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Topic IV: Some philosophers and theologians since Plato have claimed that the human body is a kind of prison of the soul. Michel Foucault has recently suggested that “the soul is a prison of the body” (Surveiller et punir, p.34).

Consider some of the conceptions and arguments that might support these opposing views.

Since the beginning of European philosophy, philosophers have tried to prove, explain and contest the existence of the so-called “soul”. The soul, according to most religions and theologians, is the one and great difference between other living beings and mankind. It enables us to think, to speak, to be, to love and to hate. Some even go as far as to claim that only the soul’s existence is certain, even when all perception is nothing but deception. And our mind, a butterfly (psyche) so wonderful, shall be trapped in an ever decaying, ill-falling body so weak, so vulgar and useless?

Considering the soul as our physical being’s prisoner would imply that the soul itself is not free, and that greater freedom could be achieved by freeing ourselves from existing in a physical way. And, in some respects, one has to agree to this statement. Our body, which determines our position in time and space, is an obstacle, a barrier. Between myself and the world of phenomena, there is a wall of flesh I can never jump over. All sensations, all perception is restricted by what my eyes and ears allow me to experience. Poor eyesight, a bad sense of smell or sensorial deprivation keep us from knowing the world as it is, not to mention the vast infinity we will never know of due to us possessing only five senses and not living longer than eight short decades! To overcome this, our mind has invented machines: Microscopes, telescopes, rockets. We accumulate knowledge by overcoming physical boundaries, always aware of doing it in vain, eternal prisoners of our body. No matter how many abstract facts we find out about ultraviolet light or exoplanets, we can never fully experience them.

We are almost as locked in as patients with real locked-in syndrome are: They cannot move any part of their body, still being aware of the world’s existence. They are stuck in one place, dependent, unable to move, victims of chance. We are imprisoned in the place we call “here” and the time we call “now”. Our body is an iron ball wrapped around our soul’s ankles. Our mind is an enormous set of possibilities from which only a few can be realized due to physical restrictions like gravity.

Furthermore, physical ideals as defined by society take effect on our mind. Beauty standards and expectations lead to depression, anorexia, self-hatred and self-harm. Appearance is always normative, it demands us to assimilate, to adapt to the way other physical entities look, behave or eat, in spite of our own will or identity; it damages our personal development towards freedom and independence of feeling and thinking.

Moreover, who we are is owned to who we were defined as newborn. Before any assumption about our personality or character could be made, presumptions about our (biological) sex were made, which lead to us growing up and being educated with gender roles which we never agreed to, but cannot escape nor forget. Last but not least, the name we keep for our whole life is chosen with sex, gender and certain social standards as criteria. Who I am, what my name is, is predetermined by who I was and am supposed to be physically.

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Christianity is the most extreme despise of physical existence and pleasure. Our soul, a divine gift from Godfather himself, who is not in the physical world, is able to ascend into heaven; it is given to us pure and innocent, however, it is likely to be unpurified by lust and sin. The body and its existence separate us from paradise and from seeing God without having to rely on our eyesight. Having a body means suffering, it involves pain. Only those who shall be tortured in hell will keep bodily feelings, those who are guided into paradise lose their physical, earthly feeling. The logical consequence of these beliefs is to live ascetically, awaiting nothing but death.

This is exactly what Nietzsche criticized about Christian morals. As no afterlife can ever be definitely proven to be guaranteed, one has to make the most of life by agreeing to it, by accepting its conditions and circumstances and by empowering oneself to be free in deciding and creating, despite our *vita misera*. Nietzsche himself was convinced of the importance of dancing; he considered it to be the highest form of physical existence, he wrote dancing songs inspired by the Mistral wind and used it for some of his most famous analogies. He wrote that “he is free who can dance even when put in chains”. Applying this to the dualism of body and soul would mean absolutely despising one of them and absolutely worshipping the other.

Foucault’s thought can be linked to this quite easily. The soul, its vague, uncertain and fragile way of being, is what puts our body in chains. For example, only my mindset keeps me from consuming cocaine, running twenty miles a day and pushing further my limits of sensational experience, from living life to its absolutely fullest. Morals, social conventions and fear prevent me from taking chances, from choosing freely between uncountable physical possibilities. The fact that we wear impractical and uncomfortable clothes such as ties and suits, voluntarily suffer in order to fulfil society’s expectations and oppress our sexual desire is symptomatic for this inequity of power between body and soul. Even if two bodies want to consensually involve in sexual activity, often social restrictions keep them from doing so. In most cases, our rational or irrational mind dominates the process of decision making. It is the instance whose decisions are not questionable nor to be questioned due to our thinking being inextricably linked with our soul, mind, common sense and language. Attempts have been made to free our body from the dictatorship of psychological and social regulations, e.g. nudism and the so-called “Sexuelle Revolution” in the late 1960s in western Germany. In the end, none of them worked out.

Nevertheless, there are some, and of the most import, domains, in which a balance of power between these two prisoners can be struck, e.g. language and art. Our tongue and teeth allow us to express our soul’s thoughts physically; our ears let us hear what others pronounce. Therefore, the soul can express itself and expect, receive and react to answers from responding souls. It is neither imprisoned nor absolutely autonomous, but sovereign in its decisions, expression and reception of the outer world.

The other import domain in which cooptation can be found is art. Soul and body cooperate in order to produce something which can be perceived physically and experienced emotionally. Wagner’s operas are not just music to my soul, they are music to my ears, my body as a whole. All kinds of aesthetic experience are meant to and bound to affect our entirety and contribute to unifying our divided existence. For example, in the early nineteenth century the Wiener Walzer was regarded as a threat to political stability. Its speed was suspected to be some sort of protest against reigning conservative powers, it was thought to provoke revolutionary thoughts and incite acts of

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disobedience against authorities, just like Marx' books. The worlds of body and soul are not exclusive and absolutely separated from each other; they belong together and influence each other.

On the other hand, body and soul depend from one another also in negative aspects. Any harm or torture done to the body if it surpasses a certain level will be considered damaging to the soul as well, sometimes leading to madness. And psychological illnesses such as depression are known to cause severe physical symptoms. Therefore, body and soul can both cooperate to complete and to perfect each other and destroy each other. None of them is definitely mightier than the other, they are both prisoner and prison guard.

Eventually, body and soul will decay, firstly by falling ill, deteriorating in condition, by forgetting and by losing physical abilities. Then, secondly, they will be annihilated when dying, vanishing into the nothing or some uncertain form of afterlife. Death can only be defined as the end of the conjunction between body and soul in the dimensions of time and space which started when these two were born as one entity. When dead, both are freed: The body is free to accept another form of life when disintegrated and consumed by other living beings. The soul, if its existence does continue when separated from its prison, which I rather consider to be a container, enters a different form of being as well. Nothing of that really concerns us as humans who consist of body and soul. As soon as one of our two components fails, is irreparably damaged or destroyed, we stop being who we were. Neither is a bodiless soul without sense organs human, nor is a soulless body, kept alive by modern technology after accidents which caused brain death. Body and soul always lose consciousness at the same time; sleep, unconsciousness and death are the three states in which neither of them can realize any of its longings. Because of their interdependence they are powerless without each other, unable to do anything and unaware of their possibilities.

Not wanting to characterize the relation between psychological and physical existence as an analogy to prison and prisoner, I would rather describe it as symbolic. Our body as a connection to the physical world whose rules and laws of physics and nature apply to it is comparable to the *signifiant* according to Ferdinand de Saussure. The *signifiant* is the phenomenon which is perceivable in lieu of something else (aliquid stat pro aliquo). Our soul is the *signifié* behind this phenomenon, not perceivable or somehow touchable, however its existence is proven by the *signifiant* via which it expresses itself to other conscious beings. Our soul surfaces with the body as its representation. Raising your hand in order to vote for or against something is the purest representation of will possible.

Staying on this surface would mean being superficial and never gaining understanding of anything, removing it would mean making the meaning behind it incomprehensible and pointless, as no bodiless soul could ever interact with any other entity, nor could it create or change the world surrounding it. My physical existence provides me with the ability to put into practice my idea of how the world should be; it enables me to do something. It is therefore the only thing which turns my soul from a bunch of abstract thoughts, which is almost nothing, into an entity capable of acting, reacting and interacting with the world. The body's will and the soul's wishes find fulfillment in each other. I can listen to Debussy's "La mer" as long as my ears let me, and I can swim into the sea as long as my mind knows how to swim and where I am. Therefore, in spite of the boundaries it brings along, this dualism is what makes me free.