

James Mensch

Decisions and Transformations

The Phenomenology of Embodiment

BODY AND CONSCIOUSNESS

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Introduction

A reflective regard to the tradition of Western thought reveals the presence of crises. A crisis, (κρίσις) in the Greek sense of the word, points to conditions calling for a decision. The call may come from the instability of the situation, an instability caused by competing demands or ambiguous evidence. It can also arise from discoveries that destabilize the existing boundaries of thought without indicating a way forward. Regardless of its origin, the call is for a decision regarding the direction of inquiry. This was the case in physics when Michelson and Morley showed that the speed of light on earth was unaffected by the earth's velocity. It was also the situation when Galileo demonstrated that the acceleration of a falling body did not depend on its weight. The response, in each case, was a demand for a change of approach and, with this, for a new source of evidence. For Einstein, this involved the abandonment of the idea that space and time afforded invariant measures. Evidence was now sought from astronomical observations of the bending of light and, later, from newly discovered atomic processes. For Galileo, the shift in direction was even more fundamental. It involved a radical dichotomy in our understanding of the sensuous presence of the world, which was now divided into its primary and secondary qualities. Primary qualities designated the measurable aspects of appearing objects, such as their spatial dimensions, weight, and frequency of vibrations. Secondary qualities referred to their colors, odors, sounds, tastes and tactility as provided by our sense organs. The task of science was to understand nature through its numerically measurable qualities. This included explaining its secondary qualities through the primary. Thus, a change in color was to be understood in terms of a change in the light wave's frequency, and a change of pitch explained by a change in the oscillation of the sound wave. The numerable aspects of reality thus became the primary source of evidence. It was there that the confirmation of the new science was to be sought.¹

Similar decision points can also be found in the history of philosophy. Ancient philosophy was shaped by Plato's and Aristotle's

decision to privilege final over mechanical causes. At issue was not so much *how* something was accomplished as the *goal* of this accomplishment. Socrates opposed the two in explaining his choice not to escape, but rather remain in prison under sentence of death. Mechanically, the explanation for his sitting and talking with his followers had to do with the “contraction or relaxation of the muscles,” the fact that he was able to bend his limbs, and to the “sound and air” that formed themselves into his speech. The true cause, however, was what he thought best—i.e., was best according with the goal of maintaining his integrity.² Modernity, both in science and philosophy, reversed this decision. Descartes disavowed teleological reasoning and science followed suit. The result was that teleological formulations of the laws of motion, such as the least action principle, were largely disregarded.³ Another, more modern decision can be seen in analytic philosophy’s choice to privilege language over consciousness. Did language structure consciousness and, hence our apprehension of the world or did it conceal the actual nature of consciousness as Henri Bergson thought?⁴ Analytic philosophy’s decision to see consciousness as thoroughly informed by language meant, for its followers, that to understand our grasp of reality, we had to study language, both in its use and abuse. It, rather than consciousness, was the privileged, objective source of evidence.⁵

Such examples show that to recognize a decision point is to open up the questions of how to proceed and where to search for confirmatory evidence. This may be expressed in terms of the hermeneutical principle: to understand a statement, one must regard its context—in particular, the questions to which it responds. In times of historical transition, such questions are the basic ones of procedure and evidence. This is also the case in the opening up of a new line of inquiry. To do so is to ask about the decisions that led to the current situation. It is to question whether alternate directions and corresponding sources of evidence were ignored. This is what Husserl did in his last work, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*. Examining the Galilean revolution in science, he focused on the forgotten fact of the lifeworld—i.e., on the methods of inquiry and evidence appropriate to it.

Husserl's examination of the lifeworld was part of a new approach in philosophy, one with its own methods of inquiry and sources of evidence. His claim to have founded phenomenology as a "rigorous science" is now more than a hundred years old. Again and again, phenomenology has been renewed by asking about the decision points in his phenomenology. Heidegger, for example, saw such in Husserl's decision to focus on consciousness as a source of evidence. His alternative was to attend to the disclosures that our daily activities made possible. In his view, such activities are based on our needs and disclose the use value of things.⁶ This disclosure is an articulation of the world. As a result: "The wood is a forest of timber, the mountain a quarry of rock; the river is water-power, the wind is wind 'in the sails.'"⁷ The wind appears as the latter when we sail across the lake. In each case, the source of our evidence is not consciousness, but rather our purposeful activity. Motivated by our concerns, it is what determines our focus. Merleau-Ponty also took issue with Husserl's procedure—in particular with his eidetic method, which organized consciousness according to the essences of its acts. In his view, "The necessities by essence will not be the 'answer' philosophy calls for ... The 'answer' is ... in the wild Being where they were, and ... continue to be, undivided."⁸ For him, the "task" is to decide "in terms of what questioning our brute or wild experience will have taught us."⁹ In other words, this wild experience is the source of evidence, and the corresponding method consists in knowing how to question it.

Husserl, of course, would dispute such alternatives. In the *Bernau Manuscripts*, he describes his method as follows: "As in this treatise so generally, we bore and we blast mineshafts in all possible directions. We consider all the logical possibilities to catch sight of which of these present essential possibilities and which yield essential impossibilities and thus we ultimately sort out a consistent system of essential necessities."¹⁰ His method, he claims, is open. It considers all the possible directions, seeing which are supported by the evidence and which are not, which are compatible and which rule others out. Yet, as the examples of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty indicate, the notion of evidence is not unambiguous. It, itself, seems to be determined by the direction of inquiry. Given this, the

issue becomes whether the evidence yielded by different lines of inquiry is of equal value—that is, whether it is richer or poorer, whether it supports a more comprehensive or a more limited understanding of the world that includes us. In some lines of inquiry—notably, those that focus on the primary qualities of experience—consciousness is itself called into question. The secondary, sensuous qualities that form its content lose their claims, becoming “epi-phenomenal.”¹¹ In Husserl’s inquiry, by contrast, the status of the body is at issue. In considering the body to be a “constituted formation,” is his approach faithful the body’s actual relation to consciousness?

The difficulty lies in the ambiguous nature of embodied selfhood. We are both extended and conscious: both a part of the material world and a place where that world comes to presence. As Hans Jonas remarked, “neither of the two descriptions can be carried to its end without trespass into the sphere of the other.”¹² Such trespass is, in fact, an elimination. To see ourselves as part of the material world invites us to consider consciousness in material terms—i.e., in terms of “the structure and dynamics of physical processes.” But these, as David Chalmers points out, “yield only more structure and dynamics.”¹³ Chalmers, here, is echoing John Locke’s statement that we can see how a change in “the size, figure, and motion of one body should cause a change in the size, figure and motion of another body.” But “we can by no means conceive how any size, figure, or motion of any particles, can possibly produce in us the idea of any color, taste, or sound whatsoever.”¹⁴ How do we understand conscious experiences in terms of such structure and dynamics? Locke states that “there is no conceivable connection between the one and other.”¹⁵ But if this is so, then the consideration of consciousness in material terms tends to eliminate consciousness. This cannot be otherwise, given that such material terms consist of primary qualities, while the secondary constitute the qualitative content of consciousness. A corresponding elimination occurs when we reverse the relation and attempt to consider the material world in terms of consciousness. Given the lack of connection between the two, we seem inevitably to wind up embracing Husserl’s position. If we begin with consciousness, then, as Husserl

affirms, “the whole spatial-temporal world ... has the sense ... of a being for a consciousness. It is a being that consciousness posits in its experiences ... Beyond this, however, it is nothing at all.”¹⁶ Here, we eliminate the material world as an independent principle and assert that “nature *exists* only as constituting itself in the ordered connections of consciousness.”¹⁷

The difficulty with these competing descriptions is not simply their incompatibility, but the fact that we cannot account for either without taking the other into account. Thus, any account of consciousness must consider embodiment—consider this as something more than a constituted formation dependent on consciousness. This cannot be otherwise given the dependence of consciousness on our embodied senses. Not only do they afford us the sensuous data that forms the content of our experiences; they also determine both how we perceive and what we perceive. When, for example, we move a finger along our forearm, the succession of tactile sensations follows the path of our finger. As Husserl writes, the body, here, serves as “the index for psycho-physical stimuli.” It links such sensuous contents “to [our] organic embodiment in its natural objective being.” It also points to “the lawfulness that makes possible the immanent temporal order, the grouping of hyletic data [and, hence] worldly apperception.”¹⁸ This index is such that visual data are linked to our eyes, acoustical data to our ears, and so on. As such, the body stands as an ordering principle for the syntheses that consciousness engages in. To reverse this, any account of the material world must assume consciousness. The synthetic connections that give the account its coherence presuppose a synthesizer. The data it joins presuppose a place of their apprehension. The necessity here is founded on the fact that science is based on experience and, as such, presupposes an experiencer. To eliminate the latter is to abstract from all the meanings that scientist have used to grasp the physical world.

Because these alternate descriptions both undermine and presuppose each other, we face a crisis in our attempts to grasp ourselves as embodied. How can we bridge our division into material objects and conscious subjects? Is this ontological divide peculiar to us or is it representative of being in general? For Jonas, “the organic

body signifies the latent crisis of every known ontology and the criterion of any future one which will be able to come forward as a science."¹⁹ It represents a decision point without necessarily pointing to a way forward. For Husserl, as we shall see, this crisis appeared in his late manuscripts on sleep, birth, and death. Such phenomena indicate the dependence of consciousness on our embodiment. Only an embodied consciousness can experience fatigue and the need to sleep. Only it can be born and die. Can we actually treat such embodiment as a constituted formation? This would assume that consciousness, by itself, provides us with the relevant data—the data that we could synthesize so as to understand these events. Yet, as Husserl points out, they are characterized by an absence of the required data. We cannot grasp the moment of our falling asleep, since such a moment signifies the ceasing of our awareness. It is, on the one hand, the “disappearing of the world-present, i.e., of the existence of the worldly things for us.”²⁰ On the other, it is also loss of ourselves. It is “the disappearing of the affected ego in its being affected.”²¹ The same, he will argue, also applies to the moments of our birth and death. These limits of possible experience indicate that the body, rather than being a constituted formation, is itself constituting. It supplies the data and structures our attempts to make sense of what we experience.

The decision point we face is whether we can take account of this within traditional phenomenology. From a Husserlian perspective, the difficulties of doing so stem from his identification of phenomenology with epistemology. Phenomenology, he claims, is “the systematic explanation of the accomplishment of knowing, an explanation in which this becomes thoroughly understandable as an intentional accomplishment.”²² This identification means that phenomenology shares epistemology’s precedence over all other sciences.²³ As such, it has to set its own standards for what counts as knowing. It must provide them to secure its analysis of the knowing process. If such standards are set by processes beyond its purview, its claims to explain knowing are relativized.

An example Husserl gives will clarify this. The science of evolution studies the relations involved in the struggle for existence and natural selection. What happens when we consider such

relations as determinative of logical relations, i.e., those which set the standards for the logical consistency of knowledge? For Husserl, this reversal of epistemology's precedence immediately occasions a skepticism about such standards. As he writes:

Thoughts of a biological order intrude. We are reminded of the modern theory of evolution according to which man has evolved through natural selection in the struggle for existence and, with man, his intellect has also naturally evolved and, with his intellect, also all of its characteristic forms—in particular, the logical forms. Accordingly, is it not the case that the logical forms and laws express the accidental peculiarity of the human species, a species which could have been different and will be different in the course of future evolution? Cognition, therefore, is doubtless only *human cognition*. It is something bound up with *human intellectual forms*, something incapable of reaching the nature of things themselves, of reaching the things in themselves.²⁴

If we draw out the consequences of this line of thought, then we are led to assert that “even logic alters with the development of the brain.”²⁵ This conclusion immediately undermines itself since it calls into question the very theory upon which it is based. Evolution is not just a descriptive account. It is, concretely regarded, a *theory* based on logical inference. If the objective validity of such inference is called into question, then so is the theory itself.

Husserl's attempt to avoid such self-undermining scepticism determined his treatment of the body. Discussing his work in the final volume of the *Ideas*, Husserl writes that “it simply concerns a motivated path which, starting from the problem of the possibility of objective knowledge, wins the necessary insight that the very sense of this problem leads back to the pure ego existing in and for itself, the insight that this ego, as a presupposition for knowledge of the world, cannot be and cannot remain presupposed as a worldly being.”²⁶ This signifies that it “loses that which gives it the value of something real in the naively experienced, pre-given world; it loses the sense of being a soul of an animate organism (*Leibes*) which exists in a pre-given spatial-temporal nature.”²⁷ The point of such remarks is not just to assert that “this ego must, through the phenomenological reduction and the epoché ... be brought, to transcendental purity” —i.e., freed from its relation to the body.²⁸ It is to eliminate the body's role as determinative of

consciousness. Phenomenology's claims to be "genuine epistemology" cannot hold if knowing is determined by bodily functions. Not only are such functions relative to us—and, hence, could be other for other sensate beings; bodily functions, as such, work in secret. We do not directly apprehend the processes of digestion. Neither are the chemical processes of the brain subjects for phenomenological analysis.

How, then, are we to investigate the body's role in constitution? The answer we shall explore in the chapters that follow comes from the body's ambiguous status as both subject and object. In a certain sense, our approach can be considered as a response to Husserl's taking the subject as ontologically distinct from the object. According to this distinction, an object is what appears. The subject is that to which objects appear. To make a subject appear is, then, to transform it into an object—in German, to make it into a *Gegenstand*, literally, into that which "stands against" a subject. But this is to make it relative, not to itself, but to a new subject to whom it appears. In other words, every attempt to make the subject appear reintroduces the subject object split.²⁹ To avoid this impasse, we have to say that the subject is essentially embodied. Its subjectivity consists, not in its being a disembodied ego brought to "transcendental purity," but rather in its being an extended place of appearing. It is such through its embodied sense organs—eyes, ears, skin, etc. Merleau-Ponty can be understood as describing this place when he writes, "our flesh lines and even envelops all the visible and tangible things."³⁰ Doing so, it provides measures "for being, dimensions to which we can refer it."³¹ In other words, through our sensate flesh, we can refer to the sensible aspects of being. We can measure it along the axes or dimensions of its sights, sounds, tastes, smells, roughness and smoothness. In providing a place where these qualities can appear, however, the body itself appears. It, itself, is available to our senses. We can see, feel, taste, touch and smell it. In addition, we can, through our sense of proprioception, apprehend the kinesthesia that accompany our movements. It, thus, presents us with not just a place of appearing, but also with something that appears. With it, we encounter something that is both subjective and objective.

To think of the body in this way is, of course, quite different from regarding it as a place of hidden processes determining the course of appearing. The body's role in such determination is, here, open to inspection. In Merleau-Ponty's terms, it reveals that just as we can say that, as embodied, we are in the appearing world, so we can equally affirm that this world is in us. In "lining" the world with our senses, we cover it. Enclosing it, we make it within us. This fact is apparent whenever we open and close our eyes, making the world visually appear and disappear, or when we open or stop up our ears, making it acoustically available or fall silent. In such examples the world shows itself to be within us by virtue of our senses—the very senses that make us a place of appearing. Yet, since this place is embodied, we can also say that it is in the world. It is, itself, one of the many appearing objects of the world. In Merleau-Ponty's words, the flesh that "lines and even envelops" the things of this world appears as "nevertheless surrounded" by them.³² It is within the world it reveals. The conclusion, then, is that "because our flesh lines and even envelops all the visible and tangible things with which nevertheless it is surrounded, the world and I are within one another."³³

In what follows, we will take this double relation of "being in" as indicative of the crisis we face. In doing so, we will look for possible ways forward with their corresponding sources of evidence. This will involve our considering appearing as such as structured by this double relation of being in. In search for possible sources of evidence, we will explore what it means to consider the ego or self as determined by embodiment. We will extend this inquiry to include our social and political relations, including those marked by violence. Given the relation between violence and religion, we will also explore the role religion plays in our conception of the divine. All of these investigations will be phenomenological—but in a transformed sense. Husserl's epoché, for instance, will not be considered from an epistemological perspective—but in terms of its uncovering the embodied trust that makes possible the apprehension of the world. The attempt, here, will be to reset the terms of phenomenology such that an account of embodiment does not lead to a self-undermining skepticism.

Husserl, throughout his career, called himself a “beginner.” By this, he underscored his repeated attempts found and re-found his phenomenology. In pursuing an alternative within the phenomenological tradition, the same can be said of the present work. This book is one of exploration. Its goal is to discover the decision points within Husserl’s phenomenology in order to pursue possible alternatives and corresponding sources of evidence. Equally, it is an invitation to readers to do likewise in their reading of the tradition. In pursuing this objective, we will begin with Husserl’s consideration of the limit questions of phenomenology – those involving birth, death, and sleep. Such questions open up the decision points faced by phenomenology.