

THE FUNDAMENTAL CONDITIONS OF EXPERIENCE AND THEIR ROLE FOR THE CONSTITUTION OF SUBJECTIVITY

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Abstract

Our aim in this paper is to show that the personal level of subjectivity, understood as narrative, or dialogical self, is rooted in a deeper level of subjectivity, namely embodiment. In order to do this, we appeal to the concepts of body schema and body image, as they are explained in the work of Shaun Gallagher. The structure of subjectivity according to body schema and body image is deepened by means of the Gibsonian concept of ecological self.

Key words: *body image, body schema, core self, ecological self, narrative self*

The aim of the present paper is to show that the personal level of subjectivity, understood as narrative, or dialogical self, is rooted into a deeper level of subjectivity, namely embodiment. This fundamental level of subjectivity also has a sense of self associated with it. For this, we will start from Shaun Gallagher's book, *How the Body Shapes the Mind*¹, and from James Gibson's *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*.² Gallagher is a contemporary philosopher whose work links cognition sciences and phenomenology regarding aspects of embodiment, subjectivity, and consciousness, while Gibson is considered to be the most important psychologist of the 20th century.

1. SUBJECTIVITY STRUCTURED ACCORDING TO BODY SCHEMA AND BODY IMAGE

Perception of the world depends on embodiment. On the one hand, parts of our body appear in our perceptual field, so that the body is thematically given to us as object in the world. On the other hand, the body shapes, constrains perception of the world in ways that remain

hidden and cannot be manipulated by consciousness. In the first case, the body is given as intentional object in the world. In the second case, the body subconsciously shapes the way we perceive the world.³ These two ways in which the body shapes perception are defined by means of two concepts: body image, and body schema. The body schema is associated with the lowest, subconscious, prenoetic level of subjectivity, while the body image is associated with the highest, reflective and cultural way personality develops. The body schema structures perception and evolution of subjectivity develop subconsciously, in ways that cannot be thematically controlled.

Body image is a mental construct about our body based on perceptual experience, conceptual understanding and emotional attitude towards the body. It is the result of a reflective attitude on the body. By contrast, body schema denotes subconscious contribution of our body to perception and cognition. It is the fundamental feeling of bodily integration in the environment. "/.../ [A] body schema is neither a perception, nor a conceptual understanding, nor an emotional apprehension of the body. As distinct from body image, it involves a *prenoetic* performance of the body. A prenoetic performance is one that helps to the structuring of consciousness, but it is not given thematically to us. In just such performances the body acquires a certain organization or style in its relations with its environment. For example, it appropriates certain habitual postures and movements; it incorporates various significant parts of its environment into its own schema."⁴ The body schema is a prenoetic body-environment unity. It is a system composed not only of bodily

aspects, but of body-in-the-environment aspects. Functioning of this subconscious unity allows us to interact efficiently and harmoniously with the world, without paying attention to all our movements in order to adjust them reflectively. This unity enables us, for example, to use tools for accomplishing very different kinds of jobs. The tools that we use become extensions of our body become one with our bodies; after learning how to use them, we manipulate them without constant reflective attention. Think for example of an experienced pianist, or violinist; playing the instrument feels for them rather as dancing than as reflectively manipulating an object that is separated from their body.

Examining cases of patients suffering from anosognosia, who deny that their limbs are paralyzed, or patients whose body images are impaired in the sense that they do not perceive parts of their bodies, or perceive them as functioning while they are not, Gallagher makes the point that the sense of ownership of the body is not as much a result of reflection over one's body and its capabilities, as a subconscious feeling. In other words, the sense of ownership of the body is a result of the functioning of the body schema.

The sense of ownership of the body is related to the notion of agency, the sense that one can willfully initiate action. The sense of agency is essential for perceiving oneself as subject in the world, as individuality that can bring change in the world. As Gallagher puts it, "volition and control is an important invariant in the sense of selfhood."⁵ The case of Ian Waterman is brought in support of this idea. Due to acute sensory neuropathy, this patient has no sense of touch, and no proprioception below the neck.⁶ By means of persistent exercise, he managed eventually to move by consciously controlling his body parts. He replaced the automatic functioning of the body schema with reflective control of movement. In order to do this he has to keep in sight the parts of his body that he wants to move. But, while he was unable to control his movements, he reported feeling loss of embodiment and alienation from his body. The feeling of being embodied is essential for experiencing individuality. The body sets boundaries between me and the world, it individuates me among

other things. The fact that it can be controlled to fulfill intentions, to rearrange what surrounds us in order to meet our needs and desires, is essential for us to experience ourselves as subjects in the world, as having power over it.

2. AFFORDANCES AND THEIR CONTRIBUTION TO THE CONSTITUTION OF THE ECOLOGICAL SELF

With Gibson, we can take this thought one step further. According to him, not only that the body individuates and grounds subjectivity, but it also determines how we feel in the world, what kind of subject we grow to be. Environment and the embodied subject constitute a unity. Were there no subject to perceive the world, only nature composed out of physical and mathematical unities would exist, not environment. Once we consider nature as given to a subject, it turns into environment. For measuring properties of the environment, generalizing instruments of physics and mathematics become secondary, the first place being taken over by environment's relation with perceiver's body. What is measured is not nature in itself, but the possibilities it offers to a body. "The essence of an environment is that it *surrounds* an individual. /.../ If it is assumed that no two observers can be at the same place at the same time, then no two observers ever have the same surroundings. Hence, the environment of each observer is 'private,' that is, unique."⁷ Given to a subject, nature becomes an arrangement structured according to subject's position and to its bodily characteristics. This arrangement also contains information about the observer. A static point of observation is a limit case of perception; observation involves movement. Hence, environment is given to each of us according to how we can move inside it, while nature has an invariant structure.

Understood as environment, nature is given differently to the human who walks upright on two legs, and to the bird that flies; to the old man who has difficulties in walking, and to the child who just learns to walk; to the snake that crawls, and to the dog that runs; to the bat that hangs

down in the dark, and to the jellyfish that feels it on its body surface. Humans and, to a certain degree, animals alter the aspect of the world to make it inhabitable, to adapt it to their bodies. Environment is inhabited nature. Objects in nature become instruments with which we supplement our bodily natural capacities; instruments are extensions of our bodies.

In order to understand how embodiment influences perception of reality, let's take a look at Müller-Lyer illusion:

This visual experiment presents us two lines of equal length having arrows attached at their ends, pointed in one case towards the outside, in the other one towards the inside of the line. The direction the arrows point towards is what determines us to perceive the lines as having different lengths. Due to the different directions the arrows point towards, the relation of the lines (of the instrument these lines could be), to our body is different: the line whose arrows point towards the inside cause a feeling of openness. To grab that instrument, the hand can open as wide as it is naturally possible. The line with the arrows pointing towards the outside causes a feeling of narrowness; it feels as if the hand would have to squeeze itself among the arrows in order to grab that instrument. Even if we rationally understand that the two lines have equal measures, we will never perceive them as being equal.

The world open to us by means of our eyes. We move our head to access newer and newer parts and aspects of the world. But what is given in the foreground has an unseen reminder. Gibson asks rhetorically: what is that hides a part of the world? "/.../ [N]ot darkness surely, not air, not nothing, but the ego! /.../ Whenever a point of observation is occupied by a human, about half of the world is revealed by the eyes and the reminder is concealed by the head. What is concealed is occupied not by a surface /.../, but by a unique entity. It is not a part of the world, but it does conform to the principle of reversible occlusion, by which those surfaces that go out of sight with one movement come back into sight with the opposite movement."⁹

As we can see in Ernst Mach's drawing, parts of our body appear in our visual field: part of the trunk, the arms and legs, maybe the nose, the moustache if we have one. Some of them are

closer, some other are farther. The closest to "us" are the parts of the head, the arms, the legs. The head, by means of the eyes, is the one that offers us the biggest part of the information we receive about the surrounding world, the limbs being perceived as working to adjust what the head perceives as deficient in the world. "The experience of a central self in the head and a peripheral self in the body is not therefore a mysterious intuition or a philosophical abstraction but has a basis in optical information."¹⁰ This is the *visual information* that we receive about our self. According to differences in our bodies, the information we receive about the self is different, and it motivates different ways of integration in the world.

Beside vision, there are also other senses providing us with information about the self, for example, *proprioception*. As we have already noted, this is the sense that offers information about the position of our body in space, and it is responsible for our ability to move without reflectively controlling our moves. It makes it possible for us to walk without paying attention to our every step, to climb or descend stairs without reflectively seizing the height of every stair, to grab objects without reflectively controlling the shaping of our hand.

Gibson names this sense *egoreception*, and defines it as: „sensitivity to the self, not as one special channel of sensations or as several of them. /.../ [All] perceptual systems are proprioceptive as well as exteroceptive, for they all provide information in their various ways about the observers' activities. /.../ The point I wish to make is that information about the self is multiple and that all kinds are picked up concurrently."¹² We hear our voice, we feel our legs touching the floor, we feel parts of our body touching other parts of our body, we feel our head turning and our muscles flexing. Therefore, the information that we receive about the exterior is related to the information we receive about the self. If one dominates, this is just the effect of our attention concentrated on the exterior or on ourselves. Perceiving the world we co-perceive ourselves.

The aspects of the environment perceived according to the bodily possibilities that they activate are called *affordances*. They are the

possibilities offered by the environment to the animal according to its corresponding embodiment. A surface that is plane enough and not too sloping, affords walking. One can stand on such a surface in contrast to the surface of water which affords swimming. Still, there are insects for which the surface of water affords walking. What the environment affords differs not only between species, or between different individuals, but also throughout the life of a person. If when someone is 16, high steps afford jumping, they might afford need of external support for the same person when she is 70.

We can conclude that there is strong evidence for arguing that subjectivity is constituted on different levels, to each level corresponding a different type of self. To the level of the body schema, or of the proprioception it corresponds a core self. This self can be understood as having objective, physical features, as it is tightly bound to the body. This fundamental self grounds and gives unity to the self associated with the higher level of subjectivity – body image, personality – described as narrative self.

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