RECOGNIZING MYSELF IN MY EXPRESSIVE BODY: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL ACCOUNT

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Abstract

In this paper I would like to investigate the possibility of one's recognition of oneself in his/her lived body. Specifically, I will maintain the thesis that one can recognize him/herself as a person in his/her bodily expressive behaviour. In order to do so, I will give an account of the latter that, even recognizing the pre-reflective nature of bodily expressions, tries to highlight their belonging to the personal sphere of our life as embodied beings. At the basis of such an account, the idea of an individual bodily expressive style as a counterpart of one's whole personal style will be developed.

Keywords: Bodily expressive style, Personhood, Recognition, Motivational laws.

Introduction

In the framework of the contemporary debate on embodied cognition (O'Regan and Noë 2001; Wilson 2002; Zahavi 2002, 2014; Gallagher 2005, 2017; Clark 2008; Heinamaa 2011; Colombetti 2014), in this paper I would like to investigate the possibility of one's recognition of oneself in his/her lived, and specifically expressive, body.

From a phenomenological perspective, which is the one I would like to assume here, it is generally underlined that one's access to his/her body is a peculiar one. My body is experienced by me from a first-person perspective as a lived body (*Leib*) and not as a mere object (*Körper*) (Husserl 1952, Merleau-Ponty 1945). A specific aspect of such an experience is that I experience my own body partly by means of outer perception (as in the case of the perception of other spatio-temporal objects), partly by means of proprioception. Indeed, outer perception does not suffice to account for the way in which we experience our own body. Stein (1917), for instance, notes that, if it were given solely in acts of outer perception, our body would appear as the strangest object. It would be experienced as a material

thing whose appearances would exhibit weird gaps. It would constantly withhold some of its parts, such as its back, showing us possible courses of perception to make such hidden profiles present, but then hiding them inevitably to us (Stein 1917, pp. 38-39). However, far from being experienced just this way, my body can be experienced by me proprioceptively, "from within" so to say. Lived this way, my body, differently from other physical objects, can never completely vanish for me: it is always there, with a tangible nearness that no other object has. As Stein herself continues, also if we shut our eyes and stretch out our arms so that no limb can touch any other, we cannot really get rid of our body (Stein 1917, p. 39). My body is always there, it belongs to me and I discover that I can feel it proprioceptively even when I have no outer perception of it. Proprioceptively I can have a sense of my body as my own lived body (Leib), which I cannot have of any other object or foreign body. In this sense, I have a specific first-person perspective on my own body. Such an experience allows me to perceive my body not actually as something that I have, but as something that *I am* (Zahavi 2002, p. 19).¹

Such a double access I can have to my body, i.e. a proprioceptive one and an outer-perceptual one, is so that proprioception and outer perception do not necessarily convey the same information to me. Indeed, it is a very common experience that I am not proprioceptively aware of the way in which my body looks like from the outside. Interestingly for my purposes here, this is what often happens with bodily expressions in our everyday life. Indeed, bodily expressions are often performed pre-reflectively, in the sense that they are not consciously reflected upon and are unthematic, so that they are not the intentional focus of our experiences and they rather stand in the background of our attention. Moreover, they are usually experienced by the subject proprioceptively and not by means of outer perception, so that when one has the opportunity to look at his/ her bodily expressions from the outside, s/he might discover something unexpected and even sometimes find it difficult to attribute that expressive behavior to him/herself. Indeed, bodily expressions are perceptually accessible better to others than to ourselves, exactly because what proprioception conveys of our bodily behavior is often not the same as what outer perception can convey.

This opens a philosophically tricky question about recognition of oneself in one's expressive behavior: since, as mentioned, my bodily expressions are not completely transparent to me – because of the dual (percep-

¹ Similarly, Merleau-Ponty 1945, pp. 98-147.

tual and proprioceptive) nature of my experience of my body – and since they are often performed pre-reflectively, can I actually recognize *myself* in my bodily expressions? If yes, which *aspects of myself* can I recognize in my bodily behavior?

In this paper I would like to maintain the thesis that I can actually recognize myself in my bodily expressive behavior and, more specifically, that I can recognize some aspects of the *person* I am. In order to do so, I will give an account of expressive bodily behavior that, even recognizing the pre-reflective nature of bodily expressions, tries to highlight their belonging to the *personal* sphere of our life as embodied beings. This will allow me to maintain that one can recognize some personal traits of him/herself in his/her bodily expressions: this does not mean that this is always the case but at least that it can be so sometimes.

The paper will be organized as follows. In Section 1, I will specify what a person is in my account, which is crucial for me to properly defend the idea that sometimes one can recognize oneself as a *person* in one's expressive behavior. In Section 2, I will present some phenomenological traits of the lived expressive body, highlighting how the latter is not just the *locus* of psychophysical causal connections but also of motivational relations. This will be a crucial prerequisite to defend the thesis that one can recognize some personal traits in one's expressive behavior. I will specifically argue for this thesis in Section 3, where I will present my account of bodily expressivity as the *stylistic mark* of one's personal embodied life.

1. An account of personhood²

In my account, I will define a person as the specific "style of his/her experiences" (Guccinelli 2013, p. XCV) or, in other terms, as a motivated connection of *acts* that lets an individuality emerge (Scheler 1916, De Monticelli 2009). Let me clarify this idea.

Against a phenomenological background, I maintain that a person is not just endowed with some psychological *functions*, but rather that he/she can exercise such functions in his/her *acts*. For instance, if "seeing" is a function, "looking at something" is an act. Indeed, as De Monticelli (2009) for instance specifies, in looking at something I exercise an ability of mine (i.e. seeing) to focus my attention on something in my visual field. Something strikes me, it somehow "requires" my attention and I look at it. This basic kind of act

² Some contents from sections 1 and 3 have been previously published in Forlè 2019.

already requires a *subject* who performs them: "looking at" is not something that passively happens to me, but something *I* do and that also shows what kind of visual things strike me and draw my attention. Indeed, it is likely, for instance, that, being confronted with the same visual things, you and I will be struck by different details and we will look at the same visual scene in different ways, focusing on different aspects. Even if we are endowed (arguably) with the same psychological function (e.g. sight), it is likely that we will focus our attention variously and we will perceive different aspects of the same scene. In this sense, in our act of *looking at*, a personal trait is already present and is able to emerge (De Monticelli 2009, p. 218).

Similarly, our emotions and feelings are the affective acts in which we respond to those valences of the world that strike us: I may be terribly scared by a snake, you may be amused by the way it moves on the ground, our friend Paul can look at it with a deep scientific interest. We are not just reacting impersonally to something: rather, each of us responds differently to it, and our way of responding is already distinctive of each of us, of our preferences, our interests, our evaluations. This does not necessarily mean that there is no objective reality, but just that different aspects of the same things can strike each individual person differently. In our responses to the world, our personal style of being already starts to be constituted. In this sense, we can describe our acts exactly as those lived experiences of ours in which we take a position towards the different aspects of reality (Husserl 1952, Scheler 1916). As mentioned, these position-takings are not something that happen to us, but something that requires a subject to make them.

Obviously, my acts are not just basic ones such as perceptions and emotions. I can perform, for instance, another kind of act when I take a position on one of my acts – e.g. when I indulge in my fear of snakes or when I try to suppress it. In this way, I can modify the way in which a basic act such as an emotion *motivates* other acts of mine (De Monticelli 2009, pp. 198-199): if I indulge my fear, the latter may motivate me to run away, whereas if I manage to suppress it, it will probably lose that motivational power.

Another crucial class of acts is obviously the one in which we take positions freely and consciously about how to act and what to do in the world. According to De Monticelli, these types of acts are actual *commitments* we make on our future behavior, both with respect to ourselves (*decisions*) and with respect to others (*promises*) (De Monticelli 2009, pp. 200-201). These acts are those in which my ability to take a position about others, the world, and myself emerges in the clearest and highest way: I can *endorse* my compassion to poor people so that I can be motivated to help them and therefore *decide* (i.e. take a position on how to act) to make a donation.

Our everyday life is characterized by many different acts that are related to one another by motivational connections. As we have just seen in the examples provided above, indeed, some acts can motivate others, i.e. they can give reasons for other acts. In such a motivational connection of different kinds of acts, I constitute myself as that specific subject who is the author of these position-takings. The idea, however, is not that I am something existing before and independently from the acts I make. On the contrary, as Scheler specifies, I come to constitute myself as the individual I am exactly in the acts I make: in the positions I take, as well as in the motivations I endorse, my personal identity starts to be shaped as an individuality that will be always different from that of all others (Scheler 1916, pp. 747-751). In fact, as De Monticelli stresses, my acts are not events that happen to me and *cause* other acts to happen, as if the latter were mere effects, which are always the same, ceteris paribus, if the causes are the same. On the contrary, first, my acts are position-takings that already show my own personal responses to the world; second, several acts of mine are often motives for other acts to be made and I can choose to endorse them and be motivated by them or not. As the subject of these acts, I am involved in them as the specific individual I am: another individual, indeed, may not be motivated by his/her acts in the same way as I am (De Monticelli 2009, pp. 219-220).

In this sense, therefore, my personal identity is shaped in my acts as an *individuality*. Moreover, as already mentioned, it is not something that pre-exists my acts, nor something that should be stable and invariant not-withstanding the variety of the acts I make. Rather, my personal identity is exactly what continuously emerges as shaped in my acts and as a kind of "qualitative orientation" (Scheler 1916, p. 751) of these acts. In this sense, we can say that a person is the "style of his/her experiences" (Guccinelli 2013, p. XCV): a person emerges in his/her own individual, qualitative, and stylistic way of orienting and directing his/her position-takings, i.e. his/her acts. A person emerges in the specific motivated connection of acts that he/she performs: being motivated in a precise and specific way depending on the position-takings made, such a connection of acts displays a *stylistic mark* that is specific for each different person. This stylistic mark is what unifies all the acts of a person, and which allows one to recognize that individual as the person he/she is.³

³ On Scheler's phenomenology and specifically on his notion of person, see Amori 2010, Cusinato 2007, Zahavi 2010, Vendrell Ferran 2008.

2. The lived body: bodily expressions and motivational connections

In section 1, I have described personhood as the domain of motivational connections of acts, so that motivation emerges as the relation connecting specifically *personal* experiences (Stein 1922, p. 34). However, when it comes to the lived body, how do we need to understand the laws governing this sphere of our subjective life? Can we say that in this domain motivational connections are in place or not? As mentioned in the Introduction, I maintain that from a phenomenological perspective we can recognize that the lived expressive body is not just the *locus* of physical and psychophysical causal connections but also of motivational ones. This will be a crucial prerequisite to defend the thesis that one can recognize some personal traits in one's expressive behavior: indeed, only if the sphere of the lived body is governed, at least partly, by the laws of the personal domain – i.e. motivational laws – then some traits of the person I am can be recognized in the sphere of the lived body itself.

We should certainly recognize that, as an object, our body is subject to the laws of nature and generally, we could say, to causal laws. Phenomenologists such as Husserl (1952) or Stein (1922) are explicit on this point. Husserl (1952), for instance, admits that if we look at human beings from the perspective of natural sciences, i.e. in the *naturalistic attitude* (pp. 183-194), we will describe them as psycho-physical beings and will find that they are submitted to the laws of causality. Just to mention an example, when considering the constitution of perceptual objects, Husserl stresses that our perceptual experiences are governed by if-then relations: if I move this way, then this aspect of the object will become visually accessible, if I look at the object from this particular point of view, then the object will look so and so, and so on (Husserl 1952, pp. 62-63). Husserl maintains that such *if-then* relations affect perception in a *causal* way. There is a specific spatial relation between my body as an object and the thing I am perceiving, so that if my body moves so and so, my retina will be stimulated so and so, and this will cause visual images to change in a specific way. I am subject to such physical and psychophysical causal laws, so that the correspondent physical and psychophysical modifications just happen to me, without me to be involved in any active way (Stein 1922, pp. 12-13).

However, both Husserl and Stein maintain that we are not just psychophysical beings who are subject to causal psychophysical laws.⁴ Husserl, for instance, maintains that the naturalistic attitude is too narrow to prop-

⁴ Similarly, Merleau-Ponty 1945, pp. 73-89.

erly understand human beings and their experiences; rather, the attitude we should adopt is the *personalistic* one. From this perspective, human beings will appear as persons, not just as psychophysical beings, and they will be recognizable as subject to motivational laws, not just to causal ones (Husserl 1952, pp. 183-194). Stein (1917) presents an example to distinguish between causal connections and motivational ones in human beings that is particularly interesting for our purposes. She considers the phenomenon of bodily expressions of feelings and distinguishes between proper expressions and mere physical accompaniment of feelings. According to Stein, some examples of the latter are: one's heart stopping beating for joy, one's pulse racing in alarm, one's wincing in pain. Such phenomena are understandable in terms of psychophysical causality, where some psychic experiences have causal effects on body functions. The idea is that in these cases the bodily modifications happening to the subjects do not depend on the meaning of the experiences but just on the way the body reacts in specific situations. Similar cases are the ones of causal dependences between vitality states and specific bodily states, as, for instance, in the case of tiredness causing an headache or diminished eyesight (Stein 1922, pp. 18-22).

According to Stein, the case of feelings and proper bodily expressions is completely different. This is so because feelings are essentially connected to expressions: it is the nature of feelings that prescribes them to "unload" in some form of expression.

The relationship of feeling to expression is completely different from that of feeling to the appearance of physical accompaniment. In the former case, I do not notice physical experiences issuing out of the psychic ones, much less their mere simultaneity. Rather, as I live through the feeling, I feel it terminate in an expression or release expression out of itself. Feeling in its pure essence is not something complete in itself. As it were, it is loaded with an energy which must be unloaded (Stein 1917, p. 48)

This idea – particularly, the fact that a feeling "is not something complete in itself" – finds phenomenological evidence in the fact that some bodily expressions seem to be so structurally and functionally significant for the affective states they express that the latter can be significantly altered if the former are not in place (Krueger and Overgaard 2012, pp. 250-254). Let us think, for instance, of the way an affective state of frustration can develop and change depending on whether it unloads in a liberating bodily comportment or not.⁵

⁵ On a similar point, see Scheler 1923, p. 251.

However, Stein is perfectly aware that sometimes feelings do not unload themselves in overt behavior, as in the case of repressed bodily expressions. This is not an issue in Stein's account though, since bodily expressions are not the only form of expression in which a feeling can unload itself. Feelings, in their essence, are loaded with an energy that must be unloaded. However, this unloading can be accomplished in many different ways: bodily expressions but also volitions, actions, secret desires, acts of fancy, acts of reflections, and so on. Some of these acts may not present forms of exteriorization but, according to Stein, they are still forms of unloading of feelings. Moreover, a feeling can terminate in a "passionate expression" or in "cool reflection": the type of expression does not say anything about the intensity of the feeling expressed. The various types of expression are various essential possibilities of the unloading of feelings (Stein 1917, p. 49).

Being *essentially* connected, feeling and expression are related by nature and meaning: in this sense, they are connected by motivational laws, not causal ones. Indeed, differently from causal relationships, motivational connections are intelligible or meaningful relations, that is connections where we can "experience the transition from one part to another within an experiential whole" (Stein 1917, p. 78). In other terms, motivational connections are those in which the component experiences have an "experienceable connection" (*ibid.*).

Some examples of proper expressions of feelings that Stein mentions are: blushing for shame, irately clenching fists, angrily furrowing brows, groaning with pain, being jubilant with joy (Stein 1917, p. 48). The idea, therefore, is that in these cases the connection between the feeling and the expression is motivated by the specific meaning of the feeling, so that one can understand, in the experience itself, the reasonable connection between the two. In other terms, the meaning of the feeling *gives reasons for* – i.e. *motivates* – the specific expression displayed. Moreover, since they are motivated – not simply caused – bodily expressions do not just happen to us but they can be, at least to some degree, more or less endorsed by us: in this sense, it may happen that a specific feeling motivates such and such expressions in me but not in you or in another individual.

On the basis of this account of expressivity, we can admit that those motivational laws that govern the proper personal sphere of human beings can operate also at the level of the lived body. This is crucial if one wants to argue for the thesis that one can recognize himself/herself *as a person* in his/her expressive lived body: as previously mentioned, to defend such a thesis the lived body cannot be considered to be governed just by non-per-

sonal, psychophysical causal laws but it needs to be possibly the *locus* of personal – and therefore motivational – connections.

This prerequisite, however, does not seem to be enough to properly defend the mentioned thesis. Something more needs to be said about how one can recognize the person one is in his/her expressive body. Indeed, what is needed is a specification of what bodily expressivity amounts to, which is what I will turn to now.

3. Bodily expressive style

The thesis I will argue for in what follows is that one can recognize one-self as a person in his/her bodily expressive behavior because, through his/her lived body, each one can express a unique *style of behaving*, meant as a unifying quality of one's bodily comportment that appears as connecting in a motivated and coherent way the different expressions and the various actions of a person. Let me clarify this idea.

First, it is worth underlining that our lived body does not seem to simply express emotions and feelings, but also our specific way of living them. Indeed, through my lived body, I am able to express not just a feeling of shame, for instance, but the specific way in which I express shame. In my expression of shame, a stylistic mark can emerge: I have a specific way of expressing this feeling and my bodily behavior seems to be able to convey that specific trait. Several cases in our everyday life show that this is the case, as in those situations in which, in the acts, movements and expressions of the other, we are able to grasp not an impersonal and unspecified way of acting, but the specific expressive style of that person. Moreover, a person can be recognized as the *same* in different situations thanks also to such a general style of behavior that pervades his/her actions as a unifying trait. In this respect, for instance, Cusinato (2018) identifies three different levels of constitution of one's own way of expressivity. The most basic one is the impersonal level of expressions as a minimal common vocabulary, which seems to be shared by all human beings, independently of the culture or society they live in. The expressions of basic emotions identified by Ekman (1999), for instance, can account for this basic level: emotions such as fear, disgust or joy seem to be universally conveyed by specific facial expressions, which constitute the basic general schemes on which each culture or society shapes its own forms of expressivity. The second level is actually the one defined by societies and cultures: each of them has its specific forms of expressivity of emotions and feelings – so that, for instance,

the way a Japanese smiles to express happiness is different from the way a German does it, even though there are some basic traits that the two have in common. Stemming from the social standards of expressivity of this second level, each individual constitutes his/her own way of expressing his/her affective states. At this level, the individual stylistic mark of each one emerges, so that, even between two homozygous siblings who have grown up in the same family, we can recognize two different styles of expression (Cusinato 2018, pp. 126-128).

However, when talking about the expressive dimension of one's own lived body, I do not mean just one's ability to express feelings and emotions, but also the ability to express more general attitudes and personal traits. Indeed, for instance, actions themselves are not simply accomplished or not, but they can be performed in a more *calm* or *anxious* way, in a more friendly or hostile, gentle or harsh manner. By means of these features, we can grasp some traits of the personality of an individual. More interestingly, by the specific way in which each individual *enacts* such expressive traits and by the way in which the latter are structured gestaltically in the behavioral style of each one, we can even grasp the specific expressive mark of that individual as opposed to, or as different from, that of another. I can recognize my friend Sarah in her style of behavior, not just on the basis of what she does, but also based on how she does what she does – that is, based both on the expressive traits of her actions and on the individualized way in which she enacts those expressive traits. The expressive dimension of one's body (the how of his/her acting) connotes in a specific way what he/she does (the what of his/her acting) and contributes to the emergence of more fine-grained and individualized traits of personality. Indeed, even though our actions and action potentialities already display some aspects of the persons we are, the specific (expressive) way in which we perform these actions characterizes them better and allows the emergence of a more defined personal style.

Let me clarify this point by means of an example by Husserl. Dealing with the notion of personal types, Husserl gives the following example. If I see a man grasping a glass of water, I can understand that he is doing so because he is thirsty and wants to drink. This action does not tell me anything about the personal traits of that man. But if I see that, before drinking, he suddenly lowers the glass since he has noticed a poor thirsty and hungry child in front of him, then this action *can* tell me something about the personality of that man (Husserl 1952, p. 282). Enlarging Husserl's example, we can say that seeing whether the man is lowering the glass with hesitancy, with an attention-seeking behavior, or with compassion can let

us grasp even more about him. Furthermore, if I happen to notice a particular stylistic trait in the expressive way in which that man accomplishes that action, I may recognize not just a man with such and such personality traits, but specifically my friend Paul, as different from my colleague John or my brother Al.

The expressive dimension of our lived body, therefore, seems to be able to convey specifically the *stylistic mark* of our embodied life. Indeed, as seen, it is not just the case that through the lived body we can express something about what our attitudes are in one or another situation. More interestingly, it is also the case that we can convey our specific *style* too. The idea is that an individual style of expression and behavior emerges when a *coherent* and *reasonable* sequence of actions and expressions emerges. An individual style is perceived (proprioceptively or by means of outer perception) when a sort of *unifying quality of behaving* is perceived as connecting in a motivated and coherent way the different expressions and the various actions of a person. The embodied expressive style of each person, therefore, appears to be something that emerges in time through the unfolding of the expressive behavior itself. Rather than being something *prior* to actions and expressions, the individual behavioral style is constituted, on the contrary, as an emergent quality of actions and expressions themselves.

Now, my thesis is that this bodily stylistic mark is what specifically allows an individual to recognize him/herself *as a person* in his/her lived body. It should be easy to see why now, based also on the previous description I gave of what a person is in my framework.

As said in the first section, in my account a person is the "style of his/her experiences" (Guccinelli 2013, p. XCV): a person emerges in his/her own individual, qualitative, and stylistic way of orienting and directing his/her position-takings, that is in the specific motivated connection of acts that he/she performs. Such a connection of acts displays a *stylistic mark* that is specific for each different person and that unifies all the acts of a person.

Now, if one's lived body can convey an individual style of behavior that emerges as a unifying qualitative feature of one's expressions and actions, as I have argued for in this section, and if a person can be understood as the individual style of his/her experiences, then my bodily expressive style can be seen as the bodily counterpart of the whole person I am. Indeed, since we are embodied persons (i.e. persons endowed with a lived body), several acts of ours are performed through our body and are often *expressed* by it. Therefore, the way our acts *motivate* each other is also expressed in our body and becomes visible to others. For instance, the fact that I have endorsed my fear of snakes so that it motivates me to scream loudly and

run away as fast as I can shows a motivational connection of acts that is expressed through my lived body, my actions and my expressions.

Surely, this is possible if one accepts the idea that the lived body is not just the *locus* of causal psychophysical laws, but also of motivational, personal ones – as I have maintained in Section 2. A person emerges in the motivated connections of the acts he/she performs. Since it is not governed only by causal laws, the lived body can express such a personal style of motivational connections emerging from one's acts and can display a *coherent* and *reasonable* sequence of actions and expressions, where the latter are perceived as *being motivated* by one's experiences and *motivating* other actions and expressions in a very specific and individualized way.

My thesis is that, because of the mentioned counterpart-relation between my whole personal style and my bodily expressive style, I can be able to recognize at least some aspects of the person I am in my lived body. Obviously, not every act — nor motivated connection of acts — is bodily expressed: this is the reason why not every aspect of the persons we are is shown, and is therefore recognizable, in the body. The person is not completely displayed in his/her lived body: however, some personal stylistic traits are, since the lived (expressive) body can show, partly, that personal stylistic mark that each person has.

The idea, therefore, is that, in our expressive lived body, we can recognize ourselves as the embodied persons we are. Experiencing the expressive traits of my lived body, I can structure my own personal identity and I can recognize myself as a person in the way I express myself. I can recognize who I am, for instance, in the gentle and kind way in which I treat another, or in that particular clumsy behavior I have in situations I am not used to.

However, in conclusion, we should also admit that sometimes, in my bodily expressive style, I may also fail to recognize myself as the person I am. For instance, I may not recognize myself in that unpleasant attitude I once took towards a friend, or in that irritable behavior at home. The possibility of this failure of recognition means that I am not completely transparent to myself, so that it is not necessarily the case that the way I experience my personality traits is epistemologically more reliable than, for instance, the way in which others can perceive me. On the contrary, I can learn a lot about myself and my expressive lived body from what others tell me about my behavior. This is so because, as said in the Introduction, bodily expressions are often performed at a pre-reflective level and the way they are experienced in proprioception is not necessarily the same in which they are experienced in outer perception. However,

this does not necessarily mean that bodily expressions do not pertain to the personal sphere of our life: this is possible, of course, if we admit that a person is not reducible, for instance, to the upshot of narrative and reflective practices in which one constructs and understands his/her own biographical story, but is constituted also in a more pre-reflective way, through the specific embodied style of his/her acts and his/her experience of them. If so, one can, at least partly, recognize oneself as a person in his/her bodily expressive style.

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