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The Body Exploited

Torture and the Destruction of Selfhood

Janna van Grunsven

I have said that the soul is not more than the body,
And I have said that the body is not more than the soul.
– Walt Whitman

Torture and the destruction of selfhood

In At the Mind's Limits, philosopher and holocaust survivor Jean Améry recounts his experience of torture at the hands of the Nazis. Having encountered a fellow human being as an absolute “antiman” who treated the boundaries of his skin and the experience of his pain as meaningless, Améry suffered from what he calls an irrecoverable destruction of his sense of self. He writes:

The boundaries of my body are also the boundaries of my self. [...] The other person [...] with whom I can exist only as long as he does not touch my skin surface as border, forces his corporeality on me [...] and thereby destroys me. [...] The tortured person never ceases to be amazed that (what) one may [...] call his soul [...] or his identity, [...] is destroyed when there is that cracking and splintering in the shoulder joints (Améry 1980, 28, 40).

Searching for the proper language to express what exactly it means to have one's identity destroyed, Améry alludes to the idea of having lost his “human dignity,” only to quickly brush this aside for being too vague a notion: “I must confess that I don’t exactly know what that is: human dignity” (ibid., 27). What he does know is that, having been tortured, he “stayed tortured” and that staying tortured meant two things. Firstly, it meant living with a permanent loss of trust in the world:

As an element of trust in the world, and in our context what is solely relevant, is the certainty that by reason of written or unwritten social contracts the other person [...] will respect my physical, and with it also my
metaphysical being. [...] Whoever has succumbed to torture can no longer feel at home in the world. The shame of destruction cannot be erased. [...] That one’s fellow man was experienced as the antiman [...] blocks the view into a world in which the principle of hope rules (Ibid., 28, 40).

Secondly, staying tortured meant living with a permanent loss of trust in himself. Like countless of other victims of torture but also of rape, Améry specifies that this is importantly tied to how his very own tortured body turned against him, how it was “(his) own body weight (that) caused luxation” – thus betraying him during the event (ibid., 32, my italics). Susan Brison makes this though even more explicit in Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self, where she recounts her violent subjection to rape: “My body was now perceived as an enemy, having betrayed my [...] trust and interest in it” (Brison 2002, 44).

Améry’s testimony provokes some important thoughts about the conditions constitutive of human selfhood. Not surprisingly, our modern philosophical tradition, with its Cartesian-Kantian heritage, has delivered very few accounts that stand up to the task of conceptually accommodating Améry’s experience. After all, a self predominantly understood as fundamentally a ‘thinking substance’ or a ‘rationally self-determining will,’ who in his deepest or most ‘dignified’ core is pictured as undetermined by others and by bodily experience, cannot be permanently undone as the result of a violent attack by another on his body. To take the testimony of Améry’s suffering philosophically serious is to work towards a conception of human selfhood as recognitively constituted and bodily mediated. The aim of this paper is to make some headway towards such a conception by offering an account of human corporeity that can conceptually underpin Améry’s experience. More specifically, what I try to account for is how my very own body, which, in Améry’s words makes up not only “my physical, (but) with it also my metaphysical being” can simultaneously figure as the most direct expression of myself as an agent – opening me up to a world of familiarity that I effortlessly feel at home in through my ongoing worldly projects – and how it can be encountered as a kind of alien force that turns itself against me.

1 In addition to Améry’s account, see also Honneth 1995, 132, and Brison 2002.
2 Jay M. Bernstein is currently finishing up his latest book in which he argues that modern moral philosophy has trouble capturing the widely and rightly held intuition that torture and rape are paradigmatic cases of moral harm – where, in turn, the notion of moral harm requires an embodied recognitive conception of human selfhood. This essay grew directly out of Bernstein’s graduate seminar “Torture and Dignity,” taught in the spring of 2008 at the New School for Social Research.
To this end, I will begin by looking at David Sussman’s illuminating essay titled “What’s Wrong with Torture?” (Sussman 2005). There, Sussman argues that the specificity of torture’s moral harm lies in the purposive exploitation of it’s victim’s body such that he is forced to involuntarily, yet actively, participate in his own abuse, ensuing in potentially irrecoverable feelings of self-betrayal. While Sussman accurately depicts the victim’s self-experience, I argue that his commitment to a Kantian framework prevents him from conceptually underpinning his descriptive insights. Sussman characterizes the self-betrayal that victims of torture are forced to undergo in terms of their “agency (turning) against itself” (ibid., 30). There are, I argue, two problems with this characterization. Firstly, as a Kantian Sussman is unable to ascribe a fundamental role to the body within his conception of agency. Secondly, a conception of the self qua agent is insufficient to account for the possibility of involuntary yet active participation in one’s own abuse and the encounter of one’s very own body as enemy. What we need is an account of the self that distinguishes between my body as lived, as something that I am; something through which I am open to a world that I am invested, and my body as a kind of thing; as something I have such that I can encounter it as a kind of alien object that is nevertheless me.

That human corporeity is marked by this double structure is the central insight of Helmuth Plessner’s philosophical anthropology. In Plessner’s words, “Man has, not a univocal, but an equivocal relation to his body, [...] his existence imposes on him the ambiguity of being an ‘embodied’ (leibhaften) creature and a creature ‘in the body’ (in Körper), an ambiguity that means an actual break in his way of existing” (Plessner1970, 32). It is this ambiguous relationship as lived body to our body as thing that is exploited in torture and that enables the feelings of self-betrayal that are astutely registered but conceptually misunderstood by Sussman. Furthermore, we will see that the notion of boundary (also translatable as border) plays a key role in Plessner’s account of how this ambiguous relationship between the body as lived and the body as thing is enacted. This will allow us to be more specific about Améry’s testimony of how the violation of his “skin surface as border” was able to irredeemably “destroy” him.

**Forced self-betrayal as the distinctive element of torture’s moral harm**

As I mentioned, Sussman presents his penetrating account of torture’s specific moral harm from within a Kantian framework. At the core of
Kant’s moral system lies the view that through an innate possession of free will and rationality, human beings are capable of acting as autonomous agents. The capacity to freely choose our own ends and act as self-determining autonomous agents endows humanity with an intrinsic value, the respect for which should be upheld in all our actions. This is something that takes effort for our will is largely driven by personal inclinations and desires in determining the ends that motivate our actions. By doing so we not only fail to exercise our capacity for self-determined autonomous action, but we also run the risk of treating others as mere means in order to satisfy our own subjectively desired ends. In Kant’s view this is immoral, since we would thereby fail to respect the intrinsically valuable autonomy of others, who, as beings capable of determining their own ends could not rationally subscribe to being treated as a mere means in the pursuit of another person’s end. The only way to avoid treating others as mere means to our ends and instead respect them as ends in themselves, is by stripping our will of any object of desire as a reason for action and making a purely rational law, which conforms with the intrinsic value of the autonomy of all rational beings, as the guiding principle of morality. This purely formal principle is expressed in the categorical imperative, which in its most general formula holds that “I ought never to act except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law” (Kant 2002, 4: 402). Kantian morality is thus geared towards the intersubjective promotion of and respect for each other’s ability to act as autonomous agents – where, crucially, autonomous agency is characterized in terms of the will’s capacity to act in accordance with the formal law.

Thus, according to the orthodox Kantian view, torture’s moral harm lies in the intense disrespect that the torturer portrays with regard to its victim’s autonomy by “using someone as a mere means to purposes she does not or could not reasonably share” (Sussman 2005, 13-14). Sussman holds that, for the traditional Kantian, there is some room to incorporate the specific moral wrongness of pain infliction, by understanding pain as something that obstructs autonomous agency. As Sussman puts it:

Pain characteristically compromises or undermines the very capacities constitutive of autonomous agency itself [...] when sufficiently intense pain becomes a person’s entire universe and his entire self, crowding out every other aspect of his mental life. Unlike other harms, pain takes its victim’s agency apart ‘from the inside,’ such that the agent may never be able to reconstitute himself fully (Sussman 2005, 14).
Although I am sympathetic to the attention Sussman draws to the victim’s relation to his own pain and the possibility for this to destroy a person’s self-relation “from the inside” it seems to me that Sussman moves too quickly here. Without an elaboration on the relation between the Kantian notion of autonomous agency, understood as the rational exercise of free will, and that which suffers the pain, that is, the body, it seems to me that it remains unclear what this ‘inside’ is for the Kantian. Moreover, since the body itself is not the locus of agency for Kantians, it seems impossible to understand how the Kantian agent can be permanently damaged as a result of having been tortured once the immediate pain has disappeared. In order to make the claim that torture can permanently affect its victim’s agency, a traditional Kantian, understanding autonomous agency as essentially our capacity to act on purely formal reasons, would have to show how torture no longer enables its victims to act on the categorical imperative. It seems wrong to say that victims of torture lose their ability to be autonomous in the Kantian sense of the word. Moreover, this doesn’t capture what makes the after effects of torture so particularly tragic, namely the loss of trust in oneself and the world.

Although Sussman does not fully engage with these difficulties for the Kantian model, he does see the need to expand the orthodox Kantian view by offering a more detailed phenomenology of what pain is and how it relates to our agency in order to account for the specific moral harm of torture. What motivates Sussman to do so is that the orthodox Kantian can draw no significant distinction between the obstruction of agency through pain on the one hand and other forms of agency obstruction (e.g. through pleasure) on the other hand. Sussman sees that, “If torture is morally distinctive in the ways that our intuitions suggest, there must be something about what pain is, and about its special relation to our own agency, that makes some important moral difference” (Sussman 2005, 19). In other words, he wants to expand the explanatory power of Kant’s moral system by showing that there is “some significant moral difference between being used as a mere means in general, and being used as such a means through one’s own distressing affects and bodily responses” (Sussman 2005, 19). In order to show how this works Sussman offers the following phenomenology of pain:

Pain has a peculiar quality. On the one hand, we experience it as not a part of ourselves. [...] It is something that just happens to us, neither immediately evoked nor eliminated by any decisions or judgments we may make. On the other hand, pain is also a primitive, unmediated aspect of our agency. Pain is not something wholly alien to our wills but something
in which we find ourselves actively, if reluctantly, participating. My pain is, after all, *my* pain (Sussman 2005, 20).

There is a certain hesitance in Sussman’s characterization of pain as a *primitive aspect of our agency*. Sussman acknowledges that “understood as a kind of expressive voice, my pain is not unproblematically an exercise of my agency (the way my reflectively adopted commitments might be)” (Sussman 2005, 21). But as a Kantian it seems he cannot place this “kind of expressive voice” that is both intimately me and experienced as something working against me, anywhere else but within the bounds of agency. As such, Sussman ultimately settles for the conclusion that although pain is “not unproblematically an exercise of agency,” it is “neither [...] something fully distinct from such agency,” adding that human agency is thus marked by a “peculiar duality that the torturer sets out to exploit” (Sussman 2005, 21, my italics). He offers the following account of this exploitation:

What the torturer does is to take his victim’s pain, and through it his victim’s body, and make it begin to express the torturer’s will. The resisting victim is committed to remain silent, but he now experiences within himself something quite intimate and familiar that speaks for the torturer, something that pleads a case or provides an excuse for giving in. My suffering is experienced as not just something the torturer inflicts on me, but as something I do to myself, as a kind of self-betrayal worked through my body and its feelings (Sussman 2005, 21).

Methods for inducing this experience of self-betrayal are not just limited to pain-infliction, but also include other ways of exploiting what Sussman calls “the most intimate aspects of (our) agency” (Sussman 2005, 23). Prisoners of Guantanamo Bay, for example, have reportedly been forced to soil themselves and to masturbate before the eyes of others. The shame and humiliation we are prone to experience even in ordinary intersubjective settings when we exhibit such involuntary bodily reactions at the wrong moment, indicates that relating to ourselves as autonomous agents requires that we have some control over when and where we portray such bodily reactions. What torture establishes, Sussman suggests, is “a deliberate perversion of that very value (of oneself as a rational self-governing agent), turning our dignity (as self-governing agents) against itself in a way that must be especially offensive to any morality that fundamentally honors it” (Sussman 2005, 19). And he sees that this “especially offensive perversion” of our self-relation as autonomous agents is brought about by “the body (being) touched in ways that make
the most personal and intense feelings manifest themselves publicly and *involuntarily* (e.g. in erection, lubrication, sweat, shivering, urination, defecation, and centrally, spontaneous cries)” (Sussman 2005, 23).

While clearly sensitive to the fundamental role that the specific exploitation of the victim’s embodiment plays in the involuntary induction of her self-betrayal, the problem with Sussman’s account is his characterization of the involuntary dimensions of our embodiment as “a primitive, unmediated aspect of our agency” (Sussman 2005, 27). There are several issues to be distinguished regarding this conceptually awkward characterization. Firstly, it is not clear what exactly it would mean for sensations of pain and involuntary movements and reactions of the body to be ‘unmediated aspects of our agency.’ Specifying this would require a developed account of how the body has a place within a Kantian notion of agency, understood as the will’s ability to act on the categorical imperative. Secondly, even if we grant that Sussman could make room for a notion of embodied agency, my claim is that this is not enough to make sense of the phenomenon Sussman describes, in accordance with Améry and Brison. What we need is an account of how I, as an embodied agent, can also experience my body as a thing or object that is still, nevertheless, me. This experience of alienness within myself cannot be understood merely from an account of embodied agency. To clarify this point, I will briefly digress to a discussion of embodied agency as sketched out within the phenomenological tradition; a tradition, which has done more significant philosophical work than any other school towards bringing the phenomenon of embodied agency in view.

According to the phenomenological view, to experience oneself as an autonomous agent in the most primordial sense of the word is not – as the Kantian has it – a matter of rationally subscribing to the categorical imperative. Rather, it is to experience oneself as the initiator of one’s actions in the form of a very minimal “thin, pre-reflective awareness of what I am doing as I am doing it” (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, 158). This thin pre-reflexive awareness is the experiential sense of agency that we have when we execute much of our everyday actions. We tend to, for example, effortlessly ride a bike through heavy traffic, walk up the stairs, or take up an appropriate distance from other people while conversing with them without having to reflect on ourselves or on the objects and people we are dealing with during these actions. Although we do not need to reflect on ourselves qua agents while performing these actions, we do have a minimal sense of ourselves as their self-moving initiators.

What makes this pre-reflective agential self and world relation possible, according to phenomenologists such as Merleau-Ponty, is that the body is
not just a mechanistic object amongst other objects that requires explicit mental guidance in order to be brought to action, but that it is instead lived. The lived, or agential body, can be understood as a nexus of perceptual and motor skills that we are born with and continue to integrate throughout our lives and through which we are always already meaningfully engaged with our environment, an environment which is in turn shaped through our embodied relation to it. It is because I have learned how to ride a bicycle that I can immediately, and pre-reflectively perceive a situation as best responded to by jumping on my bike, and as such my bodily skills correlate with the meaning that the world has for me. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, the lived body, engaged with the world through action and perception is “a system which is open on to the world, and correlative with it,” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 526, n115) and as such it “guarantees our vital communication with the world (and) makes it present as a familiar setting of our life” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 53).

The lived or agential body thus anchors us to the world; it forms our perspective onto it. Rather than being the object of experience it is its source. As such, it is characteristic of lived or embodied agency to remain pervasively in the background while we skillfully execute our everyday activities and tend to be thematically directed at other things. While an account of embodied agency or the body as lived seems vital for beginning to make sense of the mutually implicated collapse of self and world that torture brings about it cannot by itself explain the peculiar experience with which we have been preoccupied, namely the encounter with our own body as simultaneously alien to me and intimately me, as something that can involuntarily turn against me while still being me. Maarten Coolen raises this as a concern in his contribution to this volume when he writes that:

He [Merleau-Ponty] clearly points out how we get things done without having to make representations of what we are aiming at. But in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of skilful coping the body itself seems to ‘vanish’ when it is in action, in favour of the world that is opened by it. It gets, so to speak, swallowed up in its being attuned to the world (Maarten Coolen, this volume, 113).

What we need in order to bring the specificity of our relation to our own body as object into view is an account like Plessner’s that highlights the dual

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3 For a compelling account of the mutually dependent collapse of self and world brought about through torture that draws on the phenomenological tradition, see Scarry 1985.
aspect of our corporeal being in the world, reminding us of our ambiguous self-relation “of being an ‘embodied’ (leibhaftigen) creature and a creature ‘in the body’ (im Körper)” (Plessner 1970, 32) For a Kantian, who holds that you are an autonomous human self insofar as you are a willing agent, and for whom something can only be mine if it is part of this agency, this dual bodily relationship that constitutes human existence cannot be adequately brought in view. Nevertheless, Sussman makes strides in understanding the role that the victim’s corporeity plays in the self-relation that torture destroys. And although conceptually flawed, we will see that his description of human agency in terms of a “peculiar duality” is intuitively close to Plessner’s approach to human selfhood. It is to this account that I turn now.

Eccentric positionality: The continuous task of being and having a body

I started this paper with a citation from Améry, who experienced how “the other person […] with whom I can exist only as long as he does not touch my skin surface as border forces his corporeality on me […] and thereby destroys me.” We have been exploring how this destruction of the self resulting from this crossing of our skin surface as border is partly possible because our body, which we are, can at the same time be experienced as something alien to us – something that works against us, thereby corroborating in our destruction. The objective of this section is to show that Plessner allows us to better conceptualize this.

A helpful avenue into Plessner’s conception of human corporeity is via the notion of boundary, which plays a central role in his philosophical anthropology. To this end, I will offer a few general remarks about Plessner’s overall project, which is to articulate the distinction between living things and inanimate objects. Whereas inanimate objects are separated from one another by contours that do not belong to either object but are simply located in between them, living things, Plessner urges, have their own boundary. This boundary, which guarantees simultaneously a living thing’s autonomy within and openness towards its environment just is a living thing’s body. Plessner writes: “The boundary belongs to the body itself, the body is the boundary of his self” (Plessner 1975, 127). ④

As bodily beings that actively realize the boundary between themselves and their environment, human and non-human animals take up a position in their environment. This fundamental characteristic of human and non-human corporeity is expressed in Plessner’s term “positionality” (Plessner 1975). Plessner goes on to analyze the difference between human beings and animals in terms of the similarities and differences in the nature of their positionality. A fundamental commonality between the positionality of humans and animals is that they both actively realize the boundary between themselves and their environment through their motility. What makes this possible is that the structure of their corporeity is characterized by a fundamental ambiguity, or, to use Sussman’s term a “peculiar duality.” Both humans and animals are their (living) body, while simultaneously having access to this body as something they can insert in order to achieve something. Living as body in a body thing is what makes the self-moving lives of humans and animals possible. As Plessner puts it, “no movement, no leap [...] would be possible without it. The animal too must put its body into action, employ it according to a given situation; otherwise it does not reach its goal” (Plessner 1970, 37-38).

Plessner holds that, because both human and non-human animals have and are their body, they have a body-center, or as he also calls it, a self, through which they can initiate interactions with their environment. This means that the notion of selfhood on Plessner’s view entails being an autonomous, self-moving perspective onto a certain environment or world, but it equally means that the contours of selfhood are moveable, malleable and transformable by one’s environment or world. Characteristic of non-human ‘selfhood’ is that the being and having a body through which the animal sustains itself in relation to and in separation from its environment is instinctively performed. The positionality of non-human animals is, as Plessner puts it, “centric,” meaning that they do not experience themselves as a self positioned in an environment: “Insofar as an animal is a self it is absorbed in the ‘here-now,’ [...] Animals live from their center, within their center, but they do not live as center. [...] It forms a reflexive system, an itself, but it does not experience itself (as self)” (Plessner 1975, 288, my italics).

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5 Since it is not relevant for my paper I will leave aside Plessner’s discussion of plants.
6 Plessner also characterizes the notion of body-centre in terms of ‘Mitte’, ‘Kerne’, or ‘Zentrum.’
As such, living through the ‘peculiar duality’ of their embodiment doesn’t emerge as a problem for animals.

This is different for human positionality, which is marked by what Plessner calls an “eccentric” structure. Although we always remain tied to our body as center, we are fundamentally aware of our body as center, which simultaneously expels us from it. As such, we are never instinctively absorbed in our environment in an unproblematic way, but are condemned to constantly establish our position within it. This constitutes the aforementioned “break” or “brokenness” that fundamentally determines human existence. Because we not only have and are our body but also have a relationship to this “peculiar duality,” the establishment of the boundary between ourselves and our environment emerges as an explicit task for us. Plessner writes,

> Even if man can come to no decision between these two orders (of his corporeity), the one related to a center and the other not, he must nevertheless find a relation to them. For he is totally merged in neither. Neither is he just living body, nor does he just have a body. Every requirement of physical existence demands a reconciliation between being and having (Plessner 1970, 36-37).

To be a human self, for Plessner, then, is to continuously reestablish the boundary between oneself and one’s environment by coming to terms with one’s having and being a body – where this is not performed instinctively, but can emerge as an explicit, normative task for us. Two ways in which we establish our bodily mediated relation to our environment is by using our body as instrument and through the body’s own expressivity. Most of the responses we give to our environment are established by instrumentally employing our body to initiate actions. In these situations, which we can call expressions of embodied agency, we routinely catch a ball that someone throws at us or ride a bicycle without having to reflect explicitly on what we are doing. Although human beings always have to live out the relationship of having and being a body, this doesn’t occur as an explicit problem during these instances. We do not experience the body as thing but as lived. We simply act, skillfully yet effortlessly, while enjoying an experiential sense of autonomous agency. As Plessner writes,

> Usually, in unequivocal situations which can be unequivocally answered and controlled, man responds as a person and makes use of his body

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for that purpose: as an instrument of speech, as a grasping, thrusting, supporting, and conveying organ, as a means of locomotion, as a means of signaling, as the sounding board of his emotions. He controls his body, or learns to control it (Plessner 1970, 34).

In Plessner’s account, eccentric positionality thus makes embodied agency possible. It is precisely because we both are and have our body, that we are able to acquire and continuously enrich our lived relation to the world as described by phenomenologists. As Plessner puts it: “From the day of his birth on, everyone must come to terms with (the) [...] double role (of his corporeity). Every kind of learning, e.g. grasping and the correlation of its effects with visual distance, standing, running, and so on, takes place on the basis and within the framework of this double role” (Plessner 1970, 34).

In other words, on Plessner’s account, to have acquired a certain bodily skill such as walking, balancing ourselves, or riding a bicycle just means “that the reconciliation between having a body and being one [...] take(s) place readily and quickly” (Plessner 1970, 37). The ‘peculiar duality’ of our corporeity may not emerge as an explicit task in these everyday actions, but it is nevertheless what makes them possible. Plessner’s notion of eccentric positionality reminds us that our bodily mediated selves gain an increasingly effortless hold on the world in a gradual manner. And because our grip on the world is acquired and sustained through the body, the body is equally a locus of fundamental vulnerability, making it a constitutive aspect of human existence to just as easily lose our grip on the world.

There are numerous ways (both desired and undesired) in which our sense of embodied agency and our effortless, familiar connection to the world gets disrupted as our body announces itself as a kind of thing and responds for us, often in spite of us. Plessner explores this primarily via the notion of the body’s own expressivity, which, “like the instrumentality of the body [...] corresponds to that tension and entwinement which we are always having to adjust between being a body and having a body” (Plessner 1970, 43). Whereas our everyday responses to our environment tend to be characterized by the effortless control of our body as an instrument, allowing for a general experiential sense of agency, our body’s expressivity has the capacity to ‘take over’ and respond for us when we are no longer able to respond as agent. I take this to be the insight Sussman wanted to highlight when he characterized pain as “a kind of expressive voice, (that is) [...] not unproblematically an exercise of my agency (the way my reflectively adopted commitments might be)” (Sussman 2005, 21, my italics). Plessner notes that it is under more equivocal circumstances, “involving (for example)
shame, anxiety, terror, repugnance, and disgust," that the body’s expressivity becomes "largely removed from (the individual's) voluntary influences," and portrays involuntary reactions such as "blushing, turning pale, sweating, vomiting, coughing, and sneezing" (Plessner 1970, 33). These involuntary bodily reactions, the significance of which Sussman registered but could not conceptually account for, can now be understood as a fundamental aspect of our eccentric positionality; of how we are placed in the world and respond to our environment. We are beings who both are and have our body and who have to continuously settle this ambiguity that marks our existence. We can learn to control our body to such an extent that in univocal situations we are able to respond effortlessly as embodied agents without our ambiguous situatedness in the world emerging as an explicit task, but the possibility for us to encounter our body as alien to us, as something out of our control, as something that can respond for us in spite of us to unequivocal situations is always given as a possibility with our existence. 9

Plessner’s philosophical anthropology, which locates human selfhood in the structure of human corporeality and the manner in which this forces us to continuously establish our own boundary. Because being a human self, for Plessner, just is being caught up in this continuous task, involuntary bodily reactions are just as much a way of establishing our bounded selves as the intentional actions of embodied agency. The difference is, however, that when we respond by using our body as an instrument, we respond as autonomous agents. In contrast, when our response to a situation is determined by involuntary reactions, our usually pervasive body takes over and interrupts our autonomous control over it. There are countless circumstances under which this ‘taking over’ of the involuntary regions of the body is precisely what we are after. Think, for example, of the various ways in which our body takes over to make possible the pleasure of consensual sex or of how

9 The phenomena of laughing and crying are the most telling here, because unlike blushing, sweating or burping – i.e. bodily reactions that I experience as disruptive of my ability to respond to a situation as fully ‘me’ – when we laugh and cry we respond to a situation as fully ourselves precisely by having our body take over and do the responding for us, thus stressing the possibility, given with our human corporeity that our body is expressive of me precisely by taking over and responding for me: “Laughing and crying make their appearance as uncontrolled and unformed eruptions of the body, which acts, as it were, autonomously. Man falls into their power, he breaks out laughing, and lets himself break into tears. He responds to something by laughing and crying, but not with a form of expression which could be appropriately compared with verbal utterance, expressive movement, gesture, or action. He responds – with his body as body, as if from the impossibility of being able to find an answer himself. And in the loss of control over himself and his body, he reveals himself at the same time as a more than bodily being who lives in a state of tension to his physical existence yet is wholly and completely bound to it” (Plessner 1970, 31).
it responds to a comic scene with a joyous burst of laughter. But because our body can respond for us beyond the reach of our control it is also the involuntary regions of our corporeity that make us deeply vulnerable to others, who can induce our involuntary bodily expressions despite our consent.

As Sussman perceptively registered, this is precisely what happens to victims of torture who experience themselves as “simultaneously powerless and yet actively complicit in (their) own abuse” (Sussman 2005, 4). Plessner’s framework now allows us to make sense of this experience conceptually. Even though the victim is rendered completely defenseless at the mercy of another subject as she is obstructed in her autonomous control of her body, her eccentric positionality makes it impossible for her not to take up a position. It is precisely because we are condemned to always take up a position, and because we do this even when we have no autonomous control over our body, that through the purposive exploitation of the victim’s body, torture can turn the victim’s body against herself, causing within the victim a permanent distrust not just towards the world, but towards herself.

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