

Is the Body 'Self' or 'Other'?

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The first impulse many people have toward the odd question, "Is the body 'self' or 'other'?" is to beg the question. It seems self-evident that the body is "self".
Everywhere the body goes, we go; and when the body goes, we go. "I am the body."

But the linguistic oddity, "my body," indicates otherwise. Who or what is the "me" who "has" a body?

To confound matters further, the teaching of many Eastern spiritual traditions is, "I am not the body." Who or what is saying this?

So, we have, "I am the body," and "I am not the body."

I propose to sort this question out.

Why bother?

Because among all living species, only the human goes through changes of self-definition (personal growth); the question of "what I am," and any fixation on a set answer, creates fixation (holding patterns) in our way of feeling and acting. Since it is so that holding patterns that persist past their point of helpfulness create problems in a human life, it's in our interest to look at the root of the ways in which we get stuck. Our self-definition is at the root of our tendency to get stuck, so, it's helpful to understand self-identity and whether the body is really part of it.

A SOMATIC VIEW OF THE BODY

Everybody has an inside and an outside.

The inside, in physical terms, is what's on the inside of our skin.

The outside, in physical terms, is what's on the other side of our skin.

But there is another dimension of bodily experience than the view of the flesh. It's the view of the experiencer, our sense of self.

In those terms, the inside is everything we experience over which we have control. We define all of that as either "me" or "mine".

The outside is everything we experience over which we have no control. We define all of that as "not me" and "not mine."

Control over our experience is the predominant (but not sole) determining factor as to whether we label something "me" and "mine" or "not me" and "not mine." Consider, as soon as we feel we are losing control of something that is ours, we feel in danger of losing possession of it. "Me" and "mine" are closely related to the sense of control.

The medium by which we experience everything inside and everything outside, everything "me" and "mine" and "not me" and "not mine" is the body. Through the senses, the body is the meeting place of self and experience.

And oddly, our own inner self-sense is as observable (to ourselves) as any object of outer perception.

From what viewpoint do we observe self and other? That question calls for a moment of introspection, here and now, before going on.

THE EMERGENCE OF CONTROL

The process of maturation involves a growth in the powers of self-control.

Self-control doesn't mean self-repression; it means self determination, autonomy, responsibility.

Control isn't absolute; it's a matter of degree.

A human infant starts with survival instincts and no control over excretion. The survival instincts, such as suckling and bonding with the mother, come alive as a racial (or species) inheritance ("The Great Inheritance"), automatically active. Control over excretion, also a racial inheritance, has to be learned.

The felt view, "I am the body" is a common part of that inheritance, and we don't commonly question it. It's so second-nature that the view rarely comes up for consideration, even at times of death.

Learning is a primal attribute of life, especially of human life: in the process of maturation, first the given, inherited repertoire of functions and behaviors comes alive; then, with mastery of those functions and behaviors, transcendence and outgrowing of those functions and behaviors occurs, one by one, as new, self-determined functions and behaviors emerge. Creativity starts on the foundation provided by the automatic, basic inheritance and then builds upon, and often transforms, the automatic inheritance. The concert violinist must be toilet-trained, speak a language, and be able to dress – but the ability to play the violin transcends those functions. Learning involves inclusion and transcendence.

The entire spectrum of human experience – sensation, behavior, perception, cognition, values, logic and intuition -- continues from generation to generation as a Great Inheritance, much of it unquestioned, "given and taken as right and true." Individuals grow into the spectrum of experience, and that growth process evolves, as we see from person to person and culture to culture, rather than being standard and uniform among all individuals.

As each facet of the human inheritance comes alive in a person, the person attains a measure of control over it. We become responsible for automatic (inherited) behaviors and, to a degree, capable of modifying them.

As we mature and gain control over our functions and behaviors, physical, emotional and mental, each function ceases to be "it" and becomes "I" – no longer, "It happened," or "I couldn't help it," but "I did that."

THE INTERFACE OF THE SENSES

All living, sentient beings (somas) relate to what is outside them by facing things or by avoiding things, turning toward them or turning away from them; we relate to what is inside us by facing them or refusing to face them, putting attention on them or minimizing attention on them.

What both external facing and internal facing have in common is attention. To sense things, we direct attention toward them.

The body is the vehicle of the senses; it incorporates the sense organs. Attention to the senses (i.e., the body) provides an impression of the world. The body is the medium by which we gain a window on the physical world – but it's more a perceptual and behavioral filter or set of filters than a clear window – filters inherited without awareness from family, culture, education and the mass communications media, and even via the very form of the body. These inherited perceptual filters answer the questions, "What exists?" "What's important?" "What do we do about it?"

But the body is also an object of the senses. The sense organs carried by the body also register the body as a sensation. The body (soma) is self-sensing as well as other-sensing, with the difference between "self" and "other" being a matter of control and of labeling.

Does that make the body "self" or "other"? Does the body belong to the world (as an object, to be observed by others) or does it belong to ourselves (as the medium of our intention to have experiences)?

... another moment of introspection and contemplation.

THE SELF-SENSE OF THE BODY

Somehow, we feel the body to be ourselves.

Now, just because we feel something doesn't mean we identify it as ourselves, so there must be something unique about the body-feeling that makes it feel like, "me".

A sense of control over our own actions is a part of it, but there are aspects of our bodily selves over which we have no control, and yet we still consider to be ourselves. "I can't believe I did that."

What we are talking about is identification – self-identification.

Self-identification is a feeling; it's also a subtle intention. It's the feeling of the intention, "to be" or "to exist" or "to be alive". It's also the feeling of the intention to act or have experience turn out a certain way – to control experience.

Self-identification actually a state of tension – an effort to control life (self and other), so as to keep our memories of the way things are intact or developing along lines of our imagining.

All states of tension either show up as actions or as states of readiness to act (intentions). Intentions manifest as patterns of tension in the musculature corresponding to the actions for which we are ready. "Get ready, get set ..."

Maturation involves acquiring more and more readiness for more and more kinds of experience – and generally, more and more tension. Socially, people look down upon unreadiness.

To the degree that we hold on to states of readiness, we identify as the do-er, who holds on to intentions and their associated perceptions (sensations); identity forms.

Our racial inheritance consists of intentions and ways of acting, of perceptions and ways of interpreting perception, that give rise to certain experiences. That's enculturation. To the degree that we hold on to our inheritance, in this sense, that that degree we identify as the do-er of our lives, and so form and hold on to an identity. Identity is a set of intentions and sensations (attention habits) automatically held in memory, generally without attention on those intentions, but on the objects those intentions seek to control. Self seeks to control other. The foothold of self by which it pushes against experience is the sense of identity.

Now, here's another oddity: The sense of self is a sense of intention (readiness for anything); the sense of the body (as most people sense it) is the sense of its tension. People commonly mistake the sense of contraction (or tension, or intention) for the sense of self.

Tensions come and go, intentions come and go, sensations come and go, feelings come and go, but the sense of being a self, having experiences, is constant. What is the nature of that self?

THE BODY AS MEMORY

Memory is the persistence of patterns, nothing more.

Memory is thought to reside in the brain, and that is true, but not a complete accounting for memory.

Healing is a mysterious phenomenon in which somehow the body remembers its shape and reconstitutes it, or a close approximation of it.

DNA is a means of memory storage in which patterns of function pass from generation to generation without a brain being involved.

The very persistence of a pattern is the memory of it. In that sense, the entire kosmos (objective cosmos and subjective world), is a memory (or a memory of many memories) embodied in the spectrum of experience from matter to the subtleties of mind and consciousness.

Memory is not absolute. Memories change, and so does the body-pattern, and so does the experience of the body, from inside. The Universe is a living, evolving memory. (It doesn't just *include* memory; it is a form of memory. The forms of matter, energy, and experience persist over time.)

But there is some sense in which we don't change at all, and that is the consciousness of being present to the experiences of the senses, present in the world, "here", wherever we may be. The content changes, the location changes, but the sense of self as a center of "hereness" does not. It's everywhere we go, familiar or unfamiliar, equally, regardless of whether we feel good or ill.

How odd.

Are we the body? Are we the memory of a way of experiencing?

Before you answer, recognize that the only one that can answer is the individual self (or soma), and that is subject to change, made of change.

MADE OF CHANGE

It's an oddity, but we can experience only change. Any sensation that persists without changing quickly fades. (Try staring at something and see what happens.) We perceive by contrast, which is another name for changing experience. Some teachings call that, "duality." It's not only the contrast between opposites on a single continuum, such as light and dark, but also the contrast between things that are categorically different, apples and oranges. It's any contrast.

What persists over time fades from awareness. It's called, "getting used to it." What we take for granted, we soon cease to notice. Most of our species inheritance is so persistent that, having faded, as second nature, is largely inaccessible to us. It runs on automatic, perfectly apparent in its operation, but unnoticed, the elusive obvious. For example, all somas put objects from their environment inside themselves, for the sake of continuation. It's called, "feeding ourselves." Ponder that. Isn't that weird? Now, consider teeth. Teeth are cutting and grinding devices, and yet their display in a smile is reassuring. Now that's weird! But we take it for granted.

Because life is dynamic, even weird, the changes of life keep perception refreshed – sometimes too refreshed, as when contrasts are intense, or sudden large changes occur in life.

Changes of state keep the body sense refreshed – changing sensations, whether internal or external. The memory of the body-sense contrasts with changing sensations. That's the basis of excitement. Boredom is a last-ditch effort to maintain a refreshed state in the face of unchanging conditions – generally a strong impulse to move, to go somewhere else or to do something else – anything to create a contrast, to refresh the sense of aliveness.

The body lives by changing (mostly within stable limits, as cycles of equilibrium that mostly change gradually) and so the sense of the body is made of changes – changes of sensation, changes of perception, changes of behavior, some subtle, some gross – temperature, hunger, balance ...

But the oddity is that the sense of “here” (defined as “where I am”) never changes.

The ultimate contrast is between change (perpetual “this and that”) and no-change (perpetual, “*Primordial Hereness*”). Oddly, in that contrast, only change (“this and that”) stands out, while *Primordial Hereness* rests unnoticed in the background.

When changes quiet down, the sense of “here” shifts from being defined by the conditions of our locality (this and that) to the background, primordial “hereness” of our being. *Primordial Hereness* has no form, but is always present, silent and in some sense, resonant; receptive and constantly originating new creations as thoughts and impersonal events. (Note that the feeling of hereness, if it is a feeling, is part of “this and that-ness” and is not *Primordial Hereness*, but “local hereness.” When “local hereness” relaxes and disappears, we also disappear and merge with formless, *Primordial Hereness*.)

The challenge is to fall consciously through the boredom of distraction with “this and that-ness” into the substratum of *Primordial Hereness* (where we always, inevitably, are), to become conscious of that which we already are, the context and nature of all of our “this and that-ness.”

Then, we are here, but without the sense of “I” or “we” (things that change). Is the body, our self, ourself? Who says so?

CREATION

There is something between “*Primordial Hereness*” and “this and that-ness.” It's newness.

Newness refreshes by being the bridge between *Primordial Hereness* and “this and that-ness” Newness is unknown, at first, incomprehensible. In that sense, it's felt to be the same as *Primordial Hereness*, without form. But then, the newness wears off! And the process of that “wearing off” is that it becomes familiar, which is to say, it starts to integrate with this-and-that (basically, as soon as it appears, as incomprehensible as it may be).

The integration of the new with “this and that” is constantly occurring. The unknown “new” is constantly being made into, and becomes known as, a new “this or that.”

Newness shows the common identity of *Primordial Hereness* with “this and that,” since the moment of transition from newly-emergent newness (incomprehensible) to familiar “this and that-ness” (known) is the moment when we feel we comprehend it and label it as something known. It hasn't changed; our mind has changed! The thing, itself, retains its essential nature as an expression (emergence) of the unknown from *Primordial Hereness*, as a form of *Primordial Hereness*!

The new, as it emerges, is always constrained by limitations, defined by limitations, made of limitations, even as it comes out of "Primordial Hereness" (no limitation) as an expression of local hereness (this and that). As it integrates with "this and that-ness," it becomes part of The Great Inheritance we take for granted and that shapes our lives, often without conscious recognition.

The Great Inheritance is an inheritance of limitations, memory formations; memories fade or change.

In humans, the growth of control involves a growth of consciousness (or the reach of attention) to include what has faded due to persistence and familiarity, so that new creative will can be turned onto the faded foundation from which we have operated, to freely create what has not yet existed, out of the empty, but resonant void of Primordial Hereness.

The question, "Is the body self or other?" has more to do with whether we can exercise control over our inherited (or even previously created) patterns of experience and behavior, or whether those patterns control us.

To the degree that we identify with the body-sense (hold onto intentions, as the do-er), we hold on to remembered ways of doing things, rather than adapt to changing conditions or bring something new into existence from Primordial Hereness.

To act, we must be the doer and identify as the body; to grow or change, we must recognize that the do-er is (the act of) clinging to an intention and a kind of experience that, in the face of life's changes, is a memory (even the memory of an imagining).

The question, "Is the body self or other?" is a trick question. The answer is, "It depends."

As a display of observable sensations in consciousness, body is "other"; as our means of taking action, body is self.

As long as we identify as the do-er of actions, we fail to observe the sense of being the do-er. The effort of desire seems to imply, and so gives rise to the assumption of, an identity, but without awareness of the sense of identity as a sense of tension or limitation.

If we only observe the embodied self-identity, we cease to participate in experience, but instead arrest and undermine the sense of self-identity.

Neither of these positions is a problem; the pair are a contrast of alternatives.

Fixation in form is an illusion of time, a convincing delusion of self-identity.

Wisdom recognizes the body to be a memory without any intrinsic or essential self-nature, but one that exists in time and appears to have, by virtue of the existence of relationships, self-nature.

Anyway, that was not the trick of the trick question.

The trick of the trick question is this: Whether we decide that the body (soma) is "self" or "other," either decision is a state of mind held in memory. What we consider to be the body is also a state of mind held in memory. Memory is made of "this and that-ness," but what we are is both Primordial Hereness, not defined by "this and that-ness," and local hereness, which is "this and that-ness." Self is here, body is here, only temporarily defined as "this and that-ness."

The assumption of the alternatives posed by the question was the trick of the question.

Observe local hereness.

Notice that it exists in Primordial Hereness.

Let go of local here-ness; relax into Primordial Hereness. You're still locally here!

EVOLUTION

All things change in time. Whether the body is self or other is only a matter of perspective and temporary definition.

Practically speaking, we are recipients of a species inheritance that defines us as "this and that," but in a state of Primordial Hereness which is limited by neither this nor that, but is our essential or original nature.

Fixation in memory temporarily binds us. Memories and imaginings surface in time; the imperative of life (newness) is the emergence of the unknown into form, from Primordial Hereness and continuing in Primordial Hereness as an expression of Primordial Hereness!

Practically speaking, to the degree that we identify with the contracted (or memory-fixated) state of body and mind (soma), to that degree do we constrain the emergence of newness from Primordial Hereness (formlessness) into local hereness (manifestation). The emergence of newness requires space.

For that reason, our evolution depends upon recognition and dis-identification from memory-fixated states, through inclusion and transcendence, so that they/we are free to leave space for newness.

Practically speaking, since recognition depends upon perception and perception depends upon contrast, we can use a couple of different contrasts to perceive and recognize aspects of ourselves that remain familiarly hidden, to release their binding nature and create space:

1. contrast between what we desire and what we resist
2. contrast between our intuition of Primordial Hereness and local conditions

for option 1: At any moment when we may feel stuck, we can deliberately feel what it feels like to be someone who resists what we are experiencing in the moment and then what it would feel like to be someone who desires that experience. By alternating in those two feelings, we create a contrast between them, make them more vivid, and so prepare for the next step: to feel both feelings simultaneously and equally. To feel them simultaneously reveals a new sensation, previously hidden, but somehow familiar: a sense of identity felt as a kind of effort or tension that we can relax. At the moment of relaxation, we may have a perception of Primordial Hereness – or of whatever remaining tension we have around the issue (in which case, we repeat the process).

for option 2: We may deliberately alternate between putting attention on feeling stuck and on our intuition of Primordial Hereness. That contrast may be sufficient to discern the tension we are experiencing in the moment (resistance to our present experience or desire for an alternative), so that we can relax it.

The space liberated by either of these options brings relief from the stress of memory and imagining automatically generated by The Great Inheritance. Then, there's room for the emergence of *newness* into our experience as our own creative action or as our refreshed perception of the conditions of our *local hereness*.

Is the body "self" or "other"? "Body", "self", and "other" are features of The Great Inheritance, patterns of memory, changeable by the emergence of newness. There is no such thing as "body," "self" or "other," but only durable patterns of memory always being modified by the emergence of *newness* from the Primordial Hereeness.