

AUTONOMOUS BODIES OR BODILY AUTOMATA?*

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1. Introduction

The idea of the ‘rational, autonomous individual’ has once again come under attack in contemporary social philosophy – ‘once again’, in that doubts about the intelligibility of the concept, quite apart from its merits as a substantive ideal, have been a commonplace of conservative social and political thought since the early nineteenth century (Keat 1981).

The concept has usually been seen as central to liberal political theory, and its precise nature and theoretical function has varied in ways that reflect the diversity of liberalism itself (and of its Enlightenment ancestry). One such function has been displayed by the role of these (rational, autonomous) individuals in Rawls’s ‘original position’ (Rawls 1972), and in Habermas’s ‘ideal speech situation’ (Habermas 1979): individuals whose potentially consensual, collective decisions are taken to provide both a basis for choosing between competing moral and political principles, and a critical standpoint by reference to which the practices and institutions of existing societies can be judged.

Both Rawls and Habermas have been criticized in a number of similar ways, and one central strand in many such criticisms has been the supposed lack of realism or relevance in their conceptions of individual identity. Thus, for instance, the ‘thin’ and ‘universal’ identity of Rawlsian individuals has been challenged in terms of the ‘thick’ and hence *differentiated* identities provided for humans by their socio-historically varied locations of class, gender, ethnicity, and so on (Sandel 1982); and the ‘ethereal’, ‘unencumbered’ rational autonomy of Habermas’s interlocutors has been brought down to earth by appealing to the weight of history and tradition, and to the fact of human *embodiment* (Fay 1987).

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Whether this kind of liberal political theory can survive such criticisms is an issue I shall not directly address, though it is worth noting that the supposed facts about ‘real’ individuals cited by their critics are hardly ones of which Rawls and Habermas are unaware. Nor, conversely, will I address directly the question of whether their critics can avoid the broadly conservative implications drawn from similar objections by their predecessors. Instead I shall focus on the last of the ‘encumbrances’ noted above, the necessarily *embodied* character of human existence, something to which Merleau-Ponty attributed great significance, in his *Phenomenology of Perception*, and which is often expressed there in the concept of ‘the body-subject’: both the subject *as* body, and the body *as* subject (Keat 1982b).

In particular, I want to explore the question of whether one can ascribe some recognisable form of *autonomy* to human bodies themselves. If this were so, it would be a mistake to think that by emphasising the fact of human embodiment, one was thereby undermining the idea(l) of human autonomy. For instead of seeing the self as encumbered by its body, its autonomy limited by this ‘impediment’, one might see the embodied self – or rather, embodied *selves*, with their ‘thick’ and ‘differentiated’ somatic identities – as at least capable of possessing its own autonomy. One might even invoke such a concept of bodily autonomy in criticising the ways in which bodies are often ‘treated’ by certain social institutions and practices.

That, at least, is the line of thought that I wish to pursue here. I shall do so by taking as my starting point some themes from Foucault’s discussion of the body, especially in *Discipline and Punish* (and related papers such as ‘Body/Power’). I do this partly because Foucault has been a deservedly influential social theorist of the body, but also because on the one hand he has been an influential critic of ‘the critical standpoint of rational autonomy’, of ‘the Enlightenment’, whilst on the other he has himself been criticized for having no coherent critical standpoint of his own. His account of the ‘disciplined body’ provides a convenient site at which these broader issues can be explored. For Foucault, this phenomenon (of the disciplined body) is one that demonstrates the inadequacy of liberalism and the Enlightenment’s critical concepts – autonomy, freedom, coercion, and the like. Yet I shall suggest that not only does this ‘demonstration’ fail, but that there are also serious problems in the critical standpoint(s) apparently espoused by Foucault himself.

2. Disciplined bodies: what’s wrong with them?

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault describes an array of modern institutional contexts in which the disciplining of bodies takes place (or used to take place, since he thinks that this way of ‘constructing’ bodies is now giving way to others): schools, factories, military barracks, and so on. This disciplining involved a process of meticulous training, of the inculcation of specific and complex routines and repertoires of bodily behaviour such as handwriting, the use of tools and machinery, marching and arms drill, and so on. According to Foucault, these disciplinary practices involved a new and ‘positive’ or ‘productive’ form of power, one that relied not upon physical coercion and limitation, the

prevention of actions that the agent might otherwise wish to perform, but rather upon the construction and acquisition of new and additional powers and capacities. They thus involved a form of power which cannot be captured within the framework of classical political theory, with its concept of the juridico-legal subject and associated conceptions of liberty, coercion, and the like.

Whatever the merits of this claim (and I shall try to cast some doubt upon it later), I take it that a key feature of this ‘positive’ form of power is expressed by an important contrast made in the following passage from *Discipline and Punish*:

“The human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down, and rearranges it. A ‘political anatomy’, which was also a ‘mechanics of power’, was being born; it defined how one may have a hold over others’ bodies, not only so that they may *do* what one wishes, but so that they may *operate* as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed and the efficiency that one determines.” (*DP*, p. 138; my italics).

The contrast I want to emphasize here is that between *doing* (or, as I’ll put it, *acting*), and *operating*; and hence, between being able to get someone’s body to *act* in a certain way on particular occasions, e.g. through the use or threat of force or coercion; and getting the body to *operate* in such a way that it ‘does’ or ‘acts’ as desired on every such occasion, *without* the need for a corresponding succession of coercive interventions. It ‘operates’ this way, as one might put it, *automatically*, and it is this idea that is presumably expressed in the following remarks about the construction of ‘the military body’:

“By the late eighteenth century, the soldier has become something that can be made; out of a formless clay, an inapt body, the machine required can be constructed; posture is gradually corrected; a calculated constraint runs slowly through each part of the body, mastering it, making it pliable, ready at all times, *turning silently into the automatism of habit*; in short, one has ‘got rid of the peasant’ and given him ‘the air of a soldier’...” (*DP*, p. 135: my italics).¹

I want now to pose the following question: what if anything is *wrong with*, or *objectionable about*, these disciplined bodies, with their newly acquired ‘ways of operating’? I ask this question because, whilst the manner in which Foucault describes such disciplining makes it clear that he thinks there *is* something objectionable about it, he goes to some lengths apparently to reject what seem obvious, and in my view perfectly defensible answers, and at times seems to provide or imply answers of his own which strike me as not at all defensible. Amongst the former kind of answers (i.e. ‘obvious but apparently rejected by Foucault’) two at least are worth mentioning: they concern, respectively, what

¹ Foucault, it might be noted, quotes extensively from training-manuals, but does not provide any evidence about how ‘successful’ their use actually was.

might be termed the *context of acquisition* of these new modes of bodily operation, and the *political function* of what is thereby constructed or acquired. I will consider each of these in turn.

First, the context of acquisition. In many or all of the institutional practices with which Foucault is concerned, there is a twofold process of *coercion* involved: people are both more or less forced into the disciplining situation, and the ‘instruction’ or ‘meticulous training’ which they receive is itself backed by coercive threats and sanctions. (That the two elements are distinct can be seen by considering someone who enrolls for a dance-class ‘uncoerced’, but is then subjected to a highly coercive teacher). In other words, we are dealing here with a quite familiar terrain for the deployment of ‘classical’ critical concepts that appeal to the distinctions between voluntary and non-voluntary engagement, between ‘free’ and ‘unfree’ actions defined in terms of ‘negative’ conceptions of liberty, and between intentional and non-intentional processes. We know roughly how to make these distinctions, and we can straightforwardly draw upon them in showing what is objectionable here. So even if it is true that some ‘new’ form of power is involved in ‘the acquisition of modes of *operation*’, as distinct from ‘the prohibition or enforcement of *acts*’, it remains the case that the latter is also typically involved in the processes that bring about the former.

Turning now to the second answer, similarly familiar concepts may be invoked in specifying what is objectionable about disciplined bodies in terms of their *political function*. For clearly, many of the ways in which bodies may be ‘made to operate’ will be such as to support and sustain relations of domination and subordination between different social groups: the bodies of the subordinated will be operating in ways that serve the interests of the dominant, either by ensuring that the *specific content* of what is performed serves those interests, or by inculcating more generalized forms of obedience to their commands (or ‘docility’, as Foucault himself often puts it). Asymmetries of power will be involved here, and although to analyse such power-relations, the classically liberal conception of power may need to be radicalized in certain respects - as has been done, for example, by Steven Lukes (1986), working within a broadly Marxist/socialist framework) - we remain here on familiar political and moral conceptual territory.

Indeed, the need to go beyond the first answer to the second is itself a familiar one, since it involves, in effect, a somatic analogue for a well-known difficulty in ‘negative’ concepts of freedom and power. The difficulty is often presented as follows: if being free is only a matter of not being (coercively) prevented from doing what one wishes to, one is still ‘free’ even if one’s wishes have been formed in such a way that one never *wants* to do what one would be prevented from doing if one wished to. This opens up the possibility of power being exercised by controlling the formation of wants in such a way as to benefit some at the expense of others. Hence the need to consider the political function of the formation of preferences, and to extend the analysis of power-asymmetries to include these too.

Presumably, the formation of suitable modes of bodily operation can perform the same function as the formation of preferences, and given that the latter may itself be understood in terms of some concept of *ideology*, what we have here is a somatic analogue of this concept. Indeed, Foucault himself sometimes presents his account of the disciplined body as indicating a domain or form of power that is ‘between’ force and ideology. Further, there is at least one other writer whose account of the body in *this* respect ‘anticipates’ Foucault’s: Wilhelm Reich, the notoriously heterodox psychoanalytic theorist of the 1930s, and enthusiastic advocate of the so-called ‘repressive hypothesis’ so cruelly attacked by Foucault in the *History of Sexuality* (Keat 1982a; 1986). I shall return to Reich at several points later on.

3. Habits and their critics

So far I have indicated two possible answers to my ‘what’s wrong with disciplined bodies?’ question. Although it may be misleading to say that Foucault actually *rejects* them (and if he does, he should have been careful not to litter the text of *Discipline and Punish* with the vocabulary of ‘negative’ power and coercion), he clearly does not - and cannot, given their ties to a negative conception of power - regard them as adequate in understanding or criticizing this new form of ‘body power’.

I want now to explore the possibility of a quite different kind of answer to either of those outlined above: one which concerns not the context of acquisition, nor the political function of *what* is acquired, but, as one might put it, the ‘form’ or ‘formal nature’ of what is acquired. Foucault, as noted earlier, draws attention to the ‘automatized’ and/or ‘habituated’ nature of the body’s modes of operation. So perhaps what might be thought to be objectionable about the disciplining of bodies (at least in part – for this answer does not exclude the others already noted) is the very fact that these bodies now *operate*: that they have acquired previously absent sets of routines or repertoires which display the ‘automatism of habit’.

I shall comment soon on what exactly might be meant here by ‘automatism’. But certainly this is a concept which, in some of its uses, is typically counterposed to that of ‘autonomy’, so that the possibility begins to emerge that what is being appealed to is an ideal of *bodily* autonomy or autonomous *bodies*. Yet leaving this aside for the moment, and concentrating instead on the idea of bodily *habits*, of socially acquired routines and repertoires, one is immediately struck by the following question: how on earth could *these* be found objectionable *as such*, given that so much of our everyday existence as social beings is necessarily dependent upon such bodily routines and habits: the taken-for-granted, unreflective, yet highly *enabling* bases of daily life; the paradigmatic expression of our ‘practical’, as distinct from ‘propositional’, *knowledge*?

For example: what could be more innocuous than our ability to walk, stand, sit, eat and drink? These are acquired bodily routines which, though more or less universal to the species, are nonetheless

always performed in specific ways that map onto a variety of socio-historical differentiations, and which are also (and not unrelatedly) open to a variety of ‘expressive’ modulations – the *hesitant* step, the *confident* stance, the *depressed* chair-slump, the *desperate* munching, etc. Furthermore, what could be a more fulsome tribute to the human species’ (biologically grounded) learning capacities, both ontogenetically and culturally, than the vast range and ingenuity of the motor skills involved in such distinctively human activities as the playing of drums and guitars, the use of typewriters or lathes, the driving of cars or bulldozers, the juggling of bottles or knives – or, indeed, *marching* (or, if you prefer, *swimming*) in formation? (One might contrast Foucault’s representation of ‘body-weapon, body-tool, body-machine complex’ with Merleau-Ponty’s near-lyrical depiction of using a typewriter).

There are, I suggest, only two possible standpoints from which a critical eye could be cast upon such otherwise admirable, or at least indispensable, human social achievements: either that of (a certain form of) *naturalism*, or that of *intellectualism* (here I borrow a term from Merleau-Ponty), in either its rationalist or existentialist forms. From the former standpoint, many if not all such routines and repertoires are condemned – or at least, treated with some degree of suspicion – precisely because of their socially constructed and hence un-natural character. From the latter, what is objectionable is the absence either of a controlling, reflective process of reasoning or deliberation, or of a sequence of free and spontaneous decisions – which would, as it were, replace any acquired and habituated mode of *operation* by a series of *acts*.

I have argued elsewhere (Keat 1986) that there are ‘moments’ – though *only* moments – at which Foucault seems to relapse into the first of these, naturalism: for example, when he almost ignores the fact that ‘the body of the peasant’ is indeed ‘the body of *the peasant*’, and *not* a ‘formless clay’, and when he treats *resistance* as something based on an inchoate, pre-social body, the ‘plebeian body’, rather than upon *other*, and pre-established, bodily modes of *operation*. I shall not repeat the arguments here, but I do want to clarify briefly a source of potential misunderstanding about my objections to ‘naturalism’.

It is common, nowadays, to dismiss naturalistic conceptions of the human body by appealing to some all-embracing, all-powerful thesis of social ‘formation’ or ‘construction’. (This is especially attractive to proponents of various forms of idealism and anti-realism, for whom the ‘social construction of the body’ turns out to be no more than the construction of *concepts* or *representations* of the body; but that is another story that I will not engage with here). Such a thesis is quite untenable. It ignores the fact that human biology places *limits* on the body’s malleability, or at the very least ensures that a heavy cost in human suffering is exacted on attempts to form or mould it in certain ways. (A good account of this is provided by Peter Freund, in *The Civilised Body*). It regards as unintelligible what is, I believe, quite intelligible: namely the distinction between *more* and *less* ‘natural’ acquisitions of

bodily routines (e.g. walking v. juggling). And it accords insufficient weight to the fact that our learning capacities, and hence our suitability for various formative processes of acquisition, are themselves biologically grounded – a point which implies, *inter alia*, that the plausibility of Foucault's claims about the disciplining of bodies depends upon certain theoretical and empirical issues in neurophysiology and related sciences (and hence, I would argue, on accepting a *realist* conception of science).

However, although naturalism should not be rejected for the sorts of reasons just noted, it cannot provide us with any general grounds for objecting to socially constructed bodily routines of the kind that Foucault and others have been concerned with. For it would be an absurd limitation on human ingenuity and cultural creativity if we were to limit bodily repertoires to those which are largely 'naturally' acquired (i.e. ones that every human will acquire, in the absence of exceptional conditions). Indeed, this would be at odds with our biological nature which is precisely such as to make human learning and human 'history' possible.

Turning now to the second critical standpoint, of 'intellectualism', I shall merely say that I regard Merleau-Ponty's objections to this, in *Phenomenology of Perception*, as pretty much unanswerable. But what is more important to note here is his further, more 'positive' view of bodily habits and routines. Merleau-Ponty not only rejects the feasibility of normal bodily activity being guided by a controlling (and indeed autonomous) reason or consciousness; he equally strongly rejects the view that bodily activities which are *not* thus guided are thereby rendered dumb, unintelligent, mechanistic, or indeed 'automatic'. Rather, he claims, bodily habits and routines have their own *intentionality*, and are thus irreducible to any physically specifiable set of *behavioural* dispositions; they involve or display their 'own' form of *practical knowledge*; and they have a kind of imaginative or projective capacity that enables them to be 'open' to new possibilities: a certain kind of freedom, or indeed (though Merleau-Ponty does not use the term) of 'autonomy'.

The habituated body, then, is not for Merleau-Ponty an 'automaton' – unless by this one means *only* that it is not controlled by a supposedly autonomous and *non-bodily subject*. Nonetheless, he maintains, there are indeed cases in which such habits *do* come to acquire a distinctly mechanical or automaton-like quality. But this is an essentially 'pathological' condition – one in which, as one might say, these bodily routines have *lost* or at least *lack* their normally autonomous nature. In other words: the distinction between autonomy and its absence is one that can and should be drawn *within* the domain of these taken-for-granted, socially acquired, non-reflective bodily 'modes of operation', rather than *between* this domain as a whole, and some other, supposedly more privileged domain of pure and reflective rationality, or of spontaneous decision.

4. Automatized bodies: Merleau-Ponty and Reich.

Normal bodily routines, says Merleau-Ponty – he often takes, as an example, the playing of a musical instrument – display a kind of *flexibility* which enables them to adjust themselves to different situations and circumstances, without the new and previously unperformed physical behaviour required by such adjustments having to be learned entirely afresh. This is because what is really acquired, with any such routine, is not a purely behavioural pattern, but rather the practical ability (or ‘knowledge-how’) to achieve certain aims or goals – a ‘knowledge’ which is thus adaptable to changed circumstances that would otherwise prevent such goals from being achieved. Furthermore, the body is able to ‘summon up’ and ‘project itself into’ as yet unrealised, merely possible or imaginary situations – a capacity which is displayed in play-acting, for example; and it is partly through the exercise of this capacity that new routines become available to it, despite these not being strictly required by the body’s actual circumstances.

However, such flexibility and potentially innovative openness are not always present and evident in the body. Instead, we may find considerable degrees of rigidity, of fixedness and closure, so that the already established routines take on an automatized and almost mechanical nature. Merleau-Ponty talks of this as the ‘congealing’ or ‘coagulation’ of habits, and hence as the (at least partial) loss or absence of bodily freedom. What has happened here, he suggests, is a solidification of the body’s *past*: instead of this being open to a process of reworking and reconstruction, of a constant reintegration of past acquisitions into the present (and an anticipated future), it becomes closed off from such development, and is merely endlessly *repeated* – mechanically ‘replayed’, as if the circumstances and goals to which it was at one time appropriate were still there, when in fact they are not.

However, despite the merits of this phenomenology of the automatized body, Merleau-Ponty has rather little to say about what kinds of conditions may generate such rigidification. His main examples are provided by neuropsychological case studies of brain-damaged veterans of the First World War, such as the unfortunate Schneider. But at one point he notes how the body’s repetition of its past routines may be illuminated by the concept of an ‘organic *repression*’ (*Phenomenology of Perception*, pp 77-78); more generally, in his discussion of psychoanalysis (in the chapter on sexuality), he draws upon his account of ‘arrested temporality’ in articulating his own account of neurosis.

I want now to suggest that there are significant and mutually supportive parallels between Merleau-Ponty’s conception of pathologically rigidified bodily habits, and the theory of somatic *character-armouring* presented by that most bodily of psychoanalytic thinkers, Wilhelm Reich. I shall make no attempt here to present this theory in any detail: I have done this before (Keat 1982a; 1986), and so have others (Edwards 1967; Boadella 1973). It will be enough to note that Reich is concerned to

show how specific bodily routines – of facial expression, posture, and so on – are acquired as a means of ‘defence’ in situations of problematic feelings and emotional conflict, and how the *somatic* defences that develop in these ways are in some sense the equivalent of the *psychological* defences involved in the formation of ‘neurotic character-structures’.

More specifically, though – and this is the point I want to draw attention to here – Reich attempted to grapple with the question of what distinguished the ‘neurotic’ from the ‘non-neurotic’ character, given that the latter, too, displayed relatively permanent and ‘characteristic’ ways of relating to the world, including the use of ‘defences’ against its sometimes actually threatening nature. Although his solution to this problem was never entirely consistent or satisfactory, I think that its main feature was precisely to do with the ‘rigid’ and ‘automatized’ nature of the former, by contrast with the more open and, I would say, ‘autonomous’ nature of the latter.

The idea that a certain kind of autonomy can be seen as the aim or ideal of psychoanalysis is a familiar one; what Reich is trying to do, I suggest, is to provide a bodily analogue of at least some of this ideal’s characteristics. Thus, for example:

“The difference is this: in the case of the neurotic armouring, the muscular [rigidity] defence is *chronic* and *automatic*, while the [genital] non-neurotic character has his armour at his disposal... It cannot be the goal of [mental hygiene] psychoanalysis to prevent the ability to form an armour; the goal can only be that of guaranteeing the maximum [vegetative] mobility, in other words the formation of an armour which is mobile.” (W. Reich, *Character Analysis*, p. 349).

There is, of course, a long road to follow if one is to take up something like Reich’s and Merleau-Ponty’s accounts of ‘automatized’ bodies, and to apply them in less individually-focused socio-historical settings and processes – so that, for example, one could see how far the ‘modes of operation’ and ‘automatisms of habit’ that Foucault talks about can be shown to display what are distinctively automatized (and rigid) routines rather than merely habituated (and flexible) ones, and are hence potentially objectionable for this reason: that *this* is what is wrong with ‘disciplined bodies’. But you will be relieved to know that I shall not try to go along this road here.

5. Back to the beginning

Instead, I shall conclude by returning briefly to where this paper began: the criticism of the critical standpoint provided by ‘the autonomous rational individual’. What are the implications for this of the remarks I have been making about ‘autonomous bodies and bodily automata’?

The first point I want to make is this. The ‘thick identities’ of socio-historically differentiated individuals will, *inter alia*, be *bodily* identities, with specific routines and repertoires that vary along

the usual lines of gender, class, and so on. It is therefore a mistake to, as it were, *add* the fact of embodiment to a list of such differentiating and ‘situating’ features, as if it were a separable element, additional to these. Rather, almost everything that can be said about the diversity (and indeed *commonality*) of such identities can *also* be said about ‘the body’, i.e. about ‘*these bodies*’.

Second, the fact of embodiment cannot be seen straightforwardly as a *limitation* of autonomy – as if an otherwise autonomous subject were weighed down, encumbered, by his or her bodily nature. This is not only because, as I have been suggesting, one can make at least some sense of the idea of bodily autonomy, and of its absence in the form of ‘automatism’. It is also because there are many respects in which what can be said about this contrast in the bodily domain can *also* be said about its non-bodily counterparts.

This, at least, is what Merleau-Ponty would claim. For example, the autonomous body is not one that can simply *abandon* its past: even its ability to grasp and explore new possibilities is grounded in its *existing* repertoires, which are themselves a perpetual re-integration of those it has already acquired. There is clearly an analogy here with what has often been said about *traditions* in the realm of ‘thought’, and just as one can distinguish between ‘open’ and ‘closed’ traditions, but never ‘do without them’, so too might one distinguish between open and closed bodily ‘traditions’.

Perhaps there are even *dogmatic* bodies. But what there *cannot* be, I would suggest, is *post-modern* ones, at least to the extent that this involves the absence of *any* ‘identity’ – i.e. the absence of a relatively coherent set of bodily habits and routines. One should therefore be on one’s guard against critiques of disciplined bodies that, by implication, take *this* as their critical ideal.

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