projects.

Being an embodied subject is a freedom within itself. With embodiment we have the freedom to extend our bodies not as objects but as embodied subjects with the freedom to use our bodies for our own projects. To be an embodied subject versus a mere object is a freedom within itself. As an embodied subject we should have the right to not be used as a mere tool or object for someone else's project. Instead, we should be able to extend our bodies and use objects according to our own projects. Embodied subjects should be guaranteed to have the autonomy to set their own goals for themselves rather than for others and never be seen as an object for the purposes of others. The freedom of embodiment allows us to view our bodies as a background for which all other objects to be experienced through. Without this freedom we become valued as if we were just

another object for the projects of others. We seize to be an end in itself and instead become a means for another's end, an objective gaze is cast over the body and the body is no longer seen as a free embodied agent.

The Harm of Practicing Bad Faith

To deny one's freedom and view one as a mere object is known as an act of "Bad Faith". This concept as described by critical phenomenologist Lewis R. Gordon in *Bad Faith* involves, "attempting to take consciousness out of the relationships through which things appear." (Gordon 2020, 17). Gordon argues that consciousness is embodied and to try and deceive oneself into denying one's consciousness is bad faith. In performing Bad Faith, one deceives themselves into believing false ideologies through accepting things such as societal norms that limit their authentic selves or the authenticity of others. For example, stereotypes within society result in societal norms that limit either one's authentic self or the authenticity of others. Asian Americans are seen as "model minorities" and are often held to high standards based on this stereotype. The success of Asian Americans historically has been used to argue against the hardships of being an immigrant in America. Thus, extremely high standards have been set and internalized within society, leading to a limitation of the authenticity of Asians. Asian Americans may view themselves as a failure for not achieving good grades in school. At the same time other people may view the failure of Asian Americans as indicating not being a "true" Asian. In both cases there is bad faith being practiced in which both parties deceive themselves into limiting the authenticity of either oneself or another. This self-deception can lead to disastrous results, for example harmful results from practicing bad faith within society are that of internalized oppression and the continuation of social injustice. In practicing Bad Faith, one may deceive themselves into believing harmful racial ideologies. As a result of this form of self-deception one can either internalize false beliefs about oneself or false beliefs about other people. This leads to either a limitation being set on one's own freedom or a limitation on the freedom of others.

Merleau Ponty argues that his notion of the body schema is universal, that we are not objects, but rather embodied subjects that possess the freedom to live life according to one's own projects. I argue that this is not universal, that many people experience their being as objects within the world and that the freedom to live one's life in accordance with one's own projects depends on the historical, racial, and social context in which one is placed in. The experience of diverse bodies illustrates that Ponty fails to incorporate how historical, racial, and social context play a fundamental role in the formation of one's body schema. In America, the black man's body schema is crafted in a way that depends on the projects of others; the projects of the oppressors. In America the way the black man is perceived is not a subject who carries the freedom of embodiment. Instead the black man is perceived historically as being an object for the projects of the oppressive white identity.

The Collapse of the Body Schema

When taking social and racial context into account, one can see the ways one's own projects can be misconstrued. For example, in the United States, a diverse body is always met with what Frantz Fanon describes in *The Lived Experience of the Black Man* as the "White Gaze" (Fanon 2020, 90). The White Gaze refers to the black man's constant subjection to stereotypes and prejudices by the dominant white majority. With the presence of the White Gaze, diverse bodies cannot create their body schema in the same way as white bodies do. Fanon states, "In the white world, the man of color encounters difficulties in elaborating his body schema. The image of one's body is solely negating. It's an image in the third person. All around the body reigns an atmosphere of certain uncertainty." (Fanon 2020, 90). Instead of seeing one's body as the background against which other things and possibilities for action stand out, one's body schema is an image in the third person. Rather than using data such as "remnants of feelings and notions of the tactile, vestibular, kinaesthetic, or visual nature" (Fanon 2020, 91) like the body schema described by Ponty, the black man is forced to construct their body schema using data

provided by the "Other" or white people. Beneath the body schema of a diverse man is a historical-racial schema crafted by the white man, woven out of a thousand details, anecdotes, and stories.

As a result of this historical racial schema, the body schema of the diverse man collapses and gives way to an epidermal racial schema. What this collapse entails is a loss of freedom over one's own body. No longer does one see objects as tools for one's own projects, one sees themselves as a mere object for another's project. One's perception of one's body and one's understanding of one's body becomes shaped by external forces such as the white gaze. One's body schema collapses and becomes defined by the color of one's skin, hence, the underlying racial epidermal schema. Fanon states, "I was responsible not only for my body but also for my race and my ancestors. I cast an objective gaze over myself, discovered by blackness, my ethnic features; deafened by cannibalism, backwardness, fetishism, racial stigmas, slave traders, and above all, yes, above all, the grinning Y a bon Banania" (Fanon 2020, 92). Y a bon Banania is a hot cocoa brand produced by French colonizers that depicts an extremely exaggerated black man's face; The color of the black skin is reduced to the brown color of hot cocoa. As we can see, instead of one's body schema being a background for which all spatial objects are experienced, one becomes an object for the white world's background. The White Gaze creates a social foreground and background distinction where white bodies are put into the foreground as the ordinary contours of experience, while the black body is marginalized and pushed to the background of society.

The "I can" and the "I can't"

To further illustrate what it means to be pushed to the background of society, we can look towards Sara Ahmed's work in *Queer Phenomenology*. More specifically we can look towards Ahmed's notion of the strangeness and disorientation of not falling under societal norms. Orientation according to Ahmed involves aligning oneself with common societal, cultural, and historical norms. Disorientation results when a body deviates from the norms it is subjected to in society.

Disorientation occurs in the lives of every individual; Ahmed argues that disorientation is vital and offers us new directions in which to orient ourselves. There is freedom that results from the overcoming of disorientation, Ahmed states, “Merleau-Ponty, following Husserl, suggests that the ‘I can’ proceeds from overcoming disorientation, from reorienting the body so that the line of the body follows the vertical and horizontal axes. Such a body is one that is upright, straight, and in line.” (Ahmed 2006, 159) Ahmed argues that the “I can” act results from overcoming disorientation. From overcoming a situation where one is thrown off from their original orientation, one gains the “I can” by reorienting the body in a new straightforward direction.

Although the “I can” results from overcoming disorientation, what happens when one is in a perpetual state of disorientation? Intersectionality within society results in certain bodies being in a perpetual state of disorientation with the presence of the white gaze, societal norms are set up in a way that involves the projects of the white body more than that of the black body. Living in an anti-black society that is predominantly white as a black body results in a weakening of involvement within the world. For Ahmed this causes the body to collapse, Ahmed states,

The weakening of this involvement is what causes the body to collapse, and to become an object alongside other objects. In simple terms, disorientation involves becoming an object. It is from this point, the point at which the body becomes an object, that Fanon’s phenomenology of the black body begins. By implication, we learn that disorientation is unevenly distributed: some bodies more than others have their involvement in the world called into crisis. This shows us how the world itself is more ‘involved’ in some bodies than in others, as it takes such bodies as the contours of ordinary experience (Ahmed 2006, 159).

Thus, for Ahmed the unevenly distributed disorientation of being an uninvolved subject within the world causes the body schema to collapse. One’s freedom of being an involved embodied subject within the world weakens causing the body to collapse into a mere object. One no longer

sees themselves as a background, but as an object within another’s background. The black body collapses and sees themselves as an object defined by the features of their body, which are designed by societal norms created by the White Gaze. What happens when the body schema collapses is a transformation of the ‘I can’ of certain actions into an ‘I can’t,’ one does not fall under the norms established within a given social context and as a result the body contorts and becomes limited by their restriction of the capacity of other kinds of actions. Ahmed states:

Bodies take the shape of the norms that are repeated over time and with force. Through repeating some gestures and not others, or through being oriented in some directions and not others, bodies become contorted: they get twisted into shapes that enable some actions only insofar as they restrict the capacity for other kinds of actions (Ahmed 2006, 91).

The White Gaze creates a society where diverse bodies cannot construct their body schema in the ways described by Ponty as a background, as they must deal with two systems of reference, for a black man must not only be black to be a black man, but he must be black in relation to the white man. As we have noted, the body schema entails being for one’s own projects, but the body schema of the black man results in a constant being for others. To illustrate the idea of becoming an object of the white world’s background, we can look towards a clear-cut example of the black man “being for others” which was during the slave trade in the early 1600s. A black man was far from having the freedom to live his life in accordance with his own projects. During this time, slaves were a major import by many colonies, as they were used as a more plentiful, cheaper alternative for manual labor compared to indentured servants. The black man was treated as if he were a good, often being captured and traded for raw goods such as molasses. Thus, as we can see, the black man during the slave trade was a mere object or tool for the projects of their oppressors; the black man’s being was always a being for others. When one is constantly living their lives for the projects of others, they have lost freedom over the power of embodiment.

One can no longer live one's life autonomously and according to one's own goals and projects. When one's body has a price tag, and one's being is limited to the equivalent of molasses, one can no longer see themselves as being a background but instead an object.

Fast forward to the modern world, we no longer practice slavery, and the objectification of diverse bodies goes more unrecognized. Our society preaches liberty and justice for all, but our practices result in the absence of freedom for the black man. Our society's ideals do not align with our practices; we are told that the black man is just as free as the white man, but the lived experience of the black man proves otherwise. The black man still encounters objectification at every turn. A modern example of the black man "being for others" is what I would like to call the "black physician" example. Today, black men are subject to stereotypes that describe them as useless, criminal, and unintellectual, thus when we see a black man who is a doctor, physician, or a teacher, they are classified as exceptional cases. Although we may give all of the praise in the world to a black physician, the black physician is always conscious of how close he is to being discredited. If the physician messes up, his involvement with the world weakens once again; Fanon states,

I was becoming a nervous wreck, shaking at the slightest alert. I knew for instance that if the physician made one false move, it was over for him and for all those who came after him. What, in fact, could one expect from a negro physician? As long as everything was going smoothly, he was praised to the heavens, but watch out—there was no room whatsoever for any mistake. The black physician will never know how close he is to being discredited (Fanon 2020, 97).

This is a modern example of being for others, as we praise people of color when they are of use, but when they are no longer of use, they become discarded and discredited. If a person has a bad experience with a black physician, one may even wish never to see a black physician again. In the modern world, the black physician is always subject to disproportionate amounts of scrutiny as their white counterparts. The black physician is

always praised as exceptional for succeeding, but subject to disproportionate amounts of disdain when making a mistake.

As we can see, once again historical roots in racism against diverse bodies has resulted in a constant objectification of black men. We offer diverse bodies a false integration into society, one that expects us to give into the illusion that our historical roots of hatred towards diverse groups do not affect our lives today. Franz Fanon states, "Slavery? No longer a subject of discussion, just a bad memory. My so-called inferiority? A hoax that it would be better to laugh about. I was prepared to forget everything, provided the world integrated me." (Fanon 2020, 94). Although it can be easy to fall into the mindset that the black man has freedom over his being as an embodied subject, the slavery and physician example show once again that historical, racial, and social context in America does not allow the black man to live in accordance with one's own projects.

Although the presence of the White Gaze in a white-dominated society results in a collapse of the body schema of a black man into a historical-racial schema that gives way to an epidermal-racial schema, it is not the case that the body schema does not exist. The way one constructs one's body schema depends heavily on the social and racial context one is placed in. For example, a black man in a country like Africa will not have to face the White Gaze as a black man in America would. Fanon states, "As long as the black man remains on his home territory, except for petty internal quarrels, he will not have to experience his being for others." (Fanon 2020, 89). What Fanon means by this is that the black man in Africa and the black man in America experience being in a totally different way. The black man in Africa, surrounded by a majorly black population, does not have to experience his being for others. In contrast, the black man in America surrounded by a majorly white population always experiences his being for others. Thus, we can see that the racial and social context has a profound effect on being in one's body and crafting one's body schema. A black man can create his body schema in the ways Ponty describes as a background, but one must

be in the correct social and racial environment. A black man growing up in America experiences a collapse of their body schema that gives way to an epidermal racial schema. Thus, the construction of the body schema described by Merleau Ponty can be rejected as a universal definition of embodiment.

So far, through this essay I have critically examined Merleau-Ponty's concept of the body schema and its claimed universality. I have argued that the body schema, as described by Ponty, is not universal, but is deeply influenced by one's historical, racial, and social context. The lived experience of Black individuals, as exemplified by Franz Fanon's *The Lived Experience of a Black Man*, illustrates that the body schema is not a neutral, objective background for one's projects but is profoundly shaped by external forces and societal norms. We have found that the presence of the "White Gaze" in a white-dominated society and a lack of involvement of black bodies leading to a collapse of the body schema into an epidermal racial schema where one's being is constantly objectified and defined by their skin color. This objectification goes beyond historical examples such as slavery, with examples such as the "black physician" revealing that even in modern times, Black individuals are often seen as exceptions rather than equals. A lack of involvement within society causes a perpetual state of disorientation where the body collapses into an object amongst other objects. We have also seen that this objectification results in a loss of freedom as an embodied subject. The bad faith that results from this objectification, or self-deception into blindly conforming to societal norms, results in a loss of freedom by allowing societal expectations to dictate one's actions. It is crucial to recognize that the body schema can still exist in accordance with Ponty's description, but is ultimately contingent on one's historical, racial, and social context; as we have seen that a black man in an environment without the presence of the "White Gaze" has a completely different experience in forming their body schema. In total, this essay has challenged the notion of a universal body schema and illustrates that an explanation of embodiment must consider the profound impact of historical, racial, and social factors in one's lived experience.

Redefining the Body Schema

Now that we have seen that the body schema as defined by Merleau-Ponty is not a proper universal definition of the body schema, when taking social, historical, and racial context into account we can reach a new and improved universal definition of the body schema. Merleau Ponty describes the body schema as a background for which all other objects are to be experienced through; we have seen that black bodies are instead pushed towards the backgrounds of society and are no longer able to see themselves as an embodied background but instead as an object in the white worlds background. At the same time there are instances where the black body is pushed to the foreground within the eyes of the white gaze. An objective gaze is cast over the black body resulting from the racial epidermal schema, leading what is seen as the "unordinary" color of their body to stand out.

Take for example an auditorium filled with white bodies, then suddenly four black bodies enter the room. Due to the difference in skin color, the black bodies stand out in the gaze of the predominately white audience. I would like to argue that the body schema results from the combination of the "I can" and "I can't" acts one is capable of. To an extent we all have the ability to use objects in accordance with our own projects, but not everyone has the luxury to view themselves as separate from being just an object amongst other objects. For uninvolved bodies within society, a lack of involvement results in the casting of an objective gaze over the body. The capacity for action for uninvolved bodies such as the black body is much more restricted than involved bodies such as the white body. The white body seen as the ordinary contour of experience opens a much wider range of "I can" acts one is able to perform. On the other hand, the black body falling outside of the ordinary contour of experience is marginalized and subject to a restriction of one's capacity for action, where certain "I can" acts permissible for white bodies to perform are twisted into "I can't" acts. Thus, I propose that a proper account of the body schema is the composition of acts one can do and acts one cannot do. The combination

of the ways we are able to extend our bodies and the ways that the extension of our bodies are limited within a given social context. In a world with a diverse range of bodies, Merleau-Ponty fails in accounting for certain actions only some bodies are capable of in his supposed universal definition. In this next section I will highlight the reasons that the new account of the body schema is a more realistic universal understanding of what it means to be an embodied subject within the modern world.

I argue that this new definition of the body schema is a better definition than Merleau Ponty's when it comes to universality. Viewing the definition of the body schema as the combination of the ways we can extend our bodies and the ways that the extension our bodies are limited within a given social context allows us to account for those bodies that do not fall under what is considered the "ordinary contour of experience" within a given society. As we have learned, the perception of one's body is shaped heavily by the societal, cultural, and historical norms one is subject to; in many cases one is unable to perceive their bodies as anything but another object amongst other objects. I argue that Merleau-Ponty's definition of the body schema is only applicable to bodies that are considered the ordinary contours of experience. One can only experience their bodies as Merleau-Ponty describes if they are placed in a society where they are considered amongst the ordinary contours of experience. For example, in America with the presence of the White Gaze we see that white bodies are considered the ordinary contour of experience thus allowing them to see their bodies as a background in which all possibilities for action stand out. Similarly, the black man in a predominately black society would be considered ordinary. Although this is true, Merleau-Ponty's description excludes those bodies that fall outside of the ordinary. Thus, this new definition can be applied to both those bodies that fall under what is considered "ordinary" and those who do not.

Conclusion

In this essay I have argued that Merleau Ponty's supposed universal definition of the body schema as a background in which all possibilities for action stand out is not a proper universal definition. We have seen that Merleau Ponty only succeeds in describing the body schema for those who fall under what is considered the ordinary contour of experience within a given society. While those deemed "ordinary" within societal norms possess the freedom to shape their body schema as outlined by Merleau Ponty and exercise embodiment in alignment with one's own projects, it is evident that individuals falling outside societal norms face limitations due to social, cultural, and historical influences. "Ordinary" bodies enjoy the freedom of the "I can," entailing complete control over the extension of their bodies, whereas marginalized bodies encounter constraints that transform certain "I can" actions into "I can't" actions. Merleau Ponty's definition of the body schema does a great job of describing the "I can," but ultimately neglects the existence of the "I can't." Instead, proposing that a comprehensive universal definition of the body schema involves both the ways we can extend our bodies and the constraints on such extensions within a given social context, incorporates the spatiality of diverse bodies.

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