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CRISTIAN CIOCAN
CRISTIAN DANIEL
MIRCEA GRAȚIAN DULUȘ
CLAUDIU GAIU
DIANA GEORGESCU
DAN LAZEA
VERA MARIN
DANIEL NIȚU
TOADER POPESCU
SAMUEL PAKUCS WILLCOCKS

Editor: Irina Vainovski-Mihai

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New Europe College
Str. Plantelor 21
023971 Bucharest
Romania

www.nec.ro; e-mail: nec@nec.ro
Tel. (+4) 021.307.99.10, Fax (+4) 021. 327.07.74



CRISTIAN CIOCAN

Born in 1974

Ph.D. at the University of Bucharest (2006)

Dissertation: *Finitudine și corporalitate: Fenomenologia morții*

Ph.D. at the University of Paris (2009)

Dissertation: *La mort, la corporéité et le problème du vivant. Analyse des approches phénoménologiques contemporaines*

Researcher, Romanian Society for Phenomenology

Editor-in-chief of the journal *Studia Phaenomenologica*

Fellow of Alexander von Humboldt Foundation (2007-2008)

Conferences attended in France, Germany, Sweden, Italy, Israel, Peru,
Lebanon, Czech Republic, Hungary, and Bulgaria

Numerous articles published both in Romania and abroad

Book:

Moribundus sum: Heidegger și problema morții, Humanitas, Bucharest 2007

THE VULNERABLE BODY: HUMAN CORPOREALITY AND ITS LIMIT-SITUATIONS

Introduction

In this article, we wish to expose the main outlines of an applied phenomenological investigation of human corporeality. Since the philosophical perspective assumed in this research is openly phenomenological, it is obvious that the theoretical core of the present study will rely on the interpretation of the living body proposed by several major twentieth century phenomenologists, such as Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Michel Henry, and Emmanuel Levinas. However, our aim is to apply certain results of this phenomenological line of interpretation to several limit-situations of the body, which might be able to expose the fundamental layers of meanings of the phenomenon of embodiment. We must admit that, so far, phenomenological interrogations of the status of the human body have often avoided the radical limit-situations of embodiment – such as pornography, prostitution, euthanasia, abortion, cloning or torture – which are much debated in the Anglo-Saxon tradition of applied ethics. Therefore, we can ask: has phenomenology anything to say about these urgent topics of contemporary public debate? Can one explain these limit-situations of corporeality by starting from a fundamental phenomenological analysis of embodiment? Is this phenomenological interpretation of body able to shed new light upon these radical situations of being-embodied-in-the-world? Is it possible to re-conduct these fundamental analyses of body, accomplished during the history of phenomenology, towards an applied area of concrete phenomena which are highly politically and ideologically disputed in contemporary academia?

In this essay, our thesis is that the phenomenological questioning of the phenomenon of embodiment and its insistence upon an *originary* and *integral meaning* of body can indeed offer a new and fresh perspective upon these topics. Moreover, we will argue that the phenomenological exploration of the phenomenon of body, in its wholeness and its originary layers of meaning, constitutes the necessary ground for a more rigorous analysis of these limit-phenomena. Starting from a phenomenological point of view, these limit-situations in which the human body is implied can be seen as “derivative” phenomena, generated by specific privative modifications of *more originary bodily phenomena*: pornography and prostitution could be philosophically conceived as modifications of the originary phenomenon of bodily Eros, as Levinas and Marion have pointed out; euthanasia could be phenomenologically explained starting from a preliminary rigorous interpretation of the phenomenon of death, delineated by Heidegger and Levinas; abortion can be properly understood from a philosophical point of view only if a preliminary phenomenological interrogation of the essential meaning of the phenomenon of birth – as can be seen in the work of Henry, Levinas, and Marion – is exposed in its main constitutive structures.

The fact that the analysis we propose here is strictly philosophical and phenomenological implies that our interest will focus mainly upon the basic structures of the phenomena we analyze, and upon the structural modifications that intervene in the inner constitution of these phenomena. Moreover, the specificity of this phenomenological perspective also implies that any other “alternative” interpretation of these phenomena (be it sociological or cultural, anthropological or political, historical or theological, medical or biological) will be temporarily “suspended”. We will focus only on the fundamental meanings of these phenomena, in their constitutive structures and essential dimensions. Given the phenomenological point of view we assume, the essential presupposition of our philosophical inquiry is that philosophical analysis is indeed able to discover and to differentiate the phenomenal layers that constitute a complex phenomenon, and to explain the way in which the structure of a phenomenon is sometimes modified, thus generating a “derivative” way of being of this phenomenon. Consequently, we assume that phenomena are accessible in themselves, and that the principle of phenomenology “back to the things themselves” is not only valid, but also necessary for a genuine understanding.

The Phenomenon of Body and the History of Thought: A Short Overview

In order to emphasize the radical novelty of the phenomenological perspective on embodiment, we start with a short historical overview that can point out how the phenomenon of body was generally seen in the history of thought. We stress from the beginning that the issue of corporeality has not enjoyed the attention it deserves in the history of philosophy. For the most part, the subject has been relegated to the margins of philosophical concerns, since, compared to the solar themes of rationality, the body has been programmatically considered a secondary, even inferior, phenomenon in importance and theoretical dignity. The objective duality body/soul (*soma/psyche, corpus/animus*) – with its subjective correlations, rationality/passion or thinking/affectivity – have constantly been classified in accord with the hermeneutical framework of “master/slave” dialectic. The body has been regarded as an implement of the soul, therefore ontologically subordinate to the latter, as something of an essentially lesser value than discursive rationality. Instead, the soul (rationality, thinking) mastered and dominated the body (passion, affectivity) in a continual pursuit of the ideal of freeing the individual from the yoke of passions.

Platonic dualism (with its Homeric and pre-Socratic roots) has largely remained the norm for understanding the essence of corporeality and the role it has been assigned in the rationalist history of European philosophy. The difference between soul and body was subsequently superimposed upon the ontological difference between veritable being (i.e., eternal and incorruptible) and transient being (subject to becoming, death, and corruptibility). Thus, a strict axiological and ontological hierarchy between the two constitutive “realities” of human nature has emerged: what is essential in the human being is spirituality, lucidity, the light of this lucidity, always interpreted in a rational horizon; the bodily and emotional dimensions represent only an ontologically derived shadow, the chiaroscuro of what eludes intelligible control. Consequently, affections have been prevalently represented from the perspective of rationality as its negative counterpart, being thus dismissed to the territory of “irrationality”. Everything out of rationality’s reach – namely phenomena related to human corporeality or affections – was repressed or excluded from the domain of meaning. However, the repressed ended up resurging, bursting to the surface; and perhaps it is not by mere chance that our times, following in

Nietzsche's footsteps, extol what rationality has traditionally repressed: the body and the affections.

The Greek philosophical pattern of a hierarchical rapport between body and soul was integrated into Christian thought and resulted in the ascetic ideal of mastering the body in view of a spiritually fulfilled life. However, Christian theology went beyond this pure dualism, as it had to explain the core phenomenon of Christianity: God's Incarnation in a single individual. The fact that, according to the prologue to John's Gospel, "The Word became flesh" (*ho logos sarx egeneto*) implies a radical re-thinking of the Greek issue of corporeality and its inherent dualism: through the Incarnation, the body itself is raised to the rank of principle, of a primordial reality. Because it set out from the reality of the Incarnation and, subsequently, from the fact that Christ's Ascension was "in the body" but also from the belief that the "resurrection of the dead" will be "bodily" Christian theology acquired the philosophical notion of a "deified corporeality" Nevertheless, except in ascetic literature, theological reflection bypassed a full engagement with the status of the body, while spiritual life has been conceived in terms of an elevation from the material towards the angelic, spiritual, dematerialised world.

The only systematic attention given to corporeality has come from the perspective of science. This train of thought has to do with the advent of biology as a science of the living, followed by physiology and medicine. Beginning with Aristotle's biological corpus,¹ continuing with the Hellenistic medical schools, and the empirical research resumed during the Renaissance, the investigative development of medical and physiological science leads in modern times to a comprehension of the human body as an organism, a complex of organs, and a perfect machine.² From this vantage point, it should be stated that one cannot draw any essential distinction between the animal organism and the human body. This naturalistic outlook of modernity describes the human body as consisting exclusively of the physical structure of an individual. This structure comprises, on the one hand, the sum of various parts of the body (the head, trunk, arms and legs) and, on the other hand, the articulation of several systems (circulatory, digestive, respiratory, nervous, immune, muscular, et c.) made up of organs (heart, lungs, kidneys, liver, et c.), which, in their turn, are made up of tissues (muscular, nervous, epithelial or connective), the latter being formed by cells, ultimately determined by genes.

Therefore we are dealing with three theoretical standpoints as regards corporeality: on the one hand, we can talk about a metaphysical

depreciation of corporeality. What follows is its paradoxical theological reinvestment of embodiment. Finally, we encounter a thorough study of the phenomenon of body, rooted in a naturalisation along the lines of biology, medicine and physiology. The precise role of phenomenology, here, is to establish an alternative to these theoretical stances by trying to regain a broader, more original meaning of corporeality. Specifically phenomenological reflection upon the human body will suspend any presupposition – be it substantialist, hierarchical or naturalistic – of the traditional interpretation of body, and will start from the clarification of one's own experience of embodiment. Moreover, phenomenology will try to seize the integrality of this phenomenon and to underline the irreducible specificity of human corporeality in relation to all other animal organisms.

Indeed, in both its inaugural German and post-war French versions, phenomenology rediscovered the fundamental philosophical dimension of corporeality, reinstated its importance, which had been veiled by the rationalist tones of traditional philosophy, and invested it with an indisputable central position among its preoccupations. Not only Edmund Husserl, Max Scheler, or Martin Heidegger described human existence as incarnated existence – during phenomenology's initial stage – but subsequently also Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jan Patočka, Eugen Fink, Michel Henry, Emmanuel Levinas, or Bernhard Waldenfels. We will indicate here only the main lines of this problematic.

The vast investigations regarding the phenomenon of human corporeality undertaken by the “father of phenomenology” Edmund Husserl, are well known. These investigations commence from the multi-staged clarification of the constitutive levels of human experience. Husserl developed a series of explanations for the constitution of space, starting from the point zero of orientation, which is the personal body: my body is the “absolute here” of orientation, the point whence I measure my distances and evaluate my movements. The corporeality phenomenon also has a fundamental role as regards the dimension of inter-subjectivity: Husserl – formulating a distinction fundamental to this subject, that between *Leib* and *Körper* – was to speak about the shaping of inter-subjectivity by means of the dynamics between one's own living body and the corporeal body of the other: starting from the meaning of my own living body (*Leib*), which is given to me in my own immanent sphere of transcendental experience, I am able, by means of a process such as empathy, to assign a meaning to the corporeal body of the other.

This *Körper* of the other is, therefore, constituted as a living body, and an alter ego is thereby given to me. Conversely, from the meaning of the corporeal body of the other (*Körper*), I am able, through a transfer of meaning, to attach a meaning of corporeal body to my own living body and to “perceive” myself as a body that exists in an “objective” world. In both processes we find a pairing (*Paarung*) of a *Leib* and a *Körper*.

As for Martin Heidegger, although his fundamental work, *Being and Time*, seems to evade the issue of corporeality,³ this happens with a definite intention: that of not falling into the trap of reifying the body, of understanding it in terms of the metaphysical idea of substantiality. What Heidegger rejects is therefore the very metaphysics that resides behind the traditional idea of corporeality. This is why the deconstruction of this metaphysics also supposes the deconstruction of the traditional idea of substantial body (and of the body/spirit dualism, in general). The purpose of this deconstruction is not to eliminate the idea of body, but to determine a genuine, essentially phenomenological meaning, opposed to any biologism, of human corporeality.

Starting from these two decisive moments in German phenomenology, French phenomenology would look into the phenomenon of corporeality from different perspectives. Following Husserl’s type of investigation, and, at the same time, integrating Heidegger’s ontological approach, Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy placed corporeality, starting from a “phenomenology of perception” and from keen analyses of the phenomenon of touch, in relation to the phenomenon of the world.⁴ In his turn, Jean-Paul Sartre proposed the fundamental significance of the corporeal phenomenon of pudeur and shame, a meditation adopted and defined as a fundamental meaning of subjectivity in Emmanuel Levinas’ ethical approach: subjectivity becomes the nakedness of the face, exposure without any reserve or cover, the embrace of the other.⁵ Finally, Michel Henry was to integrate the Christian idea of Incarnation, within the context of a phenomenology of absolute life as pure immanence.⁶

Phenomenology of Embodiment

As already mentioned, when it comes to experiencing corporeality, the first differentiation that we must make from a phenomenological point of view, following in Husserl’s footsteps, is that between living body and corporeal body: the living body (*Leib*) is accessible only to myself, from

inside, as when I experience pain (nobody else can, properly speaking, feel my pain, although the other can analogically transfer it, by means of empathy, onto his own existence); the corporeal body (*Körper*), however, is exteriorised, objectivised, seen from outside, and only by this way accessible to the other.

Starting from this fundamental distinction, we wish to introduce another essential distinction: that between “public” and “intimate”. Indeed, if a certain level of the experience of our own corporeality takes place in our public, inter-subjective life, in relation to the others, another level of our own corporeality unfolds its meaning in pure solitude, in an intimate sphere of subjectivity, whose privileged expression is nudity. The most obvious parameter of this differentiation is provided by a fact which is only apparently common: our clothes, our garments. We can ask ourselves what is the original significance of the “garment” what meaning lies behind the fact that man hides his nakedness, and what significance the dialectic between “covering” and “discovering” has in this context. We can subsequently interrogate the deeper meaning of nudity and ask to what extent it exposes a genuine dimension of the human being. We can remark, on the other hand, that there is a privileged fact of experience in which something from the category of “public” is brought into the “intimate life”: the experience of the bodily Eros, that in which the border between “public” and “intimate” is transgressed, in which a privileged being, initially coming from a public space – open to everybody, therefore covered and clothed – is accepted, received and interiorised within the space of the intimate, within the field of immanence, as nudity and exposure.

Thus, we discover the first decisive pairs of our thematic issues: corporeality and nudity, pudeur and exposure, living body and corporeal body, solitude and inter-subjectivity, love and Eros. To these we can, as may be expected, add another pair: birth and death. On the one hand, the phenomenon of birth will open up the possibility of asking ourselves about the essential meaning of maternity and paternity, of its capacity to generate life, of the bodily relation between generations. On the other hand, starting from the phenomenon of death, we can question to what extent the end of our being into the world remains the horizon of all our experiences, particularly corporeal ones.

All these pairs justify, at a concrete level, the corporeal identity of the human being, the manner in which the human being possesses itself corporeally. More precisely, one can phenomenologically analyze the way

in which “personal identity” encompasses, as one of its stages, “the bodily and/or corporeal identity”; as a constitutive stage, one can also analyze the way in which “the bodily and/or corporeal identity” encompasses, in its turn, “sexual identity”. We can suppose that, starting from these three “concentric” identities, the human being opens up to alterity, in its inter-subjective life, to experiencing another human being, which, in its turn, “gives” itself first and foremost in its own corporeality. Thus, a last phenomenological pair arises: namely that between the “my own body” and the “body of the other”.

Body-Image and Technology

These fundamental guidelines, generated by the phenomenon of corporeality, could be compared with the contemporary experience of corporeality, with what we might call “the experience of the body in our contemporary world”, an age in which technology’s dominance over the body is by no means insignificant. By technology we do not understand something that belongs exclusively to the field of scientific, mechanical, instrumental or operational technology, but rather we are setting out from the primary inspiration for Heidegger’s term *Gestell*, understood as the tendency to dominate and to produce, beginning with what seems to be available as “raw material” and “deposit”. In this context, the idea of the body-as-image becomes central, since it represents a fundamental change in the contemporary experience of corporeality. We can indeed approach the phenomenon of the body-image starting from the manner in which it is conveyed by the mass media, be it by means of advertising, cinematography, television or the internet. The mass media constantly come up with (primarily aesthetic) paradigms of corporeality, proposing a “standard-image” of the body that joins three essential elements: youth, health and beauty. These components generate what we can call the “standard body” of today’s world, a paradigmatic image that structures the contemporary collective mentality. What if this “standard body” in fact only hides fundamental dimensions of the human existence as a whole, and of corporeality in particular? What if the self-experience of one’s own embodiment is obscured or falsified by this almighty standard-body-image of our contemporary world?

Indeed, the present-day mentality regarding corporeality can be outlined in a few simple propositions: a human being is what he is by

means of his body; the idea of “looking good” is emblematic for the self-understanding of the contemporary human being; beauty is inevitably slim when it comes to the female body, and inevitably muscular when it comes to the male body; youth is a supreme value, that is, it “forgets” old age, thus forgetting that it is existence in time, and alienating itself from the temporal dimension of one’s own existence; health is, in its turn, a supreme truth, namely the possibility of death and suffering, as essential dimensions of the incarnated human existence, is avoided. The significance of the presence of a standard-body in the mentality of the contemporary person is enormous, because a series of preoccupations (and industries) are thence born: cosmetic products, rejuvenation or anti-ageing products, the obsession with slimming diets, for health foods, for the fashion world and the celebrity of the models who populate it, for the world of cinematography and the stars that give it brilliance, etc. However, an even more important issue hides behind these things, namely that of the relation between “the young” and “the old”. Because in a world totally invaded by the image of the standard-body (forever young, bursting with good health, beautiful up to being attractive, and, therefore, necessarily Eros-imbibed), “the old person” cannot find his own place: the world is taken over by the standard-body. The old body is, on the other hand, characterised as ugly, as something that must be hidden (along with diseases, suffering and death).⁷

Privative and Derivative Phenomena of Body

Our phenomenological investigation will, however, not resort to a simple and direct description of the thematic issues previously mentioned – living body, corporeal body, identity, nudity, prudency, Eros, alterity, birth and death, etc. –, rather they will be indirectly illustrated, starting from a series of problematic phenomena which, in their contrast, have the power to reflect, by means of the very phenomenological distortion they represent, the initial phenomenon of corporeality itself, in the directions they materialize. Therefore, we will approach several phenomena whereby we will contrast the genuine experience of corporeality and corporeal experience modified by technology: pornography, prostitution, euthanasia, abortion, cloning and torture. By means of these extreme phenomena, we can be able to ask ourselves if – during our age which extols corporeality – the meaning of embodiment itself is not in fact in crisis. The urgency

and disquieting character of these phenomena of the present-day world are self-evident and do not require any further comment. It is, however, possible that the public policies which approach, at different levels, these situations, cannot fulfil their tasks without an essential, philosophical understanding of them.

These phenomena are not investigated in themselves with the aim of coming up with an ideological defence or critical position, but as a starting point whereby to seek and find an encompassing and genuine meaning of human corporeality. And it is only this meaning that can speak, in itself, for these phenomena. They cannot be understood separately, but in context, starting from the background whence they draw their meaning and which proves to be the phenomenon of corporeality as such. Thus, these phenomena can be investigated in their privative dimension, as deprivations of other phenomena that have preceded them and upon which their meaning rests. For instance, the phenomenon of cloning, as duplication of an identity, can be better understood in relation to the meaning of the specific *uniqueness* of the human being. The question is: how can we conceptually describe, from a phenomenological point of view, the originary meaning of the uniqueness of each human being? Along the same lines, euthanasia, as the possibility of deciding upon one's own death, can be better understood if the true relation between man and his own end has been previously described and explained: how can we describe then an essential meaning of being towards death? In its turn, abortion (when body becomes a field of emerging conflict of interest), should be dealt with in close relation to the original phenomenon of pregnancy (as possible alterity in the immanence of one's own corporeality). Similarly, the original meaning of prostitution as privative phenomenon can better be revealed against the background of the fundamental understanding of the genuine erotic relationship between two persons, as a modification of the latter. Likewise, pornography will have to be understood by setting out from the same background, as media exposure – by means of images – of something that is essentially intimate, with the purpose of a pseudo-erotic, phantasmal-substitutive experience. Finally, torture can be better understood by setting out from the suppression of corporeal empathy, present in our natural experience.

A. Corporeality and Eros

Thus, one of the conceptual sequences mentioned above – corporeality and Eros – is put to the test by the privative phenomena of pornography and prostitution. As we have mentioned, these phenomena are called “privative” because their proper meaning reveals itself only in relation to other, more original and fundamental phenomena, the meaning of which is thereby changed. Here, our research will clarify how pornography and prostitution actually derive from (and might be understood as modifications of) the phenomenon of bodily love, of the personalised Eros.

i). The Privative Phenomenon of Pornography. How does the experience of corporeality formally change when we refer to the consumer of pornography? The first aspect has to do with the fact that the experience of the Eros, pivotal in any theory of corporeality, is no longer experienced in relation to another person, to a genuine human alterity. Pornographic eroticism is rather purely illusory, because it occurs in the solipsistic space of the consumer. This constitutes the initial deprivation. Moreover, the opposition solipsism vs. alterity is mirrored by the truthfulness of this experience: insofar as in pornography one never encounters a person given “in the flesh” (*leibhaft da*), what appears for the sake of enjoyment is solely an image, and this is the second deprivation. The real world is thus doubled and undermined by an imaginal universe to such an extent that the two realities end up overlapping and eventually becoming indistinguishable. Implicitly, the very idea of a “genuine” world is seriously put into question. As an introductory analysis of this “ontological subversion”, we can tackle first the mass media phenomenon. Particularly, our research can deal with the multifarious and complex mutations that television brings about in the human psyche. In this sense, a third moment of deprivation would consist of the experience of Eros as no longer lived “in reality”, but purely phantasmally constituted and broadcast world wide.

More specifically, in visual pornography we are confronted with the relation between an image that offers itself and a phantasmal-solipsistic imagination which receives it. The question becomes now: what exactly does the image give and what exactly does the imagination receive? The answer is: a distinct type of nudity. To unearth the idiosyncratic elements of pornographic nudity, we should nonetheless return to the question regarding the primary meaning of the denuded body. By starting from this fundamental meaning we will be able to distinguish between on the one hand, a nudity revealing itself after an initial un-revealing and

pudeur within a privileged personal exposure, and on the other hand, a purely available nudity, commodified and ostentatious, impersonal and advertised. However, if we are to follow the Levinasian idea that the personhood shows itself pre-eminently in and through its face (*visage*) and expressivity, then the image of pornographic nudity is no longer that of a "person". In pornography, the imagery does not render a face, but rather only an exorbitantly sexualised body. What matters here from a formal-descriptive vantage point is that in such a body sexuality obscures the face, the instinctual prevails over the intimate, while Eros loses its expressive dimension. This is, in our interpretation, the fourth level of deprivation.

Nonetheless, it is important to keep in mind that pornographic experience as such does not succeed in replacing the experience of the Eros; it merely redirects it towards solipsism, anonymity, the imaginary, and the phantasmal: pornography obliterates the more original and holistic experience of erotic love, since the pornography consumer affects oneself autistically, resistant to any self-exposure, avoiding any risk: such a subject senses without being sensed and sees without being seen. If the contemporary human being wants to see *everything*, but not to be seen by *anyone*, the question is whether this new structure of man's relation to the world – seeing *all* without being seen by *anybody* – does not generate a new constitution of human subjectivity as such. Can we generalize the voyeurism required in pornography to the broader realm of contemporary humanity, which is "image-devouring" and enjoys watching from the unassailable position of a television spectator?

In any case, the phenomenon of pornography can be approached and deepened starting from the primary determinants of sight and visibility in the dual forms of seeing and being seen. Consequently, several classical phenomenological issues can be revisited here, because of their intrinsic relevance for human corporeality: the layers of experience (sensory, phantasmal, etc.), the status of the image and its relation to sight and imagination (*phantasia*), the constitution of inter-subjectivity, and the safeguarding of alterity within various attitudes of empathy.

ii). The Privative Phenomenon of Prostitution. How is corporeality experienced within the phenomenon of prostitution? Here we witness a few evident changes. First of all, we no longer deal with pure solipsism, but rather with a certain human otherness: regardless of the role of the person involved, i.e. the prostitute or customer, an encounter takes place, wherein alterity is somewhat present. As a result, in prostitution there is no

imagery deployed, just another person present “in the flesh”. Moreover, the experience is neither illusory, nor phantasmal; rather it is as real as it can be. So, the question becomes: in what sense is prostitution *privative*?

The answer lies in its anonymous and impersonal character, already obvious in the case of pornography. Both the subject of prostitution and the “consumer” lack the experience of real personhood before them. The overshadowing of the face (the Levinasian *visage*) arises as much in prostitution as in the pornographic experience. Indeed, what is common to both is that the agents are not concerned with the “who” of the individual in front of them. The “who” is no longer an issue, insofar as the one thus encountered is experienced rather as a “what”, something resembling a tool with a certain role and a determined functionality, but nothing more. Whether there might be something more, it never comes up or “does not regard anyone” (literally and metaphorically).

It could be said, however, that our daily life abounds in impersonal and anonymous relations with others and this is never considered a problem. Each and every day we pass by each other in the public space of libraries, trams, and railway platforms. We regularly do services to others, without any knowledge about them and, especially, being paid by them. We also make use of other people’s services, people unknown to us, while paying for their services. For instance, upon buying train tickets we are not interested in the identity of the person selling them. Conversely, we sell without paying the slightest attention to the “who” of the buyer.

Nevertheless, there is a fundamental difference here, namely that these anonymous and impersonal rapports are acceptable and even required only in the *public* space. And by “public” space we mean that shared common world wherein multiple interests and existential intentions, issuing from different indeterminate agents, meet and face each other temporarily and accidentally. It is now evident that we cannot and do not need to entertain *personal* relations with all the subjects that populate our surroundings. Yet, if an impersonal or anonymous human presence insinuates itself in one’s *own* milieu, in that *intimate* space of one’s own existence, this anticipates a serious phenomenological deprivation.

But how can one corroborate this anonymity precisely with the phenomenon of nudity, which is the core of the *intimate* realm of one’s own body-experience?⁸ How can one relate this impersonal character with the phenomenon of nakedness, in which manifests nothing less than the *most profound* level of one’s own body experience, the most private, and the least public level of human embodiment?⁹ Indeed, the reception of

another (“public”) human being into this most private and intimate space of one’s own self-experience of embodiment is possible (from an ontological point of view) only if a radical and absolute “personalisation” of the inter-subjective space has previously taken place. This radical personalisation of the inter-subjective space can be viewed as the counter-phenomenon of any anonymous relation – it is usually called “love”: love constitutes the phenomenological legitimacy of denudation and bodily Eros (of exposing nudity to another’s eyes and within the range of this other’s touch). When this previous radical personalisation of inter-subjective life is simply lacking (as in the phenomenon of prostitution), the bodily Eros is deprived of its ontological ground and meaning, is alienated and falsified.

Finally, another deprivation specific to the phenomenon of prostitution, has to do with the self-relation to our own body. For the person performing prostitution, the body is tacitly perceived as a raw material meant to fulfil a certain activity. In this regard, we can raise and answer the following questions: by what process does human corporeality become an “available thing”? In experiencing one’s own corporeality, what exactly changes when the bodily is taken as “raw material”? What is the meaning of that human corporeality which is turned into basic matter? A possible critique might be brought here. For a sportsman, too, one’s own body is treated like “raw material”: it is trained and prepared to achieve certain performances. To give another example, someone can sell an organ, thus relating to one’s own body as an exploitable “deposit”, something simply present and available, ready to be used in a pragmatic activity. However, there is a notable difference. Prostitution leads to the crucial phenomenon to which we have already alluded. Namely, nudity and eroticism entail not only the corporeal body (*Körper*), but first and foremost one’s own living body (*Leib*) which shapes the intimate being of each one of us. If the authentic experience of corporeality implies the transcendental pairing between the meaning of *Leib* and the meaning of *Körper*, we can affirm that the experience of prostitution reveals a transcendental scission and even an ontological divorce between these two fundamental levels of embodiment: the person prostituting him- or herself acts vis-à-vis the corporeal sense of the body (perceivable from outside) “as if” it were not structurally linked to his or her living body (experienced only from within).

B. Corporeality and Identity

Another conceptual sequence that can be taken into account envisions the relationship between corporeality and identity. Several questions can guide the analysis of this sequence: how, in what sense, and at what phenomenological levels can we elaborate upon the relation between human identity and embodiment? Is our identity constituted by corporeality or, on the contrary, is our embodiment shaped out of a previous sense of identity? Do ontological levels of identity correspond to the phenomenological levels of corporeality (corporeal body, living body)? If yes, how can we distinguish between personal *identity at a corporeal level*—by means of which others, starting from my body, could visually identify me as the person that I am—and the *identity sensed at the bodily level*, whereby I identify myself starting from feeling myself in my own body?¹⁰

The most radical challenge posed to the issue of identity and its relation to corporeality comes from another sensitive subject on contemporary political agendas, the problem of cloning. One can leave aside *therapeutic* cloning, related to the production of organs, cells or different parts of the body for purely medical purposes. What is at stake here is *reproductive* cloning, wishing to identically reproduce a living human subject. It is in this respect that we need to develop, conceptually and phenomenologically, the fundamental relation between *identity* and *uniqueness*. Therefore, one can ask: how are irrepeatability and identity shaped, and how do they subsist in and through corporeality? The medical, biological, and genetic side of cloning has been accompanied by a polymorphous bioethical debate, and discussion has put forth several aspects: amongst them, it has been argued that it is immoral to use a human clone in order to save a person, inasmuch as the human being's dignity is negatively affected by this reproductive procedure; conversely, it has been held that the procedure would be justified when the cloned entity is about to be lost.

However, one can rightfully ask whether this debate does not miss something essential, if it does not bring into discussion the more original phenomenon of living corporeality, as well as the way in which this corporeality constitutes the core identity and uniqueness of each human being. More often than not, applied ethical or bioethical approaches orbit around the danger quotient involved in the cloning process, as well as the legal and moral dimensions of the phenomenon. More specifically, what is problematized concerns, on the one hand, the possibility that the

cloning “might not succeed”, where this failure could lead to the death of the respective organism, ultimately deemed immoral. On the other hand, the bioethical approach poses questions regarding the presumptive rights of the cloned being, its legal status, and the danger that these rights may be infringed. However, the question is whether, prior to these serious (technical-biological and juridical-moral) perils, one cannot detect here an even graver danger undermining the very wholeness and essence of human nature.

We suggest that this question can be answered only starting from a phenomenological clarification of the relation between several meanings and functions of the notions of personal identity and uniqueness. This is why a basic interrogation focused on the conceptual connection between the unique identity of the human being, human corporeality, and the genetic code of that corporeality seems to be more than necessary, in order to reveal the fundamental conceptual presuppositions of this debate. Indeed, defenders of cloning generally start from several tacit presuppositions which must be, in our opinion, thoroughly and critically examined from a phenomenological point of view. One of these presuppositions – that should be phenomenologically deconstructed – is that the human being resembles a machine which, when broken, can be fixed and/or remanufactured. What if this supposition is essentially false? What if this leading idea contains in fact a radically distorted understanding of the essence of human being? What if this is only a misconception? If so, how can one philosophically deconstruct this comprehensive deformation of the idea of man?

Another idea that lies at the basis of cloning is the presupposition that, on the one hand, there is an identity between oneself and one’s own body, and on the other hand, that there is an identity between one’s own body and the DNA code.¹¹ These presuppositions may be justly set against the Heideggerian tenet that the human individual is essentially a “possible being”, while the possibilities and impossibilities incumbent upon oneself are always one’s own and inalienable. Thus, one may further ask whether the transferability of these possibilities from one being to another is nothing other than an ontological illusion, originating in the prejudice that the human person is an inactive, merely present, object.

C. Corporeality and Generation

Another thematic sequence that our phenomenological interrogation can examine is the link between corporeality and birth. In this context, we can start from the following interrogations: What is the existential meaning of birth in its two fundamental dimensions, to give birth and to be born? How exactly does the primordial experience of parenting emerge and develop? How can we phenomenologically describe the event of procreation (“another’s body out of my body”) and of generation, setting out from a phenomenologically adequate understanding of corporeality? How does the inter-subjective interaction between mother and child constitute itself, especially within the privileged circumstance of pregnancy, understood as a type of inter-subjectivity in the immanence of one’s own corporeality? Only after all these preliminary clarifications is it indeed possible to initiate a phenomenological discussion on the thorny issue of abortion. Phenomenologically speaking, to determine the original meaning of any phenomenon, the decisive aspect is the proper order of the questions raised vis-à-vis that phenomenon. Subsequently, this order regulates the explanations of the phenomenal levels implied by the research topic.

As far as abortion is concerned, the question from which our interrogation should start is not “whether the foetus suffers” when abortion takes place, nor whether it is moral to end a pregnancy, nor whether the mother should be guaranteed certain legal rights and liberties related to reproduction (and namely what these should be), nor how society’s attitude towards this phenomenon has developed historically.¹² The more primary phenomenological question is whether the foetus *is* a human being from an ontological point of view, namely in its essence as possibility. The issue that must be clarified before anything else is: when does a human person come into existence? And what does it mean “to be” for a human being? If we follow Heidegger, the essence of human being should be rigorously understood as potentiality-for-being (*Seinkönnen*) and possible-being (*Möglichsein*). If Heidegger’s assumption is right, namely if what is essential in man is not “what one actually is”, but “what one can become” as “the ‘who’ of a being-possible”, then the foetus should not be ontologically understood as “something” “not yet” human (something one can get rid of), but as a being-possible, having thus full rights of existence. From a phenomenological point of view which starts from an existential understanding of the essence of human being, this

originary level should precede all ethical or legal matters implied by the phenomenon of abortion.

Another question: how can one phenomenologically determine the relation between the mother and the foetus inside her? It is evident that, spatially speaking, the foetus is “inside its mother’s womb”, that she “incorporates” it. What is then the significance of this “inside”? What is the meaning of belonging which bonds the baby to its mother? Indeed, phrases such as “my child”, “the baby I carry”, and “the foetus inside me”, entail a special type of *belonging* that needs to be thoroughly specified. Will we succeed in satisfactorily grasping this belonging if we embrace the belief that a person, as the “possessor” of her body, is also “master” over that body and all its “parts”, having “exclusive rights” over them? To what extent can we understand the foetus as a “part” of the mother’s body, understood as a “whole”? Or, on the contrary, should we take it as a separate entity, albeit not yet independent? How does the conceptual relation between the whole and its parts vary in this context?¹³ Does this belonging and incorporation entail a meaning of “property”, as in the case of the ordinary goods one owns and over which one has the natural rights of ownership? Could it be true that the foetus *as a possible-being* cannot really “belong” to the mother in the same way that any other part of her body “belongs” to her? Could the foetus have from the very beginning a totally different ontological status? The elementary question remains: what is the exact moment when a foetus must be considered – to use Kantian parlance – an “end in itself”? Only after these primordial notions and relations have been clarified can issues of the mother’s responsibility towards the foetus and of the liberty she has in relation to her own corporeality be expanded upon in full theoretical awareness.

D. Corporeality and Vulnerability

Another question that an applied phenomenological interrogation of the human body can raise is that of the relation between corporeality and vulnerability. In what sense does the human being lend himself to essential definition as that incarnated being, characterised, in the very essential dimension of his corporeality, by vulnerability, by the constant possibility of suffering, by exposure to disease and ailment? In this perspective, the dynamics between health and disease can be investigated beginning with the existential meaning of suffering. How can we determine the existential meaning of suffering, as situated *prior* to the medical and biological

explanation of this phenomenon? This dimension of corporeal vulnerability can be examined within the framework of the inter-subjective relations of the social world, and here one can have in view two fundamental paradigms: on the one hand, we can focus on human vulnerability as exposed in totalitarian societies (and in this context we can tackle even the phenomenon of political torture), and on the other hand, we can discuss the phenomenon of vulnerability in a medical context, as the interface between disease and health, from the perspective of endangering life, therefore tackling the issues of death and euthanasia.

i). Human Vulnerability, Torture and Bodily Suffering. The turbulent history of the twentieth century has shown that reflection upon the world in which our social life takes place cannot avoid the theme of violence, of provoked suffering, of human vulnerability exposed to a malignant power. This topic must be conducted as well to an originary phenomenological understanding of the significance of the *embodied existence*. Indeed, the inter-subjective relation is often a violent one, a relation in which a human being manifests itself over another human being with malign intent, namely that of causing suffering (physical or psychical) to the being in front of him or her, the intention to dominate that being by the very suffering he or she inflicts. The one who endures the suffering is vulnerable, exposed, powerless, deprived of any ability to defend oneself. The one who employs violence and inflicts the suffering is, on the contrary, characterised as invested with power, thus invulnerable.¹⁴ Exercising violence in order to cause suffering must be firstly judged at a phenomenological structural level, starting with a series of preliminary questions: what are the transcendental conditions of possibility for cruelty? What changes in the structure of subjectivity arise when a person causes, deliberately and methodically, corporeal suffering to another human being? How does the inter-subjective relation alter when systematic assault on another body comes into play, within the framework of the relation between a torturer and a victim?

In “normal” experience, even if the subject cannot “properly” feel somebody else’s pain, the relationship with the other is mediated by the phenomenon of empathy. Empathy connects – spontaneously and pre-reflexively – the meaning of the other’s body (that shows signs of pain) with the meaning of one’s own body (the one in which one feels). Thus it is possible for the subject to feel analogically, by the mediation of this primordial level of embodiment, the pain of the other as a quasi-personal pain. This is the transcendental origin of some phenomena

that we characterise as com-passion or com-miseration, understood as suffering with the other, as being close to the other in his suffering, as taking his suffering upon you, as not deserting him in his own suffering. Only starting from this genuine level of the meaning of empathy can we assess the privative phenomena of cruelty, sadism, phenomena by means of which torture becomes possible.

ii). Vulnerability, Death and Euthanasia. Another issue related to the vulnerability theme is represented by the phenomenon of death. Following in the footsteps of profound visions related to the mortality and finitude of the human being (such as Heidegger's¹⁵ and Levinas's¹⁶), we can discuss the relation between corporeality and death, understood both as personal death, in the genuine syntax of the existence of the self, and as death of the other, in the inter-subjective framework that entails ethical responsibility. In this context, the relations between embodiment and suffering, between corporeality and disease, between incarnation and sensibility should be investigated at a fundamental phenomenological level.

In order to illustrate this debate, we can focus on another privative phenomenon: euthanasia, understood as voluntary ending of a patient's life, carried out by a doctor in a medical context and achieved without causing pain. This curtailment has at least three justifications at the basis: the medically based, empirical evidence that the patient is terminally and irrecoverably ill; the need for the patient's suffering be reduced; the idea that the patient's situation endangers his or her right to "die in a dignified manner". Put simply, if the interruption of a patient's life is performed with his or her consent, we are speaking about "voluntary euthanasia"; if not, we are dealing with "involuntary euthanasia"; this interruption can be delivered passively (necessary medicine or vital life support are no longer administered) or actively (lethal substances are administered).¹⁷ The first difficulty of this phenomenon consists in the fact that the deliberate ending of a life is closely linked to other two radical phenomena, with which it should be compared: suicide (when the deliberately-interrupted life is one's *own* life) or killing (when the deliberately-interrupted life is that of *another* person). The inter-subjective dimension, with its framework of complementary intentions, is decisive in this context, and it must be clarified at all its constitutive levels.

Euthanasia is, on the one hand, profoundly related to the fact that, in present-day society, death (as well as birth) is appropriated – if not exclusively confiscated – by the specialised context of medicine and hospitalisation. In order to clarify the significance of this appropriation,

in its variable possibilities, we must discuss several preliminary problems. What is the essential difference between the end of human life and the end of a simple living organism? What is the essential significance of disease and health? What are the presuppositions of the relation between death, medicine and biology? Is death, firstly, an essentially biological phenomenon?¹⁸ Does not the exclusivity demanded by medicine regarding the phenomenon represent a falsification of the genuine meaning possessed by the end of each and every one of us? Should we not first of all clarify the specific meaning of the end of human life, so that, proceeding from that point, we can be able to see whether and how the medical context changes the relation to one's own death? It is from these questions that we are able to discuss phenomenologically the relation between an existential meaning of one's own death and the biological-medical meaning circulated by contemporary mentality, in order further to analyse concretely the presuppositions of the debate regarding euthanasia. Can his preoccupation with the way in which we die, with the fact of preparing one's own end, still preserve anything of the genuine meaning of our existential finitude or, on the contrary, does it endanger the genuine understanding of the self as a finite being, placed under the horizon of the end?

Conclusions

We have tried in this paper to sketch the basic outlines of an applied phenomenology of body, starting from several limit-situations of embodiment. We emphasized that in any phenomenological investigation, the decisive point is to start from what is effectively known. It is obvious that each of us has experienced our own embodiment and is guided by a sense of the idea of body. We assume, in one way or another, that we are embodied beings. The phenomenon of the body – such as one's own body and that of another – is quite familiar to us. We understand very well that our presence in the world is co-determined by our body, that we act upon the world through our body, and that the surrounding world and the realities within it act as well upon our body. Hunger, thirst, fatigue, pain, mobility, eroticism and sexuality, maternity or paternity, modesty, vulnerability, nudity and other phenomena of bodily order determine and configure always the manners in which, in one way or another, we are in the world. We orient ourselves within the world spontaneously,

considering that our body is the “here” starting from which things around us are “there” or “there”, near or far. Interpersonal relations as well are based on body phenomenon: not only do we recognize someone by face, by the way s/he walks or by voice, but we relate to ourselves referring implicitly to our own body, and we relate to the other engaging something of the order of the given animated body. Thus, corporeality traverses all levels of our existence, determining all manner of our being in the world.

It is from this perspective that we have underscored that human corporeality should be understood, first of all, as an *originary* and *integrative* phenomenon. But mostly, the all-encompassing and originary dimension of corporeality is overlooked. And this is because there is a multitude of disparate concerns engaging body, in various aspects of this phenomenon, attacking it from different pragmatic or interrogative angles: the body is approached in one way in the perfume industry, for example, and in another way in the fashion; the body is engaged in one sense in sports and appears in another sense within the horizon of medicine, anatomy and biology; the more extensive concerns related to a more natural food (“health at any cost”), but also the cosmetic industry and its concerns for delaying aging (“beauty and youth at all costs”) are also based on some tacit understanding of the meaning of corporeality; at the limit, political torture is exercised upon the same phenomenon of corporeality in totalitarian regimes, as are the cruelty of abnormal and pathological acts, and human trafficking in the criminal networks of prostitution; and the same corporeality is exploited by the pornography industry today, and by media exposure of the body.

In other words, corporeality is not only an all-encompassing phenomenon, fully traversing human existence as a whole, but the experience of corporeality appears to be *stratified* and, indeed, may be *modified* and *modalized*. The question is therefore whether, within the issue of corporeality, we can identify some *originary* phenomenal layers that determine, motivate or make possible *other* phenomenal layers, seen as *derivative*. More precisely said, the question that we can pose is whether we detect certain *derived* or *privative* forms of being-embodied-in-the-world, and whether these do not effectively demand, in order to be rigorously understood, to be re-conducted to a more originary level of corporeality phenomenon. And if we can circumscribe an “*originary* dimension of embodiment”, which are the bodily phenomena that could manifest it and put it to light? Our study has suggested that, on closer examination, the multiplicity of phenomena that circumscribe the

phenomenon of corporeality, in its various forms, articulate each other and constitute networks of explanatory references, or even relations of foundation. Therefore, we assume that the task of a phenomenology of corporeality could be to reconstruct the structure of this integrative phenomenon, to highlight its originary dimension, and to explain how its derivative modalizations constitute themselves, thus trying to explain the meaning of genuine embodiment and underscore its privative modifications.

NOTES

- ¹ See Pierre Pellegrin, "Aristote. Le corpus biologique," in Richard Goulet (sous la direction de), *Dictionnaire des philosophes antiques*, Editions du CNRS, Paris, 1989, vol. I, pp. 472-481.
- ² See Denis Buican, *Histoire de la biologie*, Nathan, Paris, 1994.
- ³ On this topic, see: Michel Haar, "Le primat de la *Stimmung* sur la corporéité du *Dasein*," *Heidegger Studies* 2 (1986), pp. 67-80; Jean Greisch, "Le phénomène de la chair: un 'ratage' de Sein und Zeit," in G. Florival (ed.), *Dimensions de l'exister. Etudes d'anthropologie philosophique* V, Louvain, Peeters, 1994, pp. 154-77; David R. Cerbone, "Heidegger and Dasein's 'Bodily Nature': What is the Hidden Problematic?," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 8.2 (2000), pp. 209-230; Cristian Ciocan, "The Question of the Living Body in Heidegger's Analytic of *Dasein*," *Research in Phenomenology* 38 (2008), nr. 1, pp. 72-89.
- ⁴ See Agata Zielinski, *Lecture de Merleau-Ponty et Levinas: le corps, le monde, l'autre*, Paris: Presses Univ. de France, 2002.
- ⁵ On this topic, see: Bernhard Casper, "La temporalisation de la chair," dans E. Lévinas, *Positivité et transcendance* (suivi de *Lévinas et la phénoménologie*), PUF, Paris, 2000, pp. 165-180; Cristian Ciocan, "Embodiment in the Early Writings of Emmanuel Levinas", *Levinas Studies. An Annual Review* vol. 4 (2009), pp. 1-20.
- ⁶ Especially in his late works: *C'est moi la vérité*, Seuil, 1996 and *Incarnation. Une philosophie de la chair*, Paris, Seuil, 2000.
- ⁷ These media phenomena should be contrasted with a fact that is more and more often discussed in public agendas: the ageing of society. Indeed, the fact that the birth rate of Western society is declining, that the family is undergoing a genuine crisis, that giving birth to a child is seen, more and more often, as an obstacle to one's career and an impediment to personal fulfilment, all this will lead to the inevitable result that, in a couple of decades' time, society as such will be an "aged" one. In this case, however, the constitution of the standard-body (the canon of corporeality) will have to be redefined.
- ⁸ In this context, one can analyze the structural modification of the meaning of nudity in various medical contexts. Here, the experience of one's own body is radically modified, as well as the frontier between intimate and public. It is very possible that in medical contexts, the "patient" is paradoxically deprived of his/her body-experience.
- ⁹ The radical meaning of the phenomena of shame, pudeur, and modesty can attest this point: the violence of the public exposition of the intimate (understood as "what should never become public") emphasizes the phenomenal abyss between the public level and the intimate level of our body-experience.

- ¹⁰ What role does “sexual identity” play in this context? Is it linked with the corporeal meaning (*Körper*) only or with the living body (*Leib*), too? How can we pursue phenomenologically the possibility that external, “objective” sexuality, belonging to the corporeal body (*Körper*), does not correspond to internal sexuality, specific to the living body (*Leib*)? Such transcendental non-correspondence also underlies sexual-identity crises, while being highly relevant to homosexuality and trans-sexuality. All of these, therefore, cannot be understood without a primarily phenomenological approach to corporeality.
- ¹¹ See Jonathan Colvin, “Me, My Clone, and I - or In Defense of Human Cloning,” *Humanist*, May, 2000.
- ¹² For this latest aspect, see for example R. Sauer, “Attitudes to Abortion in America, 1800-1973,” *Population Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (Mar., 1974), pp. 53-67.
- ¹³ For a similar analysis of the relation between whole and parts, but placed in the Heideggerian context of the phenomenon of death, see our article “Heidegger, la mort et la totalité”, *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger*, vol. 134 (2009), nr. 3, pp. 291-309.
- ¹⁴ Concretely, vulnerability can be approached from several directions, either as domestic violence, as the relation between the person and the group to which he/she belongs, or as the relation between the individual and the state in which he/she lives.
- ¹⁵ For Heidegger’s problem of death, as developed in *Being and Time*, 1927, see our book *Moribundus sum. Heidegger și problema morții*, Bucharest, Humanitas, 2007; for the same topic in the late work, see our articles: “Notes sur l’évolution du problème de la mort dans la pensée de Heidegger après *Sein und Zeit* (1931-1935)”, *Synthesis philosophica* 48 (2), 2009, pp. 297-315 and “Le problème de la mort dans les *Beiträge zur Philosophie* (1936-1939)”, *Revue Philosophique de Louvain* 108(2), 2010, p. 313-333.
- ¹⁶ For the relation between Heidegger and Levinas, see our article “Les repères d’une symétrie renversée: La phénoménologie de la mort entre Heidegger et Lévinas”, *Alter. Revue de Phénoménologie* vol. 12 (2004), pp. 313-339.
- ¹⁷ One can ask whether the living body (*Leib*) exists no more, while the corporeal body (*Körper*) still lives, on the basis of the technological apparatus.
- ¹⁸ We have questioned this topic in a Heideggerian context in our article “La vie et la corporalité dans *Être et temps* de Martin Heidegger, I^e partie: Le problème de la vie. Ontologie fondamentale et biologie”, *Studia Phaenomenologica* vol. I (2001), nr. 1-2, pp. 61-93.

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