

Contributions To Phenomenology 71

Rasmus Thybo Jensen
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The Phenomenology of Embodied Subjectivity

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The Phenomenology of Embodied Subjectivity

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The Phenomenology of Embodied Subjectivity

 Springer

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Editors' Introduction

Introduction: Some Themes in the Phenomenology of Embodiment

This volume, *The Phenomenology of Embodied Subjectivity*, aims to explore the rich legacy of phenomenological thinking about the embodied subject, including the phenomenon known as 'intercorporeality', i.e. the interaction between living embodied subjects. Original and innovative phenomenological explorations of embodiment are currently taking place not just through critical and creative appropriations of the classical analyses of embodiment found in the phenomenological tradition (specifically Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Stein and Scheler) but also through close dialogue with contemporary philosophy of mind and action, scientific psychology and the cognitive sciences, the medical sciences as well as psychiatry and psychoanalysis.

As many of the contributors to this volume point out, phenomenology is all too often portrayed in a rather narrow manner as a philosophy of consciousness, an account of the first-person perspective, a description of experience as it is experienced, a philosophy of subjectivity. Indeed, many critics of phenomenology have seized on the founder of phenomenology Edmund Husserl's allegiance to Cartesianism (he even characterised phenomenology as a 'new Cartesianism') to highlight phenomenology's supposed preference for the subjective standpoint of an individual consciousness, the 'I think' (*ego cogito*). But phenomenology has from the outset, i.e. from the beginning of the twentieth century (usually marked by the appearance of Husserl's two-volume *Logical Investigations* in 1900/1901), always had a much richer appreciation of the complexity of subjective experience and has recognised that subjects are intrinsically embodied, embedded in social and historical life-worlds, and essentially involved with other embodied subjects and in an intersubjective cultural world. Indeed, Husserl himself said that we should not say '*ego cogito*' ('I think') so much as '*nos cogitamus*', ('we think') (see Husserl 1965: 316). But even emphasising the inherently intersubjective, social and cultural nature of our conscious lives does not fully capture the manner of our 'being in the world'

(*In-der-Welt-sein*) to use Heidegger's term (Heidegger 1962). Human beings are embodied intentional agents—expressive, meaning-construing and meaning intending beings embedded in a world that is loaded with significance, overlain with fantasy, imagination, memory and all kinds of projection. The overall term 'embodiment', then, is meant to capture this idea that human conscious subjects are intrinsically connected to the world in complex and irreducible ways, some of which are explored in depth in this volume.

Of all the philosophical movements of the twentieth century, phenomenology in particular has been to the forefront in the exploration of embodiment. Embodiment, corporeality, incarnation—these are all terms that express the conception of *Leiblichkeit* found especially in the writings of Edmund Husserl, Max Scheler, and other members of the phenomenological movement. Husserl himself speaks of 'the phenomenology of embodiment' (*die Phänomenologie der Leiblichkeit*) in his *Phenomenological Psychology* lectures of 1925 (Husserl 1968, 1977, § 39). Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, the French inheritors of the Husserlian tradition, similarly speak of 'the flesh' (*la chair*)—their translation of Husserl's *Leib*—and of 'incarnation' (*incarnation*) to express the idea that human beings, as embodied, are embedded in a very specific way both in the material world and in the cultural and symbolic world (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 1968; Sartre 1943, 1986).

In general, the classic phenomenologists begin their reflections from the distinction they draw between two aspects of the body—between *Leib* and *Körper*—between the living, animate, organic 'lived body' (what Merleau-Ponty calls '*le corps vécu*'), the body as it is personally experienced, and the body understood as a purely physical, corporeal thing, extended in space, the material body, the body as the object of science, or as 'corpse'—as Sartre puts it in his illuminating chapter 'The Body' in *Being and Nothingness* (Sartre 1943, 1986). The term 'physical body' (*Körper*) is used by Husserl primarily to refer to the physical body which occupies space and is subject to causal laws as described by physics and the natural and biological sciences. He used the term *Leib* (e.g. in his *Ideas II* § 18, Husserl 1952, 1989), translated usually as 'lived body' or 'animate body', to refer to the body as a living organic entity. In one sense the body is a physical thing like other physical things; it is governed by gravity, has the character of weight, impenetrability, having 'parts outside of parts', is affected by cold and heat, can be cut or damaged, is affected by disease, and so on. In another sense, the body is the animate body which I possess or which more accurately *I am*. This lived body is much more difficult to describe, precisely because it is experienced so close to me that it is indeed, as Husserl puts it, the living centre of my experience. It is with this animate body that I navigate in the world, experience the physical world as such. All my perceptual interaction with the world is mediated by this body which I am. The world appears to me in colours, shapes, textures, tastes, smells, hardness and smoothness, resistance and penetrability precisely because of the way my living organic body is constituted and coordinated with the physical world that surrounds me. I am constantly adjusting my body in relation to the world, shifting my balance

while walking, tilting my head to listen better, turning around to see what is behind me and so on. The body is a centre not just of sensation and perception but of proprioception and kinaesthesia.

Moreover, I also experience other human beings and animals (across a very wide range of living things) primarily through encountering their living bodies—their outward forms, movements, expressive faces, and gestures. Even a phone call is experienced as communication with the other person embodied in his or her voice. Everywhere our bodies meet and interact, as in handshakes, sports, fighting, or making love. Moreover, our bodily movements, functions and needs always rise above the material realm and are constituted as meaningful in complex symbolic terms. All our bodily organs are saturated with excess meanings and functions. The mouth, for instance, is an instrument for breathing, eating, but also for speaking, kissing, and even—a phenomenon regularly observed in car-parks—for temporarily holding parking tickets. The body contains a number of organs that can be used as signs—pointing is a very important part of the body's actions. The body is involved in symbolic activity at all levels—in dance, mime, singing, speaking and writing, in ritual and religious activity. The body not just writes but can be written on, the skin can be tattooed and so on. Everyday bodily activities such as eating and washing can be invested with extraordinary symbolic significance in religious ceremonies.

Edmund Husserl's and—following him—Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenologies, in particular, provide very rich accounts of the experience of embodiment, including the crucial encounters with other living bodies in what Husserl, following the German psychological tradition of his day, called '*Einfühlung*' (empathy). The encounter with others and the manner in which humans are co-subjects cooperating together or conflicting with one another is given the general name of 'intersubjectivity' (*Intersubjektivität*), and many of Husserl's research manuscripts in this area are only now being studied and mined for their insights, a mining that is undertaken by a number of papers, in particular in Part II and III of this volume. Husserl describes the lived body as a 'bearer of sensations' (*Ideas* II § 36, Husserl 1952, 1989) and as the 'organ of my will' (§ 38). It is, in Husserl's terminology, the centre of my 'I can' (*Ich kann*), i.e. it is through my body that I exercise powers such as movement, touch, turning my heading, seeing things, gripping things and so on. Indeed, Husserl claims—and here he is followed by Merleau-Ponty—that the body is present in all our perceptual experience and is involved in all other conscious functions (*Ideas* II § 39), and yet at the same time the body is peculiarly absent or transparent in our perceptions. We normally focus on the objective element in experience. When we have a visual experience we normally directly experience how things are in the world and only start to thematise our eyes if they are blurred, or affected by grit or tears. Similarly, we normally just feel the cool surface of the desk and only focus on our finger tips if in some sense they are blistered or experiencing discomfort.

With regard to visual perception, Husserl gives extensive, detailed descriptions of just *what* we see and *how* we see it, involving the nature of the act of perception, the nature of the perceived object, the sense of perception, the role of temporal awareness in the structure of perceiving, the dynamic nature of perceptual content, the nature of the indeterminate accompanying horizons, and so on. Perception, of course, is much more than visual perception, and from very early on Husserl (e.g. in his 1907 *Thing and Space* Lectures, Husserl 1973b, 1997) was attentive to the complex relations between sight and touch (he has much less to say about the senses of hearing, smell and taste) and how the sense of space is constituted from the interplay between these sensory modalities combined with kinesthetic movements (movements of the eyes, head, hands, etc.). Perception is also integrated with action and here phenomenology has offered very deep accounts of freedom and agency. These accounts have recently become the centre of attention in the McDowell-Dreyfus debate (Scheer 2013), which is also taken up in the essays of Erik Rietveld, Komarine Romdenh-Romluc and Rasmus Thybo Jensen in this volume.

Embodied experience is not just a matter of deliberate intentional willed action, but also a matter of routines, habits, practices, skills and intended but non-deliberative actions generally. The nature of habit has been extensively discussed in Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, and others, in a manner that has been taken up by contemporary sociologists (e.g. Pierre Bourdieu) and philosophers (e.g. Hubert Dreyfus). Dreyfus places a very heavy emphasis on a kind of motor intentionality in habit which takes places at the pre-personal or pre-reflective levels, and here Dreyfus draws his inspiration from Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* as well as a certain reading of human behaviour as found in Heidegger's *Being and Time*. A major part of our acting in the world involves a kind of pre-reflective expert navigating—what has come to be called by Hubert Dreyfus 'coping' (his rendering of Heidegger's *Verhalten*, comporting oneself, or behaviour in a rich sense, see Dreyfus 1991).

This concept of coping has led to a rich discussion in the contemporary literature that has drawn in not just Charles Taylor but also John McDowell, Sean Dorrance Kelly and others. Similarly, the concept of 'affordances' found in the ecological psychology of the American psychologist James J. Gibson (1904–1979) has been productively used to explain how the world appears to the embodied agent (Gibson 1977). A rock can present itself as a good place to sit, a rock-climber will perceive potential grips in the rock face, and so on. In the papers in this volume, the notion of affordance as a kind of significance that also invites a certain action is one of the recurring themes (see especially the papers in this volume by Rietveld, Romdenh-Romluc, Morris and Ratcliffe). Romdenh-Romluc, for instance, endorses Dreyfus's interpretation of Merleau-Ponty to say that perceived opportunities to act can draw forth the agent's behaviour without the need for any intervening mental representation.

Perception, for Husserl, is the bedrock of consciousness, but it is not the only form of consciousness he explored. As he saw it, all other forms of conscious experience are in one way or another *founded* on perceptual, sensory consciousness. In this

regard Husserl contrasts the 'self-givenness' (*Selbstgegebenheit*) of perceived objects with a very large class of conscious forms that he characterizes as 'representational' (*vergegenwärtig*) in one way or another. Representation, or more accurately 'presentification', 'presentation', or 'calling to mind' (*Vergegenwärtigung*), includes memory, fantasy, wishing, and symbolic thinking—all forms that do not have the sense of the immediate presence of the object. When one remembers, imagines, or fantasizes about an object, there is not the same sense of the immediate, actual, bodily and temporal presence of the object. Indeed, in memory and in expectation, the object is experienced as not presently there, but there is some kind of reference to its being, it is still being posited (as future or past) in a specific way. Unlike imagination, memory posits the real 'having-been' of something. Imagination entails no such positing of the real existence of its object in any temporal mode. It is increasingly recognized that perception, memory, and imagination are all intertwined. Several of the contributions in this volume discuss the nature of imagination and its close links with bodily movement, intentional action, and empathy, in particular the papers by Komarine Romdenh-Romluc, Julia Jansen, Joonas Taipale and Carlos Lobo.

The phenomenology of embodiment also involves close attention to the manner in which the self or ego experiences itself. The body is experienced not as identical with the ego or 'I' pure and simple, but rather as something which is 'mine', albeit that this particular 'mineness' (what Heidegger calls *Jemeinigkeit*) is subject to very many kinds of variation, intensification and even alienation. I can alienate myself from certain parts of my body (hair, nails, even inner parts of the body can be removed, e.g. the appendix or gall bladder) without feeling *myself* altered or changed in any significant way. Yet there are other experiences of my body which are experienced as violations or intrusions. There are extreme examples, such as torture, rape, sexual abuse, where bodily violation can lead to damage to one's sense of self, but there is undoubtedly a very broad spectrum of experiences where the nature of self is intimately related to experiencing one's body. Dorotheé Legrand's contribution in this volume for instance examines the complexity of self-experience and the other's experience of oneself in the case of anorexia. The body—as Sartre and others have recognised—is also the 'body-for-others' (Sartre 1943, 1986). The body can also be experienced as something over and against the ego (as Husserl writes in *Ideas* II § 54). In other words, the body can be a site of resistance to my will. I want to keep walking but my legs are tired. I try to stand up but I feel dizzy. Intimately experienced with the body are of course not just sensations and perceptions, but acts of willing, feelings, emotions, moods and the whole affective sphere. In depression or melancholia, a phenomenon discussed by Stefano Micali and Matthew Ratcliffe in their contributions, I may feel unable to act, I experience time in a different way, or the world itself seems drained of meaning.

Embodiment includes the fact that humans live *temporal* lives that evolve in developing bodily form from infancy through maturity to death. The body in this regard is constantly if subtly changing. Finitude, facticity and historicity belong to the very essence of the human as embodied. Heidegger, for instance, sees

human finitude with its necessary incompleteness as belonging to the very essence of the human being as being-in-the-world. In addition Husserl, as demonstrated by Sara Heinämaa in her paper, regards the awareness of one's historical placement within a generation and the horizon of past and future generations, as an essential for the intersubjective constitution of objectivity. The fact that human lives take many forms that makes for differences between individuals and between different stages of any given individual's life gives rise to a host of questions: If we claim that we can only make objectivity intelligible by appealing to a manifold of subjects, i.e. to intersubjectivity, then who belongs to the "we" that can be said to play such a constitutive role? If certain subjects are excluded from playing such a constitutive role, can a phenomenological approach still deliver a meaningful understanding of the experiences of such subjects, for instance the experiences of infants or people suffering from psychiatric disorders? These questions are discussed by amongst others, Heinämaa, Taipale and Micali in this volume.

Several of the papers in this volume deal with Husserl's very important and influential conception of the life-world. In the *Crisis of European Science* (Husserl 1970, 1976) and related writings, Husserl provides an extensive if somewhat formal treatment of the concept of the 'life-world' or 'world of life' (*Lebenswelt*). Husserl claims to have uncovered the life-world as a fundamental and novel phenomenon previously invisible to the sciences and to have identified it for the first time as a 'universal problem' (*Crisis* § 34). Indeed, there is—as Husserl himself insists—a specific and entirely new science of the life-world itself (*Crisis* § 51) that would, among other things, offer a new basis for grounding the natural and human sciences through an investigation of 'subsoil' (*Untergrund*) for all forms of theoretical truth (Husserl 1976, 127; 1970 124). Several of the papers in this volume discuss aspects of Husserl's account of human life in the life-world, specifically the papers by Sara Heinämaa, Ignacio de los Reyes Melero, Simo Pulkkinen, and Tom Nenon.

The Plan of This Volume

This volume brings together a total of 17 new contributions to many of the current issues concerning embodiment. Most of the papers collected in this volume were originally presented at an international conference on 'Embodied Subjectivity' held at the Royal Irish Academy on 25–27th of May 2010 under the auspices of the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences research project 'The Phenomenology of Consciousness and Subjectivity' (PI: Professor Dermot Moran; Postdoctoral Fellow: Dr. Rasmus Thybo Jensen). This conference brought together leading international researchers from a variety of disciplines—predominantly philosophy, but also cognitive neuroscience, developmental psychology and other related disciplines. The primary aim of the original conference was to explore the nature of embodied subjectivity generally and more specifically the contribution

of phenomenology as a methodology for exploring this first-person dimension of human experience.

The editors have grouped the papers in this volume into four parts in a way that highlights the research themes involved. *Part I* contains four papers that all address ongoing debates in philosophy of mind, philosophy of action and the cognitive sciences, drawing on resources from the phenomenological tradition, in particular Merleau-Ponty. The four papers of *Part II* are all concerned with Husserl's account of the constitutive role of the body in perception, the intersubjective constitution of the life-world and the distinction between normality and anomaly/abnormality. *Part III* encompass four papers that in different ways engage with cases of disturbances of bodily self-awareness and the importance of such breakdowns for our view of the constitutive role of the body. The papers in *Part III* again draw specifically on the works of Merleau-Ponty and Husserl, but also Sartre plays a crucial role. In the last section, *Part IV*, we have joined together five papers that explore the self-other relation from infancy to the level of scientific and political community where language and symbolic representation embodies idealities and ideals.

In what follows we provide a survey of the papers of each of the four parts, and draw attention to some common concerns, not only between papers within each of the four parts of the volume, but also between papers in different parts.

Part I: The Acting Body: Habit, Freedom and Imagination

Part I contains four papers which all address ongoing debates in philosophy of action and in the cognitive sciences drawing on resources from the phenomenological tradition, in the first three papers mainly the works of Merleau-Ponty and in the fourth paper by Julia Jansen by drawing on the works of Husserl.

In her paper 'Habit and Attention' Komarine Romdenh-Romluc addresses an issue that has only recently become the focus of more intense discussions within philosophy of action, namely how to account for habitual, non-deliberative actions and how to understand the role of bodily skills in the performance of intentional actions in general (see Dreyfus 2000, 2005; Pollard 2011; Levine 2012). Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's discussion of habit and motor intentionality in his *Phenomenology of Perception* (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 1962), Romdenh-Romluc here expands the account of bodily agency that she has been developing in a series of recent papers (Romdenh-Romluc 2007, 2011, 2012). On what is often called the standard story of human agency, a bodily movement is considered an action if it is caused in the right way by the right kind of conative state or event such as a belief-desire pair or an intention that also constitutes the agent's reasons for acting (see Davidson 1963 for the original formulation of this model). Against the standard causal theory Romdenh-Romluc argues that there are instances of actions where what one does is in fact act contrary to one's intentions namely in cases of so called "slips of actions". A case of such a slip of action would be the person who

intends to unlock her bike but, having forgotten to lock the bike the night before, instead inadvertently ends up locking the bike. In such a case, Romdenh-Romluc argues, the person responds to the perceived affordances and when she out of habit locks the bike, this cannot be considered a mere happening, but should be counted as something involving her agency. The behaviour seems to lie within the realm of her responsibility, which indicates that it should be considered an expression of her agency. She furthermore argues that contrary to what is proposed by the standard model we should think of even our successful intentional actions as often initiated and guided by perception of affordances in a way that leaves out the need to have the action in question represented by a mental state such as an intention.

In addition to drawing attention to the role of bodily habits in the performance of actions, Romdenh-Romluc also emphasises the role attention plays for the successful completion of actions. The function of attention is said to be to gather information that is salient for the task at hand. Attending to what one is doing is further described as an attunement to the action possibilities that are relevant to the completion of one's task. These characterizations of attention can be seen as attempts at capturing the characteristic kind of freedom involved in skillful, unreflective action which is the focus of Erik Rietveld's paper.

In his paper "Affordances and Unreflective Freedom" Erik Rietveld's aim is to bring into focus the specific kind of freedom that he argues is intrinsic to the kind of skillful, habitual actions discussed by Romdenh-Romluc. Rietveld argues that the understanding of freedom in unreflective action found in the works of Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Kelly is insufficient. The reason why these accounts fail is that they do not manage to characterize the relevant kind of freedom 'on its own terms', i.e. without reference to a higher level capacity to reflectively step back from what one is doing and critically assess one's reasons. Though Rietveld recognizes that such a capacity to step back is essential for the specifically human aspects of the freedom we enjoy, he also argues that there is an important sense in which we share an element of freedom with non-linguistic infants and animals. If an account of the kind of freedom characteristic of our unreflective actions ignores this common element, there is a risk that infants and non-linguistic animals are reduced to automata enslaved by the stimuli of their environment. Rietveld argues that neither Dreyfus' nor Kelly's account avoid this pitfall because they do not provide a sufficiently rich account of how the freedom in question manifests itself in the experience of the subject engaged in unreflective, skillful action.

When Rietveld emphasises that there is a kind of freedom in action which is shared between mature human beings, infants and non-linguistic animals, he can seem to contradict the view of skillful coping activities that McDowell has put forward in his response to Dreyfus (McDowell 2009). This is not Rietveld's intention. As Rietveld points out, McDowell fully endorses the idea that there are certain aspects of our embodied coping that we share with other animals, namely a responsiveness to affordances, i.e. possibilities for action provided by the environment (McDowell 2009, 315). What McDowell opposes is the idea that we can