Introduction

Of all the important contributions phenomenology has made to philosophy, it is perhaps the thematization of the role of the body in experience that is the most decisive one. Descriptions of the specific functions of the body feature in all phenomenological analyses of perception and action, as it is exemplary in the case of the pioneering work of Edmund Husserl (Hua XVI/1997), Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012), and Martin Heidegger (1927/2008). The body also has a central role to play in various other areas of phenomenological research, including some that might at first glance appear as thematically more remote, like for instance Max Scheler's (1913/1970) conception of social relations, Merleau-Ponty's investigations of arts and aesthetics (1964a), Jean-Paul Sartre's (1943/1956) reflections on politics, and Emmanuel Levinas's (1961/1969) thoughts on ethics and religious experience. For classical phenomenologists, the body was by no means a topic among others (cf. for a comprehensive overview of phenomenological thinking on embodiment, Alloa et al. 2012); not only does it occupy a central place in their exploration of most if not all dimensions of experience, but their reflections on embodiment also led some phenomenologists to draw important epistemological and even ontological conclusions about human experience and reality (Hua XXXVI; Merleau-Ponty 1964/1968).

In the contemporary philosophical landscape, phenomenological analyses of embodiment have recently returned to the forefront of philosophical research, either as combined or in critical dialogue with other philosophical or scientific approaches, such as analytic philosophy of mind (Zahavi 2002), cognitive and neuroscience (Gallagher 2017), developmental psychology (Zahavi and Rochat 2015), feminist theory (Heinämaa 2003, Weiss 1999, De Beauvoir 1949) queer theory (Ahmed 2006), transgener theory (Salamon 2010), and post-colonial theory (Fanon 1952), to name but a few. The phenomenology embodiment is now bolstering, as it provides important insights to other philosophical and scientific disciplines, and profit, in return, of ideas borrowed from other areas of research (Gallagher and Zahavi 2012).

Since they provide most of the methodological and conceptual resources of all the phenomenological analyses of embodiment, including those that aim at radically modifying, expanding or criticizing their works, this entry will focus on the phenomenology of embodiment of Husserl (section 9.1) and Merleau-Ponty (section 9.2). Each section has the same tripartite structure: we first (i) introduce the basic concepts and distinctions, before turning our attention to two more specific sets of problems, namely their account of action and perception (ii), and...
9.1. Husserl

The double constitution of embodiment as ‘Leib’ and ‘Körper’. One of the most well-known and neat introductions of the concept of the lived body (or embodiment) can be found in Husserl’s Ideas II, section II, chapter three: “the constitution of psychic reality through the body” (the respective manuscripts were written in 1912). Husserl’s aim in including the body into the philosophical debate was not primarily – as it is often assumed – to overcome the Cartesian mind–body dualism, but rather to show that and how bodily experience plays a key role in the philosophy of the sciences. In this regard, Husserl differentiates between a naturalistic and a personal attitude, the first belonging to the natural sciences, while the latter is characteristic of the so-called humanities. In this context, the structure and essence of human embodiment is crucial, namely in that the body functions as a turning point between the interior and the exterior (Hua IV, 161, 285f./Husserl 1989, 168, 299). By this Husserl means that one can perceive the body in a twofold way, namely from a personal (or first-person) perspective, i.e. as the subject of perception (Leib), or else from a naturalistic (or third-person) perspective, i.e. as a physical thing (Körper). This twofold nature of human embodiment as Leib and Körper also serves as the necessary background of our ability to address worldly ‘things’ either as “causal-thingly” parts or as “motivational-expressive” wholes (Heinämaa 2012, 230). The ‘double constitution’ (Hua IV, 144ff./Husserl 1989, 152ff.) of the body, as sensing subject and extended matter or object, characterizes its mediating position between the thinking I, soul and nature on the one hand, as well as between humanities and natural sciences on the other (cf. Hua IV, 175, 183f./Husserl 1989, 184, 193).

This essential two-sidedness shows itself in Husserl’s famous description of the so-called ‘double sensation’ of the body: If we touch our left hand with our right hand, both hands can, dependent on our attitude or attention, appear as either the executing instance of touching or the object of touching. We can perceive the touched hand according to its physical or objective attributes, in its smoothness or roughness; it is then the object of perception or touch. But as soon as the localized sensations of the left hand enter the picture, this does not merely add to the characteristics of the physical thing ‘body’; in this very moment, it turns into a lived body (Leib) that itself senses (cf. Hua IV, 144f./Husserl 1989, 152).

As Husserl repeatedly emphasizes, the naturalistic attitude, which presents the body as physical Körper, presupposes the personal attitude or mode of apprehension. For if I apprehend the objective characteristics of my left hand, I have to abstract from the sensational qualities that enable its givenness as an object in the first place. The personal mode of apprehension is thus primary, while the naturalistic apprehension is secondary or derivative (cf. Hua IV, 144ff./Husserl 1989, 152ff.). In the same way that the naturalistic apprehension presupposes the personal, the experienced Leibkörper presupposes a primary experiencing Leib. While the body in the naturalistic attitude appears two-layered, as a physical and psychological stratum, from a personalistic perspective the very same body appears as an expressive whole, i.e. a unity of body and spirit (cf. Hua IV, 203–206, 236–247/Husserl 1989, 214–216, 248–259).

If we describe the body from the ‘interior’ or as the subject of perception, it appears as a field of localized sensations (Lokalisationsfeld der Empfindungen, sometimes also Empfindnisse). As such,
it is conceived as the organ of the will and the seat of free movement. But there is more to it still: this subjective body or bodily self (cf. Waldenfels 2000) accompanies every experience, and is even regarded as the foundation of all intentionality and every cognitive act. The body as subject incorporates all our practical capabilities, skills and habits; it is the mobile centre or “zero-point of orientation” (Hua IV, 158/Husserl 1989, 166), in reference to which all other spatial objects are oriented as either left or right, above or beneath, near or far, etc. If, however, we take a look at the body from an exterior viewpoint, it appears as material, extended and embedded in the causal relations of nature; it is a visible, touchable and measurable object. But in contrast to ‘normal’ things, our body can only be perceived incompletely. We cannot look at it from a distance or from different perspectives: “The same body which serves me as means for all my perceptions obstructs me in the perception of itself and is a remarkably imperfectly constituted thing” (Hua IV, 159/Husserl 1989, 167).

The body thus has a twofold status: it is on the one hand an organ of the will and perception, an “I can” (Hua XI, 14/Husserl 2001, 51) that provides our practical horizon of freedom, while on the other hand, as a material and feeling Leibkörper, our body, in being visible and touchable, is vulnerable, as it is easy to hurt, manipulate or attack.

II. The body and perception.

If Husserl finally came to fully recognize the importance of the body for his analysis of perceptual experience, it was not immediately central to his philosophical endeavour. In his groundbreaking Logical Investigations, the phenomenological analysis of the body is at best indirectly implied by the concept of ‘fulfilment’, on which much of his early analysis of perceptual experience turns. Perception is here described as a fulfilling experience that involves the consciousness of a coincidence between an emptily intended sense and its corresponding intuitive content. When the intuitively given object is consciously presented as it has been emptily intended, the empty intention is said to be ‘satisfied’ or ‘fulfilled’. Given the irreducible one-sidedness of every particular perception – viz. the fact that objects are always perceived under a certain aspect (cf. Hua XIX/2, 589ff./Husserl 2001, 220f.) – perceptual fulfilment can only ever be partial or incomplete. This generates what is today called the problem of perceptual presence (cf. Noë 2004), which is brought about by the constitutive discrepancy between what is meaningfully intended (the object) in experience and what is sensibly given (the profile). For Husserl, this is unproblematic, however, for we are directed through the profile toward the object: “consciousness reaches out beyond what it actually experiences. It can so to say mean beyond itself, and its meaning can be fulfilled” (Hua XIX/2, 574/Husserl 2001, 211).

Husserl’s idea is that the unthematically co-intended profiles are integrated in perceptual consciousness and thus contribute to the constitution of objects because perceptual consciousness is by its very nature transcendent. As such, it always stretches beyond itself and intends more than what is sensibly given.

It is in the context of explaining the implications of this intending operation – which he will later call ‘Über-sich-hinaus-meinen’ (Hua I, §20, 84/Husserl 1960, 46) or sometimes simply ‘Hinausdeutung’ – that he implicitly refers to the body in the Logical Investigations. Husserl develops his thought on this by means of a phenomenological description of a perception of a piece of furniture covering up a carpet: “If I see an incomplete pattern, e.g. in this carpet partially covered up over by furniture, the piece I see seems clothed with intentions pointing to further completions – we feel as if the lines and coloured shapes go on ‘in the sense’ of what we see – but we expect nothing. It would be possible for us to expect something, if movement promised us further views” (Hua XIX/2, 574/Husserl 2001, 211). The thesis advanced here – which counts as the very first appeal to bodily movement in Husserl’s published works – states that the object’s seen profile intentionally refers to other profiles or aspects of the thing that could become visible via movement. But then Husserl adds that the kind of “occasions for possible
expectations” that movement can generate “are not themselves expectations” (Hua XIX/2, 574/Husserl 2001, 211). What Husserl is hinting at here is that the visual experience of the carpet does not imply any concrete expectations, and therefore does not command any concrete movements either, because that experience is not — or does not have to be — oriented toward its future realization. Such an experience does prescribe possibilities of fulfilment; but these possibilities are mere logical possibilities, as it were; they do not command anything concrete. This explains Husserl’s early distinction between intention and expectancy: “Intention is not expectancy” (Hua XIX/2, 574/Husserl 2001, 211), which means that all intentions do not necessarily require fulfilment. Intentions open up the possibility of fulfilment, but, strictly speaking, they do not “command” anything, since “it is not of its essence to be directed to future appearances” (Id.; see J. Benoist 2016, 128ff.).

Husserl’s view on this will rapidly change, however. After the discovery of the intrinsically temporal nature of consciousness (cf. Hua X/Husserl 1964), Husserl will come to realize that all possibilities anticipated in perception are necessary real, motivated possibilities. That the carpet will most likely continue according to the same pattern is itself motivated by my present experience of the carpet’s pattern and genetically by my habituated experience of carpet patterns continuing in a regular style (cf. Hua XXXIII, 13, 38; Hua XI, 186/Husserl 2001, 236). Both actual and past experience motivate specific perceptual possibilities which are not just logical, but real or motivated ones (cf. Hua XX/1, 178ff.). In perception, intentions are motivated possibilities, and so they do demand fulfilment, by their very essence. Qua intentions, they are empty (to differing degrees), but that emptiness is teleologically oriented toward fullness (cf. Bernet 2004). It is this very idea that Husserl starts to develop in the 1907 lecture-course Thing and Space, and which will be refined in the so-called ‘genetic’ phase of phenomenology in the early 1920s.

From 1907 on, Husserl thus constantly stresses the fundamental role of movement in perception. The sensibly given side of the perceived object carries a sense of the whole object and includes indications of possible future locations of my body under which other aspects of the object could be given. The horizon of the co-intended but momentarily absent profiles of the object is correlated with my kinaesthetic horizon, i.e. with my capacity for possible movement. The absent profiles are experienced in an intentional ‘if–then’ relation: my relation to them is characterized by my awareness that if I move in this way, then this or that profile will become accessible (cf. Hua XVI §55/Husserl 1997, 159ff.; Hua XI §3/Husserl 2001, 47ff.). In Husserl’s view, this intentional law – which he calls the law of motivation – is rooted in ‘kinesthetic experience’, which is an expression Husserl uses to refer both to our capacity to move, the ‘I can’ that belongs to the body (Leib), and to the Ego’s capacity to experience the sensations resulting from the movement of one’s own body (Leib). Husserl calls these sensations ‘kinesthetic sensations’, and they belong to our sensing Ego–Body. The specificity of Husserl’s approach to perception is to argue that both kinds of kinesthetic experience play an indispensable role in the constitution of perceptual objects (cf. Drummond 1983). It is not only our capacity to move freely our own bodies that is required for experiencing spatiotemporal objects, but kinesthetic sensations are just as crucial. Husserl’s point is that my awareness of my kinaesthetic system, thanks to which I am horizontally aware of the absent profiles of objects, is itself based on the tacit experience of my bodily position and of the relative positions of my bodily parts. This is why Husserl mentions in Thing and Space that the very possibility of the presentation of material things supposes a field of kinesthetic sensations: “The sensations of movement […] play an essential role in the apprehension of every external thing […] without their cooperation, there is no body there, no thing” (Hua XVI, §46, 160/Husserl 2011, 136).

The most important function of kinesthetic sensations is that they motivate the flow of appearances of perceptual objects, and they do so by generating a more or less definite set of
Body

expectations. (For a criticism, see Crowell 2013, 136ff.) Perceptual experience is so constituted that I am always implicitly aware that if I perform a continuous bodily activity, then a corresponding series of appearances must unfold as motivated. According to Husserl, there is a covariation relation that holds between the sensations by which one is aware of the movements of one’s own body, and the appearances of the object. The kinaesthetic system does “not simply run parallel to the flow of appearances there; rather the kinaesthetic series [...] and the perceptual appearances are related to one another through consciousness” (Hua XI, §3, 14/Husserl 2001, 50f.). The correlation that obtains between the sensations of movement and the appearances of the object is responsible for the unity of the object, which is an intentional synthetic unity that Husserl conceives as an objective sense (ein gegeständlicher Sinn).

In Husserl’s eyes, this process of constitution is teleological in the sense of being oriented toward a “limit”, namely the “consciousness of the most proper givenness.” (Hua XVI, §36, 126/Husserl 1997, 105) This experience is “the goal of the perceptual movement” (Id.), and it is one for which “no further fulfilment” (Hua XVI, §35, 125/Husserl 1997, 104) is needed. Husserl thus calls this an experience of the optimum and conceives it as the end or the goal (Ziel) of the perceptual process. Specifically, the “thing itself” is said to be given optimally when it manifests itself “in its saturated fullness” (Hua XI §4, 23/Husserl 2001, 61), that is to say, when it admits no more fulfilment. The notion of ‘optimal givenness’ thus refers to something like a maximum of richness and differentiation, a peak in clarity and distinction. Such an optimum is a permanent possibility of perception (cf. Ms. D 13 III, 151a). By making the necessary psychophysical adjustments (changing our location, modifying the lighting, etc.), it is in principle always possible to optimize our experience and gain more determinate content. In this context, Husserl contends that the kinaesthetic paths themselves have their own laws and should be regarded from the point of view of the optimum as well (cf. Ms. D 13 I, 63a). Unless a hurdle surfaces or a particular difficulty arises, we, as perceptual agents, automatically tend to opt for the optimal path and move our body so as to optimize our perceptions. This is possible because our habitual body provides our experience with some kind of basic, but still norm-sensitive, orientation or direction (cf. Doyon 2015; Wehrle 2015). The kind of kinaesthetic freedom I enjoy in this context is therefore not total liberty, since of all the things ‘I can’ do, only some will resonate with my habitualized tendencies and appear suited or appropriate with regard to my perceptual goal (cf. Doyon 2018).

III. The body and intersubjectivity. Embodiment is also crucial when it comes to what Husserl thematizes as the perception of the other people (‘Fremderfahrung’). In this regard, the internal split within human embodiment between a lived and a material body can be interpreted as a precondition for every form of empathy, i.e. the experience of other human (and to some extent also non-human) beings as living and conscious subjects with similar psychological or cognitive abilities. Although what we actually perceive is only the visible and external side of the body, the feeling, emotions and sometimes even the thoughts of the other can be virtually perceived by the behaviour and expression of this very body. This is possible because we ourselves have experienced this intertwining of the exterior, material site of embodiment with an internal/subjective side (notably in the phenomenon of the double sensation).

In his lectures on intersubjectivity (Hua XIII–XV; cf. Kern 2017) as well as in his Cartesian Meditations (Hua I/Husserl 1960), Husserl describes in great detail the necessary function of the body for the perception and understanding of other subjects. It is a real puzzle to explain how we can apprehend other (human or non-human) bodies as the subjects of their own experiences (that is, as thinking, feeling, moving and sensing bodies) given that what we subjectively experience are only our own sensations. Husserl’s solution is to suggest that the sensations of other bodies can be apperceived. In perceptual experience, we automatically add something to our actual perception without having to explicitly posit anything mentally. What is ‘added’ (or
ap-perceived) is indicated or motivated by this perception, but it is not itself actually perceived. In contrast to normal object perception, this specific object, namely the lived body as that of another subject, can never come to an actual presence (like, when moving around it, I come to see the back side of a house). Rather, the ‘interior’ or the experiences of another animal body can only be ‘indicated’ by its visual appearance and behaviour. This limit is not a failure, but a phenomenological finding: it is what makes the Other an other, that is, an Ego fundamentally different from myself.²

Husserl’s reflections on this cluster of issues go back to 1910–11 (cf. Hua XIII, Text Nr. 8). While he first thought that for experiencing an alien body as a sensing human being with similar capacities it was sufficient to imagine one’s own corporeal appearance ‘here’ as an external appearance over ‘there’, i.e. to think of oneself as physically moved to another place (Hua XIII, 253, 263), he later criticized his own approach for being too constructive or intellectual. Instead of thinking or imagining oneself in the place of the other, Husserl’s more mature analyses focus on the concrete expressions of the embodiment of others. He emphasizes in this regard that one perceptually experiences the body of the other as a sensing Leib similar to mine without having to infer such a similarity (cf. Hua XIII, Text Nr. 2). Contrary to contemporary inferentialist approaches to social cognition such as Theory of Mind (Carruthers 2015) or the Simulation Theory (Dennett 1987, Gallese 2014), Husserl – thereby clearly anticipating the enactivist view (see section 9.3 below) – thought that the perception of the other takes place in an immediate and direct way. It is based, he thought, on a passive process of association he called ‘coupling’ (Paarung). In this associative coupling, our own body functions as the instituting ‘original’, who initiates a passive process of identification between our body and the body of the other. Husserl describes this process as “a primal instituting, in which an object with a similar sense became constituted for the first time” (Hua I, 141/Husserl 1960, 111). Other people are thus accessible to us through our bodily perception but only in a kind of “verifiable accessibility of what is not originally accessible” (Hua I, 144/Husserl 1960, 114). More specifically, others’ bodies are perceived as of the same type as ours: they, too, are seen as visible and touchable (objects) as well as perceiving and sensing (subjects). But this passive ‘assumption’ – namely that what we perceive is not only a physical body but also a lived body with soul, spirit and ego – has to be proven right, or better it must confirm and demonstrate itself in further sensuous experience or communication. The experience of others is therefore never originally or even fully given to us, but it is still directly accessible through our experiences of and with them, through the behaviour and gestures of their expressive body (Hua XIII, 234). In brief, through empathy (Einfühlung), we are able to experience the other directly: the facial expressions are seen facial expressions, and they are immediately bearers of sense indicating the other’s consciousness (Hua IV, 235/Husserl 1989, 247). In its duality as material and animate, the body is therefore the concrete precondition not only of the constitution of space and perception, but also of every form of intersubjectivity and empathy.

9.2. Merleau-Ponty

I. Body and world. While the body in Husserl still is in the service of consciousness or the Ego, and thus appears as an – although imperfectly – constituted thing, Merleau-Ponty tries in his Phenomenology of Perception (Phénoménologie de la perception, 1945) to bring this view, which he takes to be standing on its head, back on its feet: the body itself is now conceived as a subject in its own right and not as a mere medium of an egoic will. The body, in its inalienable relation to the world, stands for our most primary mode of existence as a concrete and situated subject: “the subject that I am, understood concretely, is inseparable from this particular body
and from this particular world” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 431). Our bodily existence thus combines consciousness and world, or, in Sartre’s words, the being ‘for itself’ and the ‘being in itself’ (cf. Sartre 1956). Merleau-Ponty’s ‘phenomenology of the body’ is in this sense an existentialist answer to Husserl’s approach and a critical comment on Sartre’s theory developed in *Being and Nothingness.*3 Basing himself on Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty describes the body as a factual existence, i.e. as something that is in the world, and emphasizes the primarily practical character of our relation to the world. In contrast to Heidegger, who focuses on the formal description of the structures of *Dasein* and does not develop an explicit theory of embodiment, Merleau-Ponty is more interested in the concrete actions of the embodied subject. In this sense, the embodied subject is not just in the world, but (behaves) toward the world (which Merleau-Ponty captures by translating Heidegger’s *In-der-Welt-sein* as *être-au-monde*).

As embodied subjects, we are on the one hand *situated in the world* in a spatial, temporal, natural, biological as well as historical and cultural way; on the other hand, we find ourselves *in-situation with the world* as the locus of our engagements and commitments. These two levels of situatedness are reflected in the “two distinct layers” of the lived body, “that of the habitual body and that of the actual body” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 84). Our lived body (and the world) are always already there, even before we explicitly perceive or reflect on them. An embodied and situated subject therefore possesses an *individual* (past experiences) as well as an *over-individual* (natural, cultural, generative) *pre-history.* The latter shows itself in dispositions and acquired habits that represent biological, historical and social developments and meanings, and of which the embodied subject is mostly unaware. Moreover, the subject does not only comprise of a personal horizon of beliefs, explicitly remembered events or decisions; as embodied, it is also determined by a “pre-personal horizon” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 261, cf. Al-Saj 2008) of events or processes the subject never actually experiences or knows about. Our own birth is, for example, a past that never has been present (to us), and our death is a future that will never appear to us. Nonetheless, both the over-individual pre-history as well as the pre-personal dimension are the foundation for every bodily existence and shape every concrete experience.

Embodiment is thus not only twofold (*Leib* and *Körper*), but being a concrete bodily subject already comes with the prize of anonymity and ambiguity. According to Merleau-Ponty, the inherent ambiguity of the lived body that finds itself between past and present, pre-personal and personal, natural and cultural dimensions, is not a deficit but rather a necessary condition for a concordant and unified experience of the (transcendent) world and others (cf. Trigg 2017, Dillon 1988).

**II. Bodily perception.** For Merleau-Ponty, perception is the primary mode of our relation to the world. Moreover, “perception is not a ‘mental’ event, for we experience our own sensory states not merely as states of mind, but as states of our bodies” (Carman 2012, xiv). It is in precisely this sense that Merleau-Ponty affirms that intentionality is first and foremost a practical and motor intentionality. In this regard, Merleau-Ponty adopts the term ‘operative intentionality’ from Husserl, which he found in his late manuscripts (*fungierende Intentionalität*, cf. Merleau-Ponty 2012, 441). Operative intentionality, in contrast to act intentionality, does not mentally refer to an already constituted single object (thinking of a house), but describes a bodily aiming or reaching at, a general mode of practical directedness toward something. Like Husserl, Merleau-Ponty thus ascribes a specific (motor) intentionality to the body: consciousness is originally not an ‘I think’, but rather an ‘I can’ (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 139; cf. Morris 2008, 116).

Motor intentionality is characterized by kinaesthetic sensations or proprioception, as well as a bodily awareness of the surrounding environment and of worldly things that are relevant for the current action. It operates on a pre-reflective or even a pre-personal level, in which we
are not fully or explicitly aware of all the single operations involved, like when we carry out certain actions while our attention is directed elsewhere, such as when driving or walking while talking to a friend. But this does not mean that our action is a kind of subliminal or mechanical process that lacks any kind of consciousness. Rather, it is guided by a pre-reflective form of self-consciousness by means of which we are at the same time aware of the sensory qualities of outer things (cf. Legrand 2006).

Merleau-Ponty argues in this regard that motor intentionality is characterized by what he calls an “intentional arc” (2012, 137f.). Bodily movement points always beyond itself, spatially as well as temporally. While engaged in a bodily movement, we are ‘here’, but also already ‘there’, intending the thing or the action that drives our intentional project of activity: “The gesture of reaching one’s hand out toward an object contains a reference to this object, not as a representation, but as this highly determinate thing toward which we are thrown, next to which we are through anticipation, and which we haunt” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 140). In every current action the body thus synthesizes the past, present and future in an ‘intentional arc’.

Merleau-Ponty illustrates the ‘normal’ functioning of motor intentionality and embodiment through a contrasting analysis of pathological cases. Throughout the Phenomenology of Perception, he refers several times to a patient of the German neurologists Adhémard Gelb and Kurt Goldstein named Schneider. Due to a war injury, Schneider has severe brain injuries and shows functional distortions in visual perception, movement, memory, thinking and social behaviour. Schneider is, for example, not able to point to his nose when asked to do so, although he perfectly ‘knows’ where his nose is when this movement is embedded in a practical or operative action, like sneezing or in shooing away a fly that sits on his nose. Schneider can thus ‘grasp’ his nose whenever this grasping is a part of a current action or situation, but he cannot ‘point’ to his nose on demand. The same problem occurs when Schneider is asked to show where one of his doctors lives: although he has visited the place several times before and ‘knows’ where it is, he is not able to ‘indicate’ its location on cue. Again, it seems that things and events have no meaning for him when they are too ‘abstract’, viz. when they are not integrated in a ‘concrete’ situation. For this reason, Merleau-Ponty affirms that Schneider is conscious of his own body and of its surroundings as an “envelope of his habitual action but not as an objective milieu”, which is why he is only able to act habitually, but not spontaneously (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 106). In short, Schneider has lost “the power to reckon with the possible” (Romdenh-Romluc 2011, 100), that is to say, he has lost the ability to put himself in a possible position and act accordingly. Instead, he is bound to the immediate present. The intentional arc has lost its elasticity, it went “limp” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 137; for a detailed analysis and critical discussion, cf. Jensen 2009).

This affects not only perception and movement, but all domains of existence. For the intentional arc does not only temporarily synthesize movements and perceptions, but also links current actions and objects with past ones, thereby providing us with a temporal continuity and a continuity of meaning. This explains why Schneider also lacks an affective relation to the world and others, and why he is also no longer interested in erotic relations. According to Merleau-Ponty, sexuality cannot be reduced to a physical function, be it instinctive or reflexive; sexuality addresses our whole way of existing (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 160). Having an interest and desire for someone or something implies a certain connection between past, present and future events; without such a connection, neither an affective tension nor a meaningful relation can be built up. One could say that Schneider is still situated, but no longer in-situation, that is, he is not engaged in a current situation or action. He does not desire any more, because he cannot project himself into an erotic situation.

Although the future-oriented engagement with the world is disturbed, Schneider is still embedded in the world and perfectly able to operate within the world in a habitual way. This
points to the necessary role of habits for every normal perception and action. Acquired habits, practical know-how and bodily abilities provide us with orientation and skills that do not need constant attention or intellectual interference (cf. recent research in philosophy, cognitive sciences and neurosciences that supports this: Dreyfus 1996, 2002; Milner and Goodale 2006). For Merleau-Ponty, it is the body schema that mediates between our current engagements and the body’s habits. ‘Body schema’ is a concept Merleau-Ponty takes over from the psychology of his time (cf. Henry Head 1926, Paul Schilder 1923, Gelb and Goldstein 1920, Gallagher 2005) and re-formulates in the language of gestalt-theory. In contrast to a purely associative understanding of the body schema as a mere sum of information regarding different bodily functions (for example tactile and kinaesthetic sensations), Merleau-Ponty defines the body schema as a holistic form of organization that is directed toward an environment. The single limbs of our body are not merely loosely connected; instead, “I hold my body as an indivisible possession and I know the position of each of my limbs through a body schema (schéma corporel)” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 100f.). The body schema thus expresses the unity of the body, a unity that is not static or pre-given, but has to generate and actualize itself constantly anew. Because of the body schema, we have an immediate ‘knowledge’ about our localization, size and position within an intersensory world. We know, for example, whether we will fit through a particular door, whether we will be able to lift a certain object and how to move or behave in a given situation. Such practical knowledge literally has its locus in our body; it is not thematic as such, but is automatically retrieved in situation.

Moreover, the body schema is dynamic because it is constantly enriched and extended by current interactions with the world and others. New motor senses, habits and abilities are being acquired and external objects, tools or prostheses are integrated within the body schema. The body schema is thus far from being the mere sum of actual information about the body; rather, it points beyond its current state as well as its material boundaries. The body schema mediates in this regard constantly between the currently performing body, which behaves and projects itself toward the world, and the habitual body, which determines the practical possibilities of this very body through already acquired skills and know-how. In this sense, the body more than a ‘zero-point of orientation’; it creates a field of action or a situation: it is “the anchoring of the active body in an object, and the situation of the body confronted with its tasks” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 103). Merleau-Ponty thus goes beyond the conception of a spatiality of positions toward a spatiality of situations, in which we do not merely occupy a spatial position, but actively inhabit a milieu. The body, which acts as the medium or spatial starting point for perception, is just as well a body of action, which is polarized according to its practical tasks. In this sense, Merleau-Ponty contends that the body schema is a “manner of expressing that my body is in and toward the world” (Id.).

The body schema is thus what situates us in the world and at the same time guarantees a smooth interaction with this very world. It thereby facilitates an optimal perception or action in that it synchronizes the body with its environment to enable a ‘maximum grip’ (cf. Dreyfus 1996) on the world. As Merleau-Ponty states, for each object (he refers to the example of a picture in an art gallery), “there is an optimal distance from where it asks to be seen – an orientation through which it presents more of itself – beneath or beyond which we merely have a confused perception due to excess or lack” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 316). This tendency toward the maximum of visibility, which according to Merleau-Ponty every bodily subject has, is concretely realized through the body schema (see also Kelly 2005 and Taipale 2014, 121f.) In this sense, the maximum of visibility is not an objective norm, but a norm developed through the interaction between the subject and the object. What Merleau-Ponty points out is not the ideal of an adequate perception (independent of specific perceivers) as, for example, Husserl some-
times does (cf. Doyon 2018), but an optimum that fits with the general or individual abilities of bodily subjects. The object can only ‘ask to be seen’ in such or such a way if there is someone who is able to witness. Moreover, what an optimal perception or grip concretely adheres to must be relative to the respective interested actions and the overall environment. As Merleau-Ponty argues in his earlier work *The Structure of Behavior* (*La structure du comportement*, 1942), what an environment or object shows us or affords us is also highly dependent on our respective skills and habits (Merleau-Ponty 1963, 168f., cf. Wehrle and Breyer 2016, 45).

The individual body schema thus facilitates optimal perception or action, but can also restrict and limit it, depending on the situation and the point of reference. For every ‘I can’, there is also an ‘I cannot’, but this general limitation characterizes more obviously still the body schemas of female, colonial and disabled people due to their respective social and political situations. (See on this the analyses of De Beauvoir 1949; Young 1980, 2015; Weiss 1999, 2015; Fanon 1952.)

III. Intersubjectivity as intercorporeality (and the flesh).

Because of our bodily situatedness, we are immediately connected to other (situated) bodily beings. Therefore, the Husserlian problem of how the experience of other subjects is even possible, i.e. how one ego can reach the other, is not really an issue within Merleau-Ponty’s framework. I do not have to put in an effort to be empathic, to understand what she/he/they feel: this is immediately expressed in the bodily expressions and gestures themselves. His gestures are not referring to a hidden psychological fact behind what can be seen: “The gesture does not make me think about anger, it is the anger itself” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 190). But this only holds true for subjects who are situated in the same world and share a situation, i.e. interact personally with each other (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 469).

In his later works, Merleau-Ponty speaks in this regard about an ‘intercorporeality’, in which bodies are co-existent, act together and synchronize their movements and gestures (cf. Merleau-Ponty “The Philosopher and his shadow”, in: Merleau-Ponty 1964b; Fuchs 2016, Weiss 1998). Merleau-Ponty illustrates this with the example of a mutual handshake. He describes this as a mutual incorporation, in which I experience the hand of the other as an extension of my own hand: “he and I are like the organs of one single intercorporeality” (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 168). Such an immediate bodily understanding is possible, because we both belong to one and the same world, and are incarnated in the same way. We, and the others, are always already there, not as material bodies of perception, not even as spirits, egos or psyche, but in the way we affectively come in contact with others. Our bodies are intertwined, Merleau-Ponty contends, and this leads to a reciprocal experience of embodied communication: “Communication or the understanding of gestures is achieved through the reciprocity between my intentions and the other person’s gestures, and between my gestures and the intentions which can be in the other person’s behaviour. Everything happens as if the other person’s intention inhabited my body, and mine his” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 191; transl. modified). The other’s body extends onto my own, and my own overlaps with his; this is what Merleau-Ponty calls intercorporeality, and he conceives of it as a form of primary social understanding.

In his posthumously published working notes, *The Visible and the Invisible* (*Le visible et l’invisible*, 1964), Merleau-Ponty no longer addresses the individual or concrete living body as subject of perception, but embeds it within a broader structural description of being. In this regard, he uses Husserl’s example of the touching and touched hand to describe the essential relation between two ontological spheres, the visible and the invisible. The human body belongs to both realms: on the one hand, it is visible and tangible (it is an object), while on the other, it can acquire a view of itself (as a subject). While Husserl is still concerned with the experience and constitution of the body, Merleau-Ponty wants to characterize the ontological essence of the body. From such an ontological perspective, the body doubles itself up and unifies itself at the same time: the subjective (*Leib*) and the objective body (*Körper*) “encroach upon one
another” (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 117). The same holds true for the relation between body and world. From an ontological perspective, these two are no longer two separate entities that relate to each other; they rather belong to the same situation or milieu, they are of the same flesh (chair). Flesh is thereby the ontological element of the visible, which links the seeing (subjects) with the seen (objects). From this perspective, intercorporeality is founded in a common dimension of flesh, a “generality of the sensible” (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 139), which then differentiates itself from within. In this ontological framework, embodiment is no longer haunted by its ambiguity; it also loses its concrete or existential significance. Within the dimension of the flesh, the phenomena of ‘touching and being touched’ are reversible.

If one wants to describe experiences of alienation and empathy, explain pathologies and disabilities or investigate the social and political impact on embodiment, one still needs concrete phenomenological descriptions of specific and situated forms of embodiment. These topics are especially central to debates in Feminist Philosophy, Gender/Queer and Transgender studies, Medicine, Health Care, Disability Studies as well as Post-Colonial and Critical Race Studies. Within these debates, phenomenological perspectives are becoming more and more influential. Feminist phenomenologists, drawing on Husserl, Merleau-Ponty as well as Simone de Beauvoir (who developed in The Second Sex (Le deuxième sexe, 1949/1953) the first account of female embodiment) have applied, discussed, extended and transformed the concept of embodiment in fruitful ways (cf. Ahmed 2000, 2006; Alcoff 2006; Al-Saij 2010; Dolezal 2014; Heinämaa 2003, 2010, Rodemeyer and Heinämaa 2010: Slatman 2014, Weiss 1998, 2015; Young 1980, 2005; Zeiler 2013, Zeiler and Folkmarson Käll 2014).

9.3. Enactivism

Whereas Husserl’s and Merleau-Ponty’s reflections on the significance of the body in the production of meaning (in general) led them to draw important metaphysical and ontological consequences about the nature of experience (cf. Hua XXXVI; Merleau-Ponty 1964), the enactivists’ interest in embodiment is usually motivated by the attempt to better understand the nature of perception, or how action is involved in perception. This is paradigmatically the case in the so-called ‘sensorimotor enactivism’ developed by psychologist Kevin O’Regan and philosopher Alva Noë (2001; Noë 2004). In their view, objects appear as present thanks to the fact that we (implicitly) understand the kind of sensorimotor relation involved in experience. Take a tomato and look at it at some distance. You see the front, and yet you have a visual sense of the whole. How is this possible? In O’Regan and Noë’s view, we unproblematically grasp the object as a perceptual whole in virtue of the fact that we have an implicit understanding of the patterns of sensorimotor dependence that govern our relation to the object. Unlike Husserl, for whom the “appearances are kinaesthetically motivated” (Hua XI, §3/Husserl 2001, 47ff.), Noë and O’Regan’s theory is that skilful perceivers understand how experience is responsive to sensorimotor changes, and this know-how is brought about by the coordinated function of our cognitive and bodily skills: “The world shows up for perceptual consciousness in so far as it is available […] thanks to the perceiver’s knowingly and skilfully standing in the right sort of sensorimotor relation to things” (Noë 2012, 22). In this story, there is no consideration whatsoever for the more passive aspects of experience. Perception is a form of action all the way down.

Recently, the sensorimotor approach has been criticized within the enactivist camp for operating with a too narrow conception of embodiment. The critique is justified. Not only does Noë explicitly deny the importance of somaesthetic factors (cf. 2012, 12), but he never acknowledges the theoretical relevance of affective and emotional aspects of experience either. The sensorimotor approach thus needs to be enriched and updated. Moods, emotions and bodily states such as
hunger, fatigue and pain inform perceptual experience insofar as they motivate and stimulate the agent to perceptually engage and explore its surroundings (Bower and Gallagher 2013; Colombetti 2013). Affects can also influence our emotional and behavioural responses to perceptual situations, as well as explain shifts of attention (cf. Husserl 2004). This is a two-sided relation: not only are we, in virtue of our body, sensitive to perceived emotions, but our response is embodied as well. It shows in our bodily sensations, postures, movements and gestures, as well as in our blood pressure, respiration and circulatory system (cf. Gallagher 2017, Ch. 8). Building up on Merleau-Ponty’s notion of intercorporeality, Fuchs (2016) has coined the concept of ‘bodily resonance’ to highlight the fact that there are no affective and emotional responses without this kind of embodied resonance. The body is the medium of our affective relation to the world, and even if the complex ensemble of affective and emotional factors usually operates below the threshold of conscious awareness, it still has a profound and pervasive impact on conscious life as a whole.

Emotions and affects as embodied phenomena command that we conceive of the brain and the body in a new, enactive way. Rather than representing or processing information, the enactivists regard the brain as part of a larger dynamical system that includes the rest of the body and the environment. The brain–body–environment is the most basic explanatory unity for conscious phenomena, and, as active members and enablers of the system as a whole, the brain–body activities and interactions are best described as efforts to constantly attune to changing circumstances in their environment. This is an idea that goes back to the pioneering work of Francesco Varela, Evan Thompson and Eleanor Rosch, who, already in 1991, described the behaviours of all organisms – from the simplest bacteria to the most complex forms of life such as human beings – as engaged in a constant process of sense-making called autopoiesis. Since its inception, enactivism has grown into a variety of related positions – from Thompson’s (2007) autopoietic enactivism to Noë and O’Regan’s (2001) sensorimotor approach and Hutto and Myin’s (2013, 2017) so-called radical enactivism. Despite the theoretical differences these various models display, all enactivists agree on the fundamental role of body to account not just for perception, but more generally for conscious life, including cognition. This insight, which comes with a strong anti-representationalist commitment, is one of the many traces of the powerful influence that the phenomenology of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty has left on the enactivist movement.

Notes

1 Husserl differentiates between the sensations as they are given in first-personal perspective (Empfindnisse) from the content of sensations (Empfindungsinhalt), like, for instance, the roughness or the form of the touched hand (cf. Hua IV, 149/156).

2 In this sense, Husserl sees our own bodily experience as a necessary condition for intersubjectivity. The foreign lived body is the “first intersubjective datum, and my apprehension of it as a lived body is the first step on the way toward the constitution of an intersubjective world in common” (Zahavi 2001, 36; cf. Hua XIV, 110; Hua XV, 18, 572).

3 For Sartre embodiment is essentially paradoxical and binary, if we consider the body as living and moving subject (as being for itself) then it only operates but cannot be experienced as such. But as soon as we experience (feel, perceive) the body, it turns into an object or Körper that is perceivable for everyone and is thus a ‘being-for-others’. That means that we always experience our body (for itself) in the way it is seen and evaluated by others (cf. Moran 2010, 44; Dillon 1998, 126). For a more detailed account of Sartre’s theory of the body cf. Morris 2010, or the role of the body in the early and late philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas cf. Ciocan 2013, 2014.

References

Body

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