The 3rd BESETO Conference of Philosophy
Session 2

On Two Modes of Actions that a Subject Takes with a Tool

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Abstract

When Merleau-Ponty discusses the embodied consciousness, he often deals with the actions that a subject takes with different tools. According to Merleau-Ponty, the action which is directed by motor intentionality covers every sort of activity, and the vehicle body can be understood as a system of motor or postural functions, or body schema. However, when we pay attention to the tool itself and the relation between embodied consciousness and tool in action, we can focus on those actions once again. This paper describes the absorbed and unskilled actions that a subject takes with a tool. A beginner in his unskilled action tries to project towards the tool. The tool doesn't fall into the bodily space, and the body schema does not change. It is necessary for the beginner to represent the tool. The object is not directly projected by the vehicle body, but is affected through the agency of the tool. The beginner appears to posit a novel situation around him, in which the subject keeps the tool at his disposal. When a beginner is used to his tool, he becomes an expert and the unskilled action turns into an absorbed one. One of differences between an expert and a beginner is that they have different worlds by reason of different vehicles of being-in-the-world. In the absorbed action, the instrument has been incorporated into the bodily space and become one element of functional system or of the body schema. The object is something towards which the new system including the body and the instrument leads, and the instrument in the system is not necessarily represented.

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty thinks of being-in-the-world as embodied consciousness. The consciousness is interpreted as a perceiving subject, and the body is finally understood as the mediator of the world for this consciousness. When Merleau-Ponty discusses the body, he often deals with the movements that subjects take with different tools, such as a car, a walking stick and so forth. Generally speaking, he isn't concerned with tools, but explains the embodied consciousness by virtue of those actions with respect to tools. However, when we pay attention to the tool itself, we can focus on those actions once again on the basis of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*. Whether the subject who uses a tool is a beginner or expert, it is necessary for him to communicate with the world by virtue of a certain mediator or vehicle. The instrument of an expert can be regarded as an auxiliary of his vehicle body. The action of the beginner is similar to

that of an expert to some extent, but for a beginner, it is difficult to consider the tool as an element of the mediator. How can we understand the two kinds of actions concerning the tool? What are the difference of the tool's meanings and its modalities of being between the two kinds of actions? Through the description of those actions, we may find clues which help us to find the answers.

1 Motor intentionality and action

Intentionality generally names the fact that a mental state is always about something, that is, is directed at something under some description. What make the directness possible is called the mental state's representational or intentional content. Our actions seem always be accompanied by a mental state whose intentional content is what the agent is trying to do. Merleau-Ponty introduces motor intentionality as a basic form of intentionality. According to him, motor intentionality that underlies movements is a direct way of responding appropriately to the solicitations of the environment in which the agent is inextricably embedded. In this sense, it is a "'motor project,' a motor power."[1] The movement can't be understood as a bodily action caused by an intention, or rather it is not necessarily directed by a representation of what the agent is trying to do or a representation of object.

Motor intentionality as a kind of power is not limited in the realm of movements, but implied a fundamental function under the perception and the intelligence. On the one hand, it makes us be able to direct ourselves towards objects in a situation, and, on the other hand, the objects and the situation are not given. The function makes them exist for us, before making them come to light.

For a normal subject, every movement has a background that is built up. The background to movement is not a representation associated or linked externally with the movement itself, but immanent in the movement, inspiring and sustaining it at every moment. The movement and its background are a union. And at the same time, for a normal subject, his own bodily function of projection is at work in forming things, or giving a form to the matter of experience. However, the plunge into action is an original way relating the subject himself to the object. And consciousness can move towards this object only in so far as consciousness throws itself into it. In this sense, the world as the background on which the object depends has been given. The fundamental intentional function projects "round about us our past, our future, our human setting, our physical, ideological and moral situation, or rather which results in our being situated in all these respects."[2] The function implies something towards which the body projects and a pre-predicated world. The body's motor projection is generally towards someone or something in the world, and the things which are projected and the world are not the object in itself, but are meaningful and can be grasped in some way. Nevertheless, the subject's reference to something is a pure meaning-giving act and the pre-predicated world is immanently understood.

1 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, tr. by Colin Smith, London and New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 127.

2 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 157.

2 Two modes of actions which a subject takes with a tool

2.1 Two modes of actions

Merleau-Ponty notes that motor intentionality which presupposes our being absorbed in the world is continuously in play. The activity which is regulated and directed by motor intentionality is the fundamental mode of everyday activity and covers every sort of action. In everyday activities, the body of the subject is solicited by the situation to perform movements, and the subject need not anticipate or think of what he or she is trying to achieve. The mode of activity is named "absorbed action" and even is considered as the single standard mode to some extent. Generally speaking, once absorbed action is blocked, the subject pays attention to the background of the continued action. However, a subject in everyday life also takes the activities which are caused by explicit mental states, which are deliberate or intentional. When a learner begins to study a new skill, his tactile activity must be replaced by a deliberate or unskilled action, which caused by an explicit intention in virtue of the relative rules. In this action, the experience of acting is one of certain subject's intentions in action causing one's movement. This kind of action does not appear to correspond to motor intentionality, but it is not true. An action governed by mental intentionality depends upon motor intentionality, too. In general, "when intentional action occurs, it is only possible on the background of on-going absorbed action."[3] Thus, absorbed action is not the single mode of activity, and an activity which is usually understood to involve an explicit intention is another mode of action. Both modes of action are significant for us to describe human movements.

Merleau-Ponty shows that the body itself is understood as the mediator of the consciousness to project a task. As he puts it, "(t)o move one's body is to aim at things through it; it is to allow oneself to respond to their call, which is made upon it independently of any representation."[4] In absorbed action, the experience of acting is substituted for the experience of responding to the solicitation in the situation. An absorbed action undermines the action suitable for the intentional content of perception. It is inevitable that an absorbed action does not require a visual representation of itself and a mental one as its goal. One's own body can not be described as an intentional object, but a potential power or function of a number of actions and postures. To some extent, it can be understood as a system of motor or postural functions, and the "system of motor capacities, abilities, and habits that enable movement and the maintenance of posture"[5] is a body schema. Because it "operates below the level of self-referential intentionality," and "such functions can enter into and support intentional activity,"[6] the role of body is important to intentional or deliberate action. Through the medium of my own body or body schema, I can take my place in the environment.

When the subject in virtue of his or her own body communicates continuously with the world, and penetrates itself into things in it, the parts of body unify together through executing the same task, and are enveloped in each other. "The various parts of the body are known to us through their

3 Hubert L. Dreyfus, "A Merleau-Pontyian Critique of Husserl's and Searle's Representationalist Accounts of Action," p. 301.

4 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, pp. 160–161.

5 Shaun Gallagher and Jonathan Cole, "Body Image and Body Schema," *Body and Flesh: A Philosophical Reader*, ed. by Donn Welton, Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1998, p. 132.

6 Shaun Gallagher and Jonathan Cole, "Body Image and Body Schema," p. 132.

functional values only and their co-ordination is not learnt."[7] In fact, the fundamental function of consciousness brings about the unity of the parts, of the senses, of intelligence, of sensibility and motility. In so far as the communications or projections, the parts and elements of body share the common meaning, and all these activities are available to us in virtue of their common meaning.

Because of special emphasis on absorbed action as the standard modes of activity, Merleau-Ponty thinks that "non-representational form of activity is a more basic kind of intentionality"[8] and the representative function is not the final basis of the movement. Some absorbed activities do not involve any representation, including representation of objects and of what a subject is trying to achieve, and even other non-absorbed activities bases on the background of the world, which itself is not an object of consciousness. Thus, deliberate action is a derivative mode that occurs only when there is some disturbance. But, if we consider a beginner's unskilled action as a deliberate one, we must re-emphasize the role of representation in activity.

2.2 A case of two modes of actions concerning a tool

The action of I-using-a-tool which is raised towards an object comprises different phases, such as Hubert Dreyfus' five stages of activity, but we mainly consider two principle modes of actions here, absorbed action and deliberate or unskilled one. In the following parts, we will examine them by virtue of an example about a tailor. In order to make clothes, a tailor must have different skills and uses different tools. But we only talk about one kind of skill, that is to say, to cut the cloth by using a pair of scissors. When a new tailor who has never used a pair of scissors begins to use it to cut cloth, he needs not look for his hands and fingers, but finds himself to make an effort to keep one's eyes on the scissors in his hand. The representations of the tool, his aim and the rule of how to use scissors constantly lead him to use it towards the cloth. His deliberate operation is similar to that of an expert to some extent. When he gets used to his tool and becomes an expert, he keeps on performing the same task with his tool. However, in this absorbed action, the instrument is like the parts of one's own body, and the subject is preoccupied with the task and projects himself merely towards the material. There are two kinds of relations between embodied consciousness and tool shown in them. As a function of consciousness, bodily activity means "the momentum of existence", and the description of these two modes of action is an existential analysis.

3 An existential analysis of unskilled action

From a third person's perspective, the beginner seems to focus on the material and is driven by representation of the material. It looks like the subject has a complete power to cut the cloth and to penetrate into the cloth and grasp it directly. However, the unskilled movement in fact shows that the subject is just trying to set up the perfect function of consciousness that keeps tools and mate-

7 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 172.

8 Hubert L. Dreyfus, "Intelligence without Representation: Merleau-Ponty's Critique of Mental Representation," *Merleau-Ponty: Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers*, Vol. 4, ed. by Ted Toadvine, New York: Routledge, 2006, p. 392.

rial at its disposal, that is, to turn the tool into his bodily auxiliary or an element of a functional system. Before he is used to his tool, work efficiency may be improved simply because of constantly using it. But this can not conceal the particular deficiencies both of the body without the capacity to cut cloth directly and the cloth without a primary significance to be cut. And the melodic character which it shows in everyday life can not appear, and the deliberate action becomes a collection of partial movements connected laboriously together.

The beginner tries to perform the task towards the tool; he, as a subject facing a pair of scissors that he never uses, can not remain in ambiguous horizons. It is necessary for a beginner to represent the tool in his unskilled action. He does not have to look for his body, such as his hands. The body is intentional, when it is the vehicle for being-in-the-world. "The intentional body is the body as subject of intentional consciousness", and "to have a body is notably to entertain motor projects in the world."[9] On the one hand, his body is already mobilized by the tool, and, on the other hand, his action is driven by the representation of tool and of conditions that makes his action satisfaction. In this sense, beginner's activity is deliberate action. In order perform his task, the beginner must first of all find his tool. The word "find" means being aware of it with explicit representation. It is necessary for the beginner to express the angle of its two blades and the orientation of scissors and cloth in the visual field. In this mode of action, the beginner substitutes deduction of tools and explanation of working procedure for tactile awareness and direct projection. He appeals for their representations to explain and deduct the situation in front of him.

In the beginner's actual world, the cloth has no primary meaning as something that is worked with. The meaning of it for a beginner doesn't equal that for an expert who is used to his tool. The new procedure of working does not have a motor significance for the beginner, but an intellectual one, and the cloth to be cut does not directly communicate anything to him as a mobile subject. However, the cloth is still presented to him as an objective thing to a great extent, and is not an object of projection. It is correct to describe the beginner to cut out a dress, however, it is more appropriate to say that he is trying to learn how to use his tool in the actual situation. When the beginner attends to the tool, the cloth is highly neglected by him. The cloth is not done directly by the function of projection, but is affected through the agency of the tool in a figurative sense. The meaning of the cloth which is to be cut is merely imposed on the core of its present meaning and is obtained by virtue of the explanation and deduction. The products that the beginner cut out are just the by-products of the action with regard to the tool.

Because the pair of scissors is always the object of embodied consciousness, his unskilled action does not mean the pair of scissors to fall into his bodily space Scissors-blades and their sharp points is not the frontier of touch, that is, it is not amalgamated into the bodily space. The body schema does not change, in other words, the tool has not become an extension of his own bodily synthesis. In so far as the subject maintains his tool to be an object in the third person's perspective, it can't be treated as an element in the system of motor capacities. If one's own body is the vehicle or mediator of consciousness that is being-towards-the-things, the pair of scissors is not an element alike, but only an object of mediator.

9 Dorothée Legrand, "The bodily self: The sensori-motor roots of pre-reflective self-consciousness," *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 5 (2006), p. 99.

The beginner who is in the real settings appears to posit a novel situation around him, in which the action to cut out a dress is performed. But the novel situation that is postulated by the normal function of projection in front of the subject does not naturally exist, but takes on a disguise of existence. The situation is just a virtual one, but for a learner who begins to study a certain skill with a tool, the task situation must be decomposed into context-free features which the beginner can recognize without previous experience in the task domain. Hence, the beginner "is given rules for determining actions on the basis of these features, like a computer following a program."[10] Decomposition of the situation into context-free features manifests that the beginner is not in the task situation, but in the actual situation in which the subject does not get used to the tool. If to perform an action is to place oneself for a moment in an actual, imaginary or possible situation, and to find satisfaction in changing one's situation, a subject can hardly enter into a virtual situation without converting it into a present one. A virtual or false situation around the beginner is not an imaginary one that the subject can freely enter into, but a novel and strange one that is being constructed by consciousness. A virtual situation depends on recognition of a deduction and explanation, and the objects in it are striped of their carnal presence and facticity to some extent. However, a beginner's action is not a process described by representationalists or intellectualists, but a process that subject tries to establish a virtual situation to perform the tasks. Because he is always in actual world, and the virtual situation is not present at all, the material to be cut doesn't keep its visual identity as object being projected "in a literal sense"[11] and has no living motor meanings in actual world. In absorbed action, "...bodily activity is itself a kind of understanding of the world."[12] On the contrary, the beginner just manages to translate the verbal significance of working procedure and abstract cultural significance of tools into a motor significance.

4 An existential analysis of absorbed action

According to Merleau-Ponty, one of the abilities of one's own body is that it is able to break with the involvement in a given world, leave from it and construct an imaginary or possible situation. This means the body is never fixed on an established net of meanings. It is partly the reason why the primary meaning based on the motility is easily eroded. While the body, as a nexus of living meaning, has new core of meanings, it also "changes its existential modality and passes from the actual to the possible."[13] A new situation is always a task to perform afresh, so does the synthesis of the body.

Since a subject is always ready to open worlds and a new world is inevitable for him, it is possible for him to mutate from an unskilled action to an absorbed one. A normal subject, who performs tasks in a situation which is posited by consciousness itself, may encounter a virtual world, but, the virtual world can finally turn into an actual one. On the latter occasion, movement and situation are merely artificially separated stages; they are totally united. Against this situation, the

10 Hubert L. Dreyfus, "Intelligence without Representation: Merleau-Ponty's Critique of Mental Representation," p. 383.

11 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 350.

12 Sean Dorrance Kelly, "Merleau-Ponty On the Body," *Merleau-Ponty: Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers*, (vol. 4), ed. by Ted Toadvine, New York: Routledge, 2006, p. 407.

13 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 128.

movement of the tailor will be an absorbed action, and the subject will be an expert. The sediment of meanings finally means establishment of the relationship between the subject and a new world. The meanings of things and actions, in which the subject is absorbed, are not derived or imposed any longer, and the primary motor meaning of the tool in it can be determinable once more and come to be determinate in actual absorbed actions, and the values of parts of the body are distributed again among them by projecting the function. While the meanings of the actions and of the world have altered, the embodied consciousness has changed correspondingly, and the transformation is shown as an existential process.

If to have a body is to be tied to a world, the change of one's own body as a system of capability implies a new world. One of differences between the subject as an expert and one as a beginner is that they have different worlds by reason of different vehicles of being-in-the-world. According to Merleau-Ponty, because human has no "definite instincts,"[14] the body schema, or a functional system of projection, can even absorb the instruments as an element into itself by virtue of the synthesis of one's own body, such as, establishment of a certain habit. In absorbed action, the parts of body and the instrument are immediately united together as means of access to one and the same new world by performing a project. The elements of total functional system that responds the solicitation comprise both of them. It is clear that a system including the instrumental element is different from one merely composed of one's own body. If a functional system is always entangled with the bodily space, a new system suggests a new bodily space for the subject. "Although the length of our effectors (mainly the arms) limits our action space, we can use many different tools (from forks to pick up hot food to hyper-technological telesurgery devices) to extend our physical body structure and, consequently, our action space."[15] Extension of one's own bodily or action space means a world with new meanings, or even a new world. In absorbed action, since a new functional system of being-in-the-world means certain extension or alteration of our action space, the change of functional system implies a new world.

Merleau-Ponty declares, "Our body …applies itself to space like a hand to an instrument, and this is why, when we move about, we do not move the body as we move an object."[16] It is clear for Merleau-Ponty to explain the relation between our own body and the world by virtue of relation between the instrument and the body. In absorbed action, we find both of these relationships. When an expert tailor performs a familiar task with his pair of scissors, he needs not look for his hands and fingers, because they are not objects to be discovered or moved. He is his body, and his body is the potentiality. And the body as potentiality is already mobilized by the awareness of scissors. Through it, the subject can access directly to space. Furthermore, he need not visualize his pair of scissors in absorbed action. The instruments have been incorporated into the bodily space and become one element of system that has projective function. Though the instrument remains in the world, it is not an ordinary object to be seen and moved, but belongs to the subject. It is not necessarily represented and retreats from the focal point and usually hides itself in ambiguous horizons. By his new functional system including his own body and his instrument, the subject projects immediately into the material that is being

14 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 169.

15 Angelo Maravita and Atsushi Iriki, "Tools for the body (schema)," *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 2 (2004), p. 79.

16 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "An Unpublished Text by Merleau-Ponty: A Prospectus of His Works," *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*, ed. by Ted Toadvine, Leonard Lawlor, Northwestern University Press, 2007, p. 285.

cut, be identified with the task of cutting.

Of course, when the expert tailor sees the scissors in his hand occasionally, he experiences it with emotion, and feels that it belongs to him, just like one part of his own body. Sherrington distinguished between proprioception and exterception in 1906. Proprioception is feedback that is specific to the activities of ones own body, whereas exterception concerns the perception of the outside world.[17] In some sense, proprioception can be understood as egoreception, as sensitivity to the self. In the case of anosognosia, when the patients' limbs lose their places in the body schema and their proprioceptions disappear, they can not feel them with emotion any longer, but only perceive the limbs only as the objective things. So, they "describe their arms as 'like a snake,' long and cold."[18] It is only through proprioception that we can experience the parts of our body to be ours, or the parts of the body may be represented in the body image. If a subject is deeply worried about the proprioception or the body image, there are always some phenomena of depersonalization and disappearance of the sense of reality. In other words, the bodily identity or body self is damaged to a certain extent.[19] When the instrument enters into the bodily space and is not a simple tool any more, and it is not only an element of the body schema, but also is an indispensable element of the identity of body.

In absorbed action, the material is something towards which the totality both of his own body and the element of scissors leads. The embodied consciousness, whether as a beginner or an expert, communicates with the world through a certain mediator. When the beginner takes his task, he focuses on the tool in general. On the occasion, the external material to be cut can not be necessarily focused by him. And it is merely observed by the beginner if he wants to examine the quality of products. In the case of absorbed action, the subject penetrates himself into it and the external material is not necessarily represented, though the expert should pay attention to it only because of his professional ethics.

An instrument, as an element of functional system that responds the solicitation in the situation, is known by us through their functional meanings. Gallagher claims, that a carpenter may incorporate a hammer is just like that "a prosthetic device may be incorporated into a (body) schema," although "these instruments are not necessarily reflected in the body image."[20] A prosthetic device and a hammer can enter into the body schema. When the parts of one's own body and an instrument accomplish a certain task, they are enveloped by each other. Thus the instrument can be considered as an element of the body schema, or an auxiliary of the body. That means a new existential modality of instruments to a great extent. Because the body schema is also a system of values or functional system, the tool obtains its own functional value or significance among the whole function of embodied consciousness. Only through grasping its value, can we know it without particular seeing and touching it. In other words, if the body schema or the functional system is not necessarily represented, an instrument in the system is not necessarily represented, either.

17 George Butterworth, "An Ecological Perspective on the Origin of Self," *The body and the self*, ed. by José Luis Bermúdez, Anthony J. Marcel and Naomi Eilan, MIT Press, 1995, p. 88.

18 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 172.

19 Cf. Oliver W. Sacks, "The Disembodied Lady," in *The Man Who Mistook his Wife for a Hat and Other Clinical Tales*, Simon & Schuster, 1998, pp. 43–54.

20 Shaun Gallagher, "body Schema and Intentionality," *The body and the self*, ed. by José Luis Bermúdez, Anthony J. Marcel and Naomi Eilan, MIT Press, 1995, p. 237.