

Consciousness is Embodied

Petra Sterry in conversation with Thomas Fuchs, Karl Jaspers Professor of Philosophy and Psychiatry, head of the section “Phenomenological Psychopathology and Psychotherapy” at the University Clinic of General Psychiatry, Heidelberg

Petra Sterry (PS): In recent years I have devoted intensive attention in my work to an exploration of inner human states and emotions. It has become readily apparent that the method I use, namely introspection, is essential in being able to say anything about emotions and inner experience. It is through the gaze from my own viewpoint, from the subjective perspective, that I can experience and describe the world. How do you define subjectivity, and why is subjectivity so important?

Thomas Fuchs (TF): Here you have, of course, brought up one of the fundamental questions of philosophy, which cannot really be answered with a simple definition. I should begin by mentioning that point. Subjectivity is by its nature only found tied to a center of experience, a center of consciousness: everything that is experienced appears to a subject; the subject is the point of reference of all experience. In this sense, subjectivity should be understood as “centrality”. In other words, it is the relatedness of all experience to a center, from which axes of experience and movement emanate, and to which, conversely, all axes of affection and perception converge. That is how I would try to achieve a simple formulation.

Hence subjectivity is the precondition of all experience. There is no anonymous experience, no anonymous consciousness, and subjectivity is always entwined with self-experience. The center of experience is not, as it were, merely a geometric point, rather that which is experienced manifests itself “to me,” and in experiencing I am aware of myself. Seeing you now on the screen, and being in contact with you, I can be completely absorbed in my words and my conversation with you. Nevertheless, there always remains a feeling of centrality, which accompanies and frames it all. I do not disappear into the experience, into perception or into my thoughts. Bodily self-experience always remains there in the background, and to a certain degree it carries these perceptions and actions, this act of speaking. To put it succinctly, subjectivity is centrality, the perspectivity of all experience, and at the same time it is self-being, the self-awareness of all experience.

PS: But at the same time, experience is not a solipsistic state. This means that I must exist in relation to others, in relation to things and situations, in order to perceive the world. In principle, subjectivity is also linked to a certain intersubjectivity.

TF: Yes, you are absolutely right there – subjectivity must always be understood relationally. It is always existence in relation to something. Subjectivity is continually transcending itself in its relatedness to the world. That is what I said before, when I said that I am now engaged in our conversation, in the perception of our interaction and of you as a person: in making contact and relating to the world, I am always leaving the bounds of my own sphere of existence. There is an aspect of self-transcendence in every subjectivity. It roots in my relatedness to the world, the way this world appears to me. And this world's most special characteristic is that it includes other subjects. Intersubjectivity is inherent in all my experience: even if no one else is there, I experience and perceive everything from the point of view that other subjects exist, that others could be experiencing the same thing I am. In other words, intersubjectivity is included in or “built into” all of my experience. Even though Robinson Crusoe had no other people around him on his island, he saw it through the eyes of others, because implicitly he was operating under the assumption that if anyone were stranded with him, this person would be having the same perceptions. For us human beings, perception is always a potentially *shared* perception.

PS: This means that although we experience subjectively, we also have the ability to objectify. We can put ourselves in the other's place. Obviously this is very important; otherwise it would be completely impossible, perhaps, to feel empathy. I think that empathy is also important because it helps us prioritize what we experience and perceive.

TF: That is very true: the transcendence – the always-having-been-transcending – of the sphere of the self, what Heidegger referred to as *Mitsein* (being-with), is even more concentrated in empathy, in the ability to enter into shared experience with other subjects, which most of all is rooted in *intercorporeality*. In other words, in our perception of their expression and behavior as reflecting a consciousness-animated body. Primary empathy, as I understand it, is the individual's unmediated co-experience of the other's expression, the emotional dynamic that resonates with it, the gaze and other signs that show a direction, an animatedness, an intention. When you see me here reaching for a cup, you also perceive directly that I want to drink from this cup. You can perceive this intention to drink, and no further thought regarding me or the possibilities of my inner life are necessary: my intentional behavior is plainly visible to you. But now, in human beings, an additional level of empathy comes into play, which arises from our ability to put ourselves in the place of others. We can assume the perspective of other people, opening a level above the primary level of unmediated perceiving and understanding, where we can actively imagine or ask ourselves: What is occurring for the other, and

what is motivating him? What previous experiences has he had? How would I feel if I were in his position? Those are additional, more cognitively oriented possibilities that we have for putting ourselves in the other's place and for empathizing. Higher mammals do not have this special form of empathy, although they do share with humans the primary level of mutual empathy to a certain degree.

PS: In my work I have devoted a great deal of attention to emotions. I have long been interested in how one can talk about fear, about joy, about feelings of unease. It has become clear to me that there is no alternative to observing yourself, particularly to identifying how emotions work in the body. Not just in the body in an abstract sense, but in the lived body, in one's own body as one subjectively feels and experiences it.

You write of the dual aspect of the body, namely of the "physical body" (*Körper*) as nature that we have, and the "lived body" (*Leib*) as nature that we are. [Translator's note: Although the two German words inserted in parentheses here and below both translate into English as *body*, they have very different meanings. In this translation, the expressions *physical body* and *lived body* are used to retain the distinction.] How do these two aspects come together? How do the physical body and the lived body fit together into a single whole, and how can this entity be described?

TF: That is an extremely difficult question, because it relates to the mind-body problem. I would put it this way: As human beings we are in the special situation of not only living in the world in our bodies, of interacting with others as lived bodies, but also of being consciously aware of this bodily relationship to the world, and of being able to assume a mental stance toward it. We have what Helmuth Plessner once referred to as the "eccentric position" of the human being. While doing all the things we do – even if at first we do them completely unreflectedly and spontaneously – we can always observe them from the outside, by assuming an external viewpoint toward what we are doing. This gives rise to a completely different relationship to the lived body. Through this process of abstraction, our lived body (*Leib*) becomes at the same time a purely physical body (*Körper*) comparable to any other object in the world. It exists among other bodies that can be perceived externally, that can be presented to a doctor for examination, for percussion and auscultation with hammer and stethoscope. It has become a physical body that I *have*. My interaction with it can range from simple observation to scientific research. Here there arises a very different relationship to the body.

Now we run into this strange phenomenon: On the one hand, I am a living body, a being that speaks, moves, gestures, experiences himself. On the other hand, there is my physical body, and a physiologist or neuroscientist could take a close look at it, examining my muscle contractions, my brain waves, my

neural activity. All of this could be done while I speak, but with the distinction that none of my *experience* could be discovered this way. It has disappeared. Although the neuroscientist can investigate the neural activity in my head, this reveals nothing about my experience. Now we have this peculiar dualism: I am a living being that is speaking, that is experiencing himself, that you are experiencing. At the same time, all of these physical processes are in operation, which apparently are necessary for me to be able to speak to you. So, and how does all of this fit together? No one really knows exactly. But it is very certain that there is only one of me. I am sitting here before you, and my physiological processes, my physical processes, are certainly not something different. They are surely not in a different world from what I am now experiencing, the way I am talking to you and you are perceiving me. Thus we have two different outlooks on one and the same thing, namely the living person that I am.

PS: You write in your book *Ecology of the Brain: The Phenomenology and Biology of the Embodied Mind* that there is a coextension between the physical body and the lived body. You break it down into an objective “physical-body space” and a subjective “lived-body space”. And you say that lived-body affective sensation is the basis for consciousness processes. There are, however, other explanatory models stating that consciousness is based exclusively on neuronal processes. Yet it is intentional experience that makes human consciousness of the self possible, and also the human potential for self-determined action. What is the strongest argument that speaks for subjectivity?

TF: First of all, the strongest argument for subjectivity is the fact that in neuronal processes, in other words in the observation of objectively existing physiological processes, there is absolutely no indication of anything like experience. You can look at the brain for as long as you like, you can observe the processes going on inside it with as much detail as possible, but nowhere will you encounter anything like experience. The external perspective characterizing scientific research, which overlooks everything experiential and everything qualitative, can *per se* never gain access to anything like subjectivity. At most it can identify conditions that are necessary for conscious experience to arise. But you cannot reduce this experience to neuronal processes, because it is nowhere to be found in the neuronal processes. If a neuroscientist examines a human being, he/she cannot say on the basis of neurological examination alone whether the person is conscious or not. There is simply no possibility when looking at neuronal processes to say whether or not they are linked to consciousness. The only possibility for doing so is to interact with the person being examined, in other words to pose questions

or tasks, and study reactions, while simultaneously observing the accompanying activity in the brain. But subjectivity cannot be inferred from brain processes alone.

This is the fundamental limitation of the physiological approach. There is also the problem that pure investigation of brain functions completely obliterates the embodiment of the brain, in other words the relationship between brain and organism. It is a detail view, a limitation of perspective that does not stand up to the biological observation of the organism, because – and this is something that I have laid out in detail in my book – even basal consciousness processes are always rooted in feedback loops, in the connection between brain and organism. The brain cannot be separated, as if consciousness were taking place within it exclusively. There is some pretty difficult biology in the chain of evidence leading to this conclusion – it isn't possible to go through it here.

PS: You call it a category mistake that the brain is spoken of as if it were autonomous. Could you explain what you mean more exactly?

TF: The category mistake is that a component organ is spoken of in a way that only an organism can be spoken of, an entire living being. Really it is quite plain to see in all activity: when you say that a person is crossing the street to get to the other side, it is very clear that this activity must be attributed to the whole person. It is not the brain that walks across the street or wants to get across, rather it is the entire living person. If you say that the brain is that which acts, that which wants and which causes motion to occur, then you are reducing the entire pursuit of life to a single part, a single organ. That is a so-called “mereological fallacy”, a category mistake, which puts a part in the place of the whole. To get across the street, you need an entire living organism. The brain has no feet. The same also goes for perception. Perception also needs the sensory organs and the body, and in the end the same is even true of thinking. One cannot attribute thinking to the brain, because all thinking occurs before the backdrop of experience. In order to be able to think, I first must be conscious. And to be conscious, I must feel the lived body; I must feel through the lived body, and this experience is tied to the whole body. Thus thinking, which at first seems to be the classic example of “pure consciousness”, is not a process occurring in a component organ of the body. Thinking is also embedded in the pursuit of life, in the vitality of living, and this requires the entire organism.

PS: In other words, the whole is more than the sum of its parts. But the lived body is also a resonance chamber for moods and feelings. And moods and feelings are like sensors, regulators that enable the

human being to find his or her way in the world, to navigate through the vicissitudes of life and give shape to life. Why, in your opinion, are emotions so important?

TF: Emotions are forms of experience that communicate to us what is important, what is meaningful to us, what is relevant, what matters. In the broadest sense, they are the basis of our having any sort of direction at all in life. Feelings tell us which situations are relevant, and how we should react to them. Cognitive thinking alone cannot answer these questions. Cognition, namely the thoughts that we have about a situation, will never tell us what really counts. It is not until we are affected by something in the sense of the lived body that we can feel what is important in this situation and react to it. Everything that is valuable or attractive, or is to be avoided, can only be appreciated through feelings; thoughts alone can never tell us these things. And since we are living beings, which should survive in the world, and want to survive in the world, we continuously have to feel what is relevant, what matters to us. That is only possible through feelings.

PS: You quote Galen Strawson: “Meaning is always a matter of something meaning something *to* someone.” That shows that intentionality is a complex relationship. For me fear is a very interesting phenomenon. Since the very beginning of my work as an artist, fear has been an area of exploration in my art. It is a feeling with many layers, and it is one of the fundamental conditions of human existence. For me, however, it is not as negative as it is generally made out to be. I see fear in many different shades: fear can be very direct and unmediated, but it also can be elaborate and refined. Sometimes fear is devious. But it also can be funny; you see that in gallows humor or in self-irony. I think that each individual must establish a good relationship to his or her fears, and here I also see positive aspects: fear makes one more sensitive and attentive. That strikes me as being very important. Fear demands a reaction, a reaction to a situation. Some feelings tend to be put under taboo. I think that fear is among them because it goes against the current of the achievement-oriented society in which we live. Being afraid means being weak. What are the emotions that are talked about, and what are the ones that are kept quiet?

TF: I wouldn’t go so far as to say that certain feelings are generally taboo in our society. Let’s put it this way: the *unpleasant* feelings are the ones that are a threat, or an impairment, to the individual’s sense of self-worth. Fear is one of those feelings, because in a community with others, fears of the loss of self, or of the loss of status, are of particular significance. Hence the fear of losing one’s status, and even more of being excluded entirely from a community, is a driving force behind human activity.

Other feelings of this sort are shame or guilt. Shame, because it includes an immediate experience of self-worth loss, of embarrassment felt in front of others. Guilt, because one's conscience makes one feel condemned, perhaps even to the point of exclusion, by others. Those are the central fears, the central threats to how a being of the human sort experiences him- or herself, since the human is so dependent on social surroundings. Thus, at least in public, the individual does everything possible to avoid feeling shame – it is one of the most catastrophic emotions – or even mentioning things that he or she is ashamed of. It is easier to talk about fears, and one can talk about one's feelings of guilt to some extent, but one can say the least about what one is ashamed of. And that is where you find most of the taboos that society imposes upon us... embarrassment taboos, sexual taboos, what one would never say to others because it is so embarrassing. If you are looking for the emotions that are the most closed off or hidden from the social gaze, shame is the best place to start.

PS: Shame – and I think this goes back to Aristotle – has its seat in the eyes. And when one is ashamed, or when one is in a situation that causes an intense feeling of shame, it has something very fundamental; perhaps that is why it is so awful. One cannot hold the other's gaze, one turns one's eyes away.

TF: Exactly.

PS: In the work group *Elastic Punch* I investigated several emotions and inner states: fear, joy, unease, shame, trauma and lethargy. I would like to talk about trauma in a bit more detail. When someone experiences something traumatic, it occurs very immediately. The individual's perception is shaken in its foundations. The self is thrown off track. Often the person has the feeling of being dead and only continuing in life on automatic pilot, of no longer participating actively in life. Everything is extremely narrowed, and the person is caught in the situation that he/she has experienced and cannot forget. In this context I am interested in something that you write about in your book: you discuss "capacity" [*Vermögen*], and I find this word to be very appropriate. There is an inherently existential aspect in the German expression. I think what you mean by capacity is that one can cope with something, that one can actively deal with a situation. In cases of trauma, ability tilts into inability, as it were. Every life fully lived requires that the individual have a certain capacity, which allows life to be actively realized. Trauma involves a *not-being-in-a-position-to-do*. The traumatized person remains stuck in a negative key experience. In cases of trauma it is almost as if the immediacy of what has been experienced were

to remain permanently immediate. Perhaps that is the most terrible thing, that one doesn't get beyond it, that the memories don't go away, that the experience cannot be forgotten.

TF: Yes, I think you are right in everything that you are saying there. I can only add that the feeling of helplessness and powerlessness that comes with traumatization goes very deep. The experience of being subjected to a malicious or threatening force and not in any way being able to defend oneself, of experiencing absolute powerlessness, is central to incidents of lasting traumatization. The inability to act or resist, to do anything but powerlessly endure the impact, is a key to understanding it. Secondly, as you said, the experience remains immediate and is not worked through in processes of consciousness or reflection that could embed it. The traumatic event cannot really be incorporated into a narrative, and thus it remains uncomprehended. It remains immediate experience, maximally charged, and it refuses any possible continuation in a story that one could tell oneself, or others, through which one could create a distance between oneself and the event. Instead the trauma retains its pure immediacy in mental and physical experience, ready at any time to return with its full impact, with all of its brutality. The sense of alienation that arises during a traumatic experience – you mentioned something like the experience of death – does not contradict any of this. The dissociation that arises when the victim withdraws from the experience, detaching consciousness from its terror and physical impact and withdrawing into a self-alienated numbness, actually contributes to the trauma's lasting effect. There is a sort of protective mechanism that can appear in the most threatening or tormenting situations, and that is what I mean by dissociation here, a sudden alienation from the self. In the nineteenth century, reports were compiled for the first time from mountain climbers who had survived falls from great heights, and later they said: I was only an observer, I didn't feel anything, I sensed no fear or pain, I simply fell. Here you see dissociative processes at work. They also appear in cases of severe traumatization caused by other human beings. It is most of all dissociation that prevents the trauma from being experienced, processed and understood, and causes it to remain intact as pure, nameless experience.

PS: Perhaps what is missing is the objectifying function of perception, the normal distancing with which one sees the experience and oneself. In other words, the ability to take a "step back".

TF: Precisely. Objectification and symbolization are both impossible. The experience is not pushed back to a distance so that I can look at it from outside and make clear to myself what happened. And I cannot put it into words.

PS: Now I would like to move on to perception. You have often discussed a very interesting phenomenon involving pathological perception among schizophrenics, in which they see pictures of things instead of the things themselves, and perceive their surroundings as if they were on a stage or an easel, or as if they were watching a film. That is how they experience their surroundings. How have the boundaries between the self and the outer world been displaced, and what has happened to perception.

TF: In acute psychosis, perception loses exactly that which you mentioned just now: its objective character. At the beginning of our talk we established that as human beings we don't just see things as they relate to us, rather that we also see them with the eyes of the others around us at the same time. This objectifies them, as it were. They become things in space, which can also be seen from the other side, and which are independent of my looking at them. In schizophrenia this objectivity is lost, at least to a certain degree; one can call this effect a "subjectivization" of perception. Everything is directed toward me, related to me, there because of me. It no longer has any independent objective character, making it there just as much for others as it is for me. Everything within my field of perception relates to me, is of meaning to me. This subjectivization makes things begin to "shimmer": it is no longer clear whether the cup is here on the table because I left it there. Is that really a window that I am looking out of? Might it not be that someone else put this cup here to show me something? Isn't there someone looking at me through the window? Am I not visible to others at all times? Things start to shimmer, and they are always implying something else, because they are no longer independent objects. They don't stay in their place, one could say, and they acquire an exaggerated character. That is what I call the subjectivization of perception. Through it one can clearly recognize what perception usually does, which is to show things as they are. The bookcase is over there. You are looking at me. The lamp is here. Everything is in its place. Subjectivization means that everything suddenly is in motion and relating to me. That is a severe disturbance of perception.

PS: Does that mean that the perception of spatial depth is negated?

TF: No, I wouldn't say that. Spatial depth remains intact. It is not as if everything were distorted, and distances shortened, or as if everything were shifting toward me in a spatial sense. And yet things don't stay in their place in the sense of independent objects: they address me, they "jump" at me. And here I mean *jump* in an affective sense, in the sense of the attention that they awaken in me. They don't stay in their place because they are continually relating to me, seemingly telling me something, conveying important meaning. Perhaps I have no idea what they mean, but it is something important.

PS: Our conversation is coming to an end. For me, art is the attempt to communicate immediacy. Here I find the artist's own perception very important, and also implicit ability; they must work together. I ask myself questions about society, and about the self. Which formal realization comes closest to capturing my own self? In this respect I see drawing and writing as a process of forming. The thoughts are actually very unfocused. It is not until they reach consciousness, more or less, that they take form. Only when I draw or write is there is a realization. Hence I see here a process of forming, but one which is unfocused, fuzzy. It is implicit in the action of drawing and writing. Visualization is also very important to me; it accompanies perception, but it is a different kind of perception. The house is not important to me in the way it presents itself spatially, in terms of central perspective. I am concerned with the essential character of a house, or – to return to our subject of discussion – a face, and here I also have done a series. In doing it I wanted to depict the essence of fear, of joy, of surprise, and non-intentional states also interested me with regard to their essence. In this sort of drawing it is important to get away from the self. On the other hand, it is very important that one can again enter into this process of putting to paper. That makes a connection. For me the process of drawing and writing remains an unchanging constant. There is no objectification while drawing: everything emerges from one's own perspective. Evaluation, the establishment of criteria that must be met, comes much later, when I select, long after the drawing or the series has been completed. The implicit is something that I think is very important in my work as an artist, because it brings together the physical body and the lived body. For me it is firmly established that action and imagination – or one could also say imagination and action – cannot be separated from one another. Thus I would like to finish our talk with a quote from your work. You write: "Consciousness is not 'in the body,' rather it is *embodied*."

Thomas Fuchs, *Ecology of the Brain: The Phenomenology and Biology of the Embodied Mind*. Oxford University Press, Oxford 2018

Translation: Christopher Barber