

Joona Taipale, *Phenomenology and Embodiment: Husserl and the Constitution of Subjectivity*

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Phenomenology and Embodiment. Husserl and the Constitution of Subjectivity is a surprising study, given that much has been written during the last decades on phenomenology and embodiment. Although its author, Joona Taipale, does not offer revolutionarily new insights into Husserl's phenomenology (how could he?), the book is an outstanding contribution to phenomenology in general, and to Husserlian phenomenology in particular. For although it covers a broad range of topics within the area of a phenomenology of embodiment, its author expertly brings together a diverse range of aspects of his topic and weaves together many thematic threads in a lucidly written and coherent text. The study is superbly organized, as well as clearly laid out in its introduction and conclusion. And though partial aspects of Taipale's topics have been addressed before, this is the first study, as far as I can see, that brings them all together within 240 pages. After a discussion of "small scale" issues, such as sensation, affection, and kinesthesia, he widens the scope of his treatment of embodiment to include different forms of sociality, intersubjectivity, generativity, and history. All of these topics are synthesized and unified by what one could take to be the main aim of the book, namely, to offer a new reading of the paradox of subjectivity through the lens of embodied subjectivity.

As Taipale has it, "it is precisely a thorough phenomenological examination of embodiment that is able to clarify why subjectivity can neither be simply reduced to the world nor understood as something extra-worldly altogether" (p. 169). The lived body, which Taipale determines as the ground of everything *between* the pre-reflective a priori of subjectivity and the "localized" and intersubjective spatial body, turns out to be the "hinge" between mundane and transcendental subjectivity.

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While this focus of Taipale's study sounds Merleau-Pontyan, he follows it through and lays it out on mainly Husserlian grounds, which, beside its impressive ability to give a coherent account of the various dimensions of embodiment, is the real achievement of this book. Though at times it remains unclear how Taipale positions himself *systematically* within the contemporary field of research on Husserl, and though he only uncritically references authors in the footnotes that have dealt with these issues before—such as Crowell, Zahavi, Carr, Behnke, Steinbock and others—he has written a highly readable and worthwhile overview of embodied subjectivity.

The text is divided into three parts, each of which is divided into three chapters. In the first part, entitled “Selfhood and the Lived-Body,” Taipale builds up both the a priori transcendence and the worldly entanglement of subjectivity via (1) a thorough investigation of the relation between subjectivity and sensibility (including self-sensing, hyletic sensations, and kinaesthetic sensations), (2) an analysis of the bodily situatedness of subjectivity (mainly through localization, the constitution of sense-fields, and the body schema), as well as (3) an explanation of the full bodily self (through incorporated activity, expression, and habituality). As Taipale argues in this part of the book, the phenomenon of sensing underlies *everything* else. He gives many intuitive examples and concisely addresses the simultaneity and dissociation of sense fields (p. 35) as well as various types of affections. Both are then related to the constitution of the self-aware body: “in the pre-reflective and pre-objective level of self-awareness, the body remains—in a special, non-literal sense—transparent” (p. 43).

In this vein, Taipale identifies localization as the “primary form of embodiment” (p. 38), arguing that localization means neither that subjectivity fully objectifies the body nor that sensing remains an absolute and lone phenomenon. One wonders, though, whether we can really assume that localization is a primordial necessity of embodied subjectivity, insofar as one could argue that we need to understand localization as a *genetic* phenomenon that depends upon the constitution of drives that make localization possible. For example, while it seems correct to claim that newborn babies need to “find” a way into their bodies and that localization is not only a phenomenon in which sensing become spatialized (p. 38), this process seems more complex: for the instinctual body *becomes* a sensing body. In short, Taipale has the tendency to look at the sphere of sensibility from a static perspective, inasmuch as he does not reflect on the genesis and relation of sensibility in connection to drives and instincts. Having said this, special attention is paid to kinestheses understood as “immediate bodily self-affectivity” (p. 28) which, he argues, does not belong to the apperception of things and remains subjective, since kinestheses are connected to the appearances in a functional manner (p. 30), i.e., since they are not associated with specific appearances. The “bodily situatedness is a fundamental structure of subjectivity” (p. 33), which can only come about through and as the entire body (p. 44) and through a body schema, which, in my view, Taipale correctly connects to the basic structure of the “I can,” though he does not explain how this is related to practical intentionality. His elucidation of the body schema is also extended towards incorporation, a theme that the author picks up from Merleau-Ponty: “incorporation is not restricted to what we are in immediate contact with” (p. 60). According to Taipale, we are always already in “affective

contact with the environment” (p. 33), which is what establishes the basic sense of what it means to exist as a bodily self, and which the author further divides into three modes of selfhood: agency, habituality and ipseity (p. 59).

Habituality turns out to be the guiding thread to the next part of the text, in which Taipale gives an overview of less travelled areas in Husserl’s phenomenology, including, (1) a priori intersubjectivity (through the analysis of basic structures such as the co-presence of others, empathy, and pairing), (2) reciprocity and sociality (through an analysis of pre-linguistic expressivity, personality, and we-subjectivity), as well as (3) historicity and generativity (through an analysis of tradition, language, generative subjectivity, and death). As others before him, Taipale draws a distinction between primordial intersubjectivity and secondary forms of intersubjectivity: “Husserl’s theory of intersubjectivity involves [...] ‘a priori intersubjectivity’ which is not founded on but rather presupposed in all our concrete experience of others” (p. 69). In this connection, the author reconstructs central Sartrean insights in Husserl’s language and turns his attention to the general constitution of co-perceivers and the “we” behind all co-perceivers, by arguing that “subjectivity constitutes itself as a member of an intersubjective tradition” (p. 69). He thereby further develops central insights first brought up by Zahavi and Steinbock, but he extends their insights by referring to material that has been published in recent volumes of the *Husserliana*: “The constitution of our experience of others,” as Taipale shows, “goes hand in hand with our bodily self-constitution” (p. 81), which, in turn, leads him to claim that sociality is constituted on different levels, and that individuality “is to experience oneself *as one among many*” (p. 94). He also differentiates between different types of embodied personalities: “personal identity resides in the ‘rhythm’ of experiencing, in the transcendental style that concordantly pervades the subject’s modes of comportment” (p. 97). Notwithstanding the fullness of this part of his analysis, ontological questions, such as questions that Husserl discusses in the later parts of *Ideas II*, are surprisingly avoided. A full treatment of the distinctions that Taipale draws between persons, individuals, and sociality would require it.

The third part of the text deals first with historical and intercultural “super-syntheses” of embodied reality—such as primordial and intersubjective normality—by making visible the role of optima, normalities, and the challenges of normality through encounters with “the alien.” The author concludes this part of his study with an explanation of how his analysis of embodied subjectivity should lead us to once again consider transcendental subjectivity in light of the paradox of subjectivity understood as the paradox of embodiment. The author sheds light upon larger units that go beyond intersubjective relations, such as historicity and generativity, the appropriation of tradition, home and alienworld, as well as familiarity and historical habituation. With Husserl and Carr, Taipale argues that “[w]e stand in a historical horizon, in a horizon in which everything is historical, even if we may know very little about it in a definite way” (p. 108).

The infinity of consciousness that he addressed in an earlier chapter makes sense and really takes shape in this chapter, though Taipale does not explore its mystical and religious connotations. For, as long as we are primarily transcendental subjects and transcendental persons who, being part of the big “we,” co-constitute meaning,

our part of that historical stream of consciousness cannot disappear, since the individual stream becomes part of the historical stream and, if appropriated, part of a tradition. Accordingly, each of us, as meaning constituting and meaning mediating consciousnesses, lives on in the mega-constitution of history. Overall, according to Taipale, “embodied subjectivity is the original norm-generating being” (p. 146), insofar as normality is a constitutive and not only a factual feature of reality that is discoverable via typical schemata, optima (p. 125), rules (“normativities”), and normative standards that can be called into question through intersubjective processes and conflicts. Normality is thereby established *throughout* differing normalities until a “meta-normality” is established: “each concrete experience involves two kinds of normativity: the primordial-subjective (i.e., what is optimal in the limits of one’s own perceptual abilities) and the intersubjective (i.e., what is shared among the optimally perceiving members of our intersubjective community)” (p. 135).

Finally, Taipale discusses the “transcendental consequences” of his revelations, ultimately coming to interesting conclusions. All other non-human organisms, he claims, are understood as a variation of the human organism: “only as such do they have sense for us” (p. 152). As Taipale argues, with Husserl, we are the “prototype” for everything else. However, why the “we” is necessarily constituted as a species (human) remains, at least to this reviewer, unclear. Furthermore, I am also not sure whether I fully grasp Taipale’s (and Husserl’s) claim that our experience of the world cannot be corrected by the non-human animal’s experience. Would we really say that the years that Jane Goodall spent with primates did not correct her basic experience? Why couldn’t humans who grow up with their non-human animal companions not *evenly* co-constitute reality, without understanding them as foreign *species* bodies? After establishing the earth as the “earth ground,” the basis of “earthly self-awareness” (p. 158), Taipale tries to show that the lived body is absolute in the primordial-intersubjective sense, whereas the lived body is relative in the social sense. This distinction, according to the author, should be understood as a “normative tension” out of which the spatial constitution of embodied subjectivity appears, which, following Crowell, establishes a split in the source for meaning: “subjectivity already constitutes itself both as absolute and as relative *within the transcendental sphere*” (p. 165).

Taipale’s re-reading of the paradox of subjectivity is indeed very interesting, not only because of its refreshing straightforwardness, but also because of his elegant solution. In my mind, however, the real problem of the paradox seems to be what Taipale calls “lived-bodily time” (p. 173), insofar as it remains unclear in Husserl (and Taipale) how the temporal and spatial dimensions of embodiment come together. I admit that I have never understood what kind of synthesis unifies *movement*, understood as the center of spatial constitution, with *temporality* (or inner time consciousness), understood as the center of non-spatial constitution, especially if we take into account that movement *must* be as primary as temporality (since otherwise there would be no world, as Taipale himself argues). Don’t we have to assume *two* founding principles? For if we assume that time is *lived*, as our Husserlian author suggests, we would do well to conceive of the spatial moment as originating in “being moved” or “driven,” which would lead us to re-consider the

relation between time and practical intentionality. Be that as it may, I do not see how simply *declaring* a “lived body time” can solve the division between time (sensation, affection, association, etc.) and space (movement, agency, drives, etc.) without further phenomenological investigations of the pre-intentional level. As Taipale himself argues, kinestheses are unable to function as the bridge between space and time, given that they are defined as functions. In this vein, I would argue that localization is based on a *practical* genesis. Accordingly, from my perspective, the “lived body time” and the embodied subject as the solution to the paradox of subjectivity need to be reconsidered.

As someone who is wholeheartedly sympathetic to Taipale’s project, but also as someone who, over the last years, began to question central Husserlian assumptions, I would like to challenge two aspects of his analysis specifically. These two critical points, however, do not diminish the fantastic work that Taipale presents in his book; instead, they should be read as remarks about the meta-level of his analysis, i.e., as remarks about the overall philosophical position advanced in his book.

My first remark concerns Taipale’s concept of sociality and intersubjectivity. He claims that we constitute ourselves “through social relations—that is to say, through reciprocal relations between contemporaries” (p. 69) as communities and persons (p. 170). This overall vision confuses *sociality* with *society*, inasmuch as the author conceives sociality as either a passive “we” constitution or as concrete relations to others. Moreover, habituation and normality do not include the re-productive nature of social life, as Taipale argues, inasmuch as our environment is not simply shared; rather, it is *produced* and we are mediated through our own creations. Social reality is primarily the *product* of human productivity, such as labor and creativity. As such, the division between nature and society that Taipale presents as a *founding* hierarchy would, from a dialectical position, appear as two sides of the same coin. Accordingly, one wonders why historical genesis is mainly thought of as a passive *adoption* and passing down of something that existed prior to each generation. Indeed, the active expansion of our “homeworld” comes about through social and political developments, which means that these *actions* cannot simply be reduced to a “passing down” of tradition or to intersubjective challenges to this tradition through new types of intersubjectivity. Given the *real* history of wars, institutions, and social and political struggles, speaking of the world as distinguished into *homeworld* and *alienworld* carries with it and affirms a dualism that misses and covers up the entire real historical world—especially if we conceive it as “alien nation, folk, or culture” (p. 140), categories which might seem to belong to a nationalist nineteenth-century framework. Husserl claims that we belong to our “historical community” (p. 115) as *homecomrades*, but the semantic implications of these words, I would argue, is problematic and stands in need of critical reflection.

My second remark concerns Taipale’s concept of embodiment as a primarily *theoretical* phenomenon. According to Taipale’s picture of the embodied and situated self, desires, wishes, willing, motivations, pulls, drives, etc. do not show up in the affective sphere. This should cause one to wonder whether that which Taipale addresses as “contact” with the environment (pp. 33–40) remains an abstraction from the prior immersion in *action* that cannot be reduced to non-practical constitution. In my view, we cannot think of *any* movement without already

referring, *from the ground up*, to instinctual and drive elements which, I contend, must be “ethically” constituted, insofar as a drive is teleologically motivated. To give an example: Taipale speaks of “control” without reference to will and drive when he discusses the distinction between active and passive. Though it is true, for example, that our eyelids function without our control (p. 57), imagine that your eyelids were being forcibly held open. In such a moment, you *want* to close your eyelids, and this suggests that it is highly questionable whether we can approach the distinction between active and passive without making fundamental assumptions about practical intentionality. Furthermore, we may even need an underlying practical teleology that synthesizes monadic life and *includes* the entire sphere that Taipale uncovers as “history” to account for such a possibility. The true “super-synthesis” here would not be “tradition” and “generativity” *per se* but an ethical teleological structure that underlies *all* other phenomena, including that of embodiment. This point was already made by Hoyos G. Vasquez in *Intentionalität als Verantwortung* (1976).

To conclude, though I see some deficiencies in regard to the systematic position that is advanced and which competes with other philosophical conceptions of the same phenomena, in regard to Husserl and phenomenology Taipale’s study is simply outstanding and, due to his very concise rendering of these issues, it is enjoyable to read! The fact that it motivates systematic critique speaks for it and not against it. In my view, Joonas Taipale’s study represents the highest level of phenomenological research today, especially as it is written in a deep phenomenological spirit rarely matched in the contemporary literature. The treatment of Husserl is concise without falling prey to simply repeating what the master already stated himself. Everyone who studies these issues seriously should consult Taipale’s superb book.