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The inexhaustibility of questions around the human body hinges on modernity's perception of it as both private and public, a pre-given flesh and a politically encoded frame. Since Descartes introduced the formalised philosophical divide, giving rise to modernity's dyadic lens of subject and object for interpreting reality, the human self has been cleaved into a thinking being, *Cogito*, that remains disengaged from its material extension, *res extensa*, the body. This has problematised the modern perception of self as it wrestles to counter the body's uncertain standing within post-Cartesian discourse. Rather than being dismissed as an expendable material for the *Cogito*, it is slowly gaining recognition as the essential seat of humanness. Merleau-Ponty calls it the "flesh of the blood"—"*chair du monde*"¹—to indicate its intersubjective nature, through which the human 'self' experiences the world. As a relational entity, the body becomes a contested site of political, economic, and cultural constructions. Bourdieu focuses on the unreflective body through his idea of *habitus*, Judith Butler investigates gender performance of masculinity and femininity, and Foucault points towards "biopower" as a means of systemic control of collective bodies—all of which suggest a body struggling with its status as an *a priori* entity as it slowly becomes self-aware. Underneath all ideological constructs, however, lies a more seminal anxiety that is born out of the body's awareness of its own deterioration which often elides its awareness. The uncertainty arising from the body's anxiety about its continual decay and its struggle to determine whether it is a pre-given flesh or an ideologically inscribed construct presents modernity with a complex problem that has no easy resolution.

The *angst* born out of the awareness of inevitable decay prompts modern societies to hurriedly marginalise, hide, or even forget failing bodies. While philosophy and literature acknowledge finitude as a precondition of life, popular culture perceives the body's mortality as a hindrance. The uncertainty born out of human beings' undated appointment with death is pondered upon in philosophy and celebrated in literature because it lends gravity and urgency to human life choices and relationships. The popular culture, on the other hand, tries to either forget or fight mortality by cultivating a desire for young, healthy, able, heterosexual norms. It floods public spaces with advertisements featuring idealised bodies and integrates these images into ordinary people's daily lives. This repeated exposure to curated images of healthy bodies creates a deceptive illusion of an eternal present, where healthy bodies appear immune to the erosion of time and exist indefinitely. Popular culture's sole strategy to counter the uncertainty born of the frailty of human existence is to instil a false sense of confidence that humans can combat mortality. To achieve its objective, normative culture, on the one hand, sells dreams of a

¹This phrase is taken from Merleau-Ponty's final work *Le Visible Et L'Invisible* which was published posthumously in 1964.

healthy body and, on the other, regulates and systematises the sick body through the enforcement of medical, legal, and religious frameworks. The sick body is constrained by rigid medical doctrines, medico-legal systems, and ethico-religious discourses and is systematically sidelined out of mainstream culture.

The autonomous *Cogito*'s belief in its self-transparency, where it does not need the mediation of bodily sensations to arrive at certainty, makes it view the body as a material substrate to be controlled and used. To overcome its own fear of uncertainty, the rational *Cogito* requires this material substrate to function as a self-sufficient unit. For this designated purpose, educational, health, and religious institutions are developed to discipline bodies and build faith in their ability to fight the eventuality of dying. These institutions create bodily norms and enforce them directly through discipline or indirectly through subtle mechanisms of monitoring and standardisation. In reality, though, the body's compliance with institutional systems' predetermined schedules does not prepare a self-sufficient unit to fight sickness and death, but slowly transforms into a homogenised and conforming entity that can be controlled by institutional authorities. Its aspirations slowly begin to mimic the illusory aspirations of autonomous consciousness, such as the pursuit of permanence through health and a recognition of its autonomy through social performances, which are promoted and legitimised by institutions as shared behaviours. Over time, these aspirations become sedimented in the body, and it unreflectively believes them to be its own habitual desires which are then inherited by other bodies around it. This dynamic mechanism crystallises cultural normativity into rigid social hierarchies, passed on to coming generations by a docile conforming body and used by institutions to penalise nonconformist deviations which are perceived as a challenge to these ever-evolving power structures.

The experience of bodies' breakdown due to chronic illness, injuries, or gradual wearing down with age forces popular culture to relook at its illusions while confronting the frailty of the body. Institutions attempt to reduce the lived experience of pain and fear to an empirical understanding of the body's physical dysfunctions. Their ahistorical and acultural diagnoses conveniently label these bodies as specimens for geriatrics, pathology, or trauma studies. The suffering of a body enduring chronic illness or losing a limb in an accident, however, is not just the subject for diagnosis but a human being in real pain being changed as a result of it. The distress felt by a failing body is real and remains etched in memory as it painfully recalls its ability to engage with its surroundings when it was healthy. The pain of loss is exacerbated by the body's fear of an uncertain future, as it doubts its ability to deal with that uncertainty effectively. The body's struggle with the loss of a healthy past and an uncertain future further obliges it to renegotiate the meanings of its agency and even identity. The fragility, thus, offers new insights into the meanings of contingency and dependence, exposing the limitations of human will, of which healthy bodies remain blissfully unaware.

Such bodies—whether ill, disabled, or aging—along with other marginalised victims of rigid normative hierarchies, such as racialised and queer bodies, foreground a different understanding of corporeality than that of Cartesian discourse. They are

sensitive to distributive epistemology, which views the human self as essentially intersubjective, with a sense that self is not solely based on rational autonomy but is relationally distributed among others and their contingent conditions as well. These bodies are either dependent on others for their existence or aware that their identities are formed by connections with their respective histories and environments. They cannot conceive of an autonomous mind that is anterior to and disengaged from their historical conditions and intersubjective reality. These bodies counter the popular illusory narratives of youthful, healthy, and admired bodies propagated by these institutions. They not only resist institutional attempts to exert control but also question attempts to legitimise their narratives of oppressive discipline to fight an uncertain future. The monitors of discrimination, markers of femininity and masculinity, are used to force these vulnerable bodies to conform to their temporal rhythms, giving them a false sense of continuity where the assumed linearity of time ensures that the future will remain as secure as their present. When their attempts to control fail, they exclude these nonconformist bodies from inhabiting legitimised cultural spaces. For instance, racialised bodies are discriminated against and made to bear the historical scars inflicted by carceral systems targeting them based on appearance; gendered bodies are shunned as they endure a lifetime of cultural scrutiny and commodification due to conforming standardisation; and disabled bodies are marginalised in cultural imaginary to prevent their continual interrogation of idealised healthy bodies with their presence. These nonconformist bodies, nonetheless, continue to elude institutional attempts to discipline them. Even their visceral responses to everyday occurrences—such as crying, laughing, arousal, anger, frustration, and embarrassment—anchor them in a reality that defies the illusion of standardisation. A core assertion of nonconformist epistemologies around the body is that authentic knowledge of the world can be gained only through the flesh. Affect theory recovers this dimension from post-Cartesian neglect to argue that all emotions are essentially bodily events, not mere representations of inner states, but occurrences in the flesh. The bodies are brought to the centre as registers of psychological wounds which are recalled through their muscles and postures, and relived in nervous rhythms to retain what consciousness is struggling to forget.

One tangent of nonconformity also seeks to completely go beyond the messy indignities of physicality by imagining an existence as pure consciousness. To be free of the anxieties born out of sickness, decay, and discrimination has increasingly seduced human imagination to the allure of a virtual world by forgetting its physical vulnerabilities. However, in the aftermath of COVID, governmental institutions and corporations have formed a nexus, seeking control over the virtual domain and replicating their oppressive models. The virtual world has irrevocably altered the understanding of both the physical body and identity. The experience of raw pain of a loss, the effort required in recovery, and the forgetting of pain to mutate into another self, are now reduced to homogenised biometric data that can be monitored through health applications and body devices. Despite the cold precision and permanence of statistical data, though, it fails to grasp the urgency felt by a fragile body while making critical life-and-death choices to navigate its transient existence. Nevertheless, medical institutions tout this

statistical body as a portion of reality whose accuracy and understanding of physical functions far exceed the inherent experiences of the actual flesh. A similar attempt to control the body is also visible in social media, where authoritarian structures masquerade as protectors of citizens' rights, even as they curate content. People, with their various avatars, enjoy a vicarious sense of freedom to showcase their creativity or feel empowered by browsing loads of new information or gathering new ways of reading culture by engaging with make-believe worlds of entertainment. The reality, however, is quite different: all these actions are being monitored and categorised to control these bodies and their minds. Decisions affecting millions are driven by social media algorithms, and lives and thoughts are systemically regulated to sway opinions to gain specific objectives. There is, then, a deep paradoxical relationship between people in the world and their personas in the virtual world, where bodies participate in roleplaying to experience a liberating sense of autonomy. While the virtual world widens the divide between a physical body and its avatars, it also, ironically enough, gives authorities insights into these bodies' deepest desires and frustrated ambitions, enabling them to covertly govern them through surveillance.

The complexity of the virtual landscape is further intensified with the advent of AI, which falsely promises to replicate human rationality without its physical impediment. It reinforces Descartes's idea that thought can exist without material body, against which nonconformist bodies push back, and ends up performing an apotheosis of Cartesian *Cogito*. AI converts the unpredictable unconscious desires of humans into computable processes, offering new ways of engaging with the world. Academicians, who are at the forefront of adopting AI methodologies, are already grappling with the old debate of whether content is distinctly separate from its mode of expression. The rigour of writing to articulate meaning, failing in this attempt, and then trying again is now supplanted by AI that provides a ready substitution of expression. In doing so, though, AI not only polishes ideas but also alters them surreptitiously, even before they are fully developed, thus exerting more control than is ethically acceptable. The anxiety underlying attempts to articulate meaning, born out of the struggle between what we mean and what we say that constitutes human subjectivity, is now replaced by a reliance on technology which has the potential to change the essence of what humans are.