

Corporeality as the Limit of Phenomenology
A Review of Cristian Ciocan, *Întruchipări. Studiu de fenomenologie a corporalității* [Embodiments: A Phenomenological Study of Corporeality]. Bucharest: Humanitas, 2013, 350 pp, lei 32.00. ISBN 978-973-50-3855-7

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Corporeality has clearly been an on-going preoccupation of Cristian Ciocan's, judging from several earlier studies of his on the body in Heidegger and in Levinas as well as the recent thematic issue entitled *Possibilities of Embodiment* which he co-edited last year for the leading Romanian journal *Studia Phaenomenologica*¹. Neatly titled *Întruchipări*, with *chip* (face, shape) pointing outside the received (German) phenomenological opposition between *Leib* and *Körper* (to which we will return), the current project was specifically prompted by the realization that ontology and metaphysics had not adequately thematized corporeality: the author speaks about his own discovery of a "complete absence" within existential analysis (9) which made him investigate corporeality from Heidegger to the French phenomenologists and then back to Husserl, since corporeality had not become the object of philosophical investigation until it was brought to centre stage in the post-Heideggerian re-orientations of phenomenology.

Ciocan's study is built around this absence (or rather extreme 'abstracting') of the body in Heideggerian phenomenology, which the author attempts to explain in its historicity with a view to opening up avenues in order to recuperate such a vital, yet marginalized theme in the field of philosophy. Such a historical perspective allows him to step from the Heideggerian disincarnation of the body to Levinasian embodied existence in the passage from ontology to ethics: "between Heidegger and Levinas, between the striking absence of a phenomenology of corporeality in the major work of the former, and the decisive, albeit sometimes unsystematic accent on the body in the latter, I could discover a whole network of issues that actually put into play the whole history of phenomenology, even if in a diffuse manner"² (10). In spite of remaining outside the realm of phenomenology, Levinas was the one who ironically offered a solution and, in order to open up the problematic of phenomenology, turned away from it. Thus, Ciocan's project can be read implicitly as an attempt to reclaim Levinas for an extended phenomenology that would be capable of engaging with the sphere of

¹ Cristian Ciocan, "The Question of the Living Body in Heidegger's Analytic of *Dasein*," *Research in Phenomenology* 38 (2008): 72-89; Cristian Ciocan, "Le problème de la corporéité chez le jeune Levinas," *Les études philosophiques* 2 (2013): 201-219; Elizabeth A. Behnke and Cristian Ciocan, eds., *Studia Phaenomenologica* XII (2012).

² All translations from Ciocan's book are the reviewers'.

corporeality. However, he also wonders whether the overcoming of phenomenology towards an ethics is the best way of filling in those gaps in the latter about corporeality. Accordingly each of the book's three sections, on Husserl, Heidegger and Levinas, is made up of a 'genealogical' or 'archaeological' reconstruction and, by way of 'conclusion', opens on to a set of probing questions. As mentioned in the introduction of the chapter on Husserl, this double phenomenological exploration takes "the shape [*chip* – see *infra*] of an operation of exfoliation, of recuperating a stratum of originary sense hidden behind alluvia that cover it and sometimes make it unrecognizable" (25).

The first chapter, on "The Phenomenology of Corporeality: Starting from Husserl", introduces the issue of reduction (*epoché*) and investigates the phenomenon of human corporeality in relation to the constitution of space, from the 'null-point point of orientation' of one's body as the absolute Here (74). The phenomenon of corporeality is intricately linked to intersubjectivity and shaped through the dynamics between one's own singular 'lived body' and real, physical bodies, *Leib* and *Körper*. Ciocan outlines that for Husserl, once the outside world and its objects, as well as our pre-reflexive knowledge of those, have been 'reduced', we are left with the primordial field of perception and the transcendental sphere of intuitive consciousness to explore our originary field of experience (30 ff.); our own body (*Körper*) is not just like any other's but it is our own (*Leib*) as the phenomenological field of consciousness and (embodied) experience. Taking the dynamic articulation of *trup* (*Leib*) and *corp* (*Körper*) further, namely via Michel Henry in *Philosophie et la phénoménologie du corps*, Ciocan distinguishes between the visible, physical, objective, material, transcendent *Körper* and the invisible, psychical-animate, subjective, immanent, transcendental-phenomenological *Leib*. That the other cannot be intuited as a proper, immediate *Leib*, even though, through intersubjective participation, I perceive more than a mere *Körper* at the centre of another's lived world, has implications for (hetero-)affection and Eros, and Ciocan wonders whether Eros can be the ultimate radicalisation of this intersubjective relation since it implies that the experience of one's own body is overcome (47). Similarly he envisages the difficulty of moving from the transcendental solipsism of phenomenological reduction to the constitution of an effective intersubjectivity (97).

Such (and other) issues are shown to be at the core of the divergences between Heidegger and Husserl. Whereas Husserl sees that touching the body generates sensations, Ciocan notes that Heidegger insists on the incommunicable immanence of the body (47): only *Dasein*, and not material entities, can touch. It is worth noting that the relationship between touching and seeing – or haptics and optics – is as old as the parables of Jacob and Esau or that of the doubting Thomas in the Bible, and has a long, if never fully articulated history in philosophy and aesthetics, stretching at least from Diderot to (via Riegl, Worringer and Maldiney) Deleuze and Derrida. Though Ciocan never frames Husserl's distinctions within this chequered tradition, he reviews the several articulations between the tangible visual, the intangible visual and the tangible invisible in our experience of our own body (60 ff.).

Ciocan further examines how in Husserl the body-as-*Leib*, defined as a "field of localization" of sensations, is crucial in our constitution of spatiality (73). Here as elsewhere the Romanian philosopher adduces concrete examples which allow him to push terminological distinctions further, including such paranormal phenomena as a near death experience – a form of out-of-body experience or autoscopy – that cannot be

attested phenomenologically, yet is a limit case through which more flexible correlations between *Körper* and *Leib* can be articulated. (78) Such more accessible recourses to “unreal cases” and “fantastical examples” (77) may seem at odds with Ciocan’s patiently rigorous approach but are a credit to his project of broadening the epistemological remit of phenomenology – even though they belong to the tried-and-tested tradition of philosophy turning to literature for exemplary support – as in his parallels with literary fragments and imaginary creations (Păsări-Lăți-Lungilă, from Creangă’s fairy tale *Harap Alb* (80), or, unreferenced, Caragiale’s “*simt enorm și văd monstruos* [I feel enormously and see monstrously]” (81) and Arghezi’s psalm “*vreau să te pipăi și să urlu este* [I want to touch you and to yell: He exists.]” (85)), and even his (rather perfunctory) excursion into our putative posthuman future of cyborgs (111).

More space is devoted to the opposition between Husserl’s relation between the body-as-*Körper* and Heidegger’s more originary connection between the body-as-*Leib* and the *Dasein*’s existential spatiality, and prior to focusing on Heidegger himself, Ciocan recalls Heidegger’s departure from his master on issues of relationality and localisation, of the here towards the body (87 ff.).

The second chapter, “The Body as Ontological Phenomenon and Its Aporias: Heidegger”, starts by noting the absence of corporeality in fundamental ontology (121): *das Dasein* is neuter in German, like the word for ‘sex’ (*das Geschlecht*), and is therefore conceived outside sexual difference – which will lead Derrida to enquire what relation of antecedence and subsequent determination there is in Heidegger’s thought between sexual difference and ontological difference (121). According to Ciocan, the phenomenological impasse of *Sein und Zeit* (which Ciocan contrasts with “the incisive phenomenological analyses” of Husserl, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Michel Henry and Levinas; 122) is imputable in part to the inability to fully ontologise the living body, which is derived from several layers of subsumption (spatiality, the structure of *In-Sein*, a moment of *In-der-Welt-sein* (131)). With the German philosopher, *Körper* disappears altogether and the body-as-*Leib* is obscured, a mere “absent presence” (despite its recuperation in later writings) displaced onto *Dasein*.

A series of crucial landmarks in Heidegger’s acknowledgement of the failure to deal adequately with the phenomena of the body is summarised by Ciocan (132). In two separate exchanges with Medard Boss, now gathered in the *Zollikon Seminars*, Heidegger had addressed Sartre’s reproach that *Sein und Zeit* dwells on such a fundamental phenomenon as *Leib* in only seven lines (Boss actually mentioned six lines³), returning to the passage from *Sein und Zeit* which refers to the spatiality of *Dasein* in its corporeality and emphasizing that the existential analytic avoids treating the phenomenon of the body precisely because of its extreme difficulty. It is perhaps worth adding here that Ciocan somehow glosses over the fact that Heidegger ‘justifies’ this admittedly ‘poor treatment’ on two counts, adding in the later encounter that “*Nevertheless, from the Da-sein analytic perspective, it remains decisive that in all experience of the bodily one must always start with the basic constitution of human existing, that is, from being-human as Da-sein*”.⁴ Ciocan then connects this confessed

³ Martin Heidegger, *Zollikon Seminars: Protocols – Conversations – Letters*, ed. Medard Boss, trans. with notes and afterwords by Franz Mayr and Richard Askay (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2001), 232.

⁴ Heidegger, *Zollikon Seminars*, 232; see also 157; italics ours.

‘difficulty of thought’ with an uncannily similar formulation in *Letter on Humanism* bearing more specifically – in ways he will soon turn to – on the very essence of live beings (*Lebe-Wesen*) (132).

The complex imbrications between *Leib* and *Leben* (life), resting on an etymological fulcrum (134), usher in a protracted investigation of the polysemy of the ‘living’ and the concept of life in relation to mortality and death, both from a historico-theological perspective as well as within the trajectory of Heidegger’s early works up to the evacuation of ‘life’ in *Sein und Zeit*, where Heidegger’s understanding of the body and corporeality is restricted to issues of spatiality (135) and the *Dasein* seems indeed “not to be primordially alive, and his existence seems not to be a necessarily vital one”. (171) Heidegger’s research accordingly evolved from the 1919 approach of “phenomenology as pre-theoretical originary science” (*Phänomenologie als vorthoretische Urwissenschaft*) and “originary science of life itself” (*Ursprungswissenschaft vom Leben an sich*), to the 1923 “hermeneutics of facticity” (*Hermeneutik der Faktizität*) and, finally, to the 1927 existential analysis of *Dasein* and “fundamental ontology” (172 ff.).

The third and last chapter, “The Phenomenology of Corporeality between Ontology and Ethics: Levinas”, broadens the field of strict phenomenology by including Levinas within a tradition in order to gesture towards a phenomenology of corporeality which was shown to be lacking in his predecessors. Whereas Heidegger’s existential analytic and fundamental ontology had rather avoided the body-as-*Leib*, Levinas’s shift from phenomenology to ethics, with its absolute prioritisation of the Other, refocused on the body-as-*Leib* from the point of view of expressivity (261-62). Levinas’s advance was to understand that, in order to contribute to a phenomenology of corporeality, one must ground it in an ethics, and the problematic deficiencies of the body in Heidegger also precisely correspond to the failure to articulate an ethics of the Other. Ciocan’s assessment of the Levinasian take on corporeality is based on the expressivity of the body, whence we can step into the representations of the body in arts.

In this third section, Ciocan brings his attention to bear on the genesis and evolution of the phenomenology of the body, which Levinas develops within a more ethical than ontological framework, whose horizon is the encounter with the Other. Thus, in his attempt to distinguish a phenomenology of corporeality between ontology and ethics, Ciocan focuses both on the way in which Levinas articulates the problem of corporeality in his writings and on a systematic presentation of this theme, which takes on a fragmentary appearance within Levinas’s work in its entirety, although the French philosopher harks back to this constant preoccupation. This care for systematisation leads Ciocan to single out two ‘bodies’ in the French philosopher: one described as ‘ontological burden’, which might correspond to the early work from the thirties and the years immediately after the Second World War (marked by exegetical commentaries on phenomenology, but also original works like *Quelques réflexions sur la philosophie de l’hitlérisme* (1934), *De l’évasion* (1935), *De l’existence à l’existant* (1947), *Le Temps et l’autre* (1947)), and another, which is integrated in the ethical syntax of the face (*visage*) or the erotic syntax of touch and voluptuousness, more present in mature works such as *Totalité et infini* (1961) and *Autrement qu’être ou au-delà de l’essence* (1974).

Between the young and mature ‘body’, Ciocan pinpoints a whole series of metamorphoses on which the trajectory of the Levinasian phenomenology of corporeality is built. Drawing on the conceptual constellation of alterity (nudity, the

face, mystery, the night, Eros, the feminine) and insisting on the centrality of the phenomena of Eros and of the feminine in his philosophy, Ciocan emphasizes another dimension of Levinas's ethics, tackling issues such as fecundity, filiation, maternity and paternity. In its attempt to remain loyal to a phenomenological perspective (by reinscribing what remains of an ontological project in Levinas within an enlarged phenomenological tradition), this reconstruction soon reaches its own limit. Thus, Ciocan wonders if "we are really dealing with a *phenomenology* of the body or whether, on the contrary, we are dealing with mere interrogative skeletons that do not manage to constitute in effect a concrete and complex phenomenological analysis of human corporeality, in a fairly rigorous sense of the term". (287) Furthermore, the author recognises in the ambivalence of the body and in the ambiguity between Eros and ethics (constitutive of Levinasian ethics) a phenomenological impasse: "Can the fact that ethics *is not* erotic mean that the Eros *is not yet* metaphysical desire, that the erotic *does not yet reach* the ethical level, that it is fatally beyond the metaphysical dimension that it still aims at? Is Eros an "impoverished ethics" or the ethical "a sublimated Eros"?" (312).

All these legitimate, relevant questions are asked of a philosopher whose aim was to depart from a phenomenology of an ontological kind in order to elaborate a grammar of alterity, an ethical syntax whose language could admit of the double originary (ambiguous, ambivalent) sense of the body and of the couple ethic/erotic respectively. In the light of Ciocan's project, one could argue that in these conditions, an anthropological perspective should prevail over a phenomenological standpoint, which is too reductive and somehow still insists on operating with essences. With Levinas the phenomenological analysis of corporeality reaches a limit and Ciocan signals this with pertinence; yet this limit should be understood less as an insufficiency but more as a transgression. In their complexity, the phenomena of the body call for a multiple approach: not merely phenomenologically or anthropologically but also from an aesthetic perspective if we think of the importance that Levinas grants the aesthetic component in the elaboration of his philosophical programme.

This opening proposed by Levinasian ethics can be correlated with the neat title that Ciocan chose for his study: *Întruchipări*, in which one may wish to hear an allusive word-play suggesting a pendular movement between *trup* (*Leib*: body) and *chip* (*visage*: face), between the lived/living body (in its traditional opposition to *Körper*) and its transfigurations through representation, thus pointing beyond the purlieu of a stricter phenomenology. Such a tension, whether intentional or imaginary, is unfortunately lost in English, which lacks not only the operational doublets of both German *Leib* and *Körper* and Romanian *trup* and *corp* but also the rich semantic palette gathered in *chip* in opposition to *trup*, which allows the Romanian language to retain a tenuous distinction between *Întruchipare* ("enfacement") and *Întrupare*, both being usually translated into English as "embodiment".

Ciocan's perspective ultimately remains phenomenological, albeit in a revisionist sense, and all his interrogations in the concluding chapter converge in this direction. As Marion showed, the ultimate meaning of the self in today's phenomenology can no longer be found in the perceptual dimension of meaning given by consciousness (Husserl), in *Dasein*'s "understanding of being" (Heidegger), or even in the "responsibility towards the other" (Levinas), but rather in love *for* and *of* the other (see 315-16). After retracing the phenomenological lineage from the transcendental

(Husserl), the ontologico-existential (Heidegger), the ethical (Levinas), to the erotic and the promise it harbours to invigorate phenomenological research (Marion), the author returns to a fundamental issue: how can we approach Eros from a phenomenological perspective, either without lapsing into pathos or making Heidegger's mistake (abstracting and disincarnating the body). Ciocan's set of questions – "From what perspective, with what kind of optics and from what point of departure should phenomenology attempt to reveal this phenomenon? What path should we follow, on this uneven ground, so that the phenomenological analysis does not become trivial or sterilely servile, remaining sober and formal, descriptive and explicatory?" (316) – reveal a "crisis" or at least malaise in phenomenology which the author admits half-heartedly, even though he concedes that it might prove to be an arduous task to tackle the phenomenon of Eros frontally owing to its structural makeup (316). The fact that Ciocan situates the phenomenon of Eros within the larger field of the phenomenon of (Christian) love seems to blaze a trail for the questions raised above in relation to the elaboration of a phenomenology of corporeality; such a fruitful debate could be taken further, at the intersection between phenomenology and theology, into considerations of the messianic dimension of the divine and the paradox of (trans)figuration, for instance.

Although, from the very introduction, Ciocan repeatedly acknowledges the impossibility to include phenomenologists whose contributions he considered essential (Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Michel Henry, Marion), his very delimitation of the field remains dependent on a "classical", not to say unfortunate exclusion, seemingly taken for granted, of major continental, more dissident figures like Deleuze (with or without Guattari), for the relation between touching and seeing, and especially Jacques Derrida, whose monumental study *Le toucher. Jean-Luc Nancy* – author of *Corpus* which significantly does not even get a mention in the otherwise comprehensive Bibliography – is given short shrift in a terse footnote mentioning "a more ludic [*sic*] treatment of the theme of touching" (55, n. 41). While Ciocan should be praised for keeping alive and indeed trying hard to extend the project of phenomenology, his methodological advances are not matched by a comparable readiness to recognise the desirability of questioning the limits of canon formation to such an end. But this objection is in no way meant to detract from such an impressive work, both in its genealogical as well as prospective dimensions. Rather, it is hoped that, should the writer consider opportunities for an English version – since this study clearly deserves to be known outside a restricted Romanian-speaking circle – a revised edition would extend the phenomenological lineage to "incorporate" those thinkers that have contributed crucial insights into the problematic of corporeality.

References

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