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***The Notion of Personhood and Time in Phenomenological Thought. Martin Heidegger
and Hermann Schmitz***

1 Introduction

In the following paper I am going to deal with the question of personhood, and I will concentrate mainly on phenomenological theory. Definitions and descriptions of personhood traditionally refer to the Kantian notion of reason, autonomy and the free will. Also the Cartesian view of the body and mind dualism and the undoubtable Cogito is quite prominent even in today's thinking. Yet these theories do not take into consideration that human beings are as bodily entities part of the material world and cannot be thought without their reference to this world, which considerably reduces the ultimate free will. The world affects the individual and modifies his or her every feeling, thinking and acting.

Another genuinely human trait the traditional theories do not take into consideration, or, if they do, only as disturbances that must be coped with, is the whole field of affections. Human beings - and also many animals - do always 'feel' somehow, and, as we shall see, these feelings and emotions constitute and modify the reference to the world and as such determine the way we act.

Also the temporal organisation of existence and the awareness of temporality in humans is of great importance when exploring the notion of personhood.

Investigating phenomenological thought seems to be an adequate way of dealing with the question of personhood, as phenomenology throughout the 20th century has proved fruitful for other disciplines dealing with questions of personal identity, such as neurology and psychiatry. As an example the close contact between Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Kurt Goldstein and Sigmund Freud might suffice.

The basic assumption I am going to work with is that personhood is the way of human existence as a temporally structured being. The German psychiatrist Thomas

Fuchs, whose research is strongly influenced by phenomenological thought, describes the person as a human being that is able to elevate him- or herself from the immediate, concrete physically given situation, yet remains related to the physical basis. The notion of personhood therefore denotes the attachment to the world between abstract and concrete reference.¹ The style and degree of distancing oneself from the immediate confrontation with the world determines what is commonly called 'personality', meaning character or temperament.

The basic works I am dealing with are *Time and Being* by Martin Heidegger as one of the most influential works of phenomenology and *Der Unerschöpfliche Gegenstand* and *System der Philosophie* by Hermann Schmitz. Hermann Schmitz is the originator of German New Phenomenology that is in many respects a consequent development of classical phenomenological thought; in other respects New Phenomenology transforms and radicalizes classical concepts. Therefore these two authors constitute a solid basis for my analysis.

2 The Notion of Time and Felt Body

The basis for the temporal structure to emerge and for the subject to become aware of his or her temporal existence is the felt body. The body enables the subject to discern self and non-self, which is the basis for an intentional, coherent interaction with the world. Perceiving the own body in motion and in contact with the surroundings makes aware of the own physical existence. The subject 'learns' that he or she also has a physical existence, a body that can be perceived and dealt with by others (I will call this the 'seen body' in contrast to the 'felt body'). This self-awareness enables the subject to distance him or herself from the purely subjective egocentric worldview we can still find in young children.

Thomas Fuchs makes clear that the awareness of the "here and now" is the very basis for developing personal identity. The subject must be able to consciously position

1 See Fuchs, Thomas, *Leib - Raum - Person. Entwurf einer phänomenologischen Anthropologie*. Klett-Cotta Verlag, Stuttgart 2000, p.296.

itself in a concrete situation. This awareness of the own bodily existence results from confrontations between body and world. According to Fuchs, bodily self-awareness results from interruptions of the automatic bodily processes. That means that unconscious or habitual bodily processes are 'disturbed'; this occurs when habitual movements meet an impediment - we might stumble over an object or meet our own bodily limits when trying to manage a difficult bodily task. Other examples are great fear or surprise, these being states that are also felt physically and that 'remind' us of our physical existence being located in a given situation.²

With the emergence of self-awareness and the realization of the own body as a material object among others, a first step in distancing oneself from the immediately given is done. The subject is able to refer to him- or herself from a third person perspective and consequently to take over the others' perspectives to a certain degree - he or she can view the world more objectively (although a purely objective view can never be achieved). Note that the intersubjective contact is of special importance here. Personhood is also characterized by sociality, and taking on a third person perspective towards oneself means to take over the public standpoint, referring to oneself from an outer perspective as a material, perceivable being. Thomas Fuchs names this the 'generalized Other' that affirms, legitimizes and to a great degree also shapes the person according to norms and conventions.³ Intersubjectivity, however, shall not be a topic in this paper.

Closely connected to this growing ability of distancing oneself the temporal structure is constituted. The subject develops a personal identity that is mainly determined by the temporal structure defined by memory on the one hand and anticipation on the other. In perceiving the own body in motion and in contact with the world habits and motion patterns emerge; those are stored in the implicit memory. This kind of learning or getting used to the world needs the ability to refer to the past subconsciously; it implies that the subject has the notion that he or she remains the same over time, that what he or she experiences are somehow related to him- or

2 Fuchs, p.263.

3 Fuchs, p.295f.

herself and also to each other. This is even more the case in episodic memory. We all have explicit memories that more or less willfully come to mind time and again. We remember past events at times very vividly, always knowing - and this is not trivial in this context - that we ourselves have experienced this, and that we have remained the same person over time. This is the basis for anticipation of future events: according to our experience we are able to anticipate the future, prenoetically in the continuation of motion habits and to some degree noetically by making future plans and predicting future events according to the present situation. It is memory - implicit as well as episodic - and anticipation that constitute personal identity. We are to a great degree defined by patterns of our behavior as well as by our narratable past. Distancing oneself from the concretely given means to move the own standpoint: we can refer to events and situations different from the actually given one. We can remember past events as well as imagine those lying in the future. We can imagine how we might feel or act in a completely different situation, and by viewing the other we can (usually) impute a certain feeling and assume his or her experiences or future plans. To put it in a nutshell - distancing oneself from the immediately given enables us to move our point of view in space and time and to even transfer it to other subjects. Yet we always retain the subjective view: we remain bound to the basis of the felt body and when a different point of view is obtained, this is always done dependent from our own. It is this tension of concrete and distanced reference that defines personhood.

3 Examples: Heidegger and Schmitz

In the following I am going to discuss this according to the theories of Martin Heidegger and Hermann Schmitz as examples for traditional (Heidegger) and New (Schmitz) phenomenological theory.

3.1 Martin Heidegger

In *Being and Time* Martin Heidegger defines the personal human being as Dasein as Being-in-the-world. He points out that as a part of the physical world the human being

must have a certain spatiality. This implies that Heidegger is fully conscious of the importance of the bodily existence. Without the body - seen and felt - human interaction with the world, which constitutes the personal existence is unthinkable. He does not elaborate on this any further, however; he points out that he is not at all interested in anthropological questions. His *Analytic of Dasein* must precede any anthropology, psychology and biology.⁴

He describes human existence as *Dasein* as a being between thrownness and projection. Thrownness is defined as factual Being-in-the-world determined by the state of mind ('*Befindlichkeit*') which is the result of the time having been ('*Gewesenheit*'). Heidegger explicitly does not use the term 'past', because he aims to underline the relatedness of events that have already taken place to the actually given situation. '*Befindlichkeit*' clearly has an affective connotation: as a result of past time experience and being affected by the world, we feel somehow. Human beings - and also a lot of animals - are always in a certain mood, which constitutes the basis for further interaction with the world. This mood can only be explained as being the consequence of interacting with the world in a certain way. For Martin Heidegger affective states of mind constitute the reference to the world, and as such they disclose world for the subject.

Projection means the notion of defining oneself by anticipating future events. According to Heidegger projection is characterized by understanding and interpretation of the current situation. For projection language ('*discours*') plays an important role. Making sense of past and present, and consequently anticipating the future, is highly influenced by language patterns.

As these notions of thrownness and projection suggest, the personal subject as being in between these two underlies the temporal structure described in the section above. Whereas '*Befindlichkeit*' is always to a certain degree orientated at the past, talking and acting as styles of projection are directed to the future. The very present is the point of transition between these two poles.

Talking about the personal subject, Heidegger differentiates between authenticity

4 Heidegger, Martin, *Being and Time*, Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 1962, p.71.

('Eigentlichkeit') and vulgarity ('Uneigentlichkeit'). These terms denote the style of interacting with the world depending on the awareness of temporality. A subject is authentic when he or she is aware of the temporal structure of the own existence and is directed to the future, which means in consequence to be aware of the own mortality. Being vulgar in this sense means ignoring the essential fact of mortality and living a more earthbound, day-to-day existence, being orientated at the present situation rather than consciously and willfully projecting oneself to the future.

The personal subject can never be wholly authentic or vulgar. Originally all human beings are born into the state of vulgarity. Small children have a completely egocentric standpoint, hardly any conscious memory, and are wholly dependent on their environment to copy and adapt to. It is only the awareness of temporality and the knowledge of the own mortality that leads to an authentic existence. Personhood is characterized by oscillating between these two states of being. It is a question of character, meaning personality (not to be used synonymously with personhood) whether a subject is more vulgar or more authentic. Although Heidegger denies the moral implication that for instance Sartre and Camus claim explicitly, the authentic way of existence is his clear ideal, this meaning the awareness of mortality, of time, and the ability to cope with it by projecting oneself onto the future.

3.2 Hermann Schmitz

For Hermann Schmitz' theory time also plays a central role. In his major work *System der Philosophie* he establishes the complete present not only as a principle of individuation, but also as a philosophical principle as such. In doing so he is orientated at the Cartesian Cogito, which he does not find completely plausible. According to Schmitz, the only thing one cannot doubt is the fact, that any experience, any affection, any state of mind can only be felt *now*, in the very instant of being aware. The subject can always be absolutely sure about the present moment. Therefore Schmitz suggests (in contrast to Heidegger) a primacy of the present. It is the notion of present that

serves as the background of his definition of personhood.⁵

Personhood in Hermann Schmitz' theory is also characterized by the tension between two kinds of relating to the world. Within his concept of complete present he differentiates between primitive and unfolded present ('primitive' and 'entfaltete' Gegenwart). The state of primitive present means being affected directly and physically and not being able to distance oneself from the immediate impressions. The state of primitive present is achieved only rarely (especially in adults); this being the case in events of sheer affection (also felt physically) as in terror, pain, fear, etc., but also in sexual arousal, hysteria or ecstasy. Immediately after such an instant, the present is, to use Schmitz' terminology, unfolded. To unfold the present means to distance oneself from this, to regain control and to partly objectify one's perception. This distancing oneself from the situation need not be brought about noetically, in people being able to elevate themselves from sheer egocentrism it happens according to the physical dynamics. The notion of physical dynamics cannot be discussed here, but it becomes evident that the body, esp. the felt body, is also of great relevance in Schmitz' work. It is the body that is affected when the subject falls into the primitive present. Unfolding the present means to distance oneself from the sheer physical affection and to 'individuate' the event, i.e. to make sense of it.

So falling into primitive present reminds the subject of its physical existence and positions it in the world. The primitive present is the very basis for constituting identity. Only by perceiving oneself - and this is only possible by perceiving the own limits in the interaction with the world - the subject can establish a basic self-awareness, which, as has become evident, is needed for constituting identity. The next step is to distance oneself from the immediate reference of the primitive present. The subject must also be able to view not only the situation, but also the own position within this situation from the outside in order to make sense of itself and to constitute a stable identity. So the personal subject must always keep the reference to itself in its physicality and to the world. It is this tension that constitutes personhood.

Schmitz describes the change between these two states as personal emancipation

5 See Schmitz, Hermann, *System der Philosophie, Bd I, Die Gegenwart*.

(unfolding the present) and personal regression (moving towards primitive present). Similarly to Heidegger's conception, one form of personal emancipation is language; distancing oneself from a given situation and making sense of it most often happens by applying language and similar cultural techniques of world disclosure.⁶

Forms of personal regression are laughing, crying, and, related to this, humour, jokes and other techniques that release the subject from maintaining control over the situation and itself.⁷ Personal regression occurs in events of disturbance of the habitual processes, but can also be incurred willingly. So in this dynamics of personal regression (affective) and personal emancipation (through discourse) a similar structure as in Heidegger becomes evident. Personhood is in both cases defined by transcending egocentrism and the immediate physical affections, and a close connection to the basis of the felt body, which enables the personal subject to keep to the here and now.

4 Conclusion

According to both authors discussed above personhood is clearly characterized by the temporal structure with all its implications: the dynamics between immediacy and distance and all competences of interaction with the world by moving, communicating, acting and feeling that define the personal existence of human beings. Illustrating this interrelation of personhood and time, both authors exemplary for phenomenological thought in general, give thought-provoking impulses to interdisciplinary research, especially in the psycho-medical field. There are certainly a number of differences between the two theories which cannot be discussed here. Be it enough to mention Heidegger's primacy of the future versus Schmitz' notion of the complete present as a philosophical principle, and furthermore Schmitz' emphasis on the felt body that remains neglected in Heidegger's theory. What motivates the change between immediate and distanced reference also remains an open question here. I already

6 Schmitz, *Der Unerschöpfliche Gegenstand*, Bouvier Verlag, Bonn 2007, p.153ff.

7 Schmitz, *Der Unerschöpfliche Gegenstand*, p.156ff.

hinted at the notion of bodily dynamics and affectivity in Schmitz' work. These will be major topics for my future work.

Also it might be of interest to to have a closer look at the interdisciplinary context. Thomas Fuchs is only one example of psychiatrists who work in close contact with phenomenology. A lot of pathological forms of identity (as in anorexia, schizophrenia, etc.) can be made sense of by applying phenomenological theories.

Another field that might be interesting to look at in this context are the social sciences. I have pointed out the importance of human sociality for establishing first of all self-awareness and furthermore a stable identity.

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