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On Dis/Ability in Husserl's Phenomenology

HAMAUZU, Shinji

Introduction

Since publishing my dissertation entitled *Husserl's Phenomenology of Intersubjectivity* in 1995 (Sobunsha, Tokyo), I have been engaged in dealing with the issues regarding “Caring” as a concrete field of intersubjectivity, especially after I began to teach the “Clinical Philosophy” seminar at Osaka University, Japan. From such a background I shall re-read Husserl's phenomenology and suggest how we can develop a phenomenology of Dis/Ability and Ab/Normality based on it. I intend to neither stay rigidly within the framework of Husserl's phenomenology, nor go far beyond it. I'll examine carefully the possibility of Husserl's phenomenology on these problems¹.

1. “I live”

In his “Fundamental Phenomenological Outlook” of *Ideas Vol. I*(1912) Husserl described his idea of “natural attitude” by using the Cartesian word “cogito”, but immediately re-defined it as “the fundamental form of all ‘wakeful (actual)’ living”(III, 59) and, instead of “ego sum, ego cogito” he wrote “*I am, this life is, I live: cogito*”(III, 97) and called it “the flowing life”(ibid.). However, what does “living” and “life” mean in this context? What did he mean with these words? Usually we would answer, living means breathing, eating, drinking, discharging, sitting, walking, etc. These actions are related to physical sides of living and can't happen without my body. Living means further feeling, willing, thinking, remembering, expecting, etc. These actions are related to mental sides of living. We might also say that

living means talking to others, listening to others, discussing with others, playing something with others, etc. These actions have a physical and mental relationship to others.

Whereas bodily actions are performed in space and time, mental actions are performed mainly only in time. Life has not only spatial aspects in the expanse, but also temporal aspects in the flowing. Husserl understood the term “cogito” in a wider sense than Descartes did, and Husserl did not develop a body-mind dualism from the “cogito” by seeing the “cogito” only as a mental aspect in “cogito”. Rather, Husserl saw the “cogito” as offering a notion of “life”. When he talked about “intentionality” as the fundamental idea of phenomenology, he used often the word “consciousness”, as follows: “We understand under intentionality the peculiarity of lived experience (Erlebnis) to be ‘consciousness of something’”(III, 188). However later, e.g. in his manuscript for *To The Phenomenology of Intersubjectivity*(1920, XIII, 71 et passim) or in his lecture *The First Philosophy*(1923, VIII, 120 et passim), he paraphrased it with the coinage “consciousness-life”(Bewußtseinsleben). Thus he had a tendency to use the word “life” or “living” instead of “thinking” for “cogito”.

2. “Actuality and potentiality”

What does Husserl’s usage of phrases like “all ‘wakeful (actual)’ living” instead of “cogito” mean? Husserl thought that “cogito” in a narrow sense is performed in “actuality”, but “cogito” in a wider sense includes “inactuality (potentiality)” as well. He wrote: “Cogito means ‘I perform an act of consciousness.’ In order to keep this fixed concept we reserve the Cartesian expression of cogito.”(III, 73) Cogito in a narrow sense means for him, only such a performative act in actuality, but doesn’t cover all lived experience or consciousness-life in actuality as well as potentiality. So, he wrote: “The actual lived experiences are surrounded by a ‘garden(Hof)’ of inactual lived

experiences. The stream of lived experiences can't be composed only of actuality."(ibid.) In this context he introduced the important words such as "garden", "background" and "horizon".

Husserl wrote: "The actually perceived, the more or less clear present together, is partly accepted and partly surrounded by a darkly being conscious horizon of undefined reality. ... The undefined surroundings are infinite. There is necessarily a hazy and never fully defined horizon."(III, 57) Or, in other words including an example: "The grasping is a grasping out, each perceived thing has a background of experience. Around the paper there are books, pencils, inkpot, etc. in a certain sense of 'perceived' there in the field of intuitions."(III, 71) The fundamental concept of intentionality is now understood in a wider sense, and such understanding includes the concepts of actuality and potentiality as well. Therefore Husserl wrote: "Even if the intentionality is not 'performed' in the special modality of actuality, it can be already 'stirred' in the 'background' without being performed."(III, 189) Later he called it "horizon-intentionality"(XVII, 207).

From his lecture *Thing and Space* (1905), seven years earlier than *Ideas Vol.1* (1912), I would like add some passages regarding the theme of "horizon": "The thing has more than the perceived or appearing front side in the sense of perception. ... Original appearance and unoriginal appearance are not separated, but united in the appearance in the wider sense." (XVI, 50) "To the appearance it belongs that the visible refers to the invisible."(XVI, 245) However, how is the perception of the "horizon" in potentiality possible? Take this example: there is a house in front of me. I am looking at the front of the house and from here I can see neither the side nor the back of it. But if I can go around, I can see both. This example brings us to the problem of "I as lived body (Ichleib)"(XVI, 10, et passim). There are two relevant and important points which he developed in this lecture: On the one hand: "Perception of things is perception of what is grasped out from the background." This is the point I have just mentioned in *Ideas Vol.1*. On the

other hand: “Perception has a relationship to my lived body (Ichleib).” (“Ego-Body” in translation by Rojcewicz; but in original German word “Ichleib”)(XVI, 10). Now I would like to go onto the second point: my lived body.

3. “My lived body (Ichleib)”

In the lecture *Thing and Space*, Husserl developed the idea of “my lived body” as follows: “A perceived thing is not alone for itself, but stands before eyes midst a certain intuitive circumstance of things. For instance the lamp stands on the table midst books, papers and other things. The physical circumstances are similarly perceived. ... My lived body (Ichleib) belongs to these things which are perceived together.” (XVI, 80) Everything around me is relate to my body. “It [The lived body] stands there as the always staying point of relationship. ... It defines right and left, front and back, above and below. It takes a special position in the perceived world of things.”(ibid.)

Husserl emphasized the peculiarity of my lived body among other things around me. “On the one hand the lived body is a thing as well, a physical thing as other things. ... It is a thing midst other things. On the other hand this thing is just lived body, bearer of I. ... The constitution of physical things is intertwined with the constitution of my lived body (Ichleib) in a strange correlation.”(XVI, 162) Because my lived body takes a special position and is located in a special place (here), a thing lying far away can be seen only as a small thing in a distance and only in one side. If I can approach to it and go around it, I am able to see it in details and with multiple sides, and in some case look into it, touch it and analyze it, and then I see what the thing originally is. (cf. XVI, 115f.)

In order to see a thing in details, “the thing must be turned or pushed, or I must move me, my eyes, my lived body, go around it, approach it and go off.”(XVI, 155) My lived body is not a simple thing among other things, but

is an “organ” with which I can see, hear, feel, smell, go and move. It is an organ of my perception. “The eyes can move, the head, the upper body, etc, as well. ... Important is the ‘moving itself’, which is expressed in the kinesthetical senses.”(XVI, 158) The term “kinesthesia” was also an important coinage composed of “kinesis(movement)” and “aesthesia (sense)” which Husserl borrowed from the contemporary psychology and changed it into a phenomenological concept. That is, so to speak, no senses I feel at things, but senses I feel with my moving my own lived body.

He wrote: “The touching hand ‘seems’ as having sense of touch. Directed to the touched object smoothness or roughness seems as belonging to it. I look after the touching hand, it has the sense of smoothness of roughness, and it has them at the appearing fingertips. ... If I touch the right hand with the left hand, the appearance of the left and right hand constitutes itself alternately with senses of touch and kinesthesia, the one moving on another.”(XVI, 162) He continued: “Here is important that the constitution of physical things is intertwined with the constitution of my lived body (Ichleib) in the strange way.”(XVI, ibid.)

Husserl developed the idea of “lived body” further about ten years later in the manuscript of *Ideas Vol.2*. “The lived body (Leib) is the medium of all perceptions and the organ of perception. It is necessarily present in all perceptions.”(IV, 56) The lived body is no dead body or thing, but the living body which is functioning in the center of my perception. “The lived body becomes the bearer of the point of orientation, the zero point, and of here and now, from which the pure I gets intuitions of the space and the whole world of sense. Therefore each appearing thing has in itself a relation of orientation to the lived body, and not only the really appearing thing but also each thing which can appear.”(ibid.) “I have all things oppositely, they are ‘there’ - with a sole exception of the lived body which is always ‘here’.”(IV, 159)

My lived body stays in the center of my perception, even if I move with it. Husserl wrote: “Whereas I have against all other things the freedom to

change my stand point to them voluntarily, I have no possibility to remove me from my lived body. Therefore, the variety of possibilities as to how the lived body may appear is limited. I can see only the certain parts of the body in a special shortening of perspective and the other parts (e.g. the head) are unseen at all for me. The same body which serves me as medium of all perceptions stands me on my way of perception and is a strangely imperfectly constituted thing.”(IV, 159)

Merleau-Ponty, who read Husserl’s manuscript of *Ideas Vol.2* at the Husserl Archive in Leuven, quoted in his *Phenomenology of Perception* as follows: “I have appearance of touch by touching the left hand. Namely I don’t only feel, but perceive and have appearance of a soft and such and such formed smooth hand. ... But by touching the left hand, I find there a series of senses of touch which are localized there. ... If I speak of physical thing ‘left hand’, I ignore these senses. ... If I add them to it, the physical thing doesn’t get rich, but it becomes a lived body, it senses.”(IV, 145) A lived body is not only an object as a thing similar to other things in surroundings, but also a medium with which I can sense and move, further a living body, i.e. a subject which senses and moves.

4. “I can”

In connection with the idea of “lived body (Leib)”, Husserl often used also the expression “I can (Ich kann)”. E.g. in *Ideas Vol.2*: “The subject has ‘ability(Vermögen)’(I can) to move the lived body freely and to perceive the outer world through it.”(IV, 152) In the paragraph 59 titled with “The I as subject of ability(Vermögen)”, Husserl wrote: “The I as unity is a system of ‘I can’. There it is to distinguish between the physical and the physical mediated ‘I can’ and the mental ‘I can’. I have an ability on my body, am the one who moves and can move this hand. I can play piano.”(IV, 253f.) Nevertheless, it doesn’t mean that I can always do so, but sometimes I can’t

do it. He continued: “But it doesn’t work always. I forgot playing it again and am out of practice. I learn my body. ... But if I am ill for long time, I must learn going and come into it soon. But if I am mentally ill (nervenkrank), I lost control of parts of my body. ‘I can’t’. In this sense I became an other.”(ibid.)

In this context Husserl discussed many issues regarding “ability” also in relationship to actuality and potentiality, as follows: “The mental I can be grasped as an organism of ability (Vermögen) with its development in a normal typical style, namely with steps of children, youth, ripeness and elderly. The subject ‘can’ be various and is defined according to its ability through stimulus and actual motive to do. It is always active according to its ability and changes, gets rich, strong or weak always through its activity. The ability is no empty ‘can’, but a positive potentiality which comes into actuality and is always ready to go to activity.” (IV, 254f.) I am not always able to do something and I change from potentiality to actuality and vice versa, and change from inability to ability vice versa.

Husserl continued: “At last everything is sent back to primary ability (Urvermögen) of subject and then to acquired ability, sprung from the earlier actuality of life. The I as a person constitutes itself in the original genesis not only as impulsively defined personality, from the beginning and always impelled by original ‘instincts’ and following them, but also as higher, autonomous, free active, especially lead by motive of reason.”(IV, 255) Husserl initiated here the idea of a genetic phenomenology which he developed later.

Husserl characterized “able / capable” as a practical possibility and said: “What I can, am able to, am capable for, what stands for me consciously, is a practical possibility.”(IV, 258) Then he continued: “In the experience the ‘I can’ and “I can’t” are distinguished according to its phenomenological character. There is an action without opposition or a consciousness of ability without opposition, and an action with overcoming of opposition. ... There is

a degree of opposition and power of overcoming. The opposition can be irresistible. Then we are pushed to ‘it doesn’t work’, ‘I can’t’, ‘I don’t have the power’.(IV, 258f.) Husserl mentioned here my today’s theme of “ability and inability or disability” which I have according to the situation.

5. “Capability” (Vermöglichkeit)

In this context Husserl discussed “can” and “ability” in various passages, e.g.: “All my ‘can’(Können) in the physical sphere is mediated by my ‘bodily activity (Leibesbetätigung)’ and by my physical ‘can’(leibliches Können) and ability(Vermögen).” (IV, 259) However, I’m not always able to do something, or sometimes am unable or disable to do a certain thing, e.g. as follows: “My hand falls asleep. — now I can’t move it, it is benumbed temporarily. ...The hand puts aside something that stands on the way, ‘it works’. Sometimes it works ‘with difficulty’, ‘with less difficulty’, ‘without resistance’ and it doesn’t work sometimes. The opposition is unovercoming in spite of all endeavours.”(ibid.) Then he concluded as follows: “It is of importance to bring out the contrast between the possibility in the sense of mere ‘logical’ possibility and the practical possibility of ‘can’ (Können) with examples.” (IV, 261)

Husserl mentioned later, e.g. in *The Crisis of European Sciences* (1938) (VI, 164 et passim), this practical possibility of the “can” or possibility based on ability with his coinage “Vermöglichkeit”. This is a compound word composed of “be able to (Vermögen) and possibility (Möglichkeit) and I would like to translate it with the English word “capability”. If I can make a bridge between the idea of the “lived body”, “horizon”, “potentiality” and “capability”, I would say, inactuality of horizon means potentiality and possibility, e.g. “I can go further”. It is no empty logical possibility, but the “capability” (Vermöglichkeit) motivated by “I can go” with my kinesthetic lived body. The horizon is thus a “playing space” (Spielraum) of the possible and physical

experience. It has a relationship to “my lived body (Ichleib)” as the “zero point” of orientation and perspective.

It means, however, that the horizon is not only opened by capability, but also is limited by or depends on my capability of e.g. “I can go”. If I could add the above mentioned genetic phenomenology to this point, I would say that this horizon has diversity according to the steps of my development from childhood, youth to elderly and my conditions as healthy, sick, fatigue, awake or asleep. And each of us human beings has a different ability or disability, a different way of going, seeing, hearing and smelling. We all have different horizons, and how they differ depends on our own dis/ability.

6. “Normality and abnormality”

In this context, Husserl sometimes mentioned the dichotomy of the “normal / abnormal”, and “normality and abnormality” which he used often in his posthumous manuscripts *To Phenomenology of Intersubjectivity* (XIII-XV). We should examine this dichotomy carefully, because he introduced it in order not to discriminate, but to develop his genetic phenomenology. He wrote: “Abnormality is a modification of normality, stands out from it, and comes to it. ... Each subject has his normality within which abnormality emerges as a certain style of disturbing” (XV, 154) He continued: “Normality has various forms and steps which belong to the constitution of human beings where he or she ‘becomes’ him- or herself and from child to normal ripe man or woman.” (ibid.) “Child” could be characterized as abnormal only in contrast to ripe normal adult. Abnormality is a relative concept which can be defined in contrast to normality.

Abnormality as well as normality has various steps. Husserl wrote: “The steps of normality and abnormality correspond to the steps of constitution of beings. The world constituted in the normality is constituted as world including the abnormality. ... Each normal subject has occasionally

abnormal deviations from his normal experience.”(XV, 155) As examples of abnormality Husserl sometimes uses the terms “children”, “crazy”, “disease”, “sleep”, “loss of consciousness” and “animals”. He introduced these examples not in the sense of discrimination, as something apart from normality, but as various “modifications”, “steps”, “changes” of normality. We ourselves could be developed from such abnormality and could fall into such abnormality.

Therefore, Husserl introduced the genetic method which he called “Abbau”(XV, 133) and could be translated with the English word “deconstruction”. According to this method, by imagining a step where some dimension of the normal constitution which the world lacks, we can imagine the world of above mentioned abnormality such as “crazy”, “disease”, “sleep”, “loss of consciousness”, etc. This is so to speak, a method to understand abnormality as a modification of normality. Husserl understood the dichotomy of normality and abnormality rather in relativity. He wrote: “Abnormal people are only abnormal regarding to a definite layer of characteristics of normal common world, whereas they have experience otherwise in total harmony with normal people and are normal in other points.”(XV, 158)

We could understand this relativity of normality and abnormality from the point of view of ability and disability. Normality is characterized by ability by which someone is able to do something as normal people, whereas abnormality is characterized by disability by which someone is disabled, and that disability prevents them from doing something as normal people. If I fall in the situation of abnormality, I’m not able to do what I was able to do in my normality. Husserl wrote in a text: “I become somehow sick. From the inner side I have a lived experience as abnormal. Because of continuing of bad feelings I get consciousness of weakness such as disability for moving in a normal way, performing my familiar ability and gathering my thoughts. I feel the disappearance of my consciousness.”(XLII, 2) In my abnormal situation of sickness I lost my ability I have in normal situation.

My ability could open my horizon and “life-world” as “a horizon of horizons”, whereas my lost of ability namely my disability could limit my “life-world”. The extent of my “life-world” depends on my ability and disability. Husserl mentioned “adult” and “children”, as another example for normality and abnormality. This should be understood in terms of development and the genetic phenomenology. Genetic phenomenology should cover not only issues of development and genesis, i.e. how we get ability and normality, but also issues of ageing and losing them, i.e. how we lose ability and normality and fall into disability and abnormality, what we could call a de-genetic phenomenology or a phenomenology of decline². And what is interesting for me is that Husserl introduced the issues of “birth and death”(XV, 138 et passim) in this context, namely as an extreme pole of abnormality. He characterized both extreme cases as “problems of border”(cf. XLII) with which the phenomenological method can’t cope well.

Husserl asked himself: “Now it is important to set world, birth and death seriously in the essential relationship and to show how far they are not only a fact and how far a world and humans without death is unthinkable.”(XV, 172) I myself am also interested in the issues of “ageing and death” because Husserl wrote: “Also I myself will die -- like I was once born, developed into adulthood and got old. But the question is, what this means.”(XXIX, 332) I myself have been interested in the issues of “birth, ageing, disease and death” in Buddhist ideas. In his late manuscript(1930/31), Husserl himself used terms “birth, ageing, disease, death”(XV, 168). However, these themes would go beyond today’s theme and should be discussed in another chance.

Closing words: Intersubjectivity of dis/ability

In ending this talk I would like to mention the theme of intersubjectivity of dis/ability in Husserl’s phenomenology. As said previously, he discussed

normality and abnormality in relativity, namely we can talk about normal and abnormal only in relationship to each other. Then we should discuss the contrast between ability and disability in relationship to each other as well. Dis/ability is not a characteristic which individuals possess by him- or herself without any relationship to each other. I've tried to translate Husserl's coinage "Vermöglichkeit", i.e. possibilities based on ability with "capability". Also this concept should be understood not as something belonging to individuals, but something characteristic of relationships or circumstances where individuals are living. Although we can't find in my opinion so much passages leading to this thought in Husserl's text, it is important and remarkable that he discussed issues of dis/ability in the context of phenomenology of intersubjectivity.

Discussion

Q1: You say that each individual develops his own horizon and on some occasions you also say that each individual develops his own life world. This sounds strange to me since the life world is precisely the intersubjective, horizontal meaning structure that serves as background for the lived bodily focus of my experiences. The life world does not admit of any plural as Husserl writes in the *Krisis*. Maybe we can talk about a homeworld of a people in contrast to a world of foreigners as Husserl did sometimes, or pluralize the life world as "working world", "family world" ect. as in Schutz, but surely we cannot talk about one life world for each individual. As I understand it, what is individual in the experienced ability case is the way each person makes himself at home in a world that also belong to others, not the life world itself. What do you intend here?

A1: Thank you so much for your helpful comment to develop my idea! You are right, that I used the term "lifeworld" in a little deviated way from

Husserl in the *Krisis*, and that it would be better to use e.g. the term “homeworld”. But, about 40 years ago Ulrich Claesges pointed out the ambiguity or double meaning of the term “lifeworld”. However against his critique I was of the opinion, that almost every phenomenological term could be ambiguous with double meaning according to natural attitude or transcendental attitude. Especially if we contrast the lifeworld with natural scientific world in the transcendental attitude, as in the *Krisis*, we should talk one single and intersubjective lifeworld. On the contrary, when Husserl talks in the natural or personalistic attitude in the *Ideas II*, he could say different “lifeworlds” in plural. Moreover about 20 years ago I was engaged in the relationship between Husserl and Schutz, I got my opinion that the natural attitude and the transcendental attitude can be interpreted in an reciprocal relationship, and that Husserl’s interpretation of lifeworld in the transcendental attitude and Schutz’s interpretation of lifeworld in the natural attitude could be complemented each other. In addition, in last 6 years I was engaged in collaboration with researchers from various empirical fields such as medicine, sociology, caring science, antholopology and so on. From this collaboration I am tended to emphasize the term lifeworld in the natural attitude. Today’s talk had also such tendency.

Q2: Your presentation of normality and abnormality in the talk seems to be about health and illness issues rather than about social and cultural norms. What do you think about the possibilities of upholding distinctions between health norms that mainly concerns lived, bodily capabilities and social-cultural-moral norms that are found in the shared life world? From a Foucauldian point of view all normality claims could be viewed as repressive structures that have a cultural rather than biological origin. Could the Husserlian take on normality preserve some kind of difference between being unhealthy and being politically repressed when experiencing inability?

A2: Yes, in my talk today I focused on the personal side of normality and abnormality including health and illness following Husserl's discussion, and not on the social and cultural side of them, because Husserl himself in my opinion didn't develop the social and cultural aspects of the problem deeply, as I touched the lack of intersubjective dimension of normality and abnormality in Husserl's texts at the closing words of my talk. And as said there, I think that this idea of normality and abnormality should go beyond the limitation of Husserl's ideas, what I could not develop further in today's talk.

Q3: Another issue that bothers me is if the individualized capabilities of a person do not presuppose some kind of limits that are provided by the body itself on the one hand and our shared ways of making ourselves at home in the life world on the other. In other words, if health from the phenomenological perspective is an individualized norm and not a biological norm does it not nevertheless presuppose certain limits of each individual normality provided by the body itself (whatever that means)?

A3: Yes, I did mention some of such limitation, but didn't mention the limits of capability or individual normality so much. However, I do think that we can imagine such limits easily. E.g. I can walk, run and swim, but I cannot fly without any artificial equipments, neither run in 100 m per one second, nor dive without breathing 1 hour, because of our lack of capability based on our biological body. According to Husserl's idea in my today's talk the norms of normality and abnormality are understood as an individualized norm, but not as an social or cultural, therefore intersubjective norm. Limits of normality and abnormality could be understood based on individual and biological dimension on the one hand, based on social and cultural dimensions on the other.

Q4: Finally, I think your interest in the role of birth and death from the perspective of health and normality are interesting, but I wonder if it is correct to call these issues “extreme poles of abnormality”, are they not rather liminal experiences, fundamental border experiences that lend significance to the streaming life of consciousness as a whole? Birth and death are indeed not abnormal, but very normal for us, at least if we have not become transhumanists and believe in a future life as cyborgs or computers who do not have parents and will never die.

A4: Yes, birth and death can be called “extreme poles of abnormality” only if we talk from my first person perspective and start with normality with which I am accustomed to live in everyday life. However, if we talk from the third person perspective about human beings, birth and death are totally normal just “for us”, but not abnormal, neither liminal. We can observe birth and death of second and third person, but never birth and death of myself from my first person perspective. In this sense phenomenological research on birth and death is limited, they are talked only as liminal experiences.

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Notes

1. This paper was originally read at first at the PEACE VII Conference “Phenomenology of Dis/Ability” on 16. December at Tokyo University, then in a minor revised version at the Annual Conference of Nordic Society for Phenomenology, “Phenomenology and the Body – Contemporary Perspectives” on 17. June 2017 at NTNU, Trondheim, Norway. I would like to thank all participants who discussed at the both conferences. Especially I appreciate Prof. Fredrik Svenaeus who raised some questions as commentator in the discussion represented at the end of this paper.
2. We can find examples of such a de-genetic phenomenology in the following works: Beauvoir (1970) and Kall (2015).