

Bodily Praxis in Merleau-Ponty and Chuang Tzu

Wu-Tso Lin

In phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty is well known for his analysis of the body. Comparatively, in Taoism, Chuang Tzu also develops an interesting view of the body. While Merleau-Ponty points out what the meaning of human bodily praxis is, he expounds how to put human bodily praxis into reality. On the one hand, Merleau-Ponty focuses on the essence of our body, On the other hand, Chuang Tzu stresses its dynamics.

This essay aims to compare Merleau-Ponty's and Chuang Tzu's views of human body. This should reflect the difference of bodily praxis in Western and Eastern philosophy. It mainly consists of three parts. First, it will start with an analysis of Merleau-Ponty's concept of the body schema. This will show the ontological role of the body in our experiences. Second, it will expose Chuang Tzu's view on bodily praxis. Finally, by comparing these approaches, it will demonstrate how a practical verification of the essential structure of the body in which we have lived is possible. This should contribute to a new understanding of the affinity between phenomenology and Taoism.

I.

The orientation of body schema in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is not only a perception but also an intentional activity. So, Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*¹ illustrates the body-subject as an alternative to the Cartesian cogito. This is also a consequence of the field concept of the world, as opposed to the traditional idea of the world as a collection of objects. For Merleau-Ponty, the world and the human body as a perceiving subject are twisted and mutually influenced. Besides, Merleau-Ponty thinks that the body is not only an external object recognized by our reason, it owns the ability of experience perception and manifests anything the hidden meaning in the world. He said: "We find in the unity of the body the same implicatory structure as we have already described in discussing space. The various parts of my body, its visual, tactile and motor aspects are not simply coordinate."² So, he wants to look for the real existence of our body by asking what it is that happens when we see or do something. In these situations, what we typically do does not involve comparing our beliefs of the world. Rather, it depends on our ability to skillfully cope with objects in the world, that is, to successfully be able to negotiate our way in the world through our sense organs. It is this ability that gives us a practical confidence in our beliefs and indeed they form the basis of our beliefs. A movement is learned when the body has understood it, this is, when it has incorporated it into its 'world', and to 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.³ This is telling us that the meaning of bodily praxis in Merleau-Ponty's philosophical system is to find what the capability and essence of the concept of perception is. In this sense, Merleau-Ponty declares that consciousness is being towards the world through the intermediary of the body.

Merleau-Ponty further points out that perception results from our body through the use of its pre-conscious control of the world's construction. The body with its inherited subjectivity intentionally reconstructs things within an ever-increasing world frame according to the specific qualities it encounters. The appearances of things are that upon which our body has a grip, while the grip itself is a function of our interaction with the world. Generally, objects are given only in a certain perspective and at a certain moment. Things seen from our perspective transcend our view, and yet are immanent in it. By a pre-conscious act of 'original faith' we immediately place this phenomenal object in the world, where it blends in with other things and behaves like any 'figure' against a certain background. Just as much as our own unity as a bodily subject is not an unity in thought, but one that is experienced in our interaction with our surroundings, so the unity of the object is 'perceived' as pervading all of its perspectives. We do not consciously construct the object, but rather allow it to construct itself before our eyes, only when this unconscious process results in perceptive ambiguity, i.e. when the body is unable to present us the thing in any clearly articulated way, the subject will consciously interfere and clarify his perception. Apart from such instances, the subjectivity of the perceiving body operates unknown to the conscious subject, engaging the pre-objective fact and discloses the rationality of the world to the subject. Thus we encounter meaningful things in a unified though ever open-ended world. But this does not diminish their reality.

Critics have remarked that while Merleau-Ponty makes a great effort to break away from Cartesian dualism, in the end, the *Phenomenology of Perception* still starts out from opposing relationship of the consciousness and its objects. In fact, Merleau-Ponty himself also acknowledged this, and in his later work he proceeded from a standpoint of unity, replacing notions that still centered on the subject by notions of 'Being', and emphasizing the interchangeable essence of seeing and being visible.

All in all, Merleau-Ponty shows that the body is not just a spatial object,⁴ and particularly we need not to follow the traditional Cartesian idea in making the distinction between mind and body. Body has its own potential which could open itself to the world. Bodily praxis does not depend on any external or internal efficient cause. Merleau-Ponty therefore said, "In short, my body is not only an object among all other objects, a nexus of sensible qualities among others, but an object which is sensitive to all the rest, which reverberates to all sounds, vibrates to all colors, and provides words with their primordial significance through the way in which it receive them."⁵ This also explains the concept of body's schema⁶ in Merleau-Ponty's sense.

For Merleau-Ponty, the human body is an entirety of living meaning, it is full of intentional organization, intentional network, and intentional structure. And this intentionality can only be put into practice just by way of bodily praxis. So, we find in the unity of the body the same implicatory structure as we have already described in discussing space. The various parts of my body, its visual, tactile and motor aspects are not simply coordinated.⁷ So he says, "I am no longer concerned with my body, nor with time, nor with the world, as I experience them in ante-predicative knowledge, in the inner communion that I have with them. I now refer to my body only as an idea, to the universe as an idea, to the idea of space and the idea of time."⁸ He also stresses that, "the normal man and the actor do not mistake imaginary situations for reality, but extricate their really body from the living situation to make them breathe, speak and, if need be, weep in the realm of imagination. This is what our patient is no longer able to

do. In general, I experience the movements as being a result of the situation, of the sequence of events themselves; myself and my movements, are so to speak, merely a link in the whole process and I am scarcely aware of any voluntary initiative. It all happens independently of me.”⁹ Therefore, it is in the same way theoretically understandable that mental illness may, in its turn, be linked with some bodily accident; consciousness projects itself into a physical world and has a body, as it projects itself into a cultural world and has its habits: because it cannot be consciousness without playing upon significances given either in the absolute past of nature or in its own personal past, and because any form of lived experience tends towards a certain generality whether that of our habits or that of our ‘bodily functions’. These elucidations enable us clearly to understand motility as basic intentionality.¹⁰

Against the influence of the Cartesian tradition, Merleau-Ponty hence claims that the human consciousness is in the first place not a matter of ‘I think that’ but of ‘I can’. In reality, what the body is doing more than what our mind is thinking. The practical body is an action-subject, not a motionless-object. As he further expounded, “I cannot take it to pieces and reform it to make a clear idea. Its unity is always implicit and vague. It is always something other than what it is, always sexuality and at the same time freedom, rooted in nature at the very moment when it is transformed by cultural influences, never hermetically sealed and never left behind. I am my body, at least wholly to the extent that I possess experience, and yet at the same time my body is as it were a ‘natural’ subject, a provisional sketch of my total being. Thus experience of one’s own body runs counter to the reflective procedure which detaches subject and object from each other, and which gives us only the thought about the body, or the body as an idea, and not the experience of the body or the body in reality.”¹¹ Because our own body is in the world as the heart is in the organism: it keeps the visible spectacle constantly alive, it breathes life into it and sustains it inwardly, and with it forms a system. We could not grasp the unity of the object without the mediation of bodily experience. But conceiving my body itself as a mobile object that I am able to interpret perceptual appearance and construct the cube as it truly is.¹²

To sum up, the body is not a transparent object, and is not presented to us in virtue of the law of its constitution, as the circle is to the geometer, if it is an expressive unity which we can learn to know only by actively taking it up, this structure will be passed on to the sensible world. So called, in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, the theory of the body image is, implicitly, a theory of perception. We have relearned to feel our body; we have found underneath the objective and detached knowledge of the body that other knowledge which we have of it in virtue of its always being with us and of the fact that we are our body. In the same way we shall need to reawaken our experience of the world as it appears to us in so far as we are in the world through our body, and in so far as we perceive the world with our body. But by thus remaking contact with the body with the world, we shall also rediscover ourselves, since, perceiving as we do with our body is a natural self and, as it were, the subject of perception. It is my body which gives significance not only to the natural object, but also to cultural object, like words.

Therefore, as Merleau-Ponty pointed out, we should put the perceptive subject ‘I’ and physical ‘I’ together and regard these two ‘I’ as one integer ‘I’. But we cannot separate mind from body, for they are the self-sufficient unified organism. The unified body is the root cause of human being, even as the meaning of life-world and the value of being. Meaning of

the body is not like the role that played in the past. In this way, Merleau-Ponty overthrows traditional point of view and manifests new transcend meaning for our body. It no longer only owns material or physical connotation.

II.

Chuang Tzu aims to show us a kind of bodily praxis free from restraint. He has an idea that human life is limited and things to know are unlimited. So, if we use the limitation of life to look for the unlimited, he told us, it would be foolish. Hence he said, “Your life have a limit but knowledge has none. If you use what is limited to pursue what has no limit, you will be in danger. If you understand this and still strive for knowledge, you will be in danger for certain! If you do good, stay away from fame. If you do evil, stay away from punishments. Follow the middle; go by what is constant, and you can stay in one piece, keep yourself alive, look after your parents, and live out your years.”¹³

Furthermore, for Chuang Tzu, that our comprehension, language, cognition, manner, education etc. are all biased by our human perspectives. So we should be hesitant in concluding that our conclusions are equally right for all things. In addition to the other three points of view of bodily praxis, first, we should regard all things as equal and second, we should quiet our minds and forget anything which bothers and disturbs us. Finally, we should depart from our body to get into a state of the ‘True Man’¹⁴, and the state is a dimension of logos, which is named ‘Tao’.

III.

Chuang Tzu’s view on bodily praxis is totally different from Merleau-Ponty’s. Because Merleau-Ponty pays much attention to the bodily praxis and regards the body as a subject, not an object. But Chuang Tzu to consider that, the importance of body, we should not emphasize it in order to keep off distress which hurt our life and make us feel greatly. Chuang Tzu is not concerned with words and formulas about reality, but with the direct existential grasp of reality in itself. Such a grasp is necessarily obscure and does not lend itself to abstract analysis. So, he claims that the body is short period matter, we should put less attention in it, but we should eliminate the influence and disturb of body’s action, and remove our aspirations in our mind, while we do above, we could reach a realm that call the ‘True Man’.

So he tells us a fable in *the Great and Venerable Teacher* and says that , “The True Man of ancient times knew nothing of loving life, knew nothing of hating death. He emerged without delight; he went back in without a fuss. He came briskly, he went briskly, and that was all. He didn’t forget where he began; he didn’t try to find out where he would end. He received something and took pleasure in it; he forgot about it and handed it back again. This is what I call not using the mind to repel the Way, not using man to help out Heaven. This is what I call the True Man.”¹⁵

So, we can also say that the final purpose of bodily praxis of Chuang Tzu is attaining the life state of the ‘True Man’. So, Chuang Tzu’s concept of the ‘True Man’ represents the ideal of

the human being, which is different from the the 'Superior Man' in the Confucian sense. For Confucianism, the Tao is articulated in terms of the moral good. But Chuang Tzu insists that the Tao on which Confucius set his heart is not yet the great Tao. For Chuang Tzu, the Tao can only be achieved by returning to nature. However, the Tao in the sense of Confucianism is harmful for human nature and consequently guides bodily praxis to a blind alley. On the contrary, the Tao in the Taoist sense is the gateway to nature. Accordingly, it teaches us how to put bodily praxis into practice, in order to become the 'True Man'. This is particularly shown in the following story told by Chuang Tzu:

Another day, the two met again and Yen Hui said, 'I'm improving!'
Confucius said, 'What do you mean by that?'
Yen Hui said, 'I can sit down and forget everything!'
Confucius looked very startled and said, 'What do you mean, sit down and forget everything.'
Yen Hui said, 'I smash up my limbs and body, drive out perception and intellect, cast off form, do away with understanding, and make myself identical with the Great Thoroughfare. This is what I mean by sitting down and forgetting everything.'
Confucius said, 'If you're identical with it, you must have no more likes! If you have been transformed, you must have no more constancy! So you really are a worthy man after all! With your permission, I'd like to become your follower.'¹⁶

This story explains the way of bodily praxis, the so called 'sitting down and forgetting everything.'

Furthermore, Chuang Tzu also thought that, If virtue is preeminent, the body will be forgotten. But when men do not forget what can be forgotten, but forget what cannot be forgotten that may be called true forgetting. So the sage has his wanderings. For him, knowledge is an offshoot. Such an approach is entire different from that of Merleau-Ponty's one. Because the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty rehabilitates perception as source of all knowledge and seeks to understand the subject of knowledge as 'a body of its own'. The ways of Merleau-Ponty's bodily praxis by sense experience, speech, movement, and sexual desire. And these are open to the world as well as demonstrate the inner value of body itself, and the body is, totally, can be accomplished itself, for it is the subject.

But, the philosophy of Chuang Tzu transcends Merleau-Ponty's theory above and his approach can lend a support to Merleau-Ponty's one. Consequently Chuang Tzu told us, "We can't expect a blind man to appreciate beautiful patterns or a deaf man to listen to bells and drums. And blindness and deafness are not confined to the body alone, the understanding has them too, as your words just now have shown. This man, with this virtue of his, is about to embrace the ten thousand things and roll them into one. Though the age calls for reform, why should he wear himself out over the affairs of the world? There is nothing that can harm this man. Though flood waters pile up to the sky, he will not drown. Though a great drought melts metal and stone and scorches the earth and hills, he will not be burned?"¹⁷

Further, while explaining the concepts of sitting down and forgetting everything, Chuang Tzu says, "Make your will one. Don't listen with your ears, listen with your mind. No, don't listen with your mind, but listen with your spirit. Listening stops with the ears, the mind stops with recognition, but spirit is empty and waits on all things. The Way gathers in emptiness alone. Emptiness is the fasting of the mind"¹⁸... Just go along with things and let your mind move

freely. Resign yourself to what cannot be avoided and nourish what is within you—this is best.”¹⁹

Accordingly, Chuang Tzu demands our mind wander in simplicity, blend our spirit with the vastness, follow along with things the way they are, and make no room for personal views then the world will be governed.²⁰

In brief, Chuang Tzu point is that we need not think highly of the value of our bodily praxis. Sometimes we should see through life and death and see through the vanity of the world. Because we received life because the time had come, we will lose them because the order of things passes on. Be content with this time and dwell in this order and then neither sorrow nor joy can touch you. In ancient times this was called the ‘freeing of the bound.’ There are those who cannot free themselves, because they are bound by things.²¹

Therefore, in *The Sign of Virtue Complete*, when Hui Tzu asked Chuang Tzu, “If he doesn’t try to help life along, then how can he keep himself alive?” Chuang Tzu answered, “The Way gave him a face; Heaven gave him a form. He doesn’t let likes or dislikes get in and do him harm.”²²

All in all, while Merleau-Ponty describes the proper essence of the living body, Chuang Tzu tells us how to properly live our body.

NOTES

1. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge & K. Paul; New York : Humanities Press, 1962).

2. Ibid., p.149.

3. Ibid., p.139.

4. Ibid., p.198.

5. Ibid., p.236.

6. The body schema is not a perception, a belief, or an attitude. Rather, it is a system of motor and postural functions that operate below the level of self-referential intentionality, although such functions can enter into and support intentional activity.

7. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith, p.149.

8. Ibid., p.71.

9. Ibid., p.105.

10. Ibid., p.137.

11. Ibid., pp.198-199.

12. Ibid., p.203.

13. Burton Watson, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), p.45.

14. We also can say the Perfect Man or the Holy Man. And the ‘True Man’ is therefore not the man who has, by a lifetime of study and practice, accumulated a great fund of virtue and merit, but the man in whom ‘Tao acts without impediment,’ the ‘man of Tao.’

15. Burton Watson, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, p.77.

16. Ibid., p.75.

17. Ibid., p.30.

18. Ibid., pp.57-58.

19. Ibid., p.61.
20. Ibid., p.94.
21. Ibid., p.65.
22. Ibid., p.76.