



Between the word and the sense by Elisa Aaltola

I AM A PHILOSOPHER by profession. My days are filled with reading, writing, thinking. I work with words, combine linguistic concepts, derive arguments and conclusions from them. But there is a risk: forgetting the senses. Philosophers can forget their bodies, neural pathways, sensations. They can ignore their skin that touches the rough pages of a book, and their brain cells that are so very fragile, mortal and protected by the senses.

A DEVIATION

In the early 20th century, phenomenologists such as Edith Stein reminded other philosophers not to forget the physical body. Instead of “objective truths”, phenomenology sought to perceive a subjective view of reality. It asked: how does a human experience reality? Experience comes with bodiliness. A thinker can only form thoughts through their body, in the body. Writing comes from the hand that needs the breathing lungs, pumping heart and the ability to sense cold, feel thirst or hunger, to feel desire. This may seem obvious. But I know a number of contemporary philosophers who regard the sensoriness of phenomenologists as somehow non-philosophical.

In autumn 2020, I was sitting in a park and reading *The Ego Tunnel*, a book written by Thomas Metzinger that combines neurosciences with philosophy. Metzinger describes the way the human mind simulates reality, constructs it. His description follows Immanuel Kant’s argument, according to which we can never perceive “reality as such” - we can only perceive its simulation and we are the prisoners of this simulation. The simulation of reality is like a film or game that our brain constructs and outside of which we have no access: it is reality as we perceive and experience it, not reality objectively perceived. In a distinguished manner, Metzinger successfully explores the significance of deviations in the simulation. Unusual things can sometimes happen in the construct of the simulation, such as the phenomenon of the “out-of-body” experience. The brain makes a miscalculation, which leads to leaps out of the normal, a literal flight from the conventional. I was devouring the book, shutting my senses from the surrounding park.

Then one night, I could still see the ceiling of my bedroom after I had closed my eyes, as if I had no eyelids at all. The same happened the following nights. Eventually, I could see the bright starry sky through all the ceilings. “A deviation in the simulation,” I said to myself. I was a philosopher who was distancing herself from her own perceptions in order to explore them as an interesting object, a curiosity. At the same time, I was a philosopher who was cushioning the increasing distress of her senses and body. Something in me had taken fright of the phenomenon and started to scream and bang the thin walls of my consciousness to be heard. I moved my fear aside. I had to be calm, analytical. I had to strip down

the deviation to be able to examine its constituents in the light of the conceptions introduced by the theory.

Later, I got a headache that painkillers would not ease. I felt like it was shattering my skull from the inside, and yet the walls of my consciousness remained shut. Absent-mindedly, I took more painkillers and tried to concentrate on books, texts, concepts - besides the deviation in the simulation, I tried to forget the deviation in my body, my senses, me.

Soon I felt sick. Reality had become a rocky boat. I was walking on a street but had to stop to lean on a wall while I vomited, sweated, shivered. Every step I took shook my brain tissue in a painful way. I could see text as pictures and smell words as scents. All my senses had intertwined and mingled, and their new, seemingly chaotic collage was trying to tell me something. Yet the distanced philosopher in me was walking further and further away from them. I kept trying to stay calm, still, stoical. "I just need to rest," I told myself.

At home, I tried to find a position where I would not feel sick. The empirical world gone berserk and the body writhing in pain were just an anomaly that I had to control rationally. But the philosopher was no longer rational but horrified at what frightens so many of us who underline the importance of language and thinking: the sudden emergence of the body in a way that eventually breaks through the power of reason and language and thrusts in front of us mortality, the biology consisting of beginnings and ends.

SENSE

I woke up hours later. It was already dark in my bedroom. My body raised the alarm for me to get up. My senses were a loud, dazzling buzzer that blared through my cells so powerfully that the walls of my consciousness had to finally give in. I got up, I fell, I tried again. I was confused, drowsy. Every step I took made me vomit, I could not find my phone, my brain was like a pressurised glass container that would explode at any minute. The alarm created by my senses was a propelling force, a nonverbal call, "Now!", without letters. Now! Right now!

When I finally got to the hospital, my body was arranged on a bed and measured in various ways. It was taken through all sorts of scanning devices, blood and cerebrospinal fluid was drawn out of it. My skull was finally cut open and an abscess was removed that probably would soon have burst and pushed me through a coma to my death. Copious quantities of antibiotics were pumped into my jugular. Yet the unknown bacterium took over again and I got sepsis. Once again, my body was arranged on a hospital bed, measured, assessed, jabbed with needles, connected to various contraptions.

Amid all this, my rational mind had become silent. Distancing myself seemed so impossible that I did not even try. Reality had fallen back into my senses, the simplest of sensations. My consciousness was filled by the steady beeps of the heart monitor, the gentle touch of the nurse's hand, the parching thirst on my tongue and the pulsating, stapled wound on the back of my head.

In hospital, it is difficult to escape the precedence of the body. When the body has been incised, when it has been operated on, when numerous samples have been collected from it, it would have made itself - me - known. When the body is - when I am - tired, abstract concepts evaporate like bubbles rising up inside a glass. What remains is just warm biology, the motion of lung muscles, the smells of coffee and disinfectant, distant laughter and weeping that I suddenly realise is mine. The senses behind simulations and concepts are what remain.

In his robustly named book *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921), Ludwig Wittgenstein suggested that language sets the limits of reality. Suddenly his suggestions seemed absurd. It is senses that create the world, weave it out, are it.

Motion and emotion

The pressure created in my brain by the inflammation explained my weird observations. The pressure combined with my postoperative condition took my observations to even wilder deviations. I would swim in shoals of fish and fly with birds; I was a perching lizard and finally a particle that ignited and extinguished light years away. My simulation about reality had changed completely and extended now

back to prehistory and far into future. When I was talking with the brain surgeon, tropical plants were growing around him.

For a moment, everything was in a state of total confusion: my entire reality had become a deviation. All theories had vanished, my memory felt viscous, I had difficulty finding words, a few minutes of thinking made me fall asleep. At the same time, my senses seemed to be so open that anything was possible, and so I leaped into air, water, outer space.

I would like to say that I missed analytical thinking and my books. But in reality, I wanted to stay in the living, twisting, tingling vibration of senses; it was the universe compacted into countless opportunities, constant change. Every word or compound of words is too limited to capture the essence of senses burst open; they would just scratch the surface. They are but a beam of light that only hits a tiny part of an ocean. Sometimes at night, I wish I could still swim in that ocean as a fish among other fish, following their flashing, whizzing sides.

But my scales peeled off and were replaced by human skin. My body was exhausted after infections and antibiotics, but it was my body, this body. I decided never again to forget my body as if it were one of the parts in Cartesian dualism, a vessel for the mind without its own significance. I looked at my hands, felt my tired limbs, listened to my heart. The body, I, was still alive, and suddenly I was grateful for it - to my senses.

Tears would come several times a day with an astonishing force. Friedrich Nietzsche, who suffered from crippling headaches, wrote in his book *Daybreak* (1881) that someone who has experienced great suffering can afterwards hear music and weep. The idea had long appealed to me, but it had been mere words. Now it was experience. The world had become immensely beautiful, and I would be so moved by trees, music, a dog's eyes or a friend's voice that I would collapse on my knees and cry.

Antonio Damasio and Martha Nussbaum have suggested that emotions are movement. They are created by the movement of our senses and neural pathways, and they also motivate movement. When we are taken by emotions, we say that we are moved. An emotion can literally move us, make us laugh or cry, to do deeds of love or hate. It can be movement, joy spreading over everything else. I was moved by the existence of my senses and enabled by them.

BEGINNING

I had always liked phenomenology. I had thought that I was in touch with my bodiliness, my animality, my biology. Yet the thinking side of me had disregarded my senses when they were trying to message me that something was wrong. I had, after all, been a philosopher who was suppressing her senses with rationality and, ultimately, with irrationality.

The deviation had returned me to my body and made me dive, fly and crawl into the impossible with every nerve open. Control had been lost, analysis had been extinguished and what remained was a sentient creature who was moved by the mere existence of the world. My suppressed fear of the mortality of the body, the end points of thought, the end of biology had dissipated, because ends were beginnings.

One night, dreams brought these spheres above me that were dropping books and words. I began to live in the language, from the language again. I began to remember more clearly, think more cohesively. I felt that I was between two realities, a full one and an empty one; the world of my body and senses was full, while the world of words was an empty stage, where people were walking and talking nonstop without knowing what they were saying. Yet I had to embrace the books and words since without them, I would be incapable of communicating to other verbal beings all that I want to communicate.

Now I am writing all this, describing and analysing it with words. My fingers are moving on the keyboard, my heart is rushing blood into my vessels, my ears can hear the sighs of my dogs, my operation scar tingles. I am trying to combine worlds, realities of senses and theory, the full and the empty.

The full world seems like "reality as such". Kant and Metzinger's argument has no perceived significance there. What else could be "reality as such" but what our

senses tell us? In an empty world, absurd questions are asked, such as: how will we ever know the truth or reality as such, how can we even know whether we exist, or do other humans or non-humans have a mind, or is the earth real? While these questions are analytically sensible, they are empirically senseless. Perhaps they are a way to fill an empty theatre. Perhaps they are asked by characters who do not know themselves yet.

I would like to combine these two, like so many others would. I would like to ask and to sense. To question and to consider as true. Not to know and to know, to be sensible and senseless. To speak with concepts and feel, experience, move, touch, smell, see, hear. These are both contradictions and useless juxtapositions. I remember how it felt to be able to smell words. How does it feel now to hear and see words or to touch them? How does it feel to think? How does it feel between thoughts? How did it feel before a thought?

In the beginning, there could not be the word, since behind the word there has to be a mind, and behind the mind there has to be a body, biology, movement - a fish swimming in the ocean, a bird flying in air, a particle igniting and extinguishing in space, merging with other particles and creating a neuron, a sense.

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