Arthur C. Danto *The Enfleshment of the self*

In the photographs of Ariane Lopez-Huici, the model Aviva sits metaphysically enthroned in her body the way an empress is seated in her dominion. She is one with the boundaries of her empire, the size of which is the outward sign of her power. The image of her on view here is a philosophical lesson in the nature of embodiment. At the beginning of the modern era, Descartes bravely argued that the self and the body are so contingently connected that my body is merely something I have rather than something I am. His logic runs as follows: I cannot deny my own existence, simply because the very act of denial is falsified by the fact that I must exist in order to perform it: *Cogito ergo sum.* There is no parallel logic which defeats the denial of material objects, my body as a material object included. So body and self are distinct, and occupy different domains of reality – the domain of thought, on one side, and the domain of geometrical extension on the other. The self can have no spatial extension, since one can deny the existence of any spatially spread out thing but cannot deny the existence of the self. So the size and shape of the body I am extrinsically attached to has nothing to do with what or who I am.

What I refer to as Descartes' bravery has to do with the prevailing Christian belief in bodily immortality. The church had no interest in the logical immortality of a disembodied self, for its authority depended upon controlling the rewards and especially the punishments accumulated through the course of a life, as well as exercising its monopoly over the sacraments, most of which addressed the body, in its itinerary from birth to – and through – death. The Cartesian self cannot easily be thought of as something as born or as dead, nor has it any gender to speak of. Gender played no role to speak of in Seventeenth century philosophical thought. The body may be male or female, but the self has no way of being either, even if were taken for granted that, as a rational entity, it could hardly be feminine. Aviva displays the contrary of the corollary on gender left unwritten in Descartes' books, which treated optics, physics, astronomy, geometry and the like – in none of which does the facticity of gendered being have a place. Aviva's theorem affirms that as her throne and her kingdom are one, her self and her body cannot be dissociated. And since the body in her case is so spectacularly female, she, Aviva, is female to the core of her core.

In the last of his six *Méditations*, Descartes surprises us by advancing an Aviva-like thesis, holding that we *are* after all closer to our body than the previous five meditations would have led us to believe. «I am not in my body the way a pilot is in a ship», he writes, meaning that when something happens to my body, I do not learn of it the way a pilot learns that something has happened to the ship he commands. The self feels thirst and hunger, pain and pleasure, which are at the same time states of the body. It knows the body the way it knows itself. I know of no Seventeenth century philosopher who spoke of sexual feelings, though treatises on the passions of the soul abound. They would have been concerned at best with the mechanics of generation. The ancients at least saw sexual difference as disclosing a barrier to imagination: do males or females derive the greater pleasure from the sexual act? Only someone who was both, like Tiresias, could answer with authority (the answer, naturally, was that females do, at the rate of about ten to one.) By Descartes time, sexuality was expelled from the sphere of knowledge, and handed over the moralists and comedians, who dealt with cuckolds and wenches, jealousy and infatuation, impotence and indifference, flirtation and consummation – none of which concerned what Descartes speaks of as *res cogitans*, whose proper business is the overview of thought. Descartes came from the same region of France (Touraine) as Rabelais. Had Gargantua and Panurge happened to have seen an advance copy of Descartes *Méditations*, they would have found it a comic masterpiece, its central character – *Ego* – the inverse of Tiresias in having *no* sexual characteristics, but attached to something which could not be thought of as other than sexed. They would have thanked providence for sparing them the neutrality which situated them beyond male and female, and hence outside the central meanings of life as they understood and lived them. In this respect, we are, at the end of the Twentieth century, more Rabelaisian than Cartesian. The title of a famous book expresses our

metaphysics of self and body to perfection – *Our Bodies, Our Selves*, written by women for women. Aviva lives that equation, at one with the amplitude of what Ariane Lopez-Huici described as her *beaux volumes.* Our Rabelaisian acknowledgment of the gendered self does not entirely settle the moral dimension of selfhood and boditude (to invent the needed term). For the body is the battlefield of warring aesthetics. Monica Lewinsky has what in her native California is called a «weight problem». She shrinks away from the distended superficies of her body – or her body extends itself beyond the limits she ascribed to her self. *She* is not fat. *Her* volumes are not those of the body, which strains against her suddenly too tight dresses. So she is in a state of constant territorial warfare of personal identity and bodily expansion. Seeing herself in the mirror, she says in her heart: *That is not me.* She speaks for legions, male and female alike, who are in essence slim but fleshy in fact. Aviva, by contrast, is *bien dans sa peau.* She takes pride in the flesh with which she has been endowed because she takes pride in herself, knowing the she and her flesh are one, and that the grandeur of her body is of a piece with the greatness of her imperial being. Her very look is one of scorn for the skinny. I know two persons, both philosophers as it happens, who were at one stage of their lives as volumetrically expansive as Aviva. For each, the loss of weight was the loss of authority, and hence the loss of power – a political degradation, undertaken in the interest of mere health. It is no accident that weightiness is metaphorically connected with soundness, when ascribed to arguments, treatises, reasons, considerations, evidence. When evidence, for example, is slim it carries no weight. When a book is light it is not grave, which means, according to the dictionary, «extremely serious; important; weighty.» To have a *weight* problem is to have lost touch with our language. For Aviva, weight is a solution to the problem of lightness, unimportance, and irrelevance. In acknowledgment of the gravity of her subject's embodiment, Ariane Lopez-Huici presents Aviva in a format large enough to underscore the queenliness of her proportions. Hers is the photography of celebration, and at the same time it is a celebration of photography. Aviva's splendor distracts us from the presence in the photographs of the photographer's realm. But she is self-evidently in the photographer's studio. Her poses require certain improvised props – a folding metal bed, a sheet, a nondescript cushion. A piece of cloth lies rumpled on the floor. A black dropcloth makes no attempt to conceal its identity. There is no thought of creating an illusion, of seducing the viewer into seeing Aviva as someone else – Olympia, say, or the Queen of the Night, or the goddess of fertility, or the Venus of Willendorf. The paraphernalia underscores Aviva's identity as a model, someone who is there to be depicted, and not to represent anything ulterior. The poses too belong to the repertory of studio poses: she is not shown doing anything but pose, which of course goes with her nudity. The history of art is the history of nudes, which always had an external identity, Venus, Diana, Nymphs, and Naiads. But what, apart from sexual engagement – or bathing – could a woman be shown as doing in real life wearing no clothes other than posing for an artist? So Aviva turns her head, twists her body, leans on an elbow, at (I presume) the command of the artist. The images appear as if taken from a contact sheet. The photographistic setting is intended as a guarantor of the reality the photographs show: Aviva is the way we see her.

Recent technology has diluted the evidentiary function of the photograph. That function is the victim of digitalization. Who today would know if what we see as a woman comfortable with her largeness is not instead a quite normally proportioned woman whose image has been scanned into a computer, and given the amplitude the photographer's vision requires? We can no longer, except against an assumption of an immediacy of registration, infer anything about reality from a photograph. For what it is worth, it was a correspondent incapacity to deduce from his images anything about the external world that Descartes was driven by his *malin génie* to seek some truth which survived illusion, and took the steps, which led relentlessly to separating self from body.