

Life as normativity. Normativity in Human and Animal Life

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“This point of view is that of vital normativity. Even for an amoeba, living means preference and exclusion”, (George Canguilhem: *The Normal and the Patological*)

“The basic character of phenomenology is that it is a *scientific* philosophy of life”, (Edmund Husserl, *Husserliana*, Volume 32, p. 241).

Introduction

An essential characteristic of life as such is to create norms. To live means for the living being to *normalize* its relationship towards environment and itself. **In the core of our presentation is the thesis that consciousness has fundamentally different levels, and each level has a peculiarly normative character.** In this presentation I will offer a comparative analysis of different levels of life, which we interpret as an essentially norm-generating process or activity. We use this analysis to understand the origins of conscious experience, as a higher form of life. The notion of consciousness, which we keep in mind, is *embodied mind* and *experience* – such a conception, which we could find already in Husserl, and which was the basic point of orientation for Merleau-Ponty. The consciousness-object correlation, which was the primary form of intentionality in Husserl, in its more concrete form was the correlation of lived body (Leib) and its environment (Umwelt). **In this context normativity, as the essence of life, appears as the lived body’s active and dynamic relationship to its environment, in order to achieve the optimal circumstances of sustaining its life-functions.** This question belongs essentially to a field what we could call – following Husserl – “phenomenological somatology”, (in Husserl see e.g.: Hua [= Husserliana] 5: §§2-3). What is especially interesting from our actual point of view, is that there is a significant difference between organic bodies with a consciousness on the one hand, and organic bodies without consciousness on the other. The final goal of my project is to make possible a coherent phenomenological explanation of the genesis of conscious experience. **In this approach the problem of *behaviour* has a central importance. Behaviour, strictly regarded, proves to be the *expression*, the visual manifestation of the internal psychic life of a subject.** It unifies the internal and external moments of an embodied subject in a coherent structure – as Merleau-Ponty emphasized that, but it is a thought that we could find in a well-articulated way in Husserl also. With regard to the problem of normativity and normalization: we should speak of conscious and non-conscious forms of normativity in life. Behaviour, in this problem-field, is a conscious or semi-conscious activity of a subject.

Regarding these definitions, we should raise the questions: which beings have a consciousness and which don't? How can we prove it in a phenomenologically way?

In this presentation I would like to offer some initial remarks, to contribute to a systematic phenomenological theory concerning the genesis of conscious experience in the natural world; with a special regard to the normative character of experience, on the basis of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty. In my opinion, their considerations on the topic could be connected in a fruitful way to the actual scientific researches concerning the origins of consciousness in nature. Following the views of authors like Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi, I also think that phenomenological analyses could serve as a point of orientation, as a leading clue to natural scientific investigations about the main structures of consciousness. In this presentation I also would like to contribute to the phenomenological grounding of such scientific tasks and endeavours.

I. Husserl on the levels consciousness in the animal world

In the first part of our presentation, which focuses on Husserl's thoughts concerning the emergence of conscious experience in nature, first of all we will have a closer look on lower levels of animality (and to the normativity which is inherent to it); especially for the reason, that we would like to shed light on the genesis of conscious experience in general. So, in this presentation we cannot treat in details the problem of human consciousness, which is also of fundamental importance in the overall context of this problem-field, but its preconditions in the nature, and its earlier (or possibly earliest) pre-forms (precursory or preliminary forms). Husserl constructed and tried out many ways to make animal consciousness available for a first person perspective account (so: for phenomenological description). Here we cannot treat all of them (or even most of them); that would lead us very far; only some of them, which we consider to be the most relevant from our present point of view. What is first and foremost important for us here, is the *constitution of animal* – and even lower level natural – *bodies*.

A decisive question for our present topic, is the connection between immanence and transcendence. Husserl elaborated a very peculiar form of monism, which means the monism of phenomena: there are only phenomena with an immanent and a transcendent aspect.¹ First of all we have to understand the link of immanence and transcendence in his notion of noema. Then we could proceed to the problem of constitution of body; and especially to the constitution

¹ Cf. Shigeru Taguchi: *Das Problem des, Ur-Ich bei Edmund Husserl. Die Frage nach der selbstverständlichen, Nähe' des Selbst*. Dordrecht: Springer, 2006: 7.

of connection between the internal and external aspect of the body; the constitution of phenomenological unity of subjective and objective body, of Leib and Körper. After this we could make an attempt to unfold the phenomenological meaning of the functionality of body parts, of organs; and particularly of those which are – in a certain way – causally responsible for the emergence and functioning of consciousness (such as the nervous system and the especially the brain). Finally, we can say some words about the different levels consciously functioning bodies in nature, and about the normativity which is peculiar to those levels.

1.1. The “determinable X” as the link between immanence and transcendence

In Husserl’s *Ideas* (1912) the relationship between consciousness and its object has a threefold structure: noesis (conscious act), noema (objective sense or meaning) and the object simpliciter (der Gegenstand schlechthin). In the phenomenological reduction the object appears as an objective sense, a unity of sense. **However**, as Husserl emphasizes it, there is a fundamental difference between the noema and the object simpliciter, (Hua 3/1: §89). The noema of a tree is the objective sense; it cannot be burnt, it cannot be dissolved into its chemical elements. The tree simpliciter, the transcendent tree, on the other hand, could be burnt and dissolved into its chemical parts. The noema, the objective sense is immanent, the object itself is transcendent. **But, furthermore**, the noema also has several layers and components. It has marginal and more important moments. The fundamental parts of a noema are called “noematic cores” (there could be many of them). They make up the essential, central layer of the noema. But there is something even more essential and central: what Husserl calls as “determinable X”; a central moment which organizes around itself all other noematic moments. That is the bridge between immanence and transcendence. To avoid misunderstandings: the theory of the “determinable X” is not a “proof of the existence of external reality”. It is a theory of the genesis of the *sense* of objective reality. From our present point of view this theory is important for the reason, that the relationship of subjective and objective aspect of the body, and thus the connection of embodied mind and its environment, is similar to the relationship of immanent and transcendent aspect of object, through the “determinable X”.

1.2. Connection of subjective and objective body. Constitution of functional bodily organs

Husserl offers us a detailed account of the phenomenology of the body – amongst other works – in his 1907 lecture *Thing and Space* (Hua 16), in the second book of *Ideas* (Hua 4) and the *Cartesian Meditations* (Hua 1). According to these descriptions, my body is an essentially

incompletely constituted object. The other people around me can constitute my body always in a more complete way, than I can. They can see my back. Without a mirror I cannot. In the constitution of space my body is the absolute zero-point. On the other hand, I have a first person access to my own body. From this point of view my body appears as a coherent system of bodily feelings and sensations, and of capacity of free movement, a system of possible bodily actions, (“I can”-s). These latter make up the subjective aspect of my body. The perpetual functioning of my body makes me able to coordinate its subjective and objective aspect. In the end my body is constituted as *the fundamental mode* in which I can get in touch with objective reality. Through my permanent intercourse with the world, during the constitution of my body, the subjective and objective moments are intimately and inseparably interwoven. One aspect cannot be constituted without the other.

In the constitution of bodily existence, the constitution of nervous system, and especially the brain, has a peculiar role and importance. If there is a damage in them, the ways in which I can constitute myself and the world, are also damaged. The system of “I can” is injured. The nervous system, the brain, aren’t constituted with the same sense and meaning as other objects in the world, external to my body and independent from it. They have the meaning of integrating the consciousness into the causal order of the natural world. The nervous system and the brain are constituted with the meaning, that they form a functional bridge between the world of spiritual motivations and that of natural causal relations.

According to Husserl, I can constitute non-human animal beings as conscious, as far as they are *similar* enough to my functional and bodily structures. Of course, it is not an exact criterion: but it could be made so, through a phenomenological, constitutional analysis of the bodily organs and functional system, which is attentive and detailed enough. In Husserl’s opinion, we could attribute consciousness with a well-founded reason at least to living beings with a nervous system. So, he speaks about the phenomenology of jellyfishes (Qualle) for time to time, (e.g. Hua 14: 112-119, Hua 36: 163). In his reconstructions the experience of a jellyfish appears as a very rudimentary flow of primitive hyletic data.

1.3. Levels of conscious experience and normativity

In Husserl’s opinion their historical—cultural embedment and highly developed self-consciousness make human beings able to evolve a very rich and sophisticated cultural and spiritual world. Animals do not have a cultural generativity, like human communities.² Animal

² Some animals have a sort of primitive traditionality, but in a very rudimentary, preliminary sense of the word. Cf. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Animal_culture

constitution of the world, to use the expression of Heidegger, is “poor in world” (“Weltarm”).³ Animals do have a general curiosity of their own – but in a very poor, rudimentary form. Their main interests are determined by factors of survival, by issues of self-sustainment. They seek food in the world, water, potential sexual partner; they are up to identify potential dangers and threat. The animal discloses a world, in which he or she must find food, drink, partner; and in which he or she is a potential prey for predators. The animal being-in-the-world is related to a world of survival. Their organs are adapted to such a scarce, dangerous and threatening world; a world, full of enjoyment, pain and stress.

The bodily organs of animals grant an access to such a scarce and dangerous (and, in a limited sense, also interesting) world. Animal organs are constituted to constitute such a world, (or, more precisely, such an environment). The more complex the animal organs and especially the sensorimotor apparatus are, the richer and more detailed the environment is, which is unfolded through them. The way in which experience – even within the sphere of animality – is functioning is essentially normative, norm-giving. According to Husserl, there are four fundamental levels of normativity (or normality, which – in this particular context – is the same) in experience (expressed in juxtapositions): concordance—discordance, optimal—non optimal, typical—atypical and familiar—alien.⁴ These levels of normativity could be found already in animal experience. Animals constitute their environing world according to these levels of normativity; the more complex their psychophysical body is, the more sophisticated is the mode of constitution of this environment, and the concrete forms and modes of normativity, which is inherent to the correlation of lived body and its environment.

An important question that are there living beings under the level of animals conscious? Husserl in some manuscripts tends to adopt the opinion that every living organism has a consciousness of its own. But in many other writings he claims, that organisms under the level of animals are too far from us in their bodily constitution, so we cannot constitute them as having a consciousness in the strict sense, (cf. Hua 9: 103f). If we follow a Husserlian approach, the jellyfish has the most primitive environment, with elementary signals and instinctual drives; which conscious life – on the other hand – is already astonishingly complex.

³ Heidegger: *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics. World, Finitude, Solitude*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1995.

⁴ Cf. Steinbock: *Home and Beyond. Generative Phenomenology after Husserl*. Evanston: Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1995: 127f, 171f.

II. Merleau-Ponty on the body—environment correlation

Merleau-Ponty, in his interpretation concerning the origins and levels of consciousness, places the notion of behaviour and dynamism in the centre. He starts, from the very beginning, with the conception of embodied mind (which he – regarding the details of elaboration – inherits from Husserl), whose correlation is a dynamically constituted environment. In his analyses his point of departure is the realm of animals. As far as I can reconstruct, plants aren't dynamic enough for him, to attribute them consciousness (as lived experiences) in a phenomenologically founded, legitimate way. The motile structures and responses of an animals, on the other hand, appear complex enough to conceive them as expressions of an internal, psychic reality; as a constitutive, experiencing openness to the environment.⁵

A central motive of Merleau-Ponty's understanding of behaviour and psyche is his profound criticism of their mechanistic and reductionist account. According to him behaviour is nothing else than the dynamic relationship between lived body (as embodied mind, as incarnated subjectivity) and environment. Behaviour, in Merleau-Ponty's interpretation, is essentially a normative activity: it is the fundamental mode in which the subject normalizes and optimizes his or her relationship to the environment. The essence of behaviour that it does not have an essence in the sense of traditional metaphysics: it is a choice from a variety of possibilities, from multiple options. It is never purely deterministic or **mechanistic** process; its dynamic character stems from the fact that it is always and essentially a matter of choice. Behaviour is never a mere reflex; it is adaptation to new situations, to new environment. It is about learning, remembering, expecting, making projections. Behaviour is principally *temporal*; just like subjectivity, **whose external manifestation it is**.

The bodily organs are integrated into a complex system of behavioural relationship of the whole body and its environment. The more complex the bodily constitution is, the more complex is the behaviour and the environment which is constituted through this behaviour. The bodily organs – from a phenomenological point of view – have a constitutional meaning in regard of the body—behaviour—environment tripartite structure. According to Merleau-Ponty, only animals (**and humans**) have a behaviour in the strict sense of the word, (**so: plants don't**). But in the case of animals, a more complex body involves the constitution of a more complex environment, through a more complex behavioural apparatus. Behaviour is manifested through sensorimotor structures and functions. Merleau-Ponty interprets external and internal, lived and

⁵ *The Structure of Behaviour* (1942/1967), *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1945/1962).

physical body, sensorial and motor structures as parts, as dependent moments of a greater whole, of the entire being-on-the-world (“être-au-monde”) of the living being. Consciousness, in Merleau-Ponty’s view, never can be other than conscious (and embodied) relationship to an environment. This relationship is fundamentally a normative one, as it implies that the living being seeks to find and grant the best conditions for his or her self-sustainment, **satisfaction**, life-activity, as possible.

Though, in Merleau-Ponty’s opinion, animal is closed into his or her world, which is – in the strict sense of the word – rather should be called “environment”, and the world of human being – on the other hand – is essentially meaningful and open; and thus, there are fundamental differences between animal environment and human world, in his interpretation even with its so-to-say “enclosed” character, animal behaviour is essentially dynamic, and never something mechanical. Every single segment and moment of it – as part of a synthetic totality – **is** dynamic, such as life itself in general.