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Body meets Lebenswelt: Living aspects of ethics according to M. Merleau-Ponty

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Abstract: The following approach combines the Aristotelian approach to ethics with the basics of phenomenological Lebenswelt experience.

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The possibility of creating a digital 'body' in the Internet seems to be an evolutionary peak of the mental access of man to the world. This release from our material environment is metaphorically circumscribed as 'brains in the tank'. In the web 2.0, humans materialise as a mere brains. This virtual reality is described as a 'categorically new form of an immaterial reality', which emerges 'as the media-based realisation of a both collective and global res cogitans'.¹

However, this extreme initial description and vision of a purely mental virtual reality does not acknowledge the persisting bond to physical existence. Being the interface to virtual reality, the body is still experienced via our senses and is therefore the most important access to any reality in the first place.

With the borders between virtual and physical becoming increasingly blurred in our present days, could the motto possibly be: back to the body?

The following approach combines the Aristotelian approach to ethics with the basics of phenomenological Lebenswelt experience. The practical wisdom of the ethos here appears as a situational bodily communication with the world and, simultaneously, as a living origin of ethics.

The phenomenological view of Lebenswelt refers thus to the human subject itself as it experiences the world. According to this, it is the personal experience that is at the foundation of reality, lying beyond any modern rational world view.

As stated above, our experience is primarily physical.

'Therefore, our body is already engaged in concrete situations before conscious thinking starts trying to create some order and to label the experience.'² The approach towards a comprehensive understanding of the world is a continuous oscillation between perception and cognition. Perception via the totality of our senses is the foundation of all mental processes. The present moment is always inextricably linked to the body.

By cognition and perception, the human subject is 'life, which experiences the world'.

Without further reflection, we presume this world in which we live to be the foundation of our behaviour.

Lebenswelt is the 'universally given a priori' and the fundamental layer of experience to every bodily creature.³ The body is 'the zero point of reference of all our orientation, around which our world is centred.'⁴

Now, what implications may this bodily point of view have concerning ethical action?

Cognition and perception are constantly oscillating; as far as ethical action is concerned, we have to look in the direction of practical life.

The ancient approach to ethics by Aristotle regards rationality and immediately sensed experience to be essentially one and the same.

For actual life, taking Aristotelian thought into account may counterbalance the significant influence with which the sciences act upon the humanities.

In Aristotle, 'ethos', referring to living beings in general, is understood in its original meaning, namely a place to live, secondarily the specific 'habit' of this individual place of living. Thus, the ethical consists of customs and conventions of right and decent behavior as virtues.

Now, for the foundation of ethical action, there are two options: Either you form a concept derived from a principle, from the Good itself, like Plato did – or you try to explore

¹ Pietraß, M. (2010). Sinneserfahrungen in virtueller Realität, in: Mensch und Medien, VS Verlag, Wiesbaden, S. 23-46

² Husserl, E. (2012). Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften, Felix Meiner Verlag, Hamburg, S. 109

³ Schulz, W. (1989). Grundprobleme der Ethik, Günther Neske Verlag, Pfullingen, S. 218

⁴ Husserl, E. (1992). Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie, Felix Meiner Verlag, Hamburg, S. 20

the structures of that which already exists in order to detect truth and bring it forth from there.⁵

Whenever *ethos* derived from actual reality and arising out of the present moment sets the standard of what is decent, it crystallizes into systems of order which promise stability to the individual. Above all, it forms a comprehensive sphere uniting morals, justice and politics.

Aristotle assumes that its subject of ethos is human action resulting from a preference, which arises out of an attitude appropriate to a given situation.

Posture (*hexis*), which in the following refers to the way one holds himself both mentally and physically, as well as any situational decision, always comes before the action that is finally to be evaluated. (Insofar *hexis* also refers to the given 'field of possibilities'.)

This choice based on personal experience is possible by means of phronesis (meaning rational state of mind). Beside this theoretical approach, the objective of a practically realised wisdom is to find the golden mean, i. e. to achieve harmony.

Prudence (*phronesis*) means being capable of acting appropriately in any concrete situation, considering *all* factors which are relevant to that situation, including individual goals of action and moral insights.

In order to act well, we must correctly evaluate any given situation. In doing so, we must find the golden mean between the extremes which deteriorate the action.

To Aristotle, *phronesis* (the 'judgement based on practical morality') is neither science nor production. It is a third thing, different from the other two:

It can only be a truthful posture which guides action and is based on rational thought (*hexis meta logou*) concerning that which is good or bad for man.

Therefore, Aristotle by '*phronesis*' means the ideal form of practical wisdom, implying full capability of an individual to orientate himself in thought, action and living. It does not consist in following a given set of intelligent rules, but in consulting oneself, pondering and seeing the uniqueness of the given situation and being thereby capable of judging the right time and place to act in a specific way.

Concerning *phronesis*, Aristotle strongly emphasises the focus on the particular as opposed to the general:

Phronesis is not only concerned with the general, but must also have knowledge of the particular, since it is concerned with acting, and acting refers to the particular.

The advantage of Aristotelian ethics is that it looks upon actions as being situational. Furthermore it observes that, in any choice, both the motives and the consequences of an action are taken into consideration.

Now the question is: Does this capability of orientating oneself, which is founded on the judgement based on practical morality, also have a physical dimension?

The main criterion will always be the human capability of orientating oneself.

*Equally, on the other hand, this approach is quite close to phenomenology, since it deals with the concrete objects themselves and regards given circumstances as ethically relevant and everyday experience as significant. Another similarity to phenomenology is the concept of a habitualised responsivity appearing as *phronimon*.*

*He or she who is trained in *phronesis* is capable of actually responding appropriately to different situations. If meaning is offered, yet not determined by experience, and if we are therefore requested to evaluate our actual situation by acting, we are dealing with both ontology and ethics – i.e. being and being supposed to – at the same time, the two remaining, however, distinct.*

⁵ Ritter, J. (1972). *Rehabilitierung der praktischen Philosophie* Bd. 2. Rombach Verlag, Freiburg, S. 484



The concept of a structure of meaning as described by M. Merleau-Ponty suggests that norms are inherent in things and preformed by these things. Humans possess an a priori knowledge of ethics, values thus being not only developed, but continually rediscovered. Living ethos demands an incessant actualising confrontation with reality and an ongoing communication with a world whose structures we are already familiar with.

Insofar as man is by nature always thinking and investigating, he is always enshrouded in an atmosphere of meaning which determines the way he experiences the world.

Concerning experience, mere impression is not principal.

Before single impressions can be abstracted from experience as independent entities, we are already endowed with an overlying structure and a comprehensive meaning of that which manifests itself in our experience. This meaningful structure always manifests itself physically.

*The phenomenon of phenomena, according to M. Merleau-Ponty, is the body itself. In his view, physical existence means being in perspective as well as being in situations. Every situation has a structure of meaning which can be experienced physically.*⁶

Merleau-Ponty observes that our fundamental capability of being the subject of all experience is linked to our situational existence in the world. By means of experience, man opens up towards the other, the world as well as fellow beings without being strictly determined. In this physical existence, humans have always been subject to the interdependence of the ethical and the pragmatic.

At this point we may have a look at empiricism.

Scientific research here specifically deals with physical posture.

A study at an acting academy in Munich involving students undergoing ten sessions of Rolfing treatment has shown how physical orientation, capability of orientating oneself and the experience of perception and awareness are interconnected. A new posture of the body lays the grounds for a new orientation within our Lebenswelt.

Concerning this orientation, which refers both to the ethical and to the physical, Merleau-Ponty writes: 'As a mass of labyrinthine kinesthetic tactile data my body has no certain orientation yet and receives this orientation only from his level of experience.'⁷ Man created himself room to move out of his possibilities in connection with his experiences within the world. This has happened both in the physical, with man being a perpendicularly erect creature, and in the mental, since he is involved vitally as well as ethically in the world.

The potential of an ideal orientation of man is inherently existent a priori in his anatomic make-up in the form of his physical coordinate system. Thus, our perpendicular erection is an orientation which is determined by the complete optimized synergetic system, at the same time being a centering in the coordinate system of our lebenswelt.

After a Rolfing treatment, the system of the inner physical world is in a state of equilibrium, since the tonicity of flexors and extensors is then experienced as being well-balanced, thus enabling an effortless upright posture.

Our perception of processes inside our body has its foundation in our sense of equilibrium, whereas perception of data from outside our body consists of a combination of information from all our senses.

Human action is always a response to our experiences within the world and a living reference system between inner ethics and practical ethos.

⁶ Merleau-Ponty, M. (1966). *Phänomenologie der Wahrnehmung*, De Gruyter Verlag, Berlin, S. 106

⁷ Merleau-Ponty, M. (1966). *Phänomenologie der Wahrnehmung*, de Gruyter Verlag, Berlin, S. 291



This is confirmed by examples from the empirical material of the above-mentioned study:

1. 'That, fascinatingly, a new equilibrium has established itself.'
2. 'I feel that I am more grounded ... more stable.'
3. 'I have developed a feeling of togetherness. That this world, which is made up from many small single parts after all, forms a whole in my head nevertheless, just as my body, which consists of many muscles and bones, equally forms such a whole. (...)
4. 'The feeling that I am somehow aware of every fibre of my body. I know exactly where every part of my body is at this moment, and how they are positioned in relation to each other. And this, in my view, has great quality. It means more confidence in general, in myself, in my body and also in that which is around me.'
5. 'I had always wanted to control my body through my thoughts, but it is funny to discover that it's just the other way around after all. First comes the body, it is not only body, language and thought, but it is only simply one.'

From the interviews it can be concluded that:

With each increase in bodily differentiation, centeredness and balance the architecture of the body becomes more integrated into the architecture of our life. The broadness of our personal bodily experience becomes a measure of the broadness of our whole personal existence. Our physical existence, together with our inner ethicality, constitutes a unity which can be personally experienced and permanently altered and which is performed in the architecture of life.

Bodily equilibrium and differentiation enable mobility, adaptability and variability, which in turn lead to an optimum of self-orientation.⁸

To sum up: The world in which humans act physically is a reality that is culturally and historically formed and is still to be formed. Insofar as it is already formed, it does not command, yet advises us what to do. Insofar as it is still to be formed, it absorbs whatever humans are doing. Thus, physical action and Lebenswelt are inseparably connected. The bodily countenance corresponds to an inner attitude. Together, they are the embodiment of practical wisdom in an inner and physical mediocrity. Scientific research has shown how changes in bodily reality trigger changes in the inner orientation and the potential of living powers respectively, which also belong to the ethos. The body is the system of potential actions, determined by its situation and its functions in the world. Being the substance of practical ethos, it is constantly linked with personally lived ethics.

One of the practical aspects of ethics is to bridge the gap between being and duty or, in other words, between what we are and what we feel obliged to do. An ethic that is true to life is never imperative. It is connected to human existence, to our Lebenswelt.⁹

Accordingly, Helmut Fleischer in his book "Ethik ohne Imperativ" ("Ethics without imperative") says that the ethos develops by itself in a bodily way and in the present moment. It realizes itself through the indirect balancing of interests and practical constraints. Ethos can be experienced individually, presently and bodily.

We cannot move from the top, that is, from general demands, downwards to concrete actions. Instead, we have to proceed the opposite way, which is 'from the reality of living forces towards the opportunities of releasing these forces. The core of a future ethos will be

⁸ Weigl, E.M. (2013). Raumwandel – eine phänomenologische Annäherung an die veränderte Raumwahrnehmung nach Rolfing – Strukturelle Integration

⁹ Waldenfels, B. (1980). Der Spielraum des Verhaltens, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt, S. 279



an increase in collective and cooperative sovereignty of action in the self-regulation of the process of civilisation.¹⁰

This reasoning is, in a sense, circular: The subject cooperates in the development of the ethos, while, on the other hand, it is itself supposed to be determined by this ethos.

Without imperative – this means not only without using rhetorical calls of duty in order to achieve a morally “correct” will; it means, more radically, without any predetermined normative essence of the morally right and good which would be a priori superior to any concrete action. More to the point: The only guideline can then be a normative force of that which is real, but not an absolute norm, under which the real would be reduced to the rank of a mere duty.¹¹

This confidence in ‘living forces’ which belong to the ethos will promote an optimism, which, if you consider what the situation is really like in our time, gives evidence of how close philosophical ethics can be to reality and how concretely it can encourage commitment and responsibility.

What is demanded from anybody who acts out of his or her personal ethos is to be constantly present and to see oneself as ever-changing and developing.

This means that this person will act bodily, full of vitality and permanently changing in the face of the present moment.

If we act out of our personal ethos, we will have become experts in self-orientation within our own Lebenswelt, who will primarily always act and feel in a bodily way.

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¹⁰ Fleischer, H. (1980). *Ethik ohne Imperativ*, Fischer Verlag, Frankfurt, S. 279

¹¹ Fleischer, H. (1980). *Ethik ohne Imperativ*, Fischer Verlag, Frankfurt, S. 89