

Studi

Quo Vadis, Self? A Comment on “The Importance of Sensing One’s Movements in the World for the Sense of Personal Identity” by Haselager, Broens, & Quilici Gonzalez

Giuseppe Mininni

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Riassunto *Quo vadis, Self? Alcune osservazioni su “L’importanza della percezione dei propri movimenti nel mondo per il senso di identità personale” di Haselager, Broens, and Quilici Gonzalez* - Il presente testo discute il nucleo teorico dell’argomentazione proposta da Haselager, Broens e Quilici Gonzalez in *The Importance of Sensing One’s Movements in the World for the Sense of Personal Identity*, secondo cui il movimento spontaneo è il fattore corporeo più rilevante rispetto alla genesi dell’identità personale nei processi psichici. Questo lavoro cerca inoltre di mostrare come tale principio possa essere ricompreso in un quadro epistemologico che renda conto della duplice dinamica sottesa alla costituzione del sé, data dall’intersezione fra il *Mind-Body Problem* e il *Mind-Culture Problem*. Le interpretazioni suggerite concernono la possibilità di ancorare le esperienze dell’io alle sensazioni corporee intese come manifestazioni di un’ontologia della carne, e alla matrice semiotica interente sia l’attività del movimento che la proto consapevolezza della potenzialità del movimento stesso. Infatti, anche nei primi movimenti che generano la sensazione di essere “qualcuno” e non “qualcosa” si innesca una ricerca di senso realizzata progressivamente come individuazione di una direzione, ossia la presa in carico di una meta e l’elaborazione di un progetto.

PAROLE CHIAVE: Agentività; Soggettività; Tecnologie del corpo; Ontologia della carne; Culturalismo metodologico.

Abstract This paper discusses the core arguments proposed by Haselager, Broens, and Quilici Gonzalez in their paper *The Importance of Sensing One’s Movements in the World for the Sense of Personal Identity*, according to which spontaneous movement is the most relevant bodily factor with respect to the genesis of personal identity in human psychic processes. Moreover, this research aims to show that this principle could be included in an epistemological framework that can account for the double dynamic underlying the constitution of the Self, given by the intersection between the *Mind-Body Problem* and the *Mind-Culture Problem*. The paper suggests that it is possible to bind “I”-Experiences on the one hand to bodily sensations, understood as manifestations of a “flesh ontology”, and on the other to a semiotic matrix which is related to both the activity of movement and the proto-awareness of the potentiality for movement itself. Indeed, the early movements that generate the sensation of being “someone” and not only “something” already trigger a search for sense which is progressively carried out by determining a direction, i.e. choosing a goal and working out a strategy to reach that goal.

KEYWORDS: Agency; Subjectivity; Body Technologies; Flesh Ontology; Methodological Culturalism.

G. Mininni - Dipartimento di Psicologia e Scienze Pedagogiche e Didattiche - Università degli Studi di Bari “Aldo Moro” (✉)
E-mail: giuseppe.mininni@uniba.it



The Importance of Sensing One's Movements in the World for the Sense of Personal Identity by Haselager, Broens, and Gonzalez reveals how relevant “sensations” are with reference to the ability to “move within the world”. It is argued that the process of construction and regulation of the sense of one's own personal identity ensues from human mobility. The whole argument developed by the Authors aims at enhancing the contribution of the cognitive sciences to the development of a “robotics” which could meet the demands and challenges of a “post-human” condition.

In fact, life is “on the move”. The evolution of human life could be read as a slow process of complexification and implementation of mobility. This physiological basis for life also acts as an ontological metaphor for the social and cultural organization of human beings, since the *movida* is seen as a clear index of interactional and emotional as well as of intellectual and creative vitality. From an anthropological point of view, movement could be seen as an intrinsic trait of the human condition: as a “form of life” that has one of its distinctive elements in migration.¹ But before becoming existential unrest, movement moulds a basic module of mental activity: personal identity. Each restriction on being “free to move” produced by an organic alteration (as in immobilizing pathologies) or by a juridical sanction (as in a jail sentence), is experienced as a severe lesion of the sense of the Self.

The pivot of the argument put forward by Haselager, Broens, and Quilici Gonzalez could be related to «the capacity to have “I”-experiences» which is the matrix of personal identity. Nonetheless, it does not require linguistic or conceptual abilities, which obviously operate at a higher mental level. The matrix of “I-experience” is convincingly defined by Haselager, Broens, and Quilici Gonzalez in the sequence from “move” to “I move” to “I can move”. The core issues of the argumentation are:

- The value of proprioception and kinaesthesia in the genesis of the sense of the body (which should not be confused with one's own bodily image);

- The synergy between an internal perception of movement and the perception of the environment.

The general framework of this argument could be widely shared, since it aims at highlighting the bodily wholeness of the experience of the self. I completely agree with the basic aim of Haselager, Broens, and Quilici Gonzalez' argument which is pervaded by a radical critique of the present *Neuromania*.² Nonetheless, this general proposal seems to be challenged by the implicit adhesion to certain assumptions, starting from the choice to frame the (sense of) self with the ideo-logical construct of “identity” rather than “subjectivity”.³ It is undeniable as asserted by Haselager, Broens and Quilici Gonzalez that «in the history of Western philosophy, the problem of identity has mainly been a problem regarding the *criteria* for identity».⁴

However, the criteria they validate confuse personal identity with the bio-physical condition of human beings. In this way, their argument is exposed to the risk of “normative naturalism”, which characterizes the landscape of philosophy and contemporary sciences. In my opinion, the great limitation of “naturalistic epistemology” comes from its *semiotic reductionism*, since it does not succeed in capturing the qualitative difference between “elaboration” and “contextualisation” of information.

My reflections, on the other hand, do derive from the adhesion to some version of “methodical culturalism”,⁵ already anticipated in the lucid observation by Hegel, according to whom in whatever the man considers the language is present.⁶ In fact, we need a meta-theoretical framework in order to face the insolubility of *qualia*.

For reductionists the main trouble lies in understanding how a multifaceted qualitative experience could arise from a biological-neural substrate. For anti-reductionists, the problem becomes how phenomenological experience could be attached to an un-differentiated material substrate. This is why I will here propose a few comments aimed at enlarging the paradigm by considering that:

► The body's movements could also be viewed as "flesh" movements, namely as a way of thinking of the body as discursively built;⁷

► We should assume Self identity not only in terms of its experience, but also in terms of its expression;

► The prelinguistic I's movements are not presemiotic ones.

In fact, for subject positions to be possible, even bodies and embodiments have to be "made" via discursive production. In a sense, "moving" may be also viewed as a "technique of the body", which is the theoretical approach proposed by Marcel Mauss⁸ in order to emphasize the un-natural and learned characteristic of all gestures and behaviours concerning primary needs, such as feeding, rest and sexuality, which have been for so long considered innate human behaviours. In this line, Mauss also pointed out how corporeality and social binding are inseparable so that they may be thought as two moments of the same lived experience. Thus, the concept of *technique* is appropriate with respect to how human beings *perform* their bodies.

Such a way of thinking is in tune with many research projects in psychology aimed at confirming the validity of the paradigm known as "carnal knowledge". For example, neuro-phenomenology aims at understanding how experience and human knowledge is produced by crossing the biological role of the mind with that of epistemic structures, constructed in personal, social and cultural formats.⁹ Actually, processes of knowledge are not simply modulations of corporal activity, rather they are embedded, that is shaped according to the connotations of history. If the subject matter is not simply "body", but rather "flesh", we are faced with a radical re-configuration of the whole question concerning the sense of the Self.

Starting from the fact that "I"-experiences are not only a set of perceived qualities, but are also the expressing traces of a vital need. This is why the sense of the Self does not consist of passive impressions, but rather of active, dynamic properties, which can reveal

themselves as functional to life itself.

According to the "flesh ontology" proposed by Merleau-Ponty,¹⁰ the embodied mind is the result of a circular agency between the "data" provided by "experience" and the "values" emerging in "expression". Actually the "I"-sense can neither be reduced to *passive* feedback which is deterministically modified by experience nor to a *transcendent* system taking note of *qualia* and interpreting them in a creative way.

Rather, subjectivity is constantly *co-born* with its context of existence in such a way as to set in motion a dialogic "form of life". Thus, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the priority of the *un-determined* towards the always new *determined*. In so doing, he compels us to change our concept of experience itself, not as a *state*, rather as *in-becoming*. Furthermore, he also investigated the concept of *constitution* itself.¹¹

An evolutionary and historical approach may offer insights on how cultural resources are interiorized by individuals in order to act as *social subjects*. Cultural contexts frame the constitution of subjectivities through these *techniques of the body* which aim at regulating it differently.¹² As the material dimension of subjectivity requires a *sentient body*, so its functional one requires a *kinesthetic body*. The "perceived" is not constrained to any signifying operation since it is already structured in its own terms, which are fluid and tolerate ambiguity.

When psychologists perceive themselves as profoundly involved in the challenge of describing the embodied mind, they are urged to assume the "flesh" as constitutive of the psychological domain, by practicing a constant shifting between "natural prompts" and "interpretative repertoires".¹³ From this point of view, *sensation* should be conceived more as a *communion* than as an individual performance. This is why the sense of the Self has the peculiarity of being "perceived" in a frame marked by ambiguity, blurring and context-sensitivity. However, this does not mean that feeling should be considered *per se* as *de-*

structured and un-shaped.

The concept of *technologies of the self* refers to a few practices *enabling* «individuals to act – by themselves or by the means of others – on their bodies and their spirituality. By starting from their thinking, actions, attitudes, in order to produce self-transformation». ¹⁴ Persons, thus, recognize themselves as *subjects through the use* of such technologies, starting from the “movement”, which is the way they become aware of their active presence in the world and with other individuals.

One of the pivots of the rationale developed by Haselager, Broens, and Quilici Gonzalez is that «having an identity is having the capacity to have “I” experiences. However, these “I” experiences need not require linguistic or conceptual capacities». ¹⁵ Such an assumption is linked to their adhesion to the fundamentally monological perspective which has inspired the whole of Western philosophical and scientific thought. The “linguistic turn” started during in the 20th Century and thanks to the contribution of many research projects put the identity issue in the perspective of a «dialogical rationality», ¹⁶ as noted brilliantly by Bakhtin, according to whom «expression organizes experience». ¹⁷

There is no doubt that individuals tend to consider their own identity as the continuity of their own experience of life and the coherence of the story that makes it significant. The experience of the I does not coincide with the expression of the I.

A widespread and convincing line of argumentation allows the dynamic systems which anticipate the linguistic constitution of the I to emerge. In any case, the issue of the pre-linguistic form of the I keeps intact all its relevance since it lets us mark both the theoretical and empirical aspects of human development. There is no doubt that people have a “sense of the Self” both before gaining linguistic competence and after having lost control of a specific linguistic system, after a serious incident and/or pathology.

Consequently, it is important to consider

through what kind of adaptations the mind comes to organize itself as an I, beginning with the sense-motor configurations. But the pre-linguistic I, even if necessarily anchored to the potentialities of the body (in particular of the brain), is in any case a “semiotic I”, which is wrapped in a series of mechanisms of signs, sometimes linked to differentiated triggering principles, such as those which regulate signals, hints, symptoms, facial expressions.

Such an integration has been firmly focused on by most of Infant Researchers, who have recently contributed to defining the extent of early expressions of intersubjectivity. ¹⁸ In fact, the sense of self originates from “movement” since by moving individuals activate “sense” at a zero degree: an “orientation”, a “direction”. “Movement” entails a chance for self-acknowledgement since it hints at the necessity of framing the spatial and temporal coordinates of experience in the agentive perspective of finality.

“To move” is always “to move toward”. The “proto Self” (*à la* Damasio) derives from the possibility of defining an objective for the “moving toward”. Therefore, movement is decisive in the genesis of personal identity since it starts the circuit of final conducts, that is all those behaviors that seem “significant” because they are goal oriented.

Actually the title of Haselager, Broens and Quilici Gonzalez’ text seems to hint at such a perspective because it points to the density of references evoked by the repeated term “sense”, which might be meant in a double direction, whether anchored to the sphere of bodily action – sensation – (sense 1) or to the sphere of mental activity – meaning – (sense 2). The conceptual texture of the word “sense” becomes even more complex by a sort of meta-reference to the practices of movement, which are necessarily oriented in a certain “sense” or “direction” (sense 0).

The whole argument put forward by Haselager, Broens, and Quilici Gonzalez reactivates such a conceptual framework, by showing how the “meaning” of personal identity for

human beings (sense 2) emerges from their “sensation” (sense 1) of being able to move in the world in a certain “direction” (sense 0).

The sense of the body derived by the perception of movement transfigures itself in this moment when the body perceives itself as significant and mostly speaking. Movement is extremely relevant for the genesis of the I in its elementary form. Such relevance is enhanced by the bodily movements which are entailed in sense-making dynamics, and which transform themselves into gestures and words. Of course, even the speaking self is like this because the phonological and articulator apparatus is set in motion. The sounds of the first months of life are the startup phases of the sequence from movement to being able to move.¹⁹

Finally, “movement” is very important in the activation of personal identity also for another semantic trace which is inherent in its being “naturally” oriented. The “moving toward” implies an aspiration to power as a tendency to exercise control over the world. The sense of the self which emerges from the completion of the sequence from “moving” to “being able to move” makes transparent the aspiration to autonomy which derives from the orientation towards power as a form of control over the self and the world (physical and social).

Nonetheless, the expression *motu proprio* identifies a practice in the exercise of power (religious and political) which highlights the feature of “personal initiative”. Indeed, the *motu proprio* is an administrative action or a concession of privilege which emphasizes the king, a human figure who represents the freedom of willing.

Nowadays most philosophers and psychologists would agree with the Haselager, Broens, and Quilici Gonzalez’ last sentence, according to which «identity may perhaps be likened rather to a multitude than to a unity»,²⁰ but such a perspective may be best framed by a “culturalist epistemology”, because it proposes the criteria of personal identity as interactionally textured. In this sense the argument proposed by Haselager, Broens, and Quilici Gonzalez could even be used from

a cultural pragmatics perspective in favour of the chance to develop a worldwide identity thanks to the large scale movements of migrations. Indeed, «migrations are a condition for understanding space and for making sense of it».²¹

Really, culture as a whole of practices, values, objectives contributes to shape any move in space as a form of “agency”. Even proprioceptive movement and the kinesthetic sense are embedded by expectations. Neither “movements” could be understood as separated from culture, as if they took place in a space which is ideally empty and devoid of historical and social references. Bodies do not go towards their Self in the same way when moving on a steppe-like ground or on a glittering floor.

Notes

¹ See C. WIDMANN, *Il viaggio come metafora dell'esistenza*, Edizioni Scientifiche Magi, Roma 1999.

² For an open-minded critique, see J. CROMBY, *Between Constructionism and Neuroscience: The Societal Co-constitution of Embodied Subjectivity*, in: «Theory & Psychology», vol. XIV, n. 6, 2004, pp. 797-821.

³ See I. STENGERS, *Experimenting with Refrains: Subjectivity and the Challenge of Escaping Modern Dualism*, in: «Subjectivity», vol. XXII, n. 1, 2008, pp. 38-59.

⁴ W.F.G. HASELAGER, M. BROENS, M.E. QUILICI GONZALEZ, *The Importance of Sensing One's Movements in the World for the Sense of Personal Identity*, in: «Rivista Internazionale di Filosofia e Psicologia», vol. III, n. 1, 2012, pp. 1-11, here p. 2.

⁵ See D. HARTMANN, R. LANGE, *Epistemology Culturalized*, in: «Journal for General Philosophy of Science», vol. XXXI, n. 1, 2000, pp. 75-107.

⁶ See G.W.F. HEGEL, *Wissenschaft der Logik* (1812), in G.W.F. HEGEL, *Werke in 20 Bände*, Bd. 5-6, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M.

⁷ See P. GILBERT, K. LENNON, *The World, the Flesh and the Subject*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2005.

⁸ See M. MAUSS, *Techniques of the Body*, in: «Economy and Society», vol. II, n. 1, 1973, pp. 70-88.

⁹ See M. WINKWELMAN, *Neurophenomenology and Genetic Epistemology as a Basis for the Study of Consciousness*, in: «Journal of Social and Evolutionary Systems», vol. XIX, n. 3, 1996, pp. 217-236.

¹⁰ See M. MERLEAU-PONTY, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Gallimard, Paris 1945.

¹¹ See R. LANFREDINI, *Qualia e sensazioni: Merleau-Ponty e la nozione di esperienza*, in: R. LANFREDINI (a cura di), *Divenire di Merleau-Ponty. Filosofia di un soggetto incarnato*, Guerini, Milano 2011, pp. 69-86.

¹² See J. CROMBY, *Between Constructionism and Neuroscience: The Societal Co-constitution of Embodied Subjectivity*, in: «Theory & Psychology», vol. XIV, n. 6, 2004, pp. 797-821.

¹³ See J. CRESSWELL, *Towards a Post-critical Praxis: Intentional States & Recommendations for Change in Acculturation Psychology*, in: «International Journal of Intercultural Relations», vol. XXXIII, n. 2, 2009, pp. 162-172.

¹⁴ M. FOUCAULT, *Technologies of the Self. A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, edited by L.H. MARTIN, H. GUTMAN, P.H. HUTTON, Massachusetts University Press, Amherst 1988, p. 13.

¹⁵ W.F.G. HASELAGER, M. BROENS, M.E. QUILICI GONZALEZ, *The Importance of Sensing One's Movements in the World for the Sense of Personal Identity*, cit., p. 3.

¹⁶ See H. WILLMOTT, *Social Constructionism and Communication Studies: Hearing the Conversation but*

Losing the Dialogue, in: S.A. DEETZ (ed.), *Communication Yearbook*, vol. XVII, Sage, Thousand Oaks 1994, pp. 42-54.

¹⁷ M. BAKHTIN, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*, translated by C. HEMERSON, M. HOLQUIST, Texas University Press, Austin 1981.

¹⁸ See N. CROSSLEY, *Intersubjectivity. The Fabric of Social Becoming*, Sage, London 1996. See also L. CARLI, C. RODINI (a cura di), *Le forme di intersoggettività. L'implicito e l'esplicito nelle relazioni interpersonali*, Raffaello Cortina Editore, Milano 2008; G. MININNI, *Teste e testi. Per una psicologia del significare*, Aracne, Roma 2010.

¹⁹ See J. CRESSWELL, U. TEUCHER, *The Body and Language: M. M. Bakhtin on Ontogenetic Development*, in: «New Ideas in Psychology», vol. XXIX, n. 2, 2011, pp. 106-118.

²⁰ W.F.G. HASELAGER, M. BROENS, M.E. QUILICI GONZALEZ, *The Importance of Sensing One's Movements in the World for the Sense of Personal Identity*, cit., p. 8.

²¹ L. FORTUNATI, R. PERTIERRA, J. VINCENT, *Migrations and Diasporas: Making Their World Elsewhere*, in: L. FORTUNATI, R. PERTIERRA, J. VINCENT (eds.), *Migration, Diaspora, and Information Technology in Global Societies*, Routledge, New York 2012, pp. 1-20, here p. 5.