Chapter 9

The Body (Dis-)incarnate: Notes on a Subterranean Theological-Phenomenology

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> "*Consciousness does not fall into a body—it is not incarnated; it is a disincarnation*".
> Emmanuel Levinas

Introduction

On a recent blistering high summer afternoon in Cape Town, I attended a Jewish funeral. Perspiring uncontrollably, I observed, as the mourner's kaddish concluded, the unadorned wooden casket being lowered into the ground. One by one, members of the large group of friends and relatives made their way customarily to the designated shovels and began casting piles of soil into the burial site. I recalled the sensation witnessing the ritual: the cadenced vibrations of the ground underfoot as the darkness of the earth submerged the wooden coffin. There was something provocative in this slow acquiescence to death; in the fading geometry of the casket that beckons the imagination to a call – a call not so much from a realm *beyond* but from the tremors of the *underground*. The body in the subterranean and the body *as* subterranean. Had this body already reached the advanced stages of decomposition into the organic matter from which it came? A literalisation of the famous formula from Ecclesiastes: "from the dust and all return to dust" (מִן־הֶעָפָר וְהַכֹּל שָׁב אֶל־הֶעָפָר) – I wondered.[1]

1 Ecclesiastes 3:20, BHS.

Perhaps none other than the German-Swiss artist of the Northern Renaissance, Hans Holbein the Younger (1497–1543), could capture this scene beneath the earth with more exacting horror, than in his life-sized piece, *Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (1521–22). There Holbein opens the casket for all to see in a detailed depiction of the emaciated body stretched out in grotesque realism. As if on an operating table, wounds of the putrefying flesh, blackened-green face, gaunt hands, and feet, hang on a form of protruding bones held together only delicately by a thin veil of skin. The artist's vision of death is so lurid that Dostoyevsky, upon seeing the painting, had to be dragged away by his wife lest he succumb to an epileptic fit.[2] He later declared through the character Myshkin that by this image "some people might just lose their faith."[3] As if in anticipation of this final word, one might be tempted to see in the open mouth and extended finger a sign of the struggle for life even in this dense and weighty form and thus, perhaps, for the coming resurrection. To rush to this conclusion, however, would be to miss the inescapable finitude and materiality of this organic encounter with death. As one commentator has it, "there is nothing Christlike about this body, nothing sets it apart. It is anyone's corpse."[4]

In the eyes of the modern viewer, this does not appear as the incarnated Christ, but rather as a body discarded, disregarded, and indeed *dis*incarnated. For a South African philosophical theology in particular, the importance of this body lies not in the view espousing piety and humility through guilt among the faithful (*devotio moderna*),[5] but rather in one which radically affirms God's and, therefore, humanities' material and organic quality.[6] According to a traditional reading of the Gospel of St.

2 See Oskar Bätschmann and Pascal Griener, *Hans Holbein: Revised and Expanded Edition* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014), 136–38.

3 Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Idiot*, trans. David McDuff (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 255.

4 Jonathan Jones, "Holbein's dead Christ delivers a shock." *The Guardian*, 18 June 2009, https:// www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2009/jun/17/holbein-dead-christ-jonathan-jones.

5 Bätschmann and Griener, *Hans Holbein*, 138.

6 Perhaps another appropriate depiction would be that of the religious wood carvings of the South African artist, Jackson Hlungwani (1923–2000), who presents a Christ in "a theology

John, the incarnation of the "Word becoming flesh" (John 1:14) serves a reparative function with respect to sin: i.e., God is made *manifest* in the ordinary man as the *extra*-ordinary incarnated Word in the flesh. Such a view, however, performs precisely the opposite function of what St. John, who was battling the Gnostics, attempted to circumvent: namely, that the kenosis of God is by design not a display of a more fully extra-ordinary quality but denotes rather his complete ordinary-*ness* – those material aspects of the human condition which are also exposed to bodily change and corruptibility. Whatever the theological dynamics contained here, we can at least concede that in the doctrine of the incarnation one always presupposes *some* conception of embodiment. In adopting this orientation, which is far closer to Christian theology's own self-understanding in antiquity,[7] theological reflection must always start in the middle of this embodied life which we *are*. This body becomes, thus, both what the Swedish theologian Ola Sigurdsson calls an "existential precondition" for theology as well as a topic for theological reflection.[8] Or perhaps to put this another way: embodied finitude is always the horizon for doing theology just as theology has something to say about the very nature of this horizon of embodied finitude.

The question then arises as to what precisely is the character of this embodiment which accounts for the body's materiality and organic quality – a dimension which is not *just* objectively-extended (*res extensa*)? To provide an answer which *theology* must

from below, as a theology *for* the below…engaged and embodied." See Khegan M. Delport, Marthinus J. Havenga and Calvin D. Ullrich, "Guest editorial." *STJ Supplementum* 6 no. 4 (2020), 10. For a further discussion, see also Marthinus J. Havenga's, "On theological aesthetics, decolonization, and doing theology through the arts." *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 7 no. 1 (2021), 13–17.

7 Christoph Markschies, *God's Body: Jewish, Christian, and Pagan Images of God*, trans. Alexander Johannes Edmonds (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2019). See also Gregor Etzelmüller, *Gottes verkörperters Ebenbild: Eine theologische Anthropologie* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021).

8 Ola Sigurdsson, "Theology in the Middle of Things: Existential Preconditions of Systematic Theology." *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 22 no. 4 (Oct 2020): 473–93. See also Sigurdsson's *Heavenly Bodies: Incarnation, the Gaze, and Embodiment in Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016).

provoke – that is, if the truly corporeal dimension of Christ's (dis-)incarnation is considered – is to begin *within* the horizon of finitude which philosophical thought allows. In this context, it is well known that the philosophical preoccupation with the body finds its pride of place within the tradition of phenomenology. However, while it is this domain which has sought to unify experience of the body with consciousness (*in*-carnating the latter into the former), its materiality has paradoxically come to be neglected by virtue of a logic of incarnation that reinscribes the dualism of spirit–matter. That this is particularly pronounced in modern theology is easily discernible. For, is it not the case that in the emphasis on the *activity* of the living experience of Christ before and after the resurrection, or simply, the experience of Christ in the *passive* mode to register the consequences of violent affliction in the passion and crucifixion, a picture emerges which ties the body to a Self *without* its distinctive visceral corporeality? That is to say: with little consideration being given to the breathing, eating, perspiring, instinctual, driven, or decaying body.[9]

If one no longer only detects but, indeed, registers a consensus that there is a discernible Gnostic drift within theology toward spiritualisation, then things cannot be said to be as clear in phenomenology. And if phenomenology is supposed to act as a conversation partner to help theology recover its own best insights (as some suggest),[10] then it is necessary to see where phenomenology itself succeeds as well as fails in this endeavour. It is, therefore, through this investigation into the 'Gnostic problem' in phenomenology that this chapter wishes to contribute, perhaps

9 See Gregor Etzelmüller, "Verkörperung als Paradigma theologischer Anthropologie." in Gregor Etzelmüller and Annette Weissenrieder (Hrsg.) *Verkörperung als Paradigma theologischer Anthropologie* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 219–242. Etzelmüller here cites this dualist tradition in modern theology by way of example in the work of Rudolf Bultmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg.

10 Etzelmüller, *Gottes verkörperters Ebenbild*. Etzelmüller adopts an "interdisciplinary anthropology of embodiment" that includes phenomenology. However, while beyond the scope here, it should be noted that his approach relies heavily on the "embodied mind" perspective, which depends on problematic presuppositions about the status of culture, the subject, and its overall harmonious relation to reality.

indirectly, to the appropriation of phenomenology in the context of a South African philosophical theology. In short: it will not be enough for theology to uncritically adopt an incarnating formula from phenomenology (*Leib* as lived body or flesh), especially when a doctrine of the incarnation wishes to take the materiality of the body seriously. Theology should rather be sensitive to the tensions within phenomenology about the limits of the *experience* of one's own body, for it is only in this way that we can see the *underground depths* of Christ's (dis-)incarnation and thus of our own.

We shall proceed in three sections: First, attention will be devoted to the founding phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, and in particular his influential constitution of the "lived body" or *Leib.* While Husserl's distinction between *Leib* and *Körper* cannot be disputed for its value for the subsequent tradition of phenomenology, the "lived body" nevertheless is reduced to my own conscious experience (*Erlebenis*) thereof. Husserl can surely be credited for the additional latitude he places on the nature of intersubjectivity and the life-world, but the body itself – at least in its reception – remained a correlate of consciousness; uprooted from its organic processes and the matter from which any conscious activity could come to be in the first place. The Husserlian body is, as it were, always floating *above ground*. Merleau-Ponty (section two), however, comes much closer to a vision of embodiment that acknowledges its vital pre-constitutive accomplishment as well as the intimacy of intertwinement between our bodies and nature.[11] For Merleau-Ponty, the body

11 Situating this discussion of the "materiality" of embodiment within the context of phenomenology is a part of a larger project of the author to bring together theological phenomenology, which maintains a certain priority of the first-person perspective as well as an over–emphasis on transcendence, together with the so-called "affective turn" or "new materialist" philosophy. If the former still maintains anthropocentric and idealist prejudices, then the latter also too easily covers over the phenomenological perspective – i.e., the importance of the subject – as well as its contributions to materialist discourse. The present chapter begins to raise these tensions through the fulcrum of Falque's intervention. This also explains, perhaps, why this "philosophical theological" approach to the body does not take its starting point from, say, the tradition of deep incarnational theologies and their cosmic metaphors, though there is certainly theological contiguity with their aims. See for example, Niels Henrik Gregerson (ed.)

is not something one *has* but something one *is*, and this for him, especially in his earlier work, takes the form also of the lived-body (or *le corps vivant*), and later as flesh (or *la chair*). While Merleau-Ponty relinquishes the authority afforded to the Husserlian Transcendental Ego, it is doubtful whether his concept of flesh and its "chiastic" relation to the world can conceive of the materiality of the body which always resides outside of perception. The body in Merleau-Ponty seems to be *grounded everywhere* and thus, paradoxically, is nowhere to be found. However, this is not the whole picture, as the third and final section hopes to demonstrate, in a radicalisation of Merleau-Ponty through the work of Emmanuel Falque. In a provocative reading, Falque illustrates, especially in the later work, that Merleau-Ponty was embarking on a project to discover the alterity of embodiment; one that was animated not by nameless transcendence but by a textured absence and a brute wildness of being that took the subject into the depths of existence, both into the chaos of ourselves and wildness of nature. This figure of the body in Merleau-Ponty is one that reaches into the *underground*, the place where Christ took upon this descent into the subterranean element so that he might dwell and journey with us there. In the conclusion, we briefly gesture back toward theology and consider some of the political–ethical implications of this exploration.

The material and organic body which we are, is, to be sure, not simply extended matter in space, but nor is it only a body incarnated with consciousness. As the *heuristic* example of Holbein's Christ indicates,[12] the body of Christ is also disincarnated – "spread" in Falque's terminology – and affectively constituted by a manifold of forces that form the existential precondition *for* incarnation. To think through the body (dis-)incarnated is neither to romanticise chaos nor to discount the orders of conscious

Incarnation: On the Scope and Depth of Christology (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015) and Aurica Jax and Saskia Wendel (eds.), *Envisioning the Cosmic Body of Christ: Embodiment, Plurality, and Incarnation* (London: Routledge, 2020).

12 The *heuristic* value of the experience of Christ in culture is here more important than the *didactic* value; see Emmanuel Falque, *Crossing the Rubicon: The Borderlands of Philosophy and Theology*, trans. Reuben Shank (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 22, 84.

reflection, and nor is it still to celebrate a supposedly debased human condition which receives its organisation in an exclusively theological resolution.[13] It is first and foremost to connect us to the primordial material elements which we are and remind us that these are a part of the conditions for transformation.

The Husserlian Body

The underlying flirtation with Gnosticism (read as a logic of incarnation) in contemporary theological phenomenologies, such as those found in Jean-Luc Marion, Michel Henry, and Jean-Louis Chrétien (the connection and elaborations of which are not the aim of the present chapter),[14] is prefigured in the French responses to Husserl, attempting to unify the experience of the body beyond the so-called *Leib-Körper* distinction. In this contribution, we will only encounter Merleau-Ponty, but a part of this tradition one would also have to consider Emmanuel Levinas. In either case, nevertheless, the figure of Edmund Husserl looms large.

Following the so-called "transcendental turn" beginning already with the publication of *Ideas I* in 1913, the father of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl, has often been criticised as renewing a form of the Cartesian dualism between mind and body.[15] Phenomenology's supposed primacy on the structures of logic, the inner workings of internal-time consciousness, especially the Transcendental Ego,[16] are said to devalue the

13 I have elsewhere engaged extensively with Falque's notion of the spread body. See Calvin D. Ullrich, "The Spread Body and the Affective Body: A Discussion with Emmanuel Falque." *Religions* 15.1 (2024), 30; https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15010030.

14 This claim of continuity and influence of what one might call these "first generation" phenomenologists on the so-called phenomenology of "theological turn," is of course a moot point, but the more interesting question is rather the extent to which their respective theologies come under the sway of certain gestures which de-materialise the body.

15 For example, see J. N. Mohanty, "Roman Ingarden's Critique of Husserl's Transcendental Phenomenology," in *Phenomenology: Between Essentialism and Transcendental Philosophy* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1997), 32–45.

16 For some clear distinctions on how Husserl understands this transcendental idealism as a new form of egological science, see §40–41 in Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction*

materiality of the body with all its concomitant complexities, such as those of race, gender, or sexuality.[17]

Those familiar with Husserl will know that the fundamental goal of *Ideas I* was to inaugurate a move from the earlier realist paradigms contained in the *Logical Investigations* and the lectures *On the Phenomenology of Internal Time Consciousness*, to a more explicit transcendental approach; "back to the things themselves" (*zu den Sachen selbst*) or to those phenomena which give themselves to pure consciousness.[18] Insofar as the body, for Husserl, is a kind of omni-presence for our perception – that "zero-point" for all perceptive experience – the problem to be solved for phenomenology is whether the body is necessary to provide access to pure consciousness. The answer given in *Ideas I* is an emphatic "no," as the infamous thought experiment of the imagined destruction of the world in §49 demonstrates. The implications for the body are made explicit in §54; for if non-Being were to be imagined – i.e., if the whole of physical nature were to be "annulled," then "there would be no more bodies [*Leiber*] and therefore no more men … But my consciousness… would remain an absolute stream of experience."[19] Husserl believes at this stage he has established the phenomenological possibility of a disincarnated consciousness.

Matters are made considerably more complex in *Ideas II*, where these earlier accounts of the body are extensively supplemented; on the one hand, Husserl does not seem willing to let go of the foundational insight that the body is distinct from the Transcendental Ego but which is further understood in terms of mine-ness or property,[20] and on the other, the body is also

to Phenomenology, trans. Dorian Cairns (Hague: Martinus Nijhof, 1973), 81, 86.

17 For example, Levinas critically asserted that Husserl's theory of intentionality was "neutralized and disincarnate." See Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2001), 27–28.

18 Edmund Husserl, *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, trans. W. R. Boyce Gibson (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 74.

19 Husserl, *Ideas I*, 107.

20 Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy: Second Book*, *Studies in the*

not simply a constituted object in the spatiality of the world but now becomes a *medium* – i.e., a condition of possibility for the appearance of objects in the world as such.[21] However, perhaps in no other place in Husserl's oeuvre is the identification of the Body's manifestation made more explicit than in the widely commented-on section two of the third chapter of *Ideas II* in his discussion of the hand touching the hand.[22]

When we speak of the "hand" touching the "hand" we are abstracting the experience of the body (*Körper*) into objective extended space.[23] But when we recognise the "double-way" of the *Leibkörper*, that is, the body as both a physical thing in the material world that touches *and* the hand's relation to the sensations that "I find on it, and I sense 'on' it," when it is touched, then the body's constitution is just as primordially related to this (tactile) modality of sensation. To put this another way: what distinguishes the lived-body from the thingly-body is that the former is capable of possessing sensations that are localised and incorporated by various hyletic "sensation-fields" (like touch, sight, hot/cold, etc.). When these sensation-fields work together with kinesthetic sensations (the eye, or the hand touching), they are apprehended in a passive synthesis which Husserl names "sensings" or in the German neologism, *Empfindnisse*, that is, the lived experience (*Erlebnis*) of sensation (*Empfindung*).[24] Thus, contrary to the "natural attitude" or "naturalistic attitude," the body under the phenomenological attitude (*Einstellung*) is apprehended as a "practical kinaesthetic horizon" of possibility for both activities of perception and for day-to-day activities that can either be original or acquired over time.

Phenomenology of Constitution, trans. Richard Rojcewicz and André Schuwer (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1989), 223, 224, 259. Hereafter: *Ideas II.*

21 A point which has been recently emphasised by Richard Kearney; see "The Wager of Carnal Hermeneutics," in Richard Kearney and Brian Treanor (eds.), *Carnal Hermeneutics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 26–29.

22 Husserl, *Ideas II*, 152.

23 Ibid.

24 Alia Al-Saji, "Bodies and sensings: On the uses of Husserlian phenomenology for feminist theory." *Continental Philosophy Review* 43 (2010):13–37, 18.

It is not possible to provide a fully composite view of the Husserlian Body, since indeed, many of Husserl's insights remain scattered throughout his corpus as a whole and are picked up upon and expanded by various subsequent thinkers in different ways. Nevertheless, one can arrive at a summary position if one registers that within the context of the problematic set by *Ideas II*, as the subtitle of the volume reminds us – "Studies in the Phenomenology of Constitution" – the aim is to show "how the givenness of a certain kind of experienced object [in this case, the Body] is correlative to certain tacit and explicit operations and achievements of consciousness."[25] Therefore, it is perhaps unsurprising to find that despite the ambiguity between the Ego and the Body as being constituted, on the one hand, through passive localised sensations and the synthesis of sensings, and on the other hand, as a necessary component in "the constitution of Objects as spatial things,"[26] Husserl will nonetheless not grant the latter a special subjective significance. It is, in the end, just "Ego-like."

The character of this tension is revealing demonstrated in Supplement VII of *Ideas II*, where Husserl develops the distinction between the Ego and the "over-and-against" or "non-Ego," that is, the constituted stratum of Objectivity. The Body falls within this stratum and therefore is non-Ego, it ultimately "belongs" to the transcendental Ego, which is distinct and independent of it.[27] This language of property permeates *Ideas II* and gives the lie to the fact that the subjectivity of the Body is to be understood as a contingent act bestowed or "gifted" to it by the Ego: "the special status of the Body is by grace of the Ego."[28]

Merleau-Ponty's Ontology of the Flesh

The French reception of Husserl sought, through a unique generation of thinkers, to systematically de-centre Husserl's conception of the transcendental Ego from phenomenological discourse and to re-emphasise the Body's own immanent

25 Husserl, *Ideas II*, 136.
26 Ibid., 160.
27 Ibid., 330–31.
28 Ibid., 224.

manifestation. This reception occurred almost exclusively through the *Cartesian Meditations* (1931), translated into French by Gabriella Pfeiffer and Emmanuel Levinas, a publication that emerged from two lectures Husserl delivered at the Sorbonne in 1929. It is difficult to underestimate the importance of this text, not only for Husserl himself but for the tradition which followed. Presenting phenomenology for the first time in France into a Cartesian idiom, Husserl would later call it his *magnum opus* and it would shape phenomenology uncompromisingly as an "egology" – a philosophy of the subject in the shadow of its Cartesian and Kantian antecedents.[29] However, it seems almost precisely in reaction to this over-compensation of the Ego that much of the French tradition would seek its diminishment and erasure in favour of the body.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, one of the first to visit the Husserl Archives in Leuven, continues Husserl's trajectory carried out in *Ideas II*, though he explicitly rejected any primacy afforded to the Transcendental Ego.[30] The Body, or what Merleau-Ponty refers to as *le corps vivant*, and variously as *corps propre*, and importantly later on as *la chair*, is not something one has but something one *is*.[31] In his magnum opus, *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) – still entertaining his ongoing dialogue and critique of Sartre and Husserl carried out in *The Structure of Behavior* (1942) – *la corps vivant* or lived-body becomes the central term and is contrasted, like Husserl, to the objective body. This forms part of the central and but also broader thesis of the book, namely, that "perception"

29 See Didier Franck, *Flesh and Body: On the Phenomenology of Husserl*, trans. Joseph Rivera and Scott Davidson (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 14.

30 For a comprehensive overview of Merleau-Ponty's relationship to Husserl, see Ted Toadvine, "Merleau-Ponty's Reading of Husserl: A Chronological Overview," in *Merleau-Ponty's Reading of Husserl,* eds. Ted Toadvine and Lester Embree (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 2002), 227–86.

31 "I must even set aside from myself my body understood as a thing among things, as a collection of physico-chemical processes. But even if the *cogitatio*, which I thus discover, is without location in objective time and space, it is not without place in the *phenomenological* world." Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 2005), xiv. Emphasis added.

is to be equated with the primacy of embodiment; that we grasp the world not just through vision but via a sensorimotor intentionality, which is both ambiguously pragmatic as well as pre-thetic.[32] To articulate his phenomenological perspective, Merleau-Ponty deployed an ingenious strategy to uncover what was not apparently transparent to reflection, that is, to observe the break-downs in bodily functioning. His well-known case of the phantom limb demonstrated how, despite the objective-body missing an arm in the case of an amputation, there was still a "felt" presence which the body experiences in the place of this absence. The experiment showed that the body and our perception of the world involve not just objective measurings of quantifiable space but of felt relations between our body and environment. Thus, like Husserl, Merleau-Ponty also wanted to ground the lived-body in sensation and movement, but unlike him, he refuses to reduce this constitution to tactile sensations alone and also includes the field of visual perception in a circular relation: hands don't just feel, they see, words are not just spoken into the world by an I, but the I is spoken from the words of the world, and so on.

While reading Merleau-Ponty there is often a neat and underlying unity that describes *le corps vivant*. The "becoming-body of my senses and the becoming-world of my body," indeed, often strikes of a symmetry between nature and the human being, where such a perfect circulation of sensing and being-sensed instantiates, what Jacques Derrida called, a "hapto-centric closure,"[33] the effect of which is to eliminate the body as other. As Merleau-Ponty himself later conceded in his posthumously published *The Visible and Invisible*, this was "due to the fact that in part I retained the philosophy of 'consciousness'."[34] It is at this later juncture that Merleau-Ponty introduced and more deeply developed his notion of *la chair* (flesh), precisely to move beyond what could be construed as an ontologisation of the perceptual faculty of embodiment – the body as *perceiver* which becomes

32 Ibid., 83, 87, 171.
33 See Jacques Derrida, *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*, trans. Christine Irizarry (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 190.
34 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort and trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 183.

the site of all phenomenological givenness.[35] Nevertheless, while there is much to learn from Merleau-Ponty and especially in the enigmatic formulations of his later work, it is doubtful whether he succeeded in this endeavour of moving beyond a scheme of embodiment which prioritises the "I-can" of voluntary movement or the perceiver-perceived structure. Even in *The Visible and Invisible*, as Claude Romano has shown, the elaboration of a firmer ontology of flesh which departs from the hangovers of transcendental idealism still issues in a "theoreticism of the flesh."[36] In the endless reversibility and double-movement that becomes characteristic of the ontology of flesh and world (what he famously called "chiasm"), flesh undergoes a "prolongation" into the world just as the world returns to flesh.[37] The result, as Romano concludes, is that:

> the flesh, as origin of the world, can have no contours in the world; its limits are those of the world itself…Being without limits, it has no skin, either; its ubiquitous presence is a radiance whose center is everywhere and circumference nowhere. Nor does it have matter. It is without beginning or end. It is that 'glorified body' that stands opposed to the 'momentary body' and of which we should probably say, as of the pure Husserlian ego, that it has neither birth nor death.[38]

Any cursory reading of Merleau-Ponty will leave no doubt that the notion of *flesh* is deeply intertwined with the world. However, it has for its primacy a reflexivity that first and foremost determines it as a site for the openness of Being without limitation. In short, the flesh presents a "glorified body" since it appears incarnated everywhere in a radiant plenitude, without a properly defined finitude ("neither birth nor death") and of what must remain concomitantly foreign and exterior to it. On this reading of Merleau-Ponty, the body is captured by an idealism of the

35 Franck, *Flesh and Body: On the Phenomenology of Husserl*, 23.
36 Claude Romano, *There Is: The Event and the Finitude of Appearing*, trans. Michael B. Smith (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 140.
37 Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 255.
38 Romano, *There Is*, 141.

perceptible,[39] which, paradoxically, renders it not simply "above ground" in the same way as Husserl, but rather *groundless* in its ubiquity. One must here abandon the ontology of flesh, or at least radicalise it, to encounter the impossibility of coincidence and of an originary bodily exterior-dehiscence by which the body can appear to itself. The precise character of this radicalisation would have to include, in part, the discovery of alterity in Merleau-Ponty – and of a recovery of the principle of "brute being"[40] in a "phenomenology of the underground."[41]

Falque and the Merleau-Pontian Underground

We have been claiming that the tradition of twentieth-century phenomenology, here in the form of Husserl and his reception in Merleau-Ponty, despite its noble attempt to incarnate the body beyond the Cartesian dualism of soul and body – which has its counterpart in contemporary theological Gnosticisms – has in several ways only updated the duality to a higher level: namely between the lived experience of the body as flesh and the body in its organicity. Through this (dis-)incarnation, the materiality of our body which also makes up our existence is forgotten. Taking up the body *as* (dis-)incarnated, not only as 'lived' in the intentionality of the flesh, no doubt a vast and certain improvement, is not a simple return to the *res-extensia* of Descartes. Rather, it is a deepening of incarnation. This position comes to a head in the contemporary work of Emmanuel Falque, together with whom we discover a radicalisation of Merleau-Ponty toward the limits of phenomenology in Falque's concept of

39 Romano, *There Is*, 122. "The concept of the flesh does not break with idealism, even if it may at times threaten its internal equilibrium."

40 "If being is to disclose itself, it will do so before a transcendence, and not before an intentionality, it will be the engulfed brute being that returns to itself." Merleau-Ponty, "Note from September 1959," in *The Visible and the Invisible*, 210.

41 Emmanuel Falque, *The Loving Struggle: Phenomenological and Theological Debates*, trans. Bradley B. Onishi and Lucas McCracken (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), chap. 2.

the "spread body"[42] and in a phenomenology of the *underground* or *subterranean.*[43]

In the context of our discussion, this has to do with a continued investigation into the "Limitation" that constitutes our humanity as created creatures. For Falque, this is to do phenomenology *to its limit*, for the phenomenon of the organic, chaotic, materiality, of the body as revealed in the "lowly God," is that which lies *beneath* signification or is not simply "given" in the phenomenological sense. Merleau-Ponty, according to Falque, had, just before his untimely death, begun this radicalising project of a "phenomenology of the underground."[44] A project which progressively sought to pursue what phenomenology had not taken into account, through an integration of sources as different as psychoanalysis, Existentialism, and French Spiritualism. What "grounds" the *flesh* (*corps vivant*) is the subterranean body; a "descending underground in a sort of katabasis or kenosis

42 Emmanuel Falque, "Toward an Ethics of the Spread Body," in *Somatic Desire*, 91–116.

43 Emmanuel Falque is the doyen of the third generation of thinkers in the so-called "theological turn" in Continental philosophy coming out of France in recent decades. Based at the *Insitut Catholique de Paris*, he is "first and foremost a philosopher" but given the ongoing profusion of theological language and themes in his writing and the fact that he is explicit about his confessional Catholicism, it is easy to misread his primary task. Falque is a Christian thinker, but he wants to understand how to think with Christianity in a philosophical way in a world that is no longer exclusively Christian, or at least beset with new cultural conditions of secular life. These details are not incidental, but crucial to understanding Falque's methodology, which departs significantly from the initial protagonists of the "theological turn." Whereas thinkers like Jean-Luc Marion or Emmanuel Levinas begin from an almost reactionary gesture that posits the infinite and then derives the finite, Falque begins from a positive account of the human as such: following Heidegger, this is not finite as privation, but the position of "finitude." See Emmanuel Falque, *Crossing the Rubicon: The Borderlands of Philosophy and Theology*, trans. Reuben Shank (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 25 and Emmanuel Falque, *The Metamorphosis of Finitude: An Essay on Birth and Resurrection*, trans. George Hughes (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 16–19. Emmanuel Falque, *The Loving Struggle: Phenomenological and Theological Debates*, trans. Bradley B. Onishi and Lucas McCracken (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018), 104, 129.

44 Falque, *The Loving Struggle*, 45–75.

into the 'cellar' of our existence."[45] To reach and commend this underground for a philosophical theology that departs from uncritical readings of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty as have seen above, we progress; A) through a renewed humanism, which is not just "about" the human as such, and engages a non-irenic realism that a phenomenology of the body must confront; B) a corporeity which expands the notion of "flesh" to its "element" beyond common conceptions of embodiment; and C) an increasing resistance to incorporation in terms of a physicality that ventures outside of phenomenology and into the depth of our (brute) being-there, connecting us to a latency within the materiality of "Nature." After this itinerary, we will then be in a better position to see what is at stake in both a phenomenology of the body as well as a theology that takes the subterranean as a necessary site for reflection.

Renewed Humanism

Unlike the "above ground" and the "groundless" in Husserl and a traditional reading of Merleau-Ponty, the *underground* first presupposes a humanism that is realistic about the forces that are both exerted by and on the body. Life is, in this sense, not only an aspiration for transparency and ideality. It entails a "coefficient of adversity" which expresses a "preference for blurred lines over orderly divisions, the depth of obscurity to the radiance of luminosity, the humility of interdependence to the philosophy of assuredness."[46] Falque's interpretation here is harnessed against what he considers an "irenicism of origins" in phenomenology, whereby the methods of its founders presuppose a purism, whether of consciousness, the natural attitude, or Being, denying an essential obscurity in humanity. Unlike Descartes and the bifurcation he inaugurated, the mind and body are in fact less distinct and consist of a "mixture" of each other – a prescient insight which now finds its vindication even in neuro-, cognitive, and affective sciences.[47] Drawing on Maine de Biran, for Merleau-

45 Ibid., 47.
46 Ibid., 51.
47 See Donovan O. Schaefer, *Wild Experiment: Feeling Science and Secularism After Darwin* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022).

Ponty, humanity is seen less by the divine rights of rationalism and expresses, rather, the primitive fact "of combination, blending and mixture,"[48] perhaps even by an unacknowledged "animality."

To speak of the animal in a new humanism is not a *reduction to* animals, as if we were guided by mere instinct; it is rather based on the conviction, often forgotten, that animality is a *part of* the human – as if on a continuum, whose material force or power (*Puissance*) is felt in its intensity, aesthetically captured by the butchered paintings of Francis Bacon but also in work of Chaim Soutine who preceded him.[49] Elsewhere, Falque had described this "animality" and "chaos" of humanity by recovering both its Greco and Judeo-Christian senses, revealing the anthropological from the cosmological: the Greeks spoke of an originary chaos and the biblical tradition of the Tohu-Bohu, where we learn of the "descent into the abyss" of our existence,[50] not so much to escape it, nor to falsely moralise about sin or culpability, but instead to acknowledge what the limits of our humanity entail. Indeed, a humanity whose corporeity not only refers to an intentional flesh (*Leib*) also considers the "elements" outside of reflection. Contrary to canonical formulations of the body-incarnate within phenomenology, connections are thus here made possible for phenomenologies of embodiment to relate to the non-human as well as other animate organisms.

The Elements of a New Corporeity

With this vision of humanity – decentred, opaque, mixtured, animal – the lines of embodiment are re-drawn, no longer only circumscribed by an ontologised notion of *flesh*, as that point where the body is felt as the living-body *that I am*. Merleau-Ponty is instead in pursuit of an alterity that is more material,

48 Falque, *The Loving Struggle*, 53.

49 Falque, *The Wedding Feast*, 15. Falque refers to Bacon's butcher shop paintings with reference to Deleuze's commentary from *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (London: Continuum, 2005), 32. "But the lived body is still a paltry thing in comparison with a more profound and almost unlivable power." Falque does not mention Soutine, but his influence on Bacon is well known.

50 Falque, *The Wedding Feast of the Lamb: Eros, the Body, and the Eucharist*, trans. George Hughes (New York: Fordham, 2016), 5–10.

natural, or in his language more "textured" and "sensible," than simply characterised by non-sense (Derrida), and which despite being discovered in all places is not easily placed, though also not place-less. This suggests that while a new corporeity is beyond what can be expressed, it is not a denial of reflexivity in favour of a resignation to an asymptotic apophaticism. On the contrary, embodiment is to be found in the *underground* elements that precede subject–object dichotomies, that is, a conception of *flesh* or corporeity rooted imprecisely in the "old" (though not nostalgic) language and terms of the "elements." The pre-Socratics' water, air, fire, and earth, "speak" not so much of the place-lessness of the body in "textual" signification, but offer rather the "textures of flesh" or "styles" of thought to denote a dynamic density utterly removed from the firm phenomenological associations of *Leib* or *Körper*. As such, the elements of this corporeity are less abstract in a customary alterity of openness and difference; texture points rather "towards human community rather than the extremity of absolute otherness."[51]

Although Falque does not mention Emmanuel Levinas in this context, one can also call upon a subversive reading of the philosopher of extreme alterity *par excellence* and refer to the "alimentary function" of sensibility.[52] Often-overlooked in the jump to the rupture of ethics, is the *passage* of the subject which precedes its subjection to the ethical-Other, namely, through a so-called material genesis out of the elemental substance of life.[53] Levinas, thus, like Maurice Blanchot, spoke also of a neutral *there is* (*il y a*) made up of a field of "impersonal 'field of forces'" which sought concretisation in elemental nature.[54] In an affective-milieu which surrounds us like an atmosphere, the elemental is that

51 Falque, *The Wedding Feast of the Lamb*, 58.

52 See Tom Sparrow, *Plastic Bodies: Rebuilding Sensation After Phenomenology* (London: Open Humanities, 2015), 169 and John Sallis, "Levinas and the Elemental." *Research in Phenomenology* 28 (1998): 152–59.

53 See Emmanuel Levinas in *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1979 [1969]), 131–33.

54 See Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other: And Additional Essays*, trans. Richard H. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 46.

which we live from (*vivre de*). For Levinas, this sensible alimentary function is not just a background horizon for an intentional act, nor is it ever intended or apprehended, but is rather an objectivity that must be *lived through*, while such living-through is not just an effect of objectivity on subjectivity. The element of flesh, to return to Merleau-Ponty, is then a description of Being not as substance; it is "subdued being, non-thetic being, being before being"[55] and, we could say, being *underneath* being.

The (Dis-)Incarnate and the Natural

If the body is not incarnated in phenomenology, or rather, phenomenological incarnation does not fully, and indeed often fails, to account for the body (the disincarnate) as that which is not always experienced in consciousness or even in its mundane practical use, then what may seem impossible to incorporate precisely because it is "*outside* of phenomenology,"[56] is an alterity that is nonetheless one that I have, or in some cases an alterity which *has me* (as in the experience of hunger or bodily pain). This is to approach the *resistance* of the body in its organicity, the body as "the flesh and blood" (dis-)incarnated, but this time caught between my own flesh and the flesh of the world. As Falque writes: "Merleau-Ponty thought it just as critical to see the 'blood of things' flowing in the world or, at the very least, running in our veins, in order that we abolish the dichotomies with which we have understood the world…by this common 'injury' that might serve as a unifying principle."[57]

The name Falque gives to this body – the body which is resistant and active in its struggle for life – is the "spread body": "it is not totally objective because it cannot be reduced to a geometric form. Nor is it totally subjective, because it does not fully correspond to the ego when we examine it in terms of consciousness."[58] Falque frequently uses the image of the

55 Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, cited in Falque, *The Loving Struggle*, 59.
56 See Emmanuel Falque, "Outside Phenomenology?" trans. Victor Emma-Adamah in *Open Theology* 8 (2022): 315–30.
57 Falque, *The Loving Struggle*, 60.
58 Falque, *The Wedding Feast of the Lamb*, 13.

operating table, and writes: "The body extended on the operating table is not there in length, breadth, and depth—as we might describe a Cartesian geometric space. It is there in heartbeats, respiration, and intestinal rumbles—qualitative attributes of biological life."[59] Between the lived body (*Leib*) and the extended body (*Körper*) resides the spread body, which is an "abyss and mixture of passions and drives that our biological flesh retains."[60] This description of the Chaos of our physiology that feels invasive, Falque further describes as the "limited phenomenon," not because it is a nothingness or because it saturates intentionality but because it shows the limit of what is overflowed without ever being received into consciousness.[61]

Is not this limit of overflowing at once a description of the body as an *experience* of the body as Nature and as *our* nature? "To accede to nature…is always at the same time to collaborate with it: '[b]ecoming-nature of man [is] the becoming-man of nature'."[62] For Falque, this experience in Merleau-Ponty, i.e., as a body made of nature but also a body that "makes" nature insofar as it is situated in a cultural field, reveals only one dimension. The other aspect is that the social-historical production of nature is preceded, as it were, by a more originary Nature: the underground (*Urgrund*) of "brute being" – which denotes its inaccessibility and sheer "thereness." Crucially, this is not an underground onto which a ground could be built, nor is it a substructure onto which a justification for a superstructure can be made. The "brute being" of Nature is rather the attempt to seek a positive concept beneath subjectivity and nature – a "material ontology" – that is not simply rendered by my own determination (*Eigene*) and neither is it completely foreign (*Fremde*). We are inextricably tied to it even as it is "outside": "Merleau-Ponty's exhaustively researched 'brute nature' designates less a being that is 'set apart' (*hors*) than it does a thought of the 'outside' itself (*dehors*).

59 Ibid. This has some continuity with what Drew Leder once referred to as "viscerality." See Drew Leder, "Flesh and Blood: A Proposed Supplement to Merleau-Ponty." *Human Studies* 13 (1990): 209–219.
60 Falque, *The Wedding Feast of the Lamb*, 16.
61 Ibid., 22.
62 Falque, *The Loving Struggle*, 62. Falque is quoting Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 185.

It is never a matter…of 'overcoming' (philosophy, metaphysics, humanity, etc.) but, instead, of 'digging deeper…until we discover this common ground, this 'wild region' that makes us 'ourselves' without being properly 'ours'."[63]

Conclusion: The Lowly God and Subterranean Anarchism

To conclude this chapter, let us briefly consider the theo-political implications of this "phenomenology of the underground." What, if any, are the political-ethical consequences of a phenomenology of the body which follows the (dis-)incarnate into the subterranean? If we began with the image of the body of the (dis-)incarnated Christ in the tomb, then this provocation for phenomenology, as we have developed above, cannot be said to have borne fruit if we are simply content with hording the discoveries of our exploration into yet another solipsistic description of the Self. Thus, having begun with theology, let us first now return to it, systematically, in terms of the creature unfolding its creatureliness in relation to its Creator. Indeed, it is the connection to this "relation" which distinguishes the character of the "lowly God."[64] For, in a radical incarnation, where Christ comes to dwell in the very depths of our material existence, there is such a kenotic movement of God which reveals a historicity that is at odds with a distant Creator. The Creator relates to its creation not as its cause, but nor beholden only by and through the creation, as if God could be reduced to our own immanent experience. God, rather, is *with us* in a relation of horizontality such that God's being is manifested *among us* and *in the world*.[65] By invoking the axial metaphor of horizontality, it should be clear that a "lowly God" is not a simple counter-point to a God "on-high," as if it would establish itself as a new principle

63 Ibid., 65.
64 Ibid., 69–71.
65 There is much continuity here with John D. Caputo's notion of the "weakness of God." See John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006). For a detailed exposition see Calvin D. Ullrich, *Sovereignty and Event: The Political in John D. Caputo's Radical Theology* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021).

or ground. Indeed, the same follows from a phenomenology of the underground: while it defers saturation or auto-affection, it is not a new "ground" for a phenomenology of embodiment – it is precisely outside phenomenology.

The lowly God is thus a figure of non-sovereignty that is materially incarnated into the world in an unceasing relation of incompletion and entanglement between Creator and creature. It follows that such a God retrieves and materially inaugurates a world in which all things are mutually constituted by the same "textures of flesh" – found in a renewed humanism, in the elements of a new corporeity, and in the "flesh and blood" of all Nature. This issues in a political-ethical configuration that we could now call "subterranean anarchism." We can only offer a gesture at this conclusion, but as someone like Catherine Malabou has recently shown, the philosophical understanding of a "politics of horizontality" is amplified by geographical language.[66] She does not consider the subterranean, as such, and is instead critical of thinkers like Derrida, Levinas, Agamben and Rancière, for failing to think not the ungovernable but the *non-governable*.[67] Anarchism, for Malabou, is to think not anarchy and disorder, but the outside of governability and order – whether in representation, politics, any hierarchy, or, for example, in the incarnated body that forgets the (dis-)incarnated. In its refusal of verticality, a subterranean anarchism that accompanies the lowly God of a phenomenology of the underground is not an aimless wondering in the plains of place-lessness. On the contrary, it is non-statically "rooted" in the particularity of the sub-terra of our own existence, one that is connected and shared in ways that escape the logic of governing and is thus always open to the "plastic forces" of its own immanent habitat.[68]

66 Catherine Malabou, *Stop Thief! Anarchism and Philosophy*, trans. Carolyn Shred (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2023).

67 Ibid., 23.

68 For a discussion on Malabou's concept of plasticity in another context, see Calvin D. Ullrich, "The Future of Nothingness: Plastic Apocalypticism or an Insistent Messianic?" in *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 8 no. 1 (2022): 1–22. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.17570/stj.2022.v8n1.a13.