




Proceeding Paper

Reflections on Human Subjectivity in the Information Society from the Body Philosophy[†]

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Abstract: In the information society, people can think about the existence of subjectivity through the philosophy of the body. Body philosophy breaks the dominance of consciousness and constructs human subjectivity from the body, so that people can realize the unity of body and mind through the body. People understand each other through physical perception, behavior, and speech. Finally, body philosophers such as Merleau-Ponty explained the intercorporate as “flesh” from the dimension of ontology, and the homology based on “flesh” completely broke the barrier of the dichotomy between subject and object and established an inseparable connection with the world. Body philosophy solves the problem of how to deal with the relationship between humans and others and nature in the information society, which helps people not to lose themselves in the information society and determine their own existence and value in the world.

Keywords: human subjectivity; information society; body subject; speech; flesh

1. Introduction

In the information society, the development of modern artificial intelligence has greatly promoted the convenience of people's life, such as automatic driving, deep learning, automatic medical service robot, and so on. However, the development of artificial intelligence is also changing people's social existence, such as people being addicted to mobile phones, transportation, and the internet. This makes us ponder a philosophical question; the question is that when in a highly artificial intelligence information society, if various intelligent technologies and machines replace human labor and serve human survival, how can people exist after losing the physical attribute of labor? How can people find the meaning of life? The body philosophy offers us a solution.

In the history of philosophy, there have been many discussions about human subjectivity. For example, among Western philosophers, Descartes believed that humans have the ability of self-reflection, Kant believed that humans have rational autonomy, and Marx believed that the essence of humans is labor. Chinese philosophers, such as Confucius, believed that human nature is a kind of interpersonal relationship. Since Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Merleau-Ponty, and other existentialist philosophers regard the body as the subject of human beings, the philosophy of the body provides us with a way to explore the subjectivity of human beings.

2. Self: The Meaning of Body Subject

In the information society, how can we distinguish between humans and higher intelligence? The essential difference between human and advanced intelligence is that humans have a mind and a body. There are two kinds of knowledge about the body. One is the body in the Cartesian sense; that is, the body is a machine subject to consciousness. This view of the body stems from Plato's separation of mind and body. This kind of body



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is non-self-sufficiency, which has produced behaviorist epistemology. Although the theory of mind–body dualism was conducive to the development of natural science at that time, it could not reasonably explain the physical behavior of human beings. Human beings are composed of two entities, namely body (material) and consciousness (mind). However, the theory of mind–body dualism could not explain the fact that human psychology and physical behavior are consistent. Therefore, in fact, the behaviorist epistemology based on mind–body dualism cannot explain the non-representational characteristics of people’s behaviors.

The other kind of body is the body in the phenomenological sense, in which body and mind are united. For instance, Merleau-Ponty explained the non-representational characteristics of people’s behaviors, cognizing and learning technology through body-subject. Through Merleau-Ponty’s body phenomenology, we can know that body behaviors are not simple mechanical stimulus-response actions. Instead, the body expands the scope of body perception and space to understand and integrate with the world through the apperception and extension of the body schema. Merleau-Ponty proposed body schema as a “gestalt” form in the sense of gestalt psychology. It is not a simple combination of body senses in the process of experience, but a unity of tactile, kinesthetic, and visual senses. Modern neuroscience has proved that the movement of the body is the result of completely different brain systems working together, which “work together in such a way that a kinetic/kinesthetic melody unfolds” [1]. We feel the shape and structure of things through the overall perception of the body, and the senses of the body are intertwined to become the “apperception” of the body. Therefore, the body has the original comprehensive perception ability, and this initial perception ability lays the foundation for the body to learn and understand other things. At last, people can form the body intentionally so that the body can spontaneously guide the actions and change actions with the change of the phenomenon field. Here, the spiritual body is “I can” rather than “I think”. The body is not only an in-itself being occupying the space, but also a conscious being that can distinguish the self from the other selves. In the real world, the body merges the physical and the spiritual. Man is a unity of understanding and feeling, which is not only the essential difference between man and artificial intelligence, but also the foundation of man’s existence in the world. It is the integration of body and mind that makes people have embodied cognition and behavior, and makes people completely different from artificial intelligence.

3. Self and Other Selves: Speech Uses the Body as Its Way of Being

In the process of interpersonal communication, speech is the most important way, but in order to realize real communication between people, the presence of the body is still needed, because speech is the way of existence of the body. In speech, words and meanings are a whole, just as when children learn speech, they do not learn words first, nor do they have the thought with the meaning of objects first, but acquire the meaning of words and objects at the same time. When children learn speech, they do not place themselves outside the speech environment, but know that they are already a member of the speech. When children speak, they already convey the meaning of words and express their thoughts. Therefore, words in speech are not objects; the meaning contained in words and words themselves are one, so we know words is to know the unity of words and their meanings. As for how to understand the meaning in speech, according to Merleau-Ponty, although consciousness can predict the solution to the problem, people still cannot determine the solution predicted by consciousness when they communicate in speech. Merleau-Ponty believes that speech is not a tool or means, but people’s experience of the world. Speech symbols are quasi-physical, and only the body can explain the unity of words and their meanings.

Therefore, speech is not a tool. It is ultimately people’s experience of the world and their way of being in the world through physical behaviors. Gestures or body movements are “natural symbols”, while speech is a later relationship between people, a kind of “agreed symbols”. When we go back to the original rule system of speech, we find that only nature

is related to the meaning of speech. After all, speech is ultimately a “natural sign”, and an “agreed sign” should be based on the “natural sign” of the body movements. Therefore, when I communicate with others, we use the “natural signs” of the body to understand and express the meaning of words. Like the body’s understanding of actions, the ability to organize symbols and interpret the meaning of words belongs to the body’s “I can” rather than “I think”. Thus, once children learn speech, their expression is pre-reflective. When I want to express my thoughts, words naturally appear in front of me. This ability to organize symbols and explain the meaning of words belongs to the “I can” of the body. When we express our thoughts with words, it is as natural and smooth as when we touch our body parts with our hands. We simply read them in the same way that we recall the words, and in this process, I do not need to recall the words in the speech; I can recognize them, read them, and know their meaning. The body of speech is also manifested in the presence of the body, which emphasizes the speech phenomenon field between people. The self, the other selves, and the directed object constitute a verbal phenomenon field. The body of the other-selves is not presented in front of my eyes as an object, but lingering around me. It is the existence of the field of speech that enables us to communicate with others. For example, in a conversation, other people’s gestures, facial expressions, voice length, intonation, and other physical factors affect the meaning of the conversation. Artificial intelligence cannot have the consistency of words and meanings and cannot have the body speech phenomenon field, so it cannot communicate with others deeply, which is one of the differences between human and artificial intelligence.

4. Self and World: The Interweaving of “Flesh” and Body

Merleau-Ponty explained the path of self to others from the perspective of intercorporate, which solved the dilemma of solipsism. Merleau-Ponty thought that no matter whether the self knew others from the body perception or speech, both ways showed the interweaving and conversation between bodies. People can communicate and understand each other through the interweaving and conversation between bodies of intercorporate, which makes the relationship between people change from the subject–object relation of “I-it” to the subject-subject relation of “I-you”, thus it dissolves the estrangement between self and others. Merleau-Ponty put forward the concept of “flesh” from the perspective of ontology to explain the interwoven relationship between the body and the world. In his view, the body is not matter, spirit, or substance, but should be referred to by the term “element”. The “flesh” is the interweaving between the body and the world. “It is no different, in spite of what may appear to be the case, with my tactile body, for if I can, with my left hand, feel my right hand as it touches an object, the right hand as an object is not the right hand as it touches: the first is a system of bones, muscles, and flesh brought down at a point of space, the second shoots through space like a rocket to reveal the external object in its place. In so far as it sees or touches the world, my body can therefore be neither seen nor touched” [2]. The body is essentially more than the beholder and the toucher, more than what is seen and touched, but the active and the touched. My hands touch each other, my left hand can feel my right hand touching, my right hand can feel my left hand touching, and there is an interweaving cycle between the two touched hands.

In Merleau-Ponty’s later thought, nature has already acquired the ontological or ontological significance like “flesh”, and nature has the power of wild, sensual, and generative. Merleau-Ponty’s ultimate aim is to show that nature is not a lifeless object, but a spiritual being with the spiritual meaning of man. It is precise because the body is open to the world; the body and the natural world have unity, interweaving and reciprocal. According to Merleau-Ponty’s ontological explanation of the “flesh”, all natural things and bodies come from the “flesh”, and there is an inseparable relationship between the body and all things in the world, like these two hands touching each other. In Merleau-Ponty’s view, the concept of “flesh” sublimates the interwoven and reciprocal relationship between the body and the world. The “flesh” is the reversibility of the ambiguous interweaving between the body and the world. The “flesh” is not closed but open to the world, so that the body is not only

interwoven with the body, but the body is also interwoven with the external world. Therefore, people ultimately tend to a universal common “world flesh”, and the reversibility of the interweaving of the body is transmitted to the body and the world, material and spirit, so that people’s perception and behavior realize the universal connection.

In thinking about human subjectivity, body philosophy shows a logical approach to the “self-others-world”, which is progressive layer by layer and from the inside out. This thinking process actually helps people determine their own existence and value in the information society. It also solves the problem of how people behave themselves in the information society and how to deal with the relationship between humans and other selves and nature.

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