

ON LEARNING FROM THE BODY – IN THE COMPANY ARISTOTLE, MERLEAU-PONTY AND HØJRUP

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INTRODUCTION

In this paper I will present and discuss a line of conceptual relationships – what I will call *contact points* – between the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle and the Danish ethnologist Thomas Højrup¹. These contact points concern analytical relations between embodiment, practical forms of knowledge and cultural analysis, and together they constitute central parts of the theoretical frame of reference in my Ph.D. dissertation – still under way.

The point of departure for my dissertation is the current problem of academisation of i.e. the teacher education: on the one hand it is constructed on separation of theory and practice through the theoretical teaching and the practical practice periods. And on the other hand this separation in the Danish Teacher Education is attempted to be crossed by demanding that the students should write an academic bachelor thesis founded on experiences from the practice period.

The question is this: How are the experiences from the practice period turned into academic reflections? What forms of knowledge does that require? And if these forms are practical, what does embodiment mean to the practical sense?

To be able to do these analyses it is necessary to establish a system of concepts which can describe the students' vocal and bodily expressions of their experiences in their practice periods i.e. on how the site of the practice understands and promotes certain practical forms of knowledge and virtues, and how that is interpreted by the students as carriers of certain life modes. In this paper I will concentrate on the discussions of the conceptual contact points which in spite of all the differences together can meet describing the relations between embodiment and learning from the practice period to the bachelor thesis.

According to the Great Danish Dictionary the Danish term for contact point *træfpunkt* means 'at place where you can share information', which I choose to interpret as 'connections and relations that illuminates sporadically agreement on several topics, that can develop each of the connected parts without demanding an exact common founding'. On that background I formulate 4 contact points between Aristotle, Merleau-Ponty and Højrup.

1. Phronesis is bodily founded – the phronetic choices are conditioned by the body's pre-reflective experiences which is intertwined to the surrounding world (umvelt)

2. Acting does not entail, that the subject by perception alone creates the surrounding world but is also in itself created by it
3. Humans are intentional related to the objects in the surrounding world without being conscious about it but not also without losing their subjective perspective or sense of cognitive reflectivity
4. In the students process from the practice period to the bachelor thesis the bodily experiences as imaginations and projections functions as conditions to the academic reflections in a interplay between the examples from the practice period and the teacher training college

Due to the given time I will focus on contact point 1 and 4:

METHOD AND PROGRESSION

By using Aristotle, Merleau-Ponty and Højrup together I aspire to give explanations to the body's founding meaning to how humans own being are equivocal intertwined in an intentional relationship to the surrounding world, and also to describe the content in the practical forms of knowledge and finally to explain how different forms of practice are experienced and conditioned. In spite of the obvious differences between these authors my business is to develop the following:

1. I aim at giving Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body a perspective on the body's role in knowledge and cultural structures
2. I try to give Aristotle's practical forms of knowledge a closer defined meaning on how the practical and the context depended unfolds to the subject who's about to learn these forms of knowledge
3. And I look for giving Højrup's structural theory a sense of subjectivism – understood as the bodily experience conditioned by the surrounding world.

I am well aware of the huge distances between the descriptive phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, the normative ethics and psychology of Aristotle and the structural dialectics of Højrup. For one thing Højrup is mixing ethics and politics while Aristotle tries to separate them. And while Merleau-Ponty criticizes structuralism for being dualistic, Højrup rejects phenomenology for being subjectivism. It would as Veronique M. Fotí (1998) points be possible to claim that Merleau-Ponty and Aristotle alone are chiefly at odds when Aristotle teleologically argues for finitude (Johansen 1994), and Merleau-Ponty develops a ontology of the flesh to the inspiration for the postmodernists defence of infinitudeⁱⁱ (Busch & Gallagher (ed.) 1992 and M. C. Dillon (ed.) 1997). Adding to that, Højrup tries at the same time to formulate finite structures in his system of concepts and keeps it in principal open to infinite changes.

None the less – I will present some of their contact points not presuming a founding agreement but the potential in the contact – a contact that deals with how knowledge develops in practice. First I shortly present the 3 authors:

ARISTOTLE

Aristotle says (Ethics Book IV) that the practical forms of knowledge are virtues and capacities to act suitably and he uses to forms; *techné* and *phronesis* who is opposed to the theoretical form of knowledge, *episteme*. By the virtue of *techné* man does *poesis* – an instrumental, reflective act whose target lays beyond the job itself. By the virtue of *phronesis* man does *praxis* – an act of ethical and social responsibility and an ability to choose appropriately where the aim of act lies within the job itself. The practical forms of knowledge should be understood as virtues, meaning that they function as exemplary abilities, properties and insights to what are the right means to achieve the right thing. In the educations such as teacher training, child care pedagogue, nurse and engineer theory is a tool guiding practice and can here be understood as *techné*. *Poesis* functions as the concretisation of getting the right instruments. And, so *phronesis* connects i.e. to the teacher professions ideals of means to get the happy life, while *praxis* is the realisation of that virtue.

The questions that occur are; what does it mean that a form of knowledge is practical? If one wishes to understand how the teacher or the engineer learns, works and uses his or hers practical knowledge as *poesis* and *praxis*, what relations and processes are relevant to look at? How can one understand the virtues, situations and differences in the processes of learning in their education?

MERLEAU-PONTY

If you ask Merleau-Ponty (2002) the answer is the body. It is the body that places the teacher or engineer student in teaching settings, and it is because of the body that situations become meaningful for humans – both in the indirect perception and in the direct reflexion. Any learning process is conditioned by the fact that both theory and practice is understood on a background of the body's indirect perception of the particular situation. In the existential perspective of Merleau-Ponty the body is the primary condition of possibility, because it makes humans visual and visible to others. This is not subjectivism but interplay – of what Merleau-Ponty calls *the intentional arch* – between i.e. the student and the classroom, where the parts functions as each other preconditions without being each other losing themselves. According to Merleau-Ponty the students is intertwined with the pupils – but keeping his or her own bodily perspective and thereby opportunity to reflect on the experiences afterwards. To Aristotle the body is also central as it clearly says in his psychology *De Anima*, where he describes the soul as the form of the body and thereby formulates a distinct relationship between the body and soul – from a whole other point of departure than Merleau-Ponty that is! (Modrak 2004, Fotí 1998, and Jana Noel 1999).

HØJRUP

To Højrup the body is presumably not separated from consciousness even though this is not a separate theme to Højrup, he partakes in the same discussion. Inspired by Lois Althusser Højrup calls the interplay between the subject and object an *interpellation* (Højrup 2003), which is central to his theory of structural dialectics about the strives for recognition. He develops the *life mode analysis* which is used to understand how and why people look differently at working, leisure time, family life etc. and shows this by the life modes of the *self-employed*, *the wage earner*, *the career bounded* and *the housewife*. To some students the work and leisure time will seem as the same, to others the work is the means to get leisure time and to others work is a part of a career strategy. This means that the students deals very differently with how, why one should learn, responsibilities, duties as citizens etc.. These differences results in ethnocentrism inside each life mode, because they each understands themselves politically, ideologically and legally different from each other and strive for the recognition

from each other. One could have traits from more than one life mode, but one life mode will always be at the core determining central structures, values etc.. In spite of the ethnocentrism all carriers of the different life modes live side by side, and the state actually needs them all to uphold itself and enjoy the recognition of other states. In that way the state itself – or any organisation or grouping – is understood as a subject who creates and are created by other subjects in interplay. So the teacher student is in an interpellation process with the state subject and dependent on what life mode the student is carrier of, he or she will meet the states demands on how to be a good student, citizen, intern etc.. These different ways of understanding i.e. the states demands is analyzed by how the students express and understand the teleology in *aims* and *means*, and causality in *causes and effects* that they experience (Højrup 2033).

ANALYSIS: THE FOUR CONTACT POINTS ARE FORMULATED

FIRST CONTACT POINT: PHRONESIS IS BODILY FOUNDED

The Danish philologist Karsten Friis Johansen (1994) writes, that to Aristotle the relationship between the body and phronesis is that the body's perceptions grounds the experience of liking and disliking, which call for an aspiration and a goal-setting. This goal-setting is steered by the desire and by phronesis, which finds the relevant means. It is because of phronesis, that a situation is realized and the right means to obtain the desired goals are found. Instead of this intellectual interpretation another Danish lecturer Tone Saugstad (2002) and the Irish professor Joseph Dunne (1993) argues that phronesis must be understood far more intuitively and bodily anchored, because phronesis according to Aristotle are learned and works context-dependently. In *De Anima* Aristotle argues further that the body's perception is a function of the soul not separated from practical reason but in itself an act of cognition. Together with reason, liking, aspiration and perception is a fundament for understanding the human being as an acting being (Aristoteles, *De Anima* 403a8ff).

Phronesis can also be understood a little differently. Højrup claims that it is possible to read Aristotle in a way that accentuate the virtues of *techné* and *phronesis* as the states ways of giving the citizens demands in keeping up the just state from the inside of the demands, and from the outside to keep an effective military defence. Especially *phronesis* and *praxis* functions as the states demands to be a good citizen who can control and be controlled, whereas *episteme* and *theoria* functions as the states self consciousness (*techné* and *poesis* is for the slaves as Højrup laconic remarks, 2002, 118). Højrup doesn't discuss the level of consciousness in *phronesis* but the citizen must to be able to control and be controlled have a *praxis* which not essentially reflection or intuition but necessarily both – and how that works must depend on the life mode of the citizen. I will argue that the virtue *phronesis* according to Højrup's interpretation of Aristotle is embodied, because he underlines a passage in *Ethics* where Aristotle argues for virtues to be founded in schools raising of children as good citizens (Højrup 2002: 126):

Lawgivers make the citizens good by training them in habits of right action – this is the aim of all legislation, and if it fails to do this it is a failure; this is what distinguishes a good form of constitution from a bad one (*Ethics* II, p. 75)

The virtue is constantly made and remade in an interpellation process in all forms of learning and acting in relation to the concrete cultural context, state and life mode. The raising of the states children

to become owner of the right citizen virtues is a necessity and state, child-raisers, pupils and many more interpellates and certain forms of praxis developed in each the involved – a form of praxis which I argue is founded on the body's pre-reflected accept of norms conditioned by the life mode.

Merleau-Ponty doesn't explicitly engage in the works of Aristotle but could according to Fotí (1998) have benefited greatly, because the virtue notions both describes the surrounding worlds expectations and the subjects interpretations of these in what could be seen almost as a dissolving of the distinction between the subject and object. When it comes to phronesis there is no doubt that Merleau-Ponty would claim that form of knowledge – as all others – is founded on the body, meaning that phronesis is conditioned by bodily pre-reflective cognitions.

When the body's perceptions are connected to phronesis it is relevant to look more closely at what Merleau-Ponty actually means by perception. To him, perception it is a grounding, existential relationship that means that before any reflexion or thought the subject is situated, and from his or hers bodily perspective transcends and are transcended by the surrounding world in an interpretation and socialisation of what Merleau-Ponty calls the *intentional arch* (Merleau-Ponty 2002). The practical forms of knowledge of Aristotle are to Merleau-Ponty structured by this bodily situatedness, where the subject inhabits and becomes a part of the milieu not losing his or hers interpreting and subjective point of departure (Merleau-Ponty 2002, Gallagher 1992). Merleau-Ponty wants to show that the soul and rationality does not lead to static truths but are founded in perception. Rationality must be understood as what we think of is true, and rationality doesn't cease to exist but gets a more hermeneutic meaning both on an individual and cultural level – not that Merleau-Ponty actually give the cultural level much attention.

Højrup (2002) on the other hand, points to the fact – using a term borrowed from Hegel – that the subject always will try with the *cunning of reason* to work the surrounding world and its objects around so that their causality will bring out the subjects own goals and aims. He articulates (consciously?) a concord with Merleau-Ponty that the subject becomes part of the given milieu and materiality already loaded with meaning, which the subject inevitable uses for his or hers own puposes, and thereby not only is transcended by the meaning of the objects but also manifests his or her own immanent interpretations of the use, relations, values etc. (Merleau-Ponty 1995, 2002). This practice of interpretation Højrup calls *neo-culturation*, which are the subject's ways of keeping their life mode and culture under shifting conditions (Højrup 2003).

In sum, Aristotle, Merleau-Ponty and Højrup meets in a contact point I call 'phronesis is founded in the body' which entails a discussion of how phronesis is to be understood more as a reflective or intuitively notion. In the Aristotle literature there is much debate about this and inspired by the ways Merleau-Ponty and Højrup both argues for conditions such as bodily pre-reflections and cultural interpellation processes for the reason at work I will contribute to this discussion by suggesting a mid-position, that takes phronesis to be bodily founded and as an reflection structured by the body.

That phronesis is founded in the body means that the social responsibility and appropriate acts must be understood as ways the subject becomes part of the surrounding world by the interpellation processes with the state in i.e. the teacher or engineer education. The subject adjusts the demands more or less consciously and becomes only aware of the virtues and their power when they are broken or the subject is confronted with other virtues. Phronesis could not be just reflection or intuition because that would either way over- or under estimate the subject as creator or created by the

surrounding world. Aristotle seems not to decline this due to his notion of perception which functions as a context depended interpretation (Aristoteles, *De Anima*).

FOURTH CONTACT POINT: IMAGINATIONS AND ACADEMIC REFLEXIONS INTERPLAY

In contradiction to Merleau-Ponty Aristotle does not describe the subject as intertwined with the object, because human beings have reason and the ability to draw objective conclusions (Aristoteles *De Anima* 430a10ff). This 'distance' between humans and the world need to be nuanced by Aristotle own notion of how the intellect works, namely by imagining objects, situations, acts etc. due to the ability of *phantasia* which is a part of the body's perceptual capabilities (Aristoteles *De Anima* 432a8).

To Aristotle the theoretical reason also connects with perception and *phantasia* even though truth, knowledge or meaning doesn't follow from *phantasia* and it in itself not even is perception and more is a psychological term, it is a part of every cognition (Aristoteles 432a8): Because on the one hand I can imagine something that may show to be false, and I can have imaginations of the object without even having seen it, but the imagination itself is on the other hand a founding part of every recognition. Both practical and theoretical reason operates by using pictures or imaginations of the reality that reason work within. Hereby is seen what Karsten Friis Johansen (1994) calls Aristotle's epistemological ontology, which is the relationship between the reasons ability to make an discursive judgement on a background of intuitively, indirect cognition of the object in its wholeness and essence.

Jana Noel (1999) claims that *phronesis* must be understood in connection to *phantasia*, because the human imaginations, *phantasmata*, doesn't create accidental nor true pictures of a situation but still functions interpretively and guiding in practice (Aristoteles *De Anima* 433b12ff). *Phantasia* is according to Noel attached to the practical reason and the body's experiences (Aristoteles *De Anima* 403a8). Potential, future acts become real in *phantasia* not just as pictures of choices but also as interpretations of what appropriate means to be chosen – inviting *phronesis* who supports the right means (Aristoteles *Ethics* 1141b10). In practice *phantasia* can contribute to the i.e. teachers *phronesis* in 3 modes: as goal setting by imagining the wished results, as evaluative and as empathetic imaginations of how *praxis* was received by the involved, and as a critical sense and imaginations of alternatives to the carried out *praxis* (Noel 1999).

Højrup does not comment on the psychology of Aristotle (which might give his theory a better sense of the subject own relationship to the surrounding world?) but it seems that he would answer that the *phantasmata* is depended on what life mode the particular subject is a carrier of. To Jana Noel Højrup would probably respond that the sketched out didactical developing process of goal-setting, evaluation, and critique is idealistic, and could only function having in mind that humans have different life modes and some would not go through all the stages. None the less he would also agree that the imaginations would be embodied and function as central point of departure for any academic reflection on the students practice periods.

On a subjective level Aristotle's notion of epistemological meaning of *phantasia* meets Merleau-Ponty's notion of the ontological understanding of the body which

annexes neutral objects by diverting them from their immediate significance, it makes tools for itself, and projects itself into the environment in the shape of cultural objects (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 412).

So the subject projects itself onto the surrounding world and creates pictures of it in shapes of cultural artefacts. This projection is the subject's intentionality and is an integration of the human being and the surrounding world, but also describes on what terms the cognition is created: when Merleau-Ponty claims that the body inhabits a place (2002) then that doesn't only mean that the subject is-in-the-world but that the projections of ideas, wishes, plans, and values etc. comes from bodily experiences that structures how the situation is reflected by reason (Gallagher 2002). To inhabit a place can also partly be understood as a process of interpellation, where there is a battle of recognition between the present life modes and partly as how the virtues of techné and phronesis should be practiced. In the practice period this process develops under a certain pressure of acting – embodied as pre-reflective projections and phantasmata of the ethical milieu in the practice setting. In the bachelor thesis writings the student may reflect on the phantasmata but not necessarily being able to rumble all the conditions of why he or she acted in that particular way.

CONCLUSION

In the company of Aristotle, Merleau-Ponty, and Højrup it becomes possible to analyze how the students reflect their experiences from the practice period in their bachelor thesis. The contact points of terms can work as a theoretical frame of reference, because the bodily, practical form of knowledge function as a condition for all learning in all contexts and these contexts are different. Thereby a problem occurs because demands, expectations, and virtues are different in the two settings of the practice period and of the thesis writing period, and both these periods are experienced differently by students, teachers, guides and others who are carriers of different life modes. And so this theoretical frame of virtues, embodiment and life modes tries to describe the interplay of practice experiences and the writing of the bachelor thesis. In underlining several conditions in the students reasoning the embodiment of the virtues and the life modes stands out as the central point giving reasons to examine further how the practice period experiences is reflected in the bachelor thesis.

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ⁱ This paper mainly refers to the works of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (1999), *De Anima* (1995), and Merleau-Ponty's *The Phenomenology of Perception* (2002) and *The Visible and the Invisible* (2000) and finally on Højrup's *State, Culture and Life-Modes* (2003) and *Dannelsens Dialektik* (2002).

ⁱⁱ None the less is great parts of the Aristotle and Merleau-Ponty readings agreeing on the possibilities of formulating relations between them, and I will therefore present a interpretation of Aristotle and Merleau-Ponty that shares many views of Joseph Dunne (1993), Debroah K W. Modrak (2004), Veronique M. Fotí (1998), Jana Noel (1999), G. B. Madison (1990), M. C. Dillon (1997) and Shaun Gallagher (1992).