

SUBJECTIVITY OF EMBODIMENT¹

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Abstract

Levinas attempted to go beyond the correlation between life and world by taking a kind of metaphysical step back to the facticity of the body as an event still related to subjectivity. For Levinas, however, the examination of this facticity leads to the limits of phenomenology. In this paper I show that this double movement within and beyond phenomenology may help us to better understand its limits and to learn something about the bodily human condition itself.

The background of my contribution is not the contemporary debate between phenomenology and scientific research on the issue of embodiment, but rather the contemporary development of phenomenology itself in the framework of the Husserlian approach to the subjectivity of embodiment into the alternative approaches in post-classical phenomenology.

The notion of a self as based on a pure ‘I’ is certainly one of the elements of the classical, Kantian approach to subjectivity that the critical followers of Husserl needed to dissolve in favor of the embodiment of lived experience. Thus, after the war, this shift to incarnation and embodiment of subjectivity would become one of the main common features of post-classical phenomenology – particularly, but not only, in France. As Husserl realized already in the first edition of his *Logical Investigations* in 1901, the self-referentiality of every lived experience does not need any kind of substantial I constructed upon or beneath it. Rather, what we see in the phenomenological approach to subjectivity, also in Husserl already, are

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attempts to frame the self-referential embodied (or incarnated) experience in different contexts. In this perspective, the self-referentiality of lived experience is not only thought of as mediated through, but even as given by embodiment or incarnation. Thus, when we try to determine what makes *my* experience a subjective one, we may think of the feeling of one's own body as the only real, experiential, not-constructed support of subjectivity. In effect, we may think of this feeling as a basis for the givenness of my particular self. Although I will not go deeper into this question here, let me ask a question of a possible limit of phenomenology when having to examine the subjectivity of embodiment that might have pre-phenomenal basis. In this paper I would take on a related question: Can the body, as given in these basic feelings supporting the subjectivity of lived experience, also be given – in lived experience – as something that I am not, something not only foreign to me, but also limiting myself, alien to subjectivity? On the one hand, this question cannot be answered by third-person perspective inquiry. However, on the other hand, what is at stake here is also a kind of limitation of the first-person (and second-person) perspective itself, and, moreover, of the phenomenological point of view. It is a limitation of subjectivity itself, as a lived experienced limitation, as given by the embodiment in my own body.

If we keep for a moment the Husserlian distinction *Leib/Körper*, we can start with the observation that the living body of lived experience [*Leib*] is bound to the physical body [*Körper*] that I can touch and see and that there is a syntopy between the two in such a way that despite their distinction (between a lived experience and an object) they are in a sense the same being, an inseparable unity. In other terms, we live in a kind of facticity of being materially (in a sense, we are objects or physical things) that is inseparable from our living unity. In the living experience of a living unity we might also live or feel what exceeds this unity. Because it is supposed to be a primitive lived experience (*Erlebnis*), such a feeling lived experience of facticity, if it exists, would not be an external intuition (touch, sight) or a thought, inference, understanding, or interpretation based on folk psychology or other pre-comprehensions. Again, we are referring to the lived, affective experience of being a body, an experience that might be not only a basis for subjectivity, but also its limit.

My question is if there should not be a place to consider, in the lived experience itself, so from the “First-Person Perspective”, a contact of life with facticity of the body. It would mean that this contact would be no relation to an object, as constituted by the consciousness, but it would be a kind of exposition of the living experience to a material thing or facticity. However, we wonder if we can think of this facticity as given or lived before the body is constituted as an object for our

experience. The question is how this facticity is lived and what subjectivity, if any, can be attributed to this pre-objective lived-experience as a bodily one, and what would be the experienced limit of such subjectivity. This here is the focus of my question on the subjectivity of embodiment.

Is it possible that the body has, as it were, its own life, which we are not aware of in any kind of proprioception? Let us consider an example. If there is a resonance of the bodily processes in the lived experience on the pre-conscious, or in any case pre-reflective, level, then we can ask if the same resonance can also reveal a limit of subjectivity.² In that case, the appropriate approach to examine these processes would be neither the first – nor the third – person perspective, but rather a kind of pre-personal stream, in which life and body meet in a lived experience.

The topic of an anonymous lived experience was introduced in phenomenology by Husserl and Merleau-Ponty. It seems clear that interest of the latter in an anonymous lived experience comes from his attempt to describe the intertwining between the body and the sensitive flesh of the world in such a way that our materiality is the same as the world's. One suspects that we do not experience this constantly; rather, it seems that what we ordinarily feel is both an intertwining between the body of the world and our own body and a split between them. The work of Levinas – one of the radical non-naturalistic thinkers of the subjectivity of embodiment – allows us to go deeper into this issue. Before introducing the second person perspective into his account of the subjectivity of embodiment, Levinas takes a step back to the radical opposition between being and life, which allows him to consider the limit of subjectivity in lived experience. Whereas Merleau-Ponty lets subjectivity emerge from a general anonymous milieu of the world that encompasses life and things, Levinas opposes to this large and universal correlation a confrontation with an element radically foreign to life and sense. One may wonder, however, if it makes sense to claim that the embodiment of human life, according to our lived experience of it, participates in this confrontation, that is to say, if the body necessarily contains an element that can be “lived experienced” (erlebt) as indifferent or foreign to life. This leads us back to the question of the limit of the subjectivity of life through its embodiment.

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² I take the example from Thomas Fuchs' excellent book *Das Gehirn – ein Beziehungsorgan. Eine phänomenologisch-ökologische Konzeption*, dritte, aktualisierte und erweiterte Auflage, Stuttgart, Kohlhammer, 2010 which I will quote in the second part of my paper.

Now I would like to refer to a recent phenomenological account of subjectivity based on scientific research concerning the subjectivity of embodied life – Thomas Fuchs’ book *Das Gehirn – ein Beziehungsorgan*. In the chapter on “Subjectivity and Life” he comes to some general conclusions about an ecological corporeal self pertaining to animals with a determinate form of organization.³ When it comes to animals having this level of organization, the general conclusion can be made that “just like subjectivity is necessarily embodied, the appropriately organized body is also necessarily subjective. [...] Subjectivity is primarily life, liveliness, and all lived experience is a certain form of life.”⁴ Now, the human body certainly has this kind of organization and we may ask if lived experience of the body can also include a lived experience of a limit of subjectivity as it seems to be suggested by Levinas. However, before addressing this issue we should look for a common basis between Levinas’ and Fuchs’ phenomenological analyses.

Thomas Fuchs examines an aspect of the duality that I would like to transpose onto the already mentioned distinction between *Körper* and *Leib*. Fuchs himself characterizes the phenomenological perspective on the subjectivity of embodied life as one for which the lived body [*Leib*] is experienced as the “*leibliche Grundlage der Subjektivität*.” However, Fuchs goes on to speak about “what corresponds to these conditions on the neurobiological level (*eine Entsprechung in den Verhältnissen auf der neurobiologischen Ebene*):” “Consciousness arises on the basis of an interaction of the body and the brain, and in such a way that the body not only becomes secondarily a certain object for consciousness, but also that the body is constitutive for the very construction of consciousness itself.”⁵ According to Antonio Damasio, there is a “core consciousness” (*Kernbewusstsein*) based on the interaction between brain and body that gives us an “elementary sensation of

³ This form of organization includes: 1. Autonomie: “Abhebung der geschlossenen Form vom Umland, die das Lebewesen in ein Gegenüber zur Welt bringt”; 2. “Ausbildung getrennter sensorischer und motorischer Organe und ihnen entsprechender Sinnes – und Bewegungsvermögen, die in komplementärer Beziehung zur Umwelt stehen und den Objekten Bedeutungen erteilen”; 3. “Ausbildung eines nervösen Zentralorgans, das die Rezeptor – und Effektororgane miteinander koppelt und die Einheit des Organismus noch einmal in gesonderter Form repräsentiert: Ein so beschaffenes Wesen lebt nicht nur, es erlebt auch, es ist (in welchen Graden auch immer) bewusst, es nimmt wahr und reagiert nicht mechanisch, sondern bewegt sich aus seinem Zentrum heraus” (Thomas Fuchs, *Das Gehirn – ein Beziehungsorgan*, p. 117).

⁴ “So wie die Subjektivität notwendig verkörpert ist, so ist ein geeignet organisierter Körper notwendig subjektiv ... Subjektivität ist zuallererst Leben, Lebendigkeit, und alles Erleben ist eine Form des Lebens” (*Ibid.*, p. 121).

⁵ “Bewusstsein entsteht auf Basis der Interaktion von Körper und Gehirn, und zwar so, dass der Körper nicht nur sekundär zu einem Gegenstand wird, sondern für seinen Aufbau selbst konstitutiv ist” (*Ibid.*, p. 137).

life”.⁶ It is based on “the synergy of the cortical and sub-cortical functions of the brain”, which at the same time resonate with the states of the whole organism, and consists mainly in “the sensations of the bodily background based on constant proprioceptive, vestibular, visceral, endocrine and other afferents of the body”.⁷ It is a “bodily lived experience of a background (*körperliches Hintergrunderleben*),” a kind of resonance between *Körper* and *Leib*, lived in the latter, that turns into a subjectively experienced body of my sensations only because it is embodied in the body in the sense of organism (*Körper*).

This brings us back to Levinas, who, in his book *Totality and Infinity* (1961), offers many descriptions of the bodily self of sensitivity as being self-referential (Levinas calls it “pleasure” – *la jouissance*). Could this body also be sensed as non-subjective?

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In order to go beyond the phenomenality of the body as it is mediated through bodily experience and grounded in the affectivity of the flesh, I would now like to address this question by considering a more primitive experience in which the body (*Körper*) might give to feel its own materiality. In this experience, the body itself is in a way given in a kind of self-giveness of experience in which, however, our dependence on the body, i.e., the dependence of the sensuous self, and the flesh, on the body is made manifest [*kundgibt*] – yet in a somewhat different way than for Michel Henry. Here I wish to pursue a different condition of possibility for bodiliness [*Leiblichkeit*]. There is pleasure – and certainly there can also be “displeasure” – in gravity, i.e., in the experience of another kind of materiality, the experience of my own heavy body. In this experience my body is given, or rather sensed, in a non-thematic, non-intentional manner. In *Totality and Infinity* this pleasure is a moment of a more complex structure that has its own “intentionality”. In Levinas’ phenomenological analysis, this state, which is certainly sensuous in character, refers – albeit this is only apparent in certain contexts where Levinas points to the limits of phenomenology – to a kind of facticity within lived experience as a facticity not mediated by any specific intentional structure of pleasure.

⁶ Antonio Damasio, *Descartes’ Irrtum*, München, List, 1995, p. 207, quoted and commented by Fuchs, *ibid.*, p. 138: “Befinden” or “ein Empfinden des Lebens selbst”.

⁷ “Zusammenwirken kortikaler und subkortikaler Hirnfunktionen, die zugleich in Resonanz zu gesamtorganismischen Zuständen stehen”; “leiblichen Hintergründempfindungen, die auf den ständigen propriozeptiven, vestibulären, viszeralen, endokrinen und anderen Afferenzen des Körpers beruhen” (*Idem*).

An analysis of this sort seems to be proposed in an early essay of Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, where he sets specific limits for phenomenology, especially in connection with the concept of a “position” as outlined in the paragraphs on the “Here”, and “Sleep and Place” in this book. Initially we also find in Levinas a notion of materiality that is concealed in spatial things and bodies. This materiality consists in something that is foreign and entirely transcendent to our experiences of things that make sense for us: “For here materiality is thickness, coarseness, massivity ... It is what has consistency, weight, is absurd, is a brute but impassive presence.” This indicates matter grasped as a limit of phenomenology *qua* analysis of sense: one can understand absurdity as the limit of sense. On the other hand – this limit can and should be considered phenomenologically – this materiality is also lived, and can be somehow affectively given, for it is – at least, according to Levinas here – at the same time, “what is humble, bare, and ugly”⁸.

If an experience of this materiality were possible, it would have to be, according to Levinas, an experience of an “exterior”, which “remains uncorrelated with an interior”. That is why materiality exceeds the limits of intentional correlation, which constitutes a definition of perceptive experience. Thus, we cannot see or touch this materiality in the usual intentional way characteristic of perceptive experience. Still, within every intentionality of consciousness, Levinas finds a tacit, latent exposedness of man to this *il y a* [there is], the manifestation of which is an experience of horror, an emotion that might intensify the sensitivity to the facticity of things including our body as a thing, i.e., as something foreign to subjectivity and maybe even to life. “The rustling of the *il y a* ... is horror.”⁹ On the other hand, “[t]o be conscious is to be torn away from the *there is*, since the existence of a consciousness constitutes a subjectivity, a subject of existence; that is, to some extent a master of being, already a name in the anonymity of the night”.¹⁰

What interests us is the role of the body in this drama. The anonymous and senseless rustling of being, *le bruissement anonyme et insensé de l'être*, is all-encompassing in horror and terror, which are “de-personalizing.” On the other hand, consciousness, or subjectivity, is *here*, thanks to the materiality of the body. The pure materiality of impersonal being, of the “*il y a*,” is not conceived of beyond affectivity. Yet in the extreme emotion of a horror, consciousness is according to

⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis, Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press, 2001, p. 57.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 59.

Levinas bereft of its “subjectivity.” “What we call the I is itself submerged by the night, invaded, depersonalized, stifled by it.”¹¹

The excess of affectivity, the terror of the affective body or flesh, comes from the relation to the “*il y a*” itself, as a relation to an exterior without an interior, a relation without an I, without a ground. This relation takes place nowhere. An interior, a subject, emerges first and foremost in a “here.” This is a condition of its possibility, a condition that is corporeal and depends on the body [*Körper*] in its materiality. It is on the basis of this position of the material body that consciousness comes to itself, becomes subjective, and is self-given. This position is posited neither by the ‘I’ of consciousness, the self of experience, nor even by the affective flesh of the living body in its anonymity. This position does not hark back to the activity or passivity of experience, nor to sensations and sensuous affectivity; it is rather through this position that any, even the most primitive experience is first made possible. The position occurs to a certain extent even prior to the affective passivity of lived experience. And still, there is a dependence of consciousness and its subjectivity on this position, which is in a relation to subjectivity even as its limit. The body is also more than that limit, because, for Levinas, it is the position of the ground of consciousness, of self-given experience. The body is not any kind of thing or substance, but rather an event, the positioning of a “here.” This is a kind of positive givenness, the event of a position.¹²

If we speak of the physical body [*Körper*] and not of the living body [*Leib*] with Levinas in this particular context, then we are situated in a domain that, in a certain sense, eludes descriptive phenomenology. We say, “in a certain sense”, because what he is doing is still a kind of alternative phenomenological description conducted from his own experience, i.e., from the first-person-perspective. Levinas’s thesis goes as follows: The body in its position is the factual condition of all interiority and immanence. Hence, it is the condition, a factual limit of subjectivity. But it is discovered out of the subjectivity of the bodily lived experiences, it is not a statement made from an objective point of view, like “all bodies take place in a space, have a certain weight etc.”. As soon as the body takes place in its position, and it has always already happened, an interiority, an immanence, and a subjectivity are here. Without this “here”, which is one with the body as a position, no interiority, immanence, or subjectivity could be experienced.

¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 58.

¹² This event is generally not taken into account when, over and beyond the external experience of a body, one insists on its internal experience, like on kinaesthesia, in its closer or wider sense. But maybe it can be taken into account by the description of the resonance between the body (and brain) in its materiality and the materiality of the physical world.

How do we go from a descriptive phenomenology of the experience of phenomena to a domain preceding the field of phenomenality, of appearing? The answer is: through an analysis of the excess of affectivity. This analysis describes that kind of emotion that destroys the subjectivity of the subject, but remains a lived experience: “Emotion is a way of holding on while losing one’s base.”¹³ Now, this presupposes the body. Getting one’s footing again is what happens in the event of position [*événement de la position*]: “The very fact of localization is the body.” The boundary between the lived living body [*Leib*] and the physical body [*Körper*] is drawn in *Existence and Existents* in the section on “Sleep and Place:” “Kinesthesia is made up of sensations, that is, of elementary bits of information. The body is our possession, but the bond of possession is finally resolved into a set of experiences and cognitions. The materiality of the body remains an experience [*Erfahrung*] of materiality.”¹⁴

Levinas’s argument is that materiality cannot be grasped intentionally, through an experience based on sensations. In classical phenomenology, sensations would be conceived in contrast to the intentional acts of consciousness as the stuff of information, as a non-self-sufficient, dependent moment opposed to the intentional acts of supposition, which transforms everything into *noema*. Thus, as a moment of intentional consciousness, the object of sensation loses its materiality. Yet Levinas continues his argument as follows: “Will it be said that kinesthesia is more than a kind of cognition, that in the internal sensitivity there is inwardness that can go as far as identification, that I am my pain, my breathing, my organs, that I do not only *have* a body, but *am* a body?”¹⁵

To this question, I would like to reply in the negative. Sensation is not only a self-giveness of a content of life, as Levinas puts it in *Totality and Infinity*. Rather, the previous passage suggests that for Levinas the *Körper* is the means by which man is embroiled and situated in existence, whereas the lived body, the *Leib*, is rather a means of situating available to consciousness, a “kinesthesia.” For such a difference seems to be in play when Levinas says in the following passage: “But even then the body is still being taken to be a being, a substantive, eventually a means of localization, but not the way a man engages in existence, the way he posits himself.”¹⁶

What all this comes down to for Levinas is indicated by the fact that the materiality of one’s own body, which allows consciousness to be and to experience

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 71–2.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

itself, is an event, something by means of which consciousness – in a certain factual yet essential respect – is instituted. The body is not something instituted by means of intentional consciousness – this being the usual significance of *Stiftung qua Sinnstiftung* (“institution of meaning” or “sense-endowment”). According to Levinas, the *Körper* in this context – as a position – is not a noema or an object. It is the factual ground of bodily existence. In this sense, it is a condition of the possibility of the bodily existence as it is lived in and from its interiority. Interpreted this way, Levinas’s thesis is not particularly new or uncommon: we are bodies, albeit we are capable only of a slight lived experience of our bodies *qua Körper*. There is a boundary between *Leib* and *Körper* with respect to lived experience. The *Körper* is the limit itself, which conditions all phenomenality and does not appear to itself, a *position* that we cannot get behind. However, when one goes beyond the perspective of lived experience, the body as a position, the body as a limit of experience, becomes difficult to conceptualize.

We were interested in the possibility of finding in Levinas such a conceptualization taking a step back into facticity as a way of trying to go beyond the correlation between life and world. And it is this step over the limits of phenomenology that helps us to better understand it and to discover also something about the human condition itself.