

THE BOUNDARIES OF THE SELF AND THE LIMITS OF THE WORLD IN ARISTOTLE: A DIFFERENT KIND OF DECONSTRUCTION OF THE EGO

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ABSTRACT. Phenomenological theories have a long history in undermining the “traditional” opposition between mind and body. According to them, the material, viz. the corporal can serve as a place for the processes of meaning-formation, i.e., as a condition of possibility for any set of relationships forming a body of meaning. In this paper, this manifests itself through the fact that the basic concepts related to corporeality, e.g., “perception”, “movement” etc., are the conditions of possibility for any construction of meaning and consciousness process, as also shown by contemporary neuroscience and communication theory in the case of intelligence and communication. However, this was already known to Aristotle, long before the advent of modern neuroscience, but the stakes were even higher for him: the issue of corporeality is itself problematic in terms of determining its boundaries, as the limits of the Self (viz. my body) merge with those of the world. The situation is similar to the “passive and active synthesis” of Husserl and also to Heidegger’s “twofold openness” of the *Dasein*, conflating the boundaries of the Self and the limits of the world for our human being-there, or consciousness.

Keywords: Aristotle, movement, perception, touch, carnality, communication, neuroscience, Husserl, Heidegger

One touches and, in the act of touching, one's touched.
(Aldous Huxley)

Introduction

We now live in a world of many exciting trends, such as “biohacking” and “transhumanism”, organically linking biology (the concept of the “inner” and of “mine”) and technology (the “outer” and the “objectual”). In this world populated with “biotes” and in our age of artificial limbs and sensory organs, science fiction has become science

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fact due to our current software tools for speech recognition, the Google Lens, the Cloud and the instant accessibility of the world knowledge contained in Wikipedia articles etc. Nevertheless, *nihil novi*: it is the essence of us humans that our existence is linked with the use of tools, instruments and technology. Hence, my paper offers a phenomenological analysis of the basis of Aristotle's conception about perception and movement, attempting to uncover the ancient Greek roots of the contemporary merging between the inner and the outer world, as seen from the perspective of Husserl's and Heidegger's phenomenology.

Phenomenological theories have a long history in undermining the "traditional" opposition between mind and body. In this paper, this manifests itself through the fact that the basic concepts related to corporeality – e.g., "perception", "movement" etc. – are the conditions of possibility for any construction of meaning and consciousness process, as also shown by contemporary neuroscience and communication theory in the case of intelligence and communication. However, this was already known to Aristotle, long before modern neuroscience, but the stakes were even higher for him: the issue of corporeality is itself problematic in terms of determining its boundaries, as the limits of the Self (viz. my body) merge with those of the world. The situation is similar to the "passive and active synthesis" of Husserl and to Heidegger's "double openness" of the *Dasein*, conflating the boundaries of the Self and the limits of the world for our human being-there, or consciousness.

Aristotle on perception

It suffices to recall Kant's transcendental aesthetics in order to appreciate the philosophical importance of sensations. However, even before Kant, the issue was put into philosophical (phenomenological) focus by Aristotle, who started the essential radicalization of the question of perception. The naive simplification of the Pre-Socratics ends with the Stagirite, and there is also no more room for the disdainful aloofness of the Platonic analyses.

But what is it exactly that changes with Aristotle? In his *De anima*, he establishes that perception can no longer be viewed as a "movement", or as passive "suffering", during which the sense organ undergoes a qualitative change. If we conceive of perception as a form of movement, then there is a difference between perception interpreted as "potentiality" and "actual perception".² In this sense, perception is a continuous progress from possibility to "realization" (cf. *en-telecheia*). In order for this realization to come about – i.e., for the movement, or "suffering", to

² *De anima* 417a.

happen –, three basic conditions must apply: (1) the movement must have a certain minimal *intensity*, and (2) there must be a minimal *difference* between the two opposing poles of perception (like is not affected by like³), but (3) this minimal difference should not become *too sharp*.⁴

This interpretation of perception as movement and of movement as possibility and realization is confirmed both by current communication theory and neuroscience.

Communication theory

Hungarian communication theorist Özséb Horányi characterizes his subject field thus: “the communicative is conceived of as the potential place of the relevant preparedness of a (problem-solving) agent, necessary for recognizing and solving a *problem*. (...) A problem for a specific agent is *the critical difference* between his or her actual state and a desirable state, insofar as the agent recognizes this difference. (...) ‘Difference’ means that the two states are categorized as different for the agent. (...) Since the difference can be so slight that it does not yet pose a problem (...), ‘critical’ signifies that it provokes the problem-solving behavior of the agent in that specific case.”⁵

As one can see, the categories used in these discussions are quite similar. In Aristotle, the “difference” and the “minimal intensity” are basic conditions of perception, while contemporary “communication” is also a mode of manifestation of the “*entelecheia*”, or the place for preparing oneself for solving the potential “problem”, in which the difference and the minimal (or in this case: “critical”) intensity play a decisive role.

Neuroscience

“Movement” has an even more significant role within modern neuroscience. In fact, according to British neuroscientist Daniel Wolpert, “we have a brain for one reason and one reason only, and that's to produce adaptable and complex movements.

³ *De generatione* 323b.

⁴ *De anima* 424a.

⁵ Özséb Horányi: A kommunikáció participációra alapozott felfogásáról [On the Concept of Communication as Participation]. In: Idem (ed.): *A kommunikáció mint participáció* [Communication as Participation]. Budapest: AKTI – Typotex, 2006. pp. 246-264.

There is no other reason to have a brain. Think about it. Movement is the only way you have of affecting the world around you. So think about communication – speech, gestures, writing, sign language – they’re all mediated through contractions of your muscles. So it’s really important to remember that sensory, memory and cognitive processes are all important, but they’re only important to either drive or suppress future movements. There can be no evolutionary advantage to laying down memories of childhood or perceiving the color of a rose if it doesn’t affect the way you’re going to move later in life.

Now for those who don't believe this argument, we have trees and grass on our planet without the brain, but the clinching evidence is this animal here -- the humble sea squirt. Rudimentary animal, has a nervous system, swims around in the ocean in its juvenile life. And at some point of its life, it implants on a rock. And the first thing it does in implanting on that rock, which it never leaves, is to digest its own brain and nervous system for food. So once you don't need to move, you don't need the luxury of that brain".⁶

In other words, movement is the condition of possibility for the brain.

At the same time, movement seems to play an important role in the mental/cerebral construction of the body itself. This circumstance was used in an utterly impressive manner by Vilayanur Ramachandran and by his colleagues in a novel form of therapy for phantom limb pain through their mirror box. Through its artificial visual feedback, the box helps the patient to move the phantom limb, “pulling it out” from its painful position. If a mirror is placed at the centerline of the body, allowing the patient see the mirror image of the missing limb, then the same (symmetrically opposite) movement will often be felt in the phantom (missing) limb, alleviating certain kinds of pain. E.g., when the patient feels as if the phantom hand is locked in a painful spasm, the healthy hand can be clenched into a fist and then opened up again, while looking at in the mirror.

However, all this has already been anticipated by Husserl. “How, then, do I regard my eye as my own? I can do so, according to Husserl, only by touching it. Touched, it provides the ‘touch and kinetic sensations’ that allow me to apprehend it as belonging to my body. Such sensations are crucial. As Husserl writes, ‘A subject whose only sense was the sense of vision could not have an appearing body.’ For my body to appear as mine, i.e., for there to be the self-awareness that makes it mine, we need ‘the phenomenon of double sensation.’ Lacking it, we are like those patients that the neurologist Oliver Sacks describes who on waking attempt to make room for themselves by shoving their own legs out of bed. Unable to

⁶ https://en.tiny.ted.com/talks/daniel_wolpert_the_real_reason_for_brains (last downloaded on July 9, 2018)

touch themselves, they react to and move their bodies like foreign objects. This can be put in terms of the 'localization' that touch provides. The kinesthetic sensations of tension that I experience in moving my hand become localized because they are constantly 'intermixed' with those of given by the hand as it touches objects."⁷ Because: "intelligence (...) does not just involve the working of algorithms. It is founded on flesh's ability to move itself, to feel itself, and to engage in the body projects that accompanied our learning a language. This implies that to copy intelligence – i.e., produce an artificial version of it – the flesh that forms its basis must also be reproduced."⁸

It is not the purpose of the present paper to go further into these issues which are rather relevant from a phenomenological perspective as well. Nevertheless, they illustrate very well that the material, viz. the corporeal, can serve as the "place" for the processes of meaning formation and as a condition of possibility for any set of relationships forming a body of meaning. In fact, contemporary science supports the idea that the condition of possibility for (Aristotelian) perception, i.e. movement, is at the very basis of the appearing of our world, or even of its existence.

Perception in Aristotle – reprise

As seen above, the perceptual process presupposes for Aristotle a *primary difference* between the organ and the object of sense. At the same time, it also requires the existence of a "movement", or "suffering", through which one can act on the other. Before examining the meaning of this primary difference and of the movement which makes the suffering possible, the list of the basic senses should be clarified. Aristotle distinguishes five senses⁹: hearing, sight, smell, taste and touch. Since all sensing presupposes a "medium" (*metaxy*), sensations can be divided into two groups: sensations for which the medium is external (sight, hearing and smell) and those that presuppose an internal medium (taste and touch).¹⁰ So let us now turn to the difference between the medium interpreted as external or as internal.

⁷ James Mensch: Artificial Intelligence and the Phenomenology of Flesh. *PhaenEx. Journal of Existential and Phenomenological Theory and Culture* 1:1 (2006). pp. 73-85. p. 78.

⁸ Idem, p. 73.

⁹ In fact, for Aristotle, there are six senses. However, one cannot talk about the *sensus communis* in the same sense as about the first five.

¹⁰ The concept of the "outer" and of the "inner" are related here to the perceiving subject as a whole, and not to the actual organ of perception. According to Aristotle, taste is a modification of touch.

I have already noted that the condition of possibility for perception consists, for Aristotle, in a primary difference between the object and the perceptual organ and in the movement through which one of them can “touch” the other. In other words, whatever the type of perception, it has a touch basis. Nevertheless, there are differences regarding the essence of this touch: although “all organs of sense perceive by contact, the contact is mediate: touch alone perceives by immediate contact”.¹¹ The difference between touch and the other senses is that the latter require a medium of a nature different from the two poles involved in sense perception. But, since “all organs of sense perceive by contact”, touch can be regarded as the primary mode of perception, on which I will focus in the following.

Touch is what makes the difference between animals and other “living beings”: animals have a “minimal sense of touch”.¹² This is what makes it possible to speak about sensations in the case of animals. But what is it that differentiates humans from animals? According to Aristotle, humans have the “softest skin”, which makes it possible for their touch to be the “tenderest” and the “most sophisticated”. However, skin is nothing else than “dried” flesh. Thus, the “softness of flesh” is added to the fineness of skin, making it possible for the sense of touch to be the “acutest”. This perfection of sensation is no accident: it shows that, being endowed with the most perfect form of sensation, man is also capable to receive the most perfect form of soul.¹³ In spite of all these, the difference between humans and animals cannot be reduced to the soul – which, due to the active intellect, “is everything that exists” –, since human universality must also have its corporeal aspects. This universality, which could also be qualified as transcendental, is based on the medium of touch, i.e., on the flesh.

The process of sensation, which, as we have seen, presupposes the difference between the sense organ and its object, also implies a *secondary difference*. According to Aristotle, sensations are there to inform us about the differences (e.g. cold/hot, dry/wet etc.) within our world, which, on their turn, attest to the presence of things. This is nothing else than our own *being-with* the things of our world. Or, more specifically, the presence of things and my own presence coincide in sensation.¹⁴

¹¹ *De anima* 435a

¹² Jean-Louis Labarrière: *Sur la différence entre l’homme et l’animale chez Aristote* (manuscript), p. 21.

¹³ See Remi Brague: *Aristote et la question du monde*. PUF, Paris, 1988. p. 259.

¹⁴ *Idem*, p. 369.

The case of touch: from Aristotle to Husserl (and Heidegger)

All sensation has its basis in touch, but the specific sense of touch is the only one for which there is “direct” contact. In this case, we do not perceive “through”, but “along with” the medium.¹⁵ To touch means to simultaneously sense the medium as well, i.e., the flesh, which is not the actual organ of touch, the latter being located somewhere else (“in the proximity of the heart”¹⁶).

Now, flesh as a medium is within us humans. This intimacy does not mean self-enclosure, but, on the contrary, our being of flesh represents, in fact, our *openness* to things, similarly to Husserl’s passive synthesis. As a matter of fact, the Husserlian dichotomy between active and passive synthesis has Aristotelian roots, going back to the duality of the “*nous poietikos*” and the “*nous pathetikos*”, i.e., the agent and the passive intellect.¹⁷ Additionally to this parallel between Aristotle and Husserl, there is a similar analogy between Heidegger’s and Husserl’s conception, which is also due to the Aristotelian differentiation. This second parallel consists in the “twofold openness” of both *Dasein* and consciousness, which is “poetic” and “pathetic” at the same time.

Through our flesh, we are open to things, which is best illustrated through the fact that “if I touch something, then it also touches me”.¹⁸ It is also what Merleau-Ponty means when stating that touching is always to touch oneself as well¹⁹; being simultaneously the one who touches and the one who is touched. But if touch is a movement of me contacting the object and also of the object contacting me, then is this relationship actually in balance? Or if not, then in whose favor does the scale incline: am I the one who touches the object, or is it the object that touches me? In his *Being and Time*, Heidegger suggests that the one who touches is actually me, when stating that the “ready-to-hand” (*das Zuhandene*) cannot touch the *Dasein*. Unfortunately, this Heideggerian idea is overridden by

¹⁵ Idem, 372.

¹⁶ *De sensu* 439a

¹⁷ According to Husserl, there are two roots of consciousness processes. On the one hand, some mental processes are actively generated by an agent (called the Ego); e.g., these thoughts I am now putting on the page are actively generated by my Ego. These mental acts are of the “attentive” or “focusing” kind. On the other hand, there are also processes “giving themselves” within my consciousness, which are not actively generated by me; e.g., the background “environment”, which I actively perceive while formulating these ideas, are not the result of my Ego activity, but rather “automatically” and passively given to my consciousness.

¹⁸ Brague: op. cit., p. 370.

¹⁹ Cf. Maurice Merleau-Ponty: *Le visible et l’invisible*. Gallimard, Paris, 1964. p. 309.

the Cartesian paradigm, stating that men are the “masters and owners of nature”, which is characteristic for modernity and has also led to the contemporary dominance of technology, i.e., of the “ready-to-hand”.

In fact, Heidegger’s conception contains two hidden presuppositions: (1) the meaning of “being-there” can be exactly circumscribed, its limits can be traced unerringly, which makes it possible to speak separately about the Ego (*Dasein*) and about the world; (2) I am the one who *initiates* the movement (touch) and I can stop anytime. However, as we shall see, the boundaries cease to exist within the act of touching. Furthermore, it is not “me” who initiates the movement, since it is not intentional, but has the character of a passive synthesis. Just as the *ego cogito* always presupposes *cogitata mea*, I also cannot hide from the openness to which I am exposed through my sense of touch.

Perception is based on a fundamental difference between subject and object, i.e. the medium between its two poles. This uncreated (viz. non-thematic) difference is the very factor that makes the process of perception possible in the case of sight, hearing and taste. E.g., in the case of sight, the air is an unposited medium which makes perception possible as a *metaxy*. If this *distance*, or *boundary*, is lacking, then there is also no visual perception.

In fact, James Mensch’s vivid presentation of Husserl’s relevant phenomenological analyses might illustrate these points most effectively: “The ability of flesh to be taken as both subject and object gives it the special character of its self-awareness. At the origin of the ‘inner distance’ that characterizes the subject-object dichotomy is the fact that on the level of touch, flesh’s relation to itself is not direct, but rather mediated.

As Husserl makes clear, no other sense can substitute for touch in founding self-awareness. Take for example sight. I can regard my body, but as Husserl notes, ‘I do not see my body, the way I touch myself. What I call the seen Body is not something seeing that is seen, the way that my body, as touched, is something touching that is touched.’ What is lacking here is ‘the phenomenon of double sensation,’ a phenomenon that could only occur if ‘one eye could rub past the other’ – that is, if eye could touch eye. Similarly, when I look myself in the eye with a mirror, ‘I do not,’ Husserl claims, ‘see the seeing eye as seeing.’ The eye I regard is like the eye of another. I have to employ empathy to indirectly judge that it is identical with my eye. The eye that regards me from the mirror is, in other words, experienced as an object. My seeing it does not give me a first person experience of its seeing. To have this I would have to experience its seeing as my seeing. Touch does this since the hand that is touched also feels. Here the sensations of the touched hand point back to the touching hand as touching. By contrast, the

eye that I regard in the mirror is like the inanimate objects that I touch. I feel their properties, but I do not feel them feeling me. They do not, in other words, return my awareness to myself.”²⁰

Inside and outside: the limits of the Self and the boundaries of the world

The situation changes in the case of touch. The unposited medium becomes posited through the fact that it is not only the condition of possibility for the sense of touch, but it is itself touched. To sense an object through touching means, in fact, to sense ourselves through touch.²¹ If perception presupposes a movement which makes reciprocal influence, or “suffering”, possible, then this means, in the case of touch, the movement that is simultaneously touching as well as touched. This also implies that the non-thematic difference, which constitutes the boundary for other perceptions and can never be made into our own, disappears within the sense of touch, or more specifically, it becomes posited. As Aristotle puts it, it is as if the medium would slip from our hands in the act of touching: “we do perceive everything through a medium; but in these cases [i.e. the acts of touching] the fact escapes us”.²²

Hence, if in the case of the other senses, we talk about a fundamental difference between the Self and the world, then this becomes a *primary non-differentiation* in the act of touching. However, the issue is even more complicated. If the sense of touch is indeed the basic form of perception, and there is a “minimal contact”, i.e. touch, in the case of any act of perception, then does the *boundary*, or the (Heideggerian) “spatial interval” – presupposed, e.g., by the sense of sight, which separates me from the world –, really exist at all? More specifically: where does the boundary, which we cannot possess, and which should be the condition of possibility for the sense of touch, disappear? The problem becomes even more emphatic – instead of being solved – through the fact that, in the case of touch, the medium is internal. Where do we end, and where do the things of our world begin? Where do we stand when we state that the flesh is internal? These questions are important because it is not clear whether there is a (non-posited) boundary for “fleshness”, or if it is just “an extension of the world’s flesh” (Merleau-Ponty).²³ In this sense, “fleshness” would mean the disappearance of the boundary and the state of

²⁰ James Mensch: Artificial Intelligence and the Phenomenology of the Flesh. In: Lester Embree – Thomas Nenon (eds.): *Phenomenology 2005. Volume 5: Selected Essays from North America*. Bucharest: Zeta Books, 2005. p. 463

²¹ Cf. Brague: op. cit., p. 372.

²² *De anima* 423b

²³ Merleau-Ponty: op. cit., p. 309.

pre-corporeal undifferentiatedness.²⁴ This “chiasmus” between my own and the world’s “flesh” deconstructs the conceptual dichotomy between the “inner” and the “outer” reality. The world and my own flesh are both simultaneously internal and external.

Husserlian transcendental reflection turns the concepts of the “internal” and the “external” inside out in a similar manner. The world cannot be interpreted as external from its perspective, since this kind of (intentional) reflection is nothing else than a kind of openness to things that also means my exposedness beyond my own self. However, this leads not only to the Self as the place of reflection to be situated outside its own world, which becomes internal to it within reflection, but also to the Self being simultaneously outside itself as well, similarly to this very act of reflection. Or, as Wittgenstein put it: “the subject does not belong to the world but it is a limit of the world”.²⁵

We could even say, with Baudrillard, that there is a “double obscenity” not only in the case of communication, but it is actually a much deeper existential category, which applies both to the structure of consciousness and to corporeality. Communication, in its ecstasy (cf. the Greek *ek-stasis*), throws me “outside” of myself and “lays out” everything that is internal, taking away the possibility of any “cover” which would protect me from the internalization of all kinds of external factors, through the externality of the internal and the internality of the external. Nowadays, as Baudrillard puts it, “we no longer partake of the drama of alienation, but are in the ecstasy of communication”.²⁶

In our current age of communication, the ubiquitous and intrusive information has downgraded both objectuality and alterity to mere elements of a network, condemning the individual to a kind of mental explosion. Our world, or, more exactly, what is left of it, has degenerated into an internally heterogeneous consequence of mental functions. In this “absolute proximity” and “complete immediacy” of our world, the novel interpretation of schizophrenia now becomes intelligible in the sense of the original undifferentiatedness.²⁷ We come much too close to everything, while

²⁴ See Jacob Rogozinski: „Carnalitatea” comunității [The “Carnality” of Communication]. In: *Dialoguri despre ființă* [Dialogues on Being]. Amarcord: Timișoara, 1995.

²⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein: *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* 5.632.

²⁶ Jean Baudrillard: *Celălalt prin sine însuși* [The Other, by Himself]. Casa Cărții de Știință: Cluj-Napoca, 1996. p. 15.

²⁷ The use of the concept of “originality” becomes somewhat forced here, as there is a difference between the original openness to the world that is made possible by our disposition and the schizophrenic openness of our historical age. Although the former openness can also be called schizophrenic, since it recognizes the existence of an effect that takes place within ourselves without being initiated by us and also our “encounter” with that which simultaneously transcends us, the two concepts diverge when it comes to originality.

moving ever farther away from ourselves. There is no more any value-bearing alterity and objectuality for us.

In fact, however, the limit, i.e., the non-positable, can never be possessed by us. It means the stranger within us, or that which is actually external. It is my Self, the transcendental Ego, that is my boundary: the very basis of my consciousness processes, described by Husserl under the heading of the passive synthesis.

Similarly to the eye, which is not a part of what it sees, but its condition of possibility, the Ego is also a condition of possibility for our consciousness processes: the Self is the thinker of its thinking, and it is not thinking that thinks the Self. However problematic this latter point – it would, indeed, deserve a separate treatment in another, future investigation –, if we accept it, then we could also ask the question whether there is an “outside” of sensation at all, which could make the otherness possible. I touch and I am touched at the same time. But, as Aristotle puts it, “we do not perceive the senses themselves”²⁸. I cannot touch the “movement” creating the touch: there is an “untouchable” negativity within the sense of touch.²⁹ Similarly to reflection, which posits the pure negativity of the transcendental Ego as the reflexive part of the relationship, the sense of touch must also have its “untouchable”, making its existence possible.

If we accept that, in the case of reflection, the Ego is the condition of possibility for the consciousness processes, i.e., it is the Ego that thinks its thinking, then the “subject” of phenomenology is tragically *external*: whether reduced to “pure” Ego or to “pure” flesh, that which is actually transcendental always remains external to the world that it constitutes. If this was not the case, then it would also have to be “bracketed”. So, what is the meaning of this “pure” fleshness? It designates nothing else than the “reverse” of my “sensory existence”³⁰ through which fleshness itself, viz. the sense of touch is created: nothing else than the movement designating the untouchable.

This untouchable – and the unthinkable in reflection, i.e. the “pure Ego”, or the “implicit *cogito*” – is the aspect of my existence that, although it is always my own Self, also represents that through which I both am “myself” and, at the same time, the farthest away and most alien to “myself”.

²⁸ *De anima* 417a 4; see also: *De generatione* II 330a 26.

²⁹ Cf. Merleau-Ponty: op. cit., p. 308.

³⁰ Idem, p. 309.

