Instruments and the Body: Sartre and Merleau-Ponty

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It would seem redundant to recount once again a philosopher’s story about the ascendancy and development of “technique” in the Western world. The theme has become, by now, rather shopworn, especially in the wake of Heidegger and Adorno, who tend to portray it on a grand, even apocalyptic, scale. With that in mind, this paper will attempt to focus only on the somewhat smaller question of what intrinsic qualities the authentic human body might have, or should have, from the point of view of two French existentialists Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty.¹ These topics are, however, not unrelated. Theoretial discourse about technique and instrumentality can be and, in a sense which we will return to, must be readily related to a philosophical discussion of the body.

Modern instrumental thinking and production have become increasingly advanced at simulating, stimulating, supplementing, and altering the human body with a host of genetic, chemical, sensory, and many other techniques. Indeed, the philosophical relevance of this phenomenon has been so much touted as to skirt the verge of triviality. Take, for example, Marxist views on “the means of production” or the contemporary Artificial Intelligence debate over the status of minds
and machines. This situation accentuates the need for a philosophical investigation into the relation of the human body to its instruments.

A philosophical concern with the body is, of course, central to existentialist philosophy and phenomenology. With respect to Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, many commentators have noted that this concern with the body has different grounds and different outcomes. Nevertheless, they do both talk about the same phenomena using similar terminology, similar theoretical apparatus, and develop seemingly very similar accounts.

In order to focus on some precise points, and to make the discussion suitably fine-grained and detailed, we shall attempt to compound the notion of the body found in the work of these two philosophers with the way in which each understands the notion of instruments. A discursive tension and interplay arises from this juxtaposition of instruments and the body, which we subsequently investigate. We then investigate some fundamental differences between Sartre’s and Merleau-Ponty’s thought which necessarily emerge from this tension.

It may be useful to mention at the outset a difference in understanding with respect to the idea of instruments between these two French philosophers and the main protagonists of the Frankfurt School (Horkheimer, Adorno, Habermas). These Frankfurt School thinkers understand instruments and instrumental thinking primarily as a manifestation of Baconian and Cartesian thought. In *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, for example, Horkheimer and Adorno are mainly concerned with recounting the misadventures of such thought in the story of Western culture. For them, instrumental thinking and authentic humanity represent antithetical poles. As we shall see, however, this antagonism unfolds within the *essence/existence* duality in the thought of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, thereby losing the radicality and exclusiveness accorded to it in Frankfurt School writings and thus not playing a fundamental role in their existential analyses. For Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, there is neither pure human experience and understanding nor pure instruments and objects. For them these are only components of what might be termed, following Habermas, the life-world orchestration, conducted by human society and performed by individuals.

Both Sartre and Merleau-Ponty maintain that there are no intrinsic qualities which exclusively constitute the human body and that the human body in fact interreacts with the world in numerous ways. By those very interreactions, the human being forms a subtle and dynamic fabric of actions shaping the world while at the same time being shaped by the world. With respect to instruments and the body, this can be described as a twofold sense of integration: the body allows instruments