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Lived body / lived world: phenomenological approach

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Lived world is a term of central importance for understanding human action, including the case of (computer) mediated action.

Lived world is a rather clumsy English rendering of the German *Umwelt*. The term is used by Husserl (and in phenomenology in general; see Merleau-Ponty and the French *monde propre*) to designate the world as it exists from the point of view of the perceiving subject, after the exercise of phenomenological reduction. What is enacted or brought forth by a human subject is a world of lived experience, world as a world of possibilities, of things and situations which makes sense for the subject, and not the objective and neutral world as-it-is.

The term was also employed by the German ethologist von Uexküll to designate the world as experienced by this or that species of animal. A famous example is the world of the tick. Even though it is blind, deaf and dumb (and can only crawl slowly), the tick nevertheless succeeds in the remarkable feat of identifying a warm-blooded mammal, catching it and feeding by sucking its blood. To do this, tick uses just 3 bits of information, which von Uexküll identified experimentally in a laboratory setting:

- Butyric acid / or not. If there is, the tick lets itself fall from its perch on the twig of a bush.
- Hairy / smooth surface. If the surface is hairy, the tick crawls until it finds a smooth surface i.e. bare skin; it then pierces the surface with its head.
- Liquid at 37+2°C / or not. If yes, the tick will suck the liquid.

The concatenation of these three perception-action cycles, in ecological context,

enables the tick to find a mammal. The lived world of the tick is thus remarkably impoverished, containing just three beacons; but this minimalist simplicity conditions robustness of the actions, and robustness is more important than richness.

It is interesting to note that the Gestalt psychologists (largely inspired by phenomenology) made a similar effort to avoid the error of the stimulus – the error in question consisting of attributing perceptual experience to the perceived objects, to the detriment of describing the actual subjective experience as such.

There is a similar distinction between body and lived body: on the one hand, the biological body as a physical object (*Körper*), on the other hand the lived body as the seat of subjective experience (lived body is a rather clumsy English rendering of the German *Leib*, French *corps propre* or *chair*). The interplay between these two radically inseparable facets of the body leads to the theme of embodiment.

Let us consider the situation called tactile chiasmus, when one explores by touch his left hand with his right hand. In that case, the subject feels his left hand from the inside, as being touched. However, at the same time, for the right hand, the left hand is also an object of the world, that is considered as any other object. The notion of lived body is closely related to the kinaesthesia, understood as the very locus of inhabiting the body and feeling it from the inside.

Finally these notions should be understood, strictly speaking, in the light of the specific phenomenological methodology which is called phenomenological reduction. The basic method is that of phenomenological reduction or *Epochè*. Phenomenological reduction consists in putting into parentheses the naïve thesis of the existence of the external world; and in neutralizing belief in the existence (or indeed the non-existence) of objects in the world. This is methodologically necessary in order to focus attention on the mode of appearance of objects, and hence to

define the way objects appear to the consciousness (or the modalities of their coming into presence). It is important not to confuse phenomenological reduction with introspection, with a restriction or limitation, nor with reductionism as it is practised in the context of scientific enquiry.

Phenomenological reduction leads to the discovery of the intentional structure of consciousness. While maintaining the Kantian insistence on the transcendental level, Husserl put emphasis on the concept of phenomenon (i.e. what appears to the consciousness, and the way it appears to the consciousness, and this independently from the real existence of the object). He then redefines consciousness in terms of intentionality. Consciousness is no longer a thinking substance (*res cogitans*), but rather a dynamic action whereby (the subject) aims at (something).

Phenomenology thus introduces a double shift from classical approaches to the question of knowledge:

- On the one hand, phenomenology seeks to account not for the object that appears to the consciousness, but for the way in which the object appears. This process of appearing supposes that there is an a priori correlation between consciousness and its objects; experience – and hence knowledge – only exists for (a subject of consciousness); conversely, consciousness is always consciousness of (something).
- On the other hand, contrary to Kant for whom the a priori categories of experience (space and time) are purely formal categories, phenomenology seeks to describe up to the cognitive categories as arising from the flow of the lived experience. These ideas, though related to the transcendental tradition, renews it radically; the notion of lived experience (*Erlebnis*), which is the centre of gravity of phenomenology, implies that knowledge and consciousness is not possible without a grounding in embodiment.

Through this thematisation of lived body and embodiment, phenomenology leads thus to a reconceptualization of consciousness, which is then understood as an activity of the subject which enacts the lived world. Although the concept of enaction was introduced by Varela and Maturana, it is largely inspired by – and grounded on - phenomenology.

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