5 Bodily Experience and Experiencing One’s Body

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The world from a bodily perspective

What makes my own body so different from the things around me? When Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in his Phenomenology of Perception, turns to the question of how to describe the specific spatiality of one’s own body, he starts with an everyday example of someone sitting at a table. “If my arm is resting on the table, I should never think of saying that it is beside the ashtray in the way in which the ash-tray is beside the telephone” (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 112). This seemingly simple observation already suffices to effectively demonstrate how seriously Merleau-Ponty takes the bodily perspective on the world in his phenomenological account of human existence. Clearly, I do not perceive my own body, or a part of it, merely as a thing that is located somewhere in space, as I do with other things. On the contrary, without my body there is no space at all for me through which it would make sense to speak of things that are lying next to each other on the table. My pre-reflexive familiarity with the world depends on my so-called body schema, i.e. my body’s ability to project its motor intentions into the world it inhabits. But this body schema is not an image or a representation in which my body’s empirically determinable motor habits and capabilities are simply summed up. My body is polarized by its tasks, “it exists towards its tasks,” and consequently the term ‘body schema’ expresses “that my body is in the world (est au monde)” (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 115).

In an earlier part of his book, Merleau-Ponty carefully presents his objections against the empiricist and rationalist (or “intellectualist,” which is the term he uses) theories of human perception and action which were most prevalent amongst his contemporaries. These objections are still valid when applied to today’s versions of this kind of theories, e.g. in mainstream cognitivistic sciences, which depart from two basic assumptions. First, it is assumed that knowledge of the world is obtained by analyzing it in terms of detachable and isolated elements, and placing these elements in some systematic order, by which a universe is constructed that serves as a rational representation of the world. Secondly, one presupposes that humans take action in their world by manipulating this representation,
according to the rules of ‘calculative reason.’ In the cognitivist view, human knowledge consists in processing data that are stored in a representation of the world. This representationalism is indeed the dominant contemporary manifestation of that stance towards the world that Husserl identified as the “general positing which characterizes the natural attitude” (1982, 57), and Merleau-Ponty called the “prejudice in favour of the objective world” (2002, 7). On the basis of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception, one can indeed make a convincing case for the claim that these presuppositions prohibit the possibility of a full understanding of human existence. He also shows in great detail how one can acquire a comprehensive perspective on man’s openness towards the world in a phenomenology that starts from the primacy of the “bodily point of view” – to use a phrase introduced by Taylor Carman (2008, 93f).

But, on the other hand, humans have the capability of distancing themselves from the world they inhabit, and of adopting an attitude in which they can distinguish objective features in their surroundings. Moreover, they are able to objectify their bodily capabilities into stable functional structures through which they act on the external world outside of them. From the phenomenological perspective on human perception and skilful action one cannot stress enough how this reflection and objectification is only possible because the human body is maintaining its grip on the world in the background (cf. Dreyfus 2007, 363). In my view, this is indeed a necessary condition of the possibility for humans to reflect and objectify. However, is it sufficient? What kind of experience would force humans to give up their being absorbed in responding to solicitations that stem from affordances they come across in their world?

In order to answer these questions, it is necessary to develop a phenomenological account in which one, while holding on to the primacy of embodied intentionality, tries to describe the kind of situations in which humans actually experience that they are forced to give up their unreflective coping with the world, and also tries to show how they actually manage to make the turn to reflection and objectification. One of the elements of such an account, I will argue, would be a description of how the body can have a relation to itself and become part of the external world in the very process of being geared into the world it inhabits. To achieve this, I could have chosen to try finding an interpretation of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology that allows for an answer to my problem. Instead, I opted for a different approach, namely to look at his phenomenology from the viewpoint of Helmuth Plessner’s philosophical anthropology.
Phenomenology and philosophical anthropology

In everyday life, we don’t need explicit mental representations of what we want to see or do, or of how our bodies are situated in the world we are familiar with. When we want to look at something, we tend to move around until we have found the right distance from which we can take in both the thing as a whole and its details that are relevant to us in the particular situation. “For each object,” Merleau-Ponty says, “as for each picture in an art gallery, there is an optimum distance from which it requires to be seen, a direction viewed from which it vouchsafes most of itself; at a shorter or greater distance we have merely a perception blurred through excess or deficiency” (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 351).

Without any doubt, Merleau-Ponty gives an apt description of what is presented to us in our perceptual field, when we have found the optimal view of the painting. But he does not mention at all that here we might also have some kind of experience in which we sense that our body is indeed located at the right place after moving around in the art gallery. And when we are reaching out for things we need in order to perform a certain task, e.g. preparing food in the kitchen, we tend to get a grasp of them that is optimal for fulfilling the task we are involved in. As Merleau-Ponty says elsewhere in the Phenomenology of Perception: “My body is geared into the world when my perception presents me with a spectacle as varied and as clearly articulated as possible, and when my motor intentions, as they unfold, receive the responses they expect from the world” (ibid., 291). He clearly points out how we get things done without having to make representations of what we are aiming at. The body is solicited by the situation to find an optimal equilibrium for what has to be get done. But in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of skilful coping, the body itself seems to ‘vanish’ when it perceives something or puts itself into action, in favour of the world that is opened by it. It gets, so to speak, swallowed up in its being attuned to the world.¹ It cannot at the same time be experienced as something that is located in the perceived world. As Merleau-Ponty puts it: “I am aware of my body via the world, [...] and I am aware of the world through the medium of my body” (2002, 94-95).²

One can fully subscribe to the primacy of the bodily point of view, and at the same time feel forced to consider the question whether humans, exactly on the basis of their bodily coping with the world, can also have a pre-reflective

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¹ In a very different context, Shusterman (2005) presents similar observations.
² The translation is slightly changed: ‘aware’ instead of ‘conscious.’
sensitivity towards the phenomenon that they, as human beings, always have to occupy, as living bodies, a place on their own behalf, and that this is a place which in one way or another may also be present to them as a place – whatever this place may actually be. For Plessner, the issue that humans are positioned in their world through their bodies stands at the centre of his philosophical anthropology. One should take into account, he says, “that man does not have a univocal, but an equivocal relation to his own body, that his existence imposes on him this ambiguity of being an ‘embodied’ (leibhaften) creature and a creature ‘in the body’ (im Körper)” (1970, 32). Regardless of whether humans move about and do something, or quietly take in the perceived world, the condition of their existence is marked by this double aspecitvity.

Plessner warns against misunderstanding this twofold perspective as a dualistic theory in which the inner is conceived of as a purely mental person who is operating his outer body, which is nothing more than a physical thing. This is in accordance with Merleau-Ponty. Man is his living body (Leib), insofar as it serves him as a centre of his incarnated intentionality; and he has his body (Körper), insofar as it is a thing that locates him amidst of other things, or a thing he can use in action. “A human being always and conjointly is a living body [...] and has this living body as this physical body” (1970, 34). Neither do I coincide with being my body, as if I could find the right distance to see a painting without any awareness of the place where I am standing, nor do I just have my body at my disposal, as if I could move it around as a purely external object without any motor intentionality to be fulfilled. I must accept two orders, one related to my embodied intentionality, and another one related to my body’s place in an external world. So, taking up the example of looking at a painting in an art gallery once more: when I bump with my back into a wall while trying to find the optimal distance to look at the painting, I do not only experience that I fail to get the optimal view of it, I also sense that I fail to put my body in the right place, and this in turn makes me aware of my body as a thing that is positioned amidst other things.

Human bodily existence is characterized by the following threefold structure: the living creature is its body, it has its body as a thing, and it continuously actualizes the relation between being its body and having its body. Man must come to terms with the fact that he exists as a living body in a physical thing (als Leib im Körper). In any situation he must meet the demand for a settlement for the relation between being his body and having it. But this reconciliation cannot but be a momentaneous one. Moreover, man will never be able to penetrate into the nature of this relation that constitutes his existence. Plessner’s expression eccentric positionality captures this fundamental trait of the human condition very adequately.
Additionally, an individual living being whose position is structured in this threefold manner, Plessner calls a *person.*

There are not many passages in Plessner’s work, in which he explicitly refers to Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy as another example of an account in which corporeality has a central place in understanding what it is to be a human being. He does mention Merleau-Ponty, however, towards the end of the preface to the second edition of *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch,* which appeared in 1965. Because one can find phrases in Merleau-Ponty which show a striking similarity to his own, Plessner wonders whether Merleau-Ponty had known his book after all. He dismisses this conjecture, explaining that not all convergences in thought have to be based upon influence. The same happened to him with respect to Hegel, he admits. He would have had to refer to Hegel’s writings, had the right passages been known to him. He then expresses this phenomenon in the following words: “In the world more thinking is going on, than one thinks.”

In *Laughing and Crying,* Plessner criticizes a philosophical attitude that appears to have all the traits of ‘pure’ existential phenomenology, although he does not give it this title. Here, Plessner must have been attacking Heidegger’s position rather than Merleau-Ponty’s. He describes this attitude as one that is opposed to Cartesianism in a manner that evades the problem of being a body and having it as a thing altogether, by “going back to an allegedly unproblematic primordial level of existence.” Thereby all forms of human behavior are characterized right from the start in such a way that “the cleft between ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ does not appear at all” (1970, 30-31). They are, of course, exactly the phenomena of laughing and crying that demonstrate the inadequacy of this philosophical position. We laugh or cry whenever we are unable to respond as a person to meaningful affordances of the situation we find ourselves in. Plessner explains that this is where we let our body take over the task of answering. Laughter occurs when the person’s normal behavior is blocked by an irreducible ambiguity, which is a typical trait of the comic situation. We burst into tears when we are overwhelmed by a feeling of powerlessness, because we fail to come to terms with the fact that we lack control over the circumstances we happen to find ourselves in. When the body takes over the answer from us as a person, it

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3 This is my interpretation of a passage from Plessner’s *Stufen* 1975, 293, first paragraph.
4 His reference to Hegel is interesting in itself. One can indeed recognize the use of certain oppositions in Plessner’s arguments, but the terms in the oppositions are not lifted to a higher level, in which they are assimilated or reconciled (*aufgehoben*) with each other, as is structurally the case in Hegel’s dialectics. The higher level is a new stage of life. But that is a different subject, on which I will not dwell now.
expresses exactly that we do not know which position we should take in that situation. By doing so, it takes ‘our stand.’

To what extent does Merleau-Ponty’s existential phenomenology take into account this ambiguity, or rather this double aspectivity, of man being both an embodied creature and a creature in a body? As mentioned before, in his account the body remains inconspicuous, completely on the side of the perceiver, it does not appear as something in the field that is perceived. So if there is something wrong with our body, this is not directly noticed by us, but seems to become apparent to us only through the resulting distortion or loss of our world. If one subscribes to Plessner’s principle of eccentric positionality, this cannot be the whole story. Using Plessner’s distinction, Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology seems to show an inclination to overemphasize the living body (Leib) at the cost of the body as a thing (Körper). As a consequence Merleau-Ponty’s account leaves little room for Plessner’s notion of the person, since what makes us a person depends on how we actually deal with the relation between being our living body and having our body as a thing.

**Body and world**

How, then, do humans deal with being a living body in a body-thing? Plessner specifies the necessary fundamental possibilities that humans have at their disposal when coping with all kinds of situations in their lives in terms of three basic “anthropological laws”: the laws of natural artificiality, mediated immediacy and utopian standpoint (Plessner 1975, 309ff.). These laws explain how eccentric positionality manifests itself in human conduct, by specifying three typical oppositions humans have to struggle with as they try to lead their lives.

Again, my aim in this article is to demonstrate how Plessner’s philosophical anthropology can provide a line of thought which allows us to reconcile the following two approaches to human embodiment. I endorse the phenomenological position that our openness towards the world, as in perception and in action, is grounded in our bodily existence, but I want to find a way to combine this view with an account of how our own body can be experienced as ‘something’ amidst other things in the world that is perceived by us and in which our conduct takes place.

In my opinion, a discussion of the second anthropological law has the most to offer in this respect, which I therefore choose as my starting point. It would be a mistake to think that the principle of mediated immediacy implies that humans have two different but parallel kinds of connections
bodily experience and experiencing one’s body

to their world: an immediate one in as far as they are open to what the world has to offer, and a mediated one in as far as humans reflect upon the world. Given its dualistic character, such a way of thinking would be reminiscent of Cartesianism. In the Stufen, Plessner gives a very precise description of what he means by a relationship between two terms that is governed by mediated immediacy. In an immediate relation, the terms are connected without any intervening terms; in a mediated relation, the terms are linked to each other through one or more intervening terms. A mediated-immediate relation is “that form of binding [...] in which the mediating intervening term is necessary in order to establish or ensure the immediacy of the connection” (Plessner 1975, 324).5

Both human and animal life are organized in accordance with this principle of mediated immediacy. For Plessner, this is a consequence of the specific way in which a living body realizes its boundary between itself and its surroundings. He discusses the notion of ‘boundary’ extensively in an earlier chapter of the Stufen. In order to avoid having to deal with complications that are irrelevant for our purposes, let us restrict ourselves to higher forms of life, i.e. animals and humans. We never actually look at a thing from all of the possible different angles and distances. Yet, while only one particular aspect of it is directly perceived by us, in each aspect the perceived thing is nevertheless given as a whole.6 We see an ‘exterior’ that cannot exist without indicating the ‘interior’ of the thing, i.e. its substantial core. Conversely, the ‘interior’ of the thing is perceptually present to us even if we only see its ‘exterior.’ Our perception of specific spatial characteristics of a thing would not be possible without this double aspectivity in which the thing’s exterior and interior are bi-directionally linked. Due to this structure of perception, we see things delineated from their surroundings by a contour or boundary.

All perception is governed by this principle of double aspectivity, whether the things in our perceptual field are inanimate or alive. But in the case of living beings, the perceived distinction between exterior and interior emerges as a proper characteristic of the mode of being of the living thing itself. This is demonstrated by the fact that living beings have to be capable of preserving themselves as a self-sustaining entities by distinguishing themselves from their environment (the ‘inward’ aspect) in order to stay

5 The translation is mine, as of all of Plessner’s texts in German of which there did not already exist an English translation.
6 This is in concordance with Husserl’s account of perception, according to which things are only given to us in adumbrations (Abschattungen), e.g. Husserl 1982, 9.
alive, which they can only manage by realizing a specific openness towards their environment (the ‘outward’ aspect). Thus, we perceive that living things realize their own delineations or boundaries, as opposed to when we look at inanimate objects, which borrow their distinctions amongst themselves from our act of perception. In Plessner’s own words: “When in the intuition (Anschauung) of a corporeal thing a fundamentally divergent relation between outer and inner appears as belonging objectively to its [the thing’s] being, it is called living” (Plessner 1975, 89 and 98). The boundary is part of the living body itself (ibid., 127), and therefore it is also the body that marks off what is its other, i.e. its environment, with which it is in immediate contact across its boundary. It positions itself in its environment by living both beyond and within its boundary, “beyond itself” (über ihm hinaus) and “into itself” (in ihn hinein) (ibid., 129). When the living body actually realizes its boundary itself, it follows that the mediating term that secures the immediate relationship between the organism and its environment, is not a separate third entity, but the body itself.

What I have said until now about the law of mediated immediacy holds for animal and human life alike. Yet, according to Plessner, both forms of life differ qua mode of being fundamentally from each other. An animal only performs the mediation of its immediate relationship with its environment, e.g. by noticing something or setting its body into action. An animal oscillates between coinciding with its body and operating with it, but it remains totally submerged in this alternation. For humans, this relationship is also present as a relationship which always needs to be actualized in one way or another. The animal is placed at the point where the mediation is performed in such a way that it cannot break out of its absolute nearness to itself (ibid., 238-239); or, using an expression of Plessner’s himself, animal life is characterized by a “centric positionality.” Only man lives eccentrically, meaning that he, “as the living thing, that is placed in the middle of his existence, knows about this centre, experiences (erlebt) it, and therefore is beyond it” (ibid., 291). Again we see that eccentric positionality entails that man, in contrast to animals, has a relation to his (mediated-immediate) connection with his environment. For Plessner it is obvious that this should not be misconstrued in a Cartesian fashion as if there were a separate mind that is reflecting upon the movements of a mediating body. It must be man as an embodied being, who establishes this relation.

But what does that imply for human corporeality? First, insofar as man is a living body (Leib), he mediates his (immediate) contact with the world by getting his physical body (Körper) to do things. In this respect, animal and human life are similar. Secondly, while the animal’s ‘instrumental use of the
body’ is wholly bound to the momentary situation in which the animal is active, man experiences or perceives that he puts his own body into action when he uses it as an instrument in order to mediate his immediate contact with the world. The term ‘perception’ here is not meant to refer to some kind of scientific observation, but rather to the everyday perception that takes place when we are finding ways to cope with the things in the world. This would be in concordance with how Merleau-Ponty understands perception, with the exception that he would not accept that there are situations in which one does not only perceive one’s body as it “makes itself explicit in the language of external perception” (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 239), but one also—to some extent—experiences one’s own body as a thing present in a perceptual field, while one perceives other things when one is in the process of responding to solicitations of affordances that emanate from the perceived world.

So the human body is an embodied subject, experiencing the relationship between both aspects of the body, namely the living body he is (that is open to an environment) and the physical body he has (that can be used instrumentally). Moreover, man also experiences this relationship as being performed by himself when he realizes his openness to affordances in the world. Plessner uses the terms ‘object’ and ‘instrument’ without much hesitation. His phrasings must seem rather objectivistic to someone who is accustomed to Merleau-Ponty’s style of language. But, in my opinion, one should not interpret Plessner as if he would imply that an instrumental use of something would require a representation of what has to be done. The use of the body he has in mind is of a practical kind, like when one uses one’s arms to pull oneself upwards. So when the body aims at fulfilling a task, it mediates its movements with which it accomplishes the task.

Let us now turn our attention to the first anthropological law, which states that human life should be understood from the standpoint of natural artificiality. It would be fallacious to assume that human features can be divided into two distinct and opposing categories, natural and artificial. Rather, artificiality belongs to man’s very nature, i.e. to his mode of existence. What does this mean? As we have seen, the human living body must actualize a relationship to itself as it realizes its connection with its environment. This requires that the living thing is in control of its own body, which is indeed the case, because the living creature is its body and has it as something that can be put into motion.

Both animals and humans meet this requirement. However, an animal cannot detach itself from its connection with the particular occasion in which its body notices and affects its surroundings while responding to solicitations of affordances. Only man has the capacity to use his body
explicitly at his disposal. Having the inherent instrumental nature of the
own corporeality disclosed to oneself is a privilege that is restricted to
humans (cf. e.g. GS VIII, 321). Consequently humans are the only creatures
confronted with the fact that their bodies can suffer from certain short-
comings when they are in the process of performing a task. They have to
create artificial means with which they supplement their ‘naturally grown’
bodies in order to have a full corporeal existence. Furthermore, they have
to transform things they come across in their surroundings into artifacts
in order to fully satisfy their needs. Man can live only insofar as he leads
his life in a specific manner and only insofar as he succeeds in turning
himself into what he is, but not only into that what he already is. Artificial
by nature, humans make use of technical artifacts and lead their lives in a

Thus, man is not simply at home in and with his body in the way animals
are. Nor is his body an external thing he can own or appropriate. On the
basis of his specific eccentric positionality, his body has to appear to him as
something that is both familiar and strange to him. In human embodiment,
familiarity with and alienness to oneself are intertwined.

I shall only briefly discuss the third anthropological law, as it only
marginally relates to the issue at hand. Eccentricity forces man to accept
that he can never find a position in the world that is definitely secure, but
at the same time it demands from him that he, nevertheless, always takes
a stand. “Eccentrically positioned, he stands there where he stands, and
at the same time he does not stand there where he stands” (Plessner 1975,
342). It is not given to man to know for certain where he stands and what
his world is like. Having to take a stand without being able to find a secure
footing anywhere, he perpetually longs for an absolute grounding of his
world. Yet, if he wants to be true to his eccentric existence, he must doubt
any conception that appears to fulfill this longing definitively.

One may wonder why I am spelling all this out in such detail. In my opinion,
we have arrived here – on a very low level, so to speak – at the point where
a fundamental difference arises between Merleau-Ponty’s and Plessner’s
understanding of human embodiment. In Merleau-Ponty’s account of hu-
man corporeality in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, the body is exclusively
described as being on the side of who is perceiving; it does not also turn up as
a thing in the perceptual field into which the perceiving body is geared. That
my body is in pain, for example, only has significance insofar as this affects
my openness to the world. The painful body doesn’t become an annoyance to
me at all. Yet, in Plessner’s philosophical anthropology, my body can always
become a burden I have to carry. This possibility is even a necessity, on the
basis of man’s eccentric positionality. Along the example of pain, I would like to quote Frederick Buytendijk, who, very much in agreement with Plessner, writes: “The essence of pain we have now learned to understand as man being stricken in his utmost intimate unity, his psycho-physical naturalness, through which the ego comes in conflict with its own body, whereas it nevertheless remains bound to the body in all its painfulness” (Buytendijk 1943, 170).7

This is a vivid example of how the tension between being one’s body and having it (as a thing, and being in it) can cast a shadow over human life. In Plessner’s line of thought, one might say that the body (I have) mediates my immediate co-existing (as the body I am) with the things in the world. Perhaps this merges the two philosophical vocabularies a little too far into one another. I chose this expression to emphasize that one should not take Plessner’s characterization of the human condition in terms of eccentric positionality as being in conflict with Merleau-Ponty’s characterization of the human being-in-the-world primarily in terms of motor intentionality. In my interpretation, the mediation of the immediate can be seen as a complementary principle in which the body-thing (Körper) is introduced in addition to the living body (Leib), while the concept of the living body ultimately undergoes changes as well.

The body is not only familiar with the world, but also alien to itself

What bearing does Plessner’s view on human corporeality have on Hubert Dreyfus’s well-known phenomenological account of skilful action, of which he has offered an increasingly more comprehensive exposition throughout the years (cf. e.g. Dreyfus 2008; Dreyfus 2002; Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1986)? Most notably, it challenges the cognitivistic model of human expertise, according to which human intelligent behavior depends on knowing facts and following rules. This assumption is made by researchers in a field called knowledge engineering. They claim that it is possible to build computer-based expert systems, which, within a well-delineated domain, could perform equally well as human experts. A good example here is a computer system that can diagnose a disease on the basis of a set of objectified data thought to represent the patient’s condition. For such a system to display the same intelligent behavior as a human doctor, one allegedly only needs to be able to analyze the situations that are relevant for the specific domain in terms of objective, context-free features, subsequently create

7 Original in Dutch; my translation.
formal systems which relate these features to one another, and finally define explicit rules for determining actions on the basis of these systems, which are considered to represent the situations in which the competent performance is expected.

But such systems have consistently failed to exhibit expertise. This failure, Dreyfus argues, shows that the cognitivist conception of human skills is not at all supported by empirical evidence. More importantly, drawing on Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of embodiment, Dreyfus develops a phenomenological description of how adult humans acquire a new skill when being delivered explicit instructions (cf. 2002, 368f.). This is different from how skills are acquired by trial and error or by imitation, the predominant modes for learning at early age. Such a learning process would typically start with an instructor telling us which specific objective features of the task environment we have to pay attention to and which rules we have to follow in order to act on the basis of these features, much like a computer following a program. This means that it requires us to step back from the immediately experienced situation, reflect upon which movements we have to make, and explicitly monitor our actions as we are performing them. But we can only be an expert at a skill if we can let go of this monitoring and allow ourselves to be drawn into an absorbed coping in which our bodies respond to solicitations of affordances present in the situation.

Dreyfus raises a similar concern in his debate with John McDowell, deliberating on how our openness to the world should be understood (cf. McDowell 2007, Dreyfus 2007). Dreyfus interprets the difference between their positions as follows. For McDowell, the world we have direct access to consists of propositionally structured knowledge of facts about what affords what. We know, e.g. that apples can be eaten. Dreyfus, on the other hand, understands the world to which we are directly open as a multitude of solicitations of affordances. When I am hungry, I am attracted to the apple without having explicit knowledge about its properties. According to Dreyfus, McDowell holds the view, that a key characteristic of our openness to the world is our “capacity to step back and criticize any particular proposition about what is the case and any reason for one’s actions.” Dreyfus himself takes the view that this openness is brought into practice by our “capacity to let ourselves [...] respond to some particular constellation of attractions and repulsions” (cf. Dreyfus 2007, e.g. 357). One could say that to a beginner, the specific world with respect to which he is learning a new skill may look like McDowell describes it. Once he has become an expert

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8 Dreyfus refers to McDowell 2006.
in the skill, he simply knows how to act in response to what the situation demands of him.

In this debate, I personally endorse Dreyfus's side. However, the issue I want to address here is a different one. As Dreyfus acknowledges, humans have the capacity to step back and reflect, and, as I would add, to observe their surroundings and their own actions in an objectifying manner. But we can only notice objective features and explicit reasons on the basis of our "everyday absorbed coping"; and even then, this coping must go on in the background, if we are to have a stable world we can step back from and reflect upon (2007, 363). Although I agree with Dreyfus on this point, it nevertheless seems necessary to pose the question what it is that makes us move from absorbed coping with our situation to reflecting upon our environment. Dreyfus is also aware of this problem: “[T]he existential phenomenologist also has his problems. He owes an account of how our absorbed, situated experience comes to be transformed, so that we can experience context-free [...] substances with detachable properties” (Dreyfus 2007, 364).

I would like to emphasize the phenomenological nature of this task: we need a description of the kind of experience we must live through, before we give up our absorbed coping. But why would we ever want to do that? Or why must we? Why don't we just go on coping, continuously changing from one task to another, without ever having to face a breakdown that would force us to step back and reflect? How do we differ from animals, which never ‘revert’ to reflecting, but just go on responding to solicitations?

We have to find an answer to these questions without falling prey to the fallacy of taking humans as animals whose essential feature is a mental capacity to reflect. We are in need of a philosophical account of how human embodiment differs radically from the animal way of being embodied. This is a key objective of Plessner’s philosophical anthropology. An animal puts its body into action in order to respond to what is afforded to it by its environment, and by doing so its body mediates its immediate contact with the environment which it depends on. But an animal coping with its environment in such a way does not experience that its body plays a mediating role in this process. To the animal, its own body is never present as such; it vanishes as it performs its mediating role. Humans and animals alike cannot cope with their environment without the mediating aid from their bodies. But in my understanding, Plessner distances himself from Merleau-Ponty when he clarifies that the characteristic human mode of being in the world connected with eccentric positionality forbids us from
leading a life in which we experience our own body “only in its mediality, in its mediating role” (GS VIII, 291).  

Animals are superior to humans in that they are able to be totally absorbed in the flow of doing things through their bodies, while humans are denied any such possibility. Humans, on the other hand, are always capable of getting their bodies to develop completely new skills, as many examples of mastering new athletic disciplines demonstrate. This presupposes that humans are able to take their living bodies as things that can serve as an instrument, or to put it differently, that they can have an objectifying stance towards their bodies. But the objectification that is involved here is not of the theoretical kind, as is realized in the modern natural sciences through abstraction and representation. Quite to the contrary, it is a practical objectification materialized in the form of an actual intervention in the forms of mediality that the body already possessed when it entered into the flow of doing something (GS VIII, 291-292). That is why we can be taken by surprise when our body is hindered in its movements by an unexpected external obstacle or when it suddenly loses one of its functionalities.

Our specific eccentric openness to the world forbids our body to merge fully with its role of mediated coping. Therefore, we can always be thrown out of the flow of our absorbed coping, thus being forced to step back and reflect. We do not only know about this by taking a theoretical attitude towards ourselves, it is also an unavoidable part of our experience of the way we do things in our lives. By virtue of his eccentric positionality man always is also capable of looking at himself from an outside perspective, in which his body is presented to him as a thing external to himself in contrast with the lived body that allows him to be in direct contact with the world around him. In this specific sense one can say that his body is something alien to him. We do not experience ourselves as a thing, because there are things around us; it is the other way round: because of our capability of an outer perspective on ourselves, we can make sense of what it means to be part of a world of external things. Of course, we cannot actually be concerned with other things without their de facto existence, but the latter is not the basis upon which the capability of this concern rests. So, according to Plessner, the

9 Martin Heinze (2009, 122) states the opposite: he thinks that Plessner holds “that ‘eccentric positionality’ means, amongst other things, ‘to live and experience one’s own body only through its mediality or in its mediating role’” (GS VIII, 291). This misinterpretation is most likely caused by a faulty translation of Plessner’s words on the mentioned page: “was ich als das Charakteristische menschlichen In-der-Welt-Seins zu fassen versucht habe, mit der exzentrischen Postionalität, die uns verbietet, den eigenen Leib nur in seiner Medialität, in seiner vermittelnden Rolle zu leben und zu erleben.”
world of external things, or outer world (Außenwelt), has to be understood as the form in which man understands his own bodily position as located in the realm of organic and physical things (cf. 1975, 293f.), or in Plessner’s own words: “[man as t]his positional whole stands [...] in the outer world as do all the other things” (Plessner 1975, 294).10

Anybody who tries to acquire the motor skills that are needed to become proficient in a new athletic discipline will have to train specific movements that are initially unfamiliar to his body, and in most cases this also involves the handling of external objects, e.g. in speed skating. How does one learn to get the body to make the right movements? Here the description of the body responding to solicitations of affordances has to be supplemented by a description of how the body is put into motion. In acquiring a skill like skating, the body is both the body-subject which moves and the body-thing that is moved or has to be moved. But, of course, my body cannot be an object that is moved insofar as it itself is moving objects. As Merleau-Ponty rightly points out, “[w]hat prevents its ever being an object, ever being ‘completely constituted’ [here he refers to Husserl’s Ideas II], is that it is that by which there are objects” (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 105). In the context in which Merleau-Ponty makes his remark, he is only concerned with the permanency of one’s own body that perceives the world, not at all with the possibility of experiencing one’s own body as a thing one has to deal with. When I try to learn skating, I can be receptive to the experience that my body does not always comply with what I would like it to do. For my body to acquire the habit of speed skating, it may be necessary but not sufficient to follow given instructions to help me determine which movements my body should undergo, treating it like nothing but a passive object completely under my control. I would soon learn from this experience that sometimes my body does not obey my practical attempt to make it move in a specific way. Acknowledging this failure is even essential for improving my skating skills. As the habitual living body I am, my body lets me be familiar with the world I live in; but I also experience my body, insofar as it is an instrument that mediates my immediate coping, as something that resists being absorbed in my body schema, as a thing that retains a certain alienness with respect to me.

In order to elucidate my point a little further, I will make some short remarks about why eccentric positionality entails that humans have technical artifacts at their disposal. Humans, as the law of natural artificiality explains, have to supplement their bodies with artificial artifacts, which not

10 This is parallel with his Mitwelt, see Plessner 1975, 302.
only enhance the motorial functionality of their bodies, but also augment their openness to the world. The simplest examples of technical artifacts are tools we use with our hands. In our time, the artificial objects with which we can improve our body’s capacities have become increasingly more sophisticated. Yet in principle, at least insofar as I am concerned here, the argument remains the same. What makes it possible for us to employ external objects as instruments? If one goes along with Plessner’s philosophical anthropology, one must answer: the basis of this capacity is that our eccentric embodiment allows us to make instrumental use of our own bodies. On the basis of the anthropological law of mediated immediacy, it can be explained why it is not significantly different whether a ‘part’ of the body or a thing in the outside world is involved in the performance of a skill. From the perspective of Merleau-Ponty’s motor intentionality, one can conclude that the enhancement of the body with an external object will only succeed when this alien object is incorporated into the motorial scheme of the coping body. In accordance with Dreyfus’s account of skill acquisition, it follows that the more proficient someone is, the less he notices to which extent the tool contributes to the greater capabilities of his body. But we should bear in mind that the immediacy which is attained in the expert handling of the tool is mediated by the body using a thing that is alien to it – which it can do because the body is alien to itself.

When I directly respond to solicitations that stem from what is afforded by my surroundings, then, according to Dreyfus, I don’t experience my body as mine, I only experience my ongoing coping (Dreyfus 2007, 356). On this point he is only partly right. Indeed, insofar as I am simply in the flow of doing something, i.e. insofar as my body’s absorbed coping is going on quietly in the background, the double aspecitivity of my body may remain hidden from my view. But even then my eccentric bodily existence prevents me from coinciding with the lived body I am. My body appears to exhibit some kind of resistance against being swallowed up in its mediating role as I open up to the world. A human being differs from an animal in that he has to experience his body as his, whatever his body is involved in. Eccentric positionality constitutes both the possibility and the necessity of experiencing a distinction between what is internal and what external to the body. When someone experiences his body as his, he is aware that it is both familiar with the world, insofar as it is attuned to its world, and alien to itself.

We can even experience this alienness in the environment created by some works of installation art. Cf. my article (2008). There I argue that these works give us the opportunity to experience that our reflexive relation to ourselves has an origin in human corporeality.
itself, insofar as it is a thing amidst other things. On the basis of this peculiar alienness that adheres to their bodies, humans are capable of stepping back from the world of solicitations to which they immediately respond, allowing them to reflect on it and take an objectifying stance towards it. This enables them to conceive the preconceptual world of affordances they are attuned to as a universe of detachable features.

Bibliography
