



Healing the Lifeworld: On personal and collective individuation

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Abstract

The paper argues that the dynamics of personal and collective individuation could be interrelated and bear ethical significance thanks to an analysis of the Lifeworld and intersubjectivity that link together the genetic and the generative perspectives of phenomenology. The first section of the paper recalls the epistemological and ontological implications of Husserl's and Stein's analysis of personal individuation in relation to what Husserl would call, later, the "Lifeworld" and the intersubjective constitution of communities. The second section of the paper turns to a phenomenology of the Lifeworld through an analysis of refugees' care and the intersubjective dynamics involved in the clinic of exile. Such an example will bring to light the importance of embodiment and intercorporeity to grasp the process through which the genetic constitution of the Lifeworld constitutes itself as a collective process of individuation trying to heal the scars of historicity. Consequently, individuation will appear as a personal and collective task, rather than a static and ego-centered achievement that would be forgetful of our fundamental interdependency. Finally, the last section argues that "healing the Lifeworld" does not amount to conceive of its "horizon" as being itself a predetermined "telos" of transcendental subjectivity, as if this open structure could be itself constituted. Rather, the varieties of the Lifeworld and its paradoxical movement of appropriation and differentiation point to a relational ontology that considers the becoming of a common and meaningful world as a *limit-problem* of phenomenology and, perhaps, its ethical and critical promise.

Keywords Husserl · Merleau-Ponty · Individuation · Lifeworld · Embodiment · Care

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1 Introduction

Perhaps we are at one of those moments when history moves one. (...) But underneath the clamor, a silence is growing, an expectation. Why could it not be a *hope*?

Merleau-Ponty¹

In the middle of the cemetery of Catania (Sicily) stands a white marble monument built in memory of the refugees who drowned while crossing the Mediterranean Sea. “The hope of the shipwrecked sailor” pictures a man standing, dominating the waves of chaos. A few anonymous graves surround him as if to signify the indifference in which these lives were lost. A poetic epitaph of the Nigerian Nobel Prize of Literature, Wole Soyinka is engraved in the marble of each of them, trying to make sense of the unbearable. A few meters away, far from the unifying symbol, the raw reality of the bodies buried in the soil. Waiting for the opening of a large international cemetery, the bodies of those who did not survive the crossing or died soon after rest in a dedicated space of the Catania cemetery or other cemeteries of the surrounding villages. Labels bearing a number identifying the name of the boat, the date, and the sex of the body are planted in the ground, exhibiting the violence of a serially killing indifference.

The effort of the organizations to find their identities, to honor their memory and to relieve the suffering of the families who remained at home without news, reveals humanity’s relentless effort to restore the human presence of these precarious lives, beyond aesthetics or objectification.² Confronting the reality of the bruised fleshs and the place we give them in the social and historical space reveals a dimension of our relationship to ourselves, to others, and the world that once again raises the question of the personal and collective meaning of our being-in-the-world, with others, beyond any imperative, be it political or ethical.³ It urges us to rethink the meanings constituted in and through the habitualities, opinions, and affective experiences that are sedimented in our Lifeworld.

Such a situation reveals the paradoxical dimension of individuation, resolutely rooted in the space and time of a world that passes but which just as much engages us so that it can be part of a collective process as well. If our physical reality subjects us to a form of necessity that makes our relationship to natural and human worlds individuated and raw, the desire that aspires to make sense of life, whether in an intellectual, spiritual, political, or even artistic form—in symbolic and aesthetic experiences—testifies to that lability and expressiveness of the world, that led Merleau-Ponty to characterize subjectivity as a “fissure of the world.” He states:

Thus, it is essential for the thing and for the world to be presented as ‘open,’ to send us beyond their determinate manifestations, and to promise us always

¹ Merleau-Ponty (1964, p. 23).

² Cf. Butler (2006).

³ Cf. Bartolo and Tilotta (2017). Cf. Cattaneo (2019).

‘something more to see.’ This is what is sometimes expressed when it is said that the thing and the world are mysterious. They are indeed mysterious, as soon as we do not limit ourselves to their objective appearance and as soon as we place them back into the milieu of subjectivity. They are even an absolute mystery, which admits of no elucidation, not through a temporary flaw in our knowledge – for then it would fall back to the status of a mere problem – but rather because it is not of the order of objective thought where there are solutions. There is nothing to see beyond our horizons except still other landscapes and other horizons; there is nothing within the thing except other, smaller things. The ideal of objective thought is simultaneously grounded upon and left in ruins by temporality. The world, in the full sense of the word, is not an object. It is wrapped in objective determinations but also has fissures and lacunae through which subjectivities become lodged in it or, rather, which are subjectivities themselves.⁴

Subjectivities, as fissures, break in the “taken-for-granted” structure of the Lifeworld and its sedimented meanings to perpetually renew its generative force—a force that “mysteriously” and paradoxically links together this shattered plurality made of uneasiness and familiarity. This paper aims to analyze and reflect on that paradox of polarity and porosity: the polarity of self and other—conditions of their responsibility and mutual recognition—and the porosity of the Lifeworld through its intersubjective constitution—without which no freedom of expression can occur. In other words, relying on the phenomenological characterization of the Lifeworld and individuation, notably in Husserl, Stein, Merleau-Ponty, Richir, and Waldenfels, this paper argues that the dynamics of personal and collective individuation could be interrelated and bear ethical significance thanks to an analysis of the Lifeworld and intersubjectivity that link together the genetic and the generative perspectives of phenomenology. Indeed, the most recent example of the Covid-19 pandemic and the way it has disrupted our relation to the world and others have shown the pressing need to preserve the intersubjective and embodied dynamics through which the Lifeworld could become an inclusive yet differentiated “home-world,” able to carry out the “continual renewal” of its generative force.⁵ The generalization of war and its devastating global consequences (hunger, exile, social and economic crisis) urge us to divest the Lifeworld from its pathological objectification into worldviews that conflate (personal and collective) individuation processes with homogenization and identity politics.

The first section of the paper recalls the epistemological and ontological implications of Husserl’s and Stein’s analysis of personal individuation in relation to what Husserl would call, later, the “Lifeworld” and the intersubjective constitution of communities. The second section of the paper turns to a phenomenology of the Lifeworld by analyzing refugees’ care and the intersubjective dynamics involved in

⁴ Merleau-Ponty (2013, p. 348–349).

⁵ “In order for a home-world to become a home-world, a home-world demands what Husserl calls ‘continual renewal’ of its generative force (HXXVII, 43)” (Steinbock 1995, p. 200).

the clinic of exile. Such an example will bring to light the importance of embodiment and intercorporeity to grasp the process through which the generative force of the Lifeworld constitutes itself as a collective process of individuation trying to heal the scars of historicity. Consequently, individuation will appear as a personal and collective task rather than a static and ego-centered achievement that would be forgetful of our fundamental interdependency. Finally, the last section argues that healing the Lifeworld does not necessarily amount to conceiving its “horizon” as a predetermined “*telos*” of transcendental subjectivity as if this unifying yet open structure could be constituted. Instead, the varieties of the Lifeworld and its paradoxical movement of appropriation and differentiation point to a relational ontology that considers the becoming of a common and meaningful world as a *limit-problem* of phenomenology and, perhaps, its ethical promise. It paves the way for an ethical sense of individuation that acknowledges its “absolute mystery” yet strives for its realization in and through the Lifeworld.

2 The constitution of the Lifeworld and individuation

The works of Husserl are often described along the lines of a well-known distinction between the eidetic phenomenology and its transcendental scope as defined by *Ideas I & II*, and the genetic phenomenology of the later Husserl describing the ontogenetic and teleological dimensions that sustain active and passive synthesis and the constitution of the Lifeworld. However, this differentiation could be misleading as it tends to oppose the transcendental *domain* of the subject on the one hand, and the *territory* of the world on the other hand. In other words, such a distinction has often led to understand the concept of the *Lebenswelt* in epistemological terms, solving thereby what is meant to remain a “paradox.” How could we reconcile the posture of the subject in the natural attitude with the phenomenological reduction operated by the philosopher? How could we think of a pure Ego that would be nonetheless articulated with and inseparable from the concrete psychic Ego and her world? How could we move from the natural intersubjectivity experienced primarily and pre-reflectively in our daily lives to the transcendental intersubjectivity depicted by Husserl in his theory of inter-monadic constitution? These questions have also laid the grounds for the growing field of critical phenomenology, which legitimately insists on the necessity to focus on the world and the conditions for plurality rather than on the transcendental subject, which would need to be deconstructed and divested from its illusory homogenizing and unifying powers.⁶

Nevertheless, as Luft argues: “the reduction as leading-back, then, must not be understood as leading back from the world to the I, but rather from the natural attitude, in which I and world are conceived empirically, to the transcendental attitude, in which the correlational a priori discloses itself. The leading-back, therefore, discloses what Husserl also simply calls “the transcendental” as the title for the

⁶ Cf. Weiss et al. (2019, p. xii–xvi).

correlational a priori with its noetic-noematic structure. The relation of both sides of the coin is that of a constant balance, an equilibrium, a harmony.”⁷

In this sense, portraying the varieties of the Lifeworld may amount to uncovering and typifying the various layers of facticity (history) in which the transcendental activity of the subject expresses itself pre-reflectively (historicity). Consequently, the characterization of the Lifeworld in Husserl’s *Crisis* and its supplements, for instance, leads us to consider the *epistemological* question of the Lifeworld and tackle the nature and consequences of its *teleological* structure. What kind of pre-reflective teleological framework would be able to cross over the realm of nature and the realm of history, the sphere of appropriation, and the sphere of differentiation? Thus, our preliminary question would be less to compare the sedimented world of homogenized significations with a differentiated world of constituted meanings identified through phenomenological reduction. Instead, we would like to reflect on the differentiation process that allows both for the institution (*Urstiftung*) of the Lifeworld and the absolute, as well as relative, individuation process of subjectivity that constitutes it as a genetic and generative force.⁸

As Steinbock explains: “Husserl charges that a static clarification, which at first functioned as a leading clue to genetic analysis, now presupposes a genetic analysis: ‘preceding this is the static elucidation of world-apperception and of the sense-giving that is executed in it. But, it seems, an absolute consideration of the world, a ‘metaphysics,’ can only be first carried out, and the possibility of a world can only first be understood through the genetic consideration of individuation’ (Hua XI, 343).”⁹ Indeed, such a statement reminds us that investigating the Lifeworld by inquiring into its quiddity will lead us to a static characterization that would homogenize and potentially reify the world horizon, which is meant to remain open and plural, yet contingent upon the activity of transcendental consciousness.¹⁰ It would lead us to elaborate a *Weltanschauung* that might be the projection of an anthropologically situated subject. On the contrary, if we acknowledge the variety that is constantly produced by the genetic process of individuation—namely, “operative intentionality”—then we could consider as potentially compatible the constitution of the self and the formation of community, through their social, political, and ethical processes of appropriation and differentiation.¹¹ Husserl explicitly links the issue of subjectivity’s individuation with the horizon’s formation, when he wrote: “individuation springs into one with horizon formation.”¹² Such correlation echoes the last paragraph of *Ideas II*, in which Husserl describes absolute individuation and relative individuation and asserts their dynamic intertwining:

⁷ Luft (2011, p.15).

⁸ Cf. Husserl (1970, 1989).

⁹ Steinbock (1995, p. 48).

¹⁰ “To ask what the Lifeworld is is to inquire into its *quidditas*; it is to have already misconstrued the horizontal character. The response to such a question would of necessity be something static; for example, it will be something that all lifeworlds share.” Ibid. p. 107.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 200. Cf. Boubilil (2014, p. 304–339).

¹² Husserl (2008, p. 78).

Absolute individuation enters into the personal Ego. The surrounding world of the Ego acquires its individuation essentially by the way of its relation to the Ego that has experience of it and that exchanges its experience with other individuals. For each Ego, any thing has the here and the now as a correlate of intuition. An Ego, or an intersubjectivity for itself, constitutes the surrounding world, and if it allows itself to be determined by its “over and against” in the surrounding world, or itself determines this latter actively and perhaps formatively, then this latter has the secondary individuation of the “over and against,” whereas the originary individuation, the absolute one, resides in the Ego itself. The same spirit cannot be twice, or can it return to the same total state, nor does it manifest its individuation merely by standing in different nexuses with the same content.¹³

Edith Stein, who did work with Husserl on the edition of *Ideas II* and consequently reflected on personal individuation in its relation to the natural attitude and what would be called later the “Lifeworld,” could help us delve into this characterization.

Husserl’s considerations on the *Leibkörper* in *Ideas II* have influenced Stein’s understanding of empathy and her approach to community formation in her lectures on *Psychology and the Humanities* (1922) and her lectures on *The Human Person* (1931). In the latter, Edith Stein defines the person as “a free and spiritual being,” to show that these two features—being free and being spiritual—cannot and should not be separated from one another if one wants to understand political freedom correctly and makes a room for a certain sense of transcendence in the Lifeworld without reifying the latter under the various forms of ideologies.¹⁴ From its ontological structure to its ethical vocation, the human person, for Stein, is characterized by its relational nature and inalienable freedom that stems from the subject’s affective and imaginative experiences. As Stein writes in her *Lecture on the Human Person* (1931): “The human being does not come into the world as complete but has to build herself up in a constant process of transformation during her life and to renew herself again and again without ever reaching a final state.”¹⁵ Throughout her life, she must build herself and constantly renew herself in a permanent process of self-transformation. This individuation process is experienced and unfolded in and through subjectivity’s interactions with the world and others and if it draws, according to Stein, from interiority—the “core of the person”—it nonetheless makes us apprehend the latter as a dynamic capacity for self-transformation.¹⁶

In the 1922 lectures, Stein initially argued that several levels compose the human being: the physical level and the psychic level are ruled by a specific form of causality, and some external and physical-biological determinations, the mental-intellectual level, and the structure of the personal-spiritual level of the human being are ultimately free of any determinations. “Motivations” are elaborated in this last

¹³ Husserl (1989, p. 315).

¹⁴ Stein (2004, p. 78).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

sphere (personal-spiritual) and are correlated with the values or ethical commitments endorsed by the subject. When freedom is enacted, and when the subject “acknowledges” her motivations, they become “decisions” for which the subject must take responsibility.¹⁷ Stein does not deny—quite the opposite—the weight of situational constraints (oppression, precariousness, etc.) or psychophysical ones (fragility, physical weakness) since the vital force of the individual guarantees the conditions of exercise of her freedom. Nevertheless, she argues that the subject can express consent or dissent to a given situation’s meaning or intention (*logos*). According to her, the subject is always in a position, reflecting *from within*, to consent or refuse to adhere to the values attached to the situation she is in. The issue is then to be able to perform consent or dissent in our intersubjective relations.

Stein’s conception of interiority as *a capacity for resistance* and self-transformation has nothing to do with the static image of the Cartesian or transcendental Ego conceived as a closed-off entity. This capacity for self-transformation shows, paradoxically, that the subject is at the same time free and embedded in the Lifeworld and its intersubjective networks.

This conception of personhood considers the Lifeworld and the intersubjective dimension of existence as constituents of personal and collective individuation. The lived experience (*Erlebnis*) the subject undergoes in empathy builds up her sense of community. From her picture of the person as a free and relational being, Stein moves on to a phenomenological description of the social self and how it could flourish through communal experiences (*Gemeinschaftserlebnisse*). Indeed, the intentional structures of the lived body and empathic perception are essential to understanding the intersubjective processes at stake in all kinds of human associations. Atomizing individuals, annihilating their personality cut them off from the very possibility of self-achievement that lies at the core of their being. Solidarity is then a specific form of lived experience with others that demonstrates an ability to live together while considering and taking care of the other’s personal needs and achievements. According to Stein, to reach this level of solidarity, one must reach the level of communal experiences. Living together as a community amounts to acknowledging our interdependency and our diversity as a pre-condition for an ethical constitution of the Lifeworld. This collective sense of individuation is inseparable from the personal individuation Stein characterizes as a dynamic embodied process of self-transformation. Stein’s contribution thus consists in rephrasing the intentional correlation in a properly ethical and genetic sense that links together the ethical becoming of the individual as a “person,” on the one hand, and the intersubjective constitution of the Lifeworld.

The movements of the heart, and our affective life, make freedom concrete. The heart’s life shows the embodied dimension of personhood and underlines the relational dynamics of inter-affectivity and the role of imagination at work in the Lifeworld. The subject is *exposed* to the needs and especially to the suffering of the other, who then becomes an irreducible “you.” In other words, the heart’s receptivity

¹⁷ Cf. Calcagno (2007, 2014, 2016), Szanto (2015), Szanto and Moran (2015), Magrì and Moran (2017), Ales Bello (2018).

calls for the person's responsiveness. The self-awareness of the affective receptivity that opens the subject to the world and others constitutes her as a person endowed with a capacity to act and care. In *Finite and Eternal Being*, Stein describes this way of living and thinking from within, from the heart, and its consequences for inter-subjective and social relations:

It may happen that two human beings listen jointly to the same news and that both have an intellectually clear grasp of its contents, such as, for example, the news of the Serbian regicide in the summer of 1914. However, the one who 'thinks no more about it' goes calmly on his way and, a few minutes later, is again busy with his plans for a summer vacation. The other is shaken in his innermost being. With his mind's eye, he envisages the approaching general European war, and he sees himself uprooted in his professional life and involved in the great world-historic events. His thoughts cannot detach themselves from what has happened, and he lives henceforth in feverish anticipation of the things that are to come. In his case, the news has struck deeply at his inner life, and he understands the external events from the point of view of his own interiority. And because his full intellectual power is alive in his understanding, his mind penetrates into the context and into the 'consequences' of the external event. In this latter kind of thinking, 'the entire human being' is engaged, and this engagement expresses itself even in the external appearance. It affects the bodily organs, the heartbeat, and the rhythm of breathing, the individual's sleep, and digestion. He 'thinks with the heart,' and his *heart* is the actual *living center* of his being.¹⁸

Stein acknowledges here the responsive dimension involved in our interactions. Thinking with and from the heart necessarily implies an existential-ethical standpoint that initiates and impacts our decision-making processes. In other words, personal individuation—precisely understood as deeply relational and responsive—does not oppose the formation of political communities and solidarity but, on the contrary, becomes the ethical condition of political and cultural coexistence. Moreover, as Sepp underlines: "the emphasis on the instances of actually experiencing in the continuing tension between the actual ego and the self means that the talk of 'unity,' 'identity,' or 'wholeness' of the person points to a profoundly *temporal* connectedness that is inseparable from it. The connectedness consists in the fact that a human being at each moment of the present is at stake 'as a whole' and must sustain itself as such; hence, it is not simply 'whole,' but can only *become* a whole—without any definitive resolution."¹⁹ This commentary leads us back to Merleau-Ponty's characterization of subjectivities as "fissures of the world" living through the paradoxical dimension of temporality that makes them one and differentiated at the same time. This tension involves a processual understanding of personal individuation that requires a de-formalization of the teleological feature at stake in the collective individuation process operated in and through the Lifeworld. In the next section, I turn

¹⁸ Stein (2002, p. 437–38).

¹⁹ Sepp (2017, p. 53).

to the experience of care in limit situations, such as trauma resulting from exile and torture, to bring to light the intercorporeal feature through which a sense of “wholeness,” “connection,” and concrete “solidarity” could be restored, when the sense of space and time pre-reflectively constituted by the Lifeworld is suddenly disrupted.

3 Individuation and care: A phenomenology of the Lifeworld

The clinic of exile can illustrate the paradoxical movement of continuity (Lifeworld) and creativity (affectivity; life-force) expressed through the intersubjective constitution of the world. It represents a limit-situation in which the relation to another can either destroy and annihilate the subject (violation/alien-world) or restore her integrity and trust in the world (care/home-world). This section shows that the relational structure of personal individuation is built upon the collective individuation process that makes the world livable—or not. In this sense, as we will see in our final section, healing the Lifeworld—creating the conditions of possibilities for subjectivities, like scars and fissures of the world, to live *together*—can be thought of as a critical endeavor to constitute the Lifeworld as a livable, diverse yet reciprocal space.²⁰

The clinic of exile, which specializes in refugees care, is characterized by a high prevalence of what French psychologist Françoise Sironi terms “intentional trauma” and the pervasiveness of all kinds of vulnerabilities: social, economic, and administrative precariousness, limited access to healthcare, psychological and physical vulnerability of the victims. As Sironi defines it, intentional trauma “is a trauma deliberately induced by a human or a non-human, by a visible or invisible being, on a given subject, or a group of individuals.” Social vulnerabilities and existential and psychological vulnerabilities are therefore closely related. The caregiver is confronted with the psychological and physical pain of the patient, a pain often reactivated by the bodily reviviscence of the acts of torture that have been perpetrated.²¹ These violent and premeditated acts deeply affect the patient’s ability to make sense of every situation and her own life. A complete disruption occurs as such violence is not integrable or, at the very least, reducible to the patient’s personal history. Such violence resists any causal or teleological framework but haunts, psychically and physically, the present and future of a being whose humanity they deliberately sought to destroy. Thus, the very structure of “intentional trauma” affects the person’s ability to relate to others and her sense of otherness. Her ability to reflect on herself and her experience is blocked off by the vivid presence of the “internalized perpetrator.” Similarly, the recognition of others as others is hindered by an impossible reference to oneself as an interlocutor and a partner in the relationship. In this psychological context, the notion of “intentionality” refers to the decision taken by the perpetrator to inflict deliberate violence on the victim. Intentional trauma means the opposite of what phenomenology understands by intentionality, namely a meaning-making process. The assault breaks in and disrupts the victim’s intentional

²⁰ Cf. Oliver et al. (2019, p. 1–8).

²¹ Sironi (2004, p. 323).

consciousness structure. This type of deliberate and repeated violence freezes perception by attacking the person's ability to relate, recognize and understand situations, and mediate their actions through thinking and acting. It makes empathy and narratives in care problematic. Without considering the specificity of such a clinic, explaining always takes the risk of justification; understanding the patient's situation is often limited by the caretaker's inability to act and protect her. On the other hand, emotional engagement is at risk of vicarious traumatization.²² The proper therapeutic distance is too often blurred by the irruption of suffering, the injustice, and anxiety associated with an actual loss of trust in the world and others.

In such a context, the phenomenological distinction between the objective body (*Körper*) and one's own body (*Leib*) is also blurred by the twofold impossibility of 1/making sense of the traumatized flesh in the form of an objective body or of 2/ accepting the raw suffering that is exposed in the deliberately inflicted wound, as the irruption of violence fractures the self-affection of one's own body. Clinical practice in these limit-situations confronts the caregivers with injuries that are the consequences of extreme violence. The perception of the wound is coupled with an awareness of the injustice and harm inflicted deliberately on the other, whose care is now entrusted to the doctor. The therapeutic encounter immediately faces an abyss that reveals the upsurging of non-sense. The restoration of the patient's integrity and the recognition of her suffering creates the obligation for the caregiver to receive the traumatic event as it presents itself from the patient's flesh. What cannot be said, expressed by memory or speech, is translated, and communicated through "interbodily resonance."²³

The violence faced by the caregiver aimed to destroy the patient's body, sensitivity, and memory, which touches on the very roots of her human identity, her capacity for affection, and action, namely her capacity to constitute and take part in the Lifeworld. A reversal/perversion of the phenomenological paradigm of embodiment occurs, especially in the extreme situation of torture: the lived body becomes an objectified body, and the objective body is leaking out the wounds of the assault. As Thomas Fuchs explains, "trauma means an immediate and massive impairment of physical and psychological integrity. (...) It remains, so to speak, in the body's memory as a poorly digested foreign body."²⁴ The therapist's commitment and involvement are required to identify what remains of this "foreign body" that resists representation. This foreign body seems to prevent the subject from getting back into the home-world she would like to share again with others.

The objectification and subjugation of the body reproduce mechanisms of depersonalization and dissociation that the therapist must strive to defuse by redrawing, with the patient, the boundaries of intimacy. Nevertheless, to restore intimacy, where there seems no longer to be any, the caregiver must paradoxically first welcome and acknowledge the inter-affective resonance that underlies the relationship. Many caregivers describe a feeling of impregnation, thereby expressing the persistence in

²² Cf. Boubilil (2021, p. 64).

²³ Cf. Fuchs (2013a, p. 230).

²⁴ Fuchs (2018, p. 134–135).

their memory and imagination of the stories heard and reiterated in the aftermath of the clinical encounter. The individuated flesh torn apart by torture reveals the fragility of the *skin of the Lifeworld*, to paraphrase the title of Jean-Luc Nancy's book.²⁵ It is no longer the Husserlian or Merleau-Pontian "touching-touched" that serves as a paradigm for the body's individualization and the flesh co-constitution, but the paradoxical porosity and polarity of real and symbolic skins that frame these relationships within the Lifeworld. As Nancy puts it: "the skin does not envelop a set of organs: it develops the presence in the world that these organs maintain," "the skins are not watertight between them: they are porous by definition, organic and metaphysical at the same time."²⁶ This twofold aspect of the skin—as "organic and metaphysical" at once—holds together the reality of our embodied condition as beings *living* in the world with others. It underlines the ethical horizon of the Lifeworld and its generative force, beyond and above the limits and failures of its genetic constitution through time-consciousness and embodiment—both features severely impaired by trauma. Physical and symbolic disintegration of the ordinary world through the destruction of the *Leibkörper* experienced in torture can only be thwarted by restoring our common belonging to humankind within the therapeutic relationship. The interpersonal resonance displayed by the care relationship allows for the gradual rebuilding of the ethical and generative structure of the Lifeworld. As Fuchs explains:

Trauma represents an occurrence that refuses its appropriation, symbolization, and integration into a meaningful context. The person concerned is not able to respond to the happening, and his being overwhelmed expresses itself in emotional paralysis, shock, and stupor. The lasting effect of trauma proceeds, however, not only from an immediate threat but also from the interruption of the implicit, basic assumption of the "and-so-on" [persistence of life]. As Husserl [5, p. 51] puts it, the "and-so-on" is the silent expectation that one's Lifeworld will remain constant and reliable in its familiarity and coherence. Traumatizing is that which surprises me completely and which makes me lose my composure because it disappoints my expectations and forestalls my precautions [cf. 6, p. 326]. A 'housing' is broken here as well, namely the housing of everydayness and its life worldly basic assumptions. In the world, a fissure has opened, and from inside, the real possibility of violence, abandonment, and death has peeked out.²⁷

Such description reveals trauma as a limit-situation in which the apparent dis-individuation of the subject is correlated with what seems to be the irreversible loss of the Lifeworld as the ground for individual and communal experiences. The fissure here is not the creative space where subjectivity can dwell but the deadly non-sense that disrupts the vital continuity of our pre-reflective relation to the world. However, through inter-affective resonance and appropriate care, an ethical horizon of

²⁵ Nancy (2020, p. 144).

²⁶ Ibid., p. 144/146.

²⁷ Fuchs (2013b, p. 303–304).

reciprocity and interdependency could be recovered through collective individuation. Therefore, there is a link between the integrity of the *Leibkörper*, the personal individuation of the subject, and the collective process through which the flourishing of the latter is guaranteed and respected within the Lifeworld.

As Marc Richir explains: “Pathology is always a *suffering*, but a blind suffering: that of having no flesh, no more flesh, and that of the illusion where it seems to rebuild one blindly, without my awareness, where ‘I’ am not strictly speaking.”²⁸ The concept of flesh should be understood as a personal element and a collective one, in the Merleau-Pontian sense of an ontological belonging of the subjects to the world as flesh. When the embodied and relational structure of our existence in the Lifeworld is negated or injured, either through violence or isolation, then the self and the world sink together into the abyss of alienation and obliteration, leading to an experience of dis-incarnation. While analyzing the concept of the world in phenomenology, Stephan Strasser insisted on this connected structure of the Lifeworld and its individuating force: “The world of which Husserl speaks is never the ‘*summa rerum*’ or the ‘universe’ in the rationalistic sense. It always has the meaning of a ‘world for me,’ ‘for us,’ ‘for a community of monads,’ and never the meaning of an inherent totality of beings. The subjective moment is essential for this concept of the world.”²⁹ This subjective moment is not the totalizing act of an all-mighty subject but rather this individuating movement of the *Leibkörper* through which is unfolded the conditions of possibility for appropriation and differentiation, self and other.

4 Phenomenology and the ethical sense of the Lifeworld

In *Ideas II*, Husserl characterized the *Leibkörper* as a “transition/transfer point” (*Umschlagpunkt*), a passage between the subject and the world, whether it is the natural world or the social world.³⁰ Merleau-Ponty saw in the body’s anchorage in the world and its expressive porosity the characteristics of its power to be and to act. In his Course at the Collège de France, *Le Monde Sensible et Le Monde de l’Expression*, Merleau-Ponty wrote: “The human body is expressive in that it carries in each of its gestures *Umwelt-intentionalität*, it draws and displays an *Umwelt* and even a ‘world.’”³¹ The body becoming flesh (*Leibkörper*) is the transition/transfer point (*Umschlagstelle*), the medium of intercommunication and interdependency that makes the subjects belong to the ontological flesh of the world. Merleau-Ponty goes further by transposing this view of individual existence at the level of social and political life. Collective history is “incomplete” and contingent upon the creation of meanings that emerge from our experience of adversity, resistance, and suffering. Adversity and creation are the reversible and inseparable manifestations and faces of contingency. Therefore, an authentic political *praxis* would assume itself

²⁸ Richir (1990, p. 184).

²⁹ Strasser (1976, p. 154).

³⁰ Husserl (1989, p. 161).

³¹ Merleau-Ponty (2011, p. 58).

as a will to metamorphosis, as a continuous and unremitting effort to convert this natural contingency into historical expression. The Lifeworld is not shaped by a pre-determined *telos* but instead emerges from the ethical sensitivity and responsiveness that may unfold from the dynamics of operative intentionality.

In addition to these topological and political dimensions, Bernhard Waldenfels, who coined the concept of responsiveness, stresses the importance of the temporal dimension specific to generation and its rhythms. Following Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, he states that “our bodies are not made of one piece. Pure nature and pure culture are constructions of modernity that result from a naturalistic and culturalist oblivion.”³² In other words, “the question arises of how to grasp the intermediate position of the body without falling into a unilateral culturalist or naturalistic vision.”³³ Waldenfels thus proposes, in the spirit of Erwin Straus’ theory of sensation, the idea of a dual aspect or a “self-duplication of the body,” which he called: “*diastasis*.”³⁴ This concept means that the body is always somewhat alien to itself in the form of “temporal and spatial self-shifting,” which means that I never have a complete control over it. Thus, beyond the distinction between lived and felt bodies and an objectively perceived body, Waldenfels indicates this unity of one’s own body which paradoxically takes the traits of a foreign body that nonetheless resists objectification. This vulnerability inscribed at the very heart of the flesh opens the space of a meaning that overflows and exceeds it. It makes room for responsiveness and an ethical sensitivity that will link personal individuation with intersubjective dynamics. The possibility of otherness is lodged in this dynamic temporality where ipseity and dis-appropriation, freedom, and solidarity respond to one another. This movement acknowledges our finitude while living through an ontological excess that Merleau-Ponty initially described as an “absolute mystery.” Such an approach seems to underline that the intertwining of the genetic constitution through time-consciousness, embodiment, and intersubjectivity and the generative constitution carried out in and through the Lifeworld and collective individuation processes may be a way to fill the gap between a somewhat irreducible opposition: the becoming of an individuated self and the conditions for a genuine interdependency.

Going back to the title of our paper and the tragic example of forced migration, one may wonder what “healing the Lifeworld” would mean. To follow Merleau-Ponty’s metaphor of subjectivities as “fissures of the world,” would it be possible or even desirable to “heal” the Lifeworld, to fill in the gaps and lapses or our relationships to achieve concrete interdependency? The ethical connection between the personal and collective levels of individuation seems to require the *diastasis*, described by Waldenfels, to allow for plurality and resonance. Waldenfels’s conception of *diastasis* echoes Merleau-Ponty’s notion of *écart* and lateral passivity. A phenomenology of passivity (and operative intentionality) is required to understand the relation between otherness and openness and to acknowledge the idea that concern for others does not call for self-identification. Instead, it demands to reconnect with the

³² Waldenfels (2017, p. 22).

³³ Ibid., p. 22.

³⁴ Straus (1935).

asymmetrical space, the sensible world. In his lectures on *Institution and Passivity*, Merleau-Ponty notes that “the frontal relation of *Sinngebung* must compose with a lateral relation which retains it and ballasts it, relativizes its *Sinngebung* in advance; [that of each one] announces that of the others and inserts them in the same universe. Passivity is never frontal, as in realism, but always lateral, i.e., the subject recognizes herself as continuing a certain *Stiftung*, a certain perspective.”³⁵ What Merleau-Ponty calls “lateral passivity” is not pure receptivity. It generates and exhibits a capacity for resistance through meaning-making processes, and it refers to a kind of differentiation process that blurs the subject-object dichotomy. This lateral passivity does not *explain* or *constitute* the perspectives of the other. Instead, this kind of passivity welcomes and comprehends, at the pre-reflective level, the perspectives of the other and thereby *institutes* a space for mutual sharing and foundation (*Stiftung*). Merleau-Ponty’s description tries to overcome the distinction between the reflective and the pre-reflective levels. This lateral passivity points to a sensible world that is already animated by the movement of its expression. Therefore, intersubjective relations rely on the vulnerability of a shared world of meanings and on the operative and irreducible finitude that makes any subject vulnerable yet related to others. This ontological and existential vulnerability expresses itself through the activity of imagination. Imagination is radically different from objectification. It is conceived as this “imminent vision” that makes our individuation contingent on the other visions found at the intersection of my spatiality and that of others.³⁶ There is a sort of indirect yet symbolic efficacy—imagination has an actual impact on my existence, and as Merleau-Ponty writes, “it causes a super-signification to vibrate.”³⁷ To Merleau-Ponty, imagination is the “perceptual horizon” that displays the oblique vision that sustains an inexhaustible individuation process. If transcendental phenomenology is indeed a “phenomenology of transcendence rather than a phenomenology of subjectivity,” then one may well say that Merleau-Ponty remains faithful to it by recasting the dynamics of operative intentionality along the lines of a self-transformative process that opens a path for transcendence and excess within the opacity and thickness of the flesh, its determinations, and its finitude.³⁸

5 Conclusion: Community, incarnation, and the sense of renewal

This final *détour* by Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of lateral passivity and indirect ontology aimed to stress that genetic phenomenology and generative phenomenology could be linked together to sketch how personal and collective individuation processes interact to influence one another. In the clinical cases mentioned above, the trust damaged by the deliberate violence inflicted on the person is not only about the subject’s relationship to her own body and the space around her. It fractures the

³⁵ Merleau-Ponty (2010, p.135).

³⁶ Merleau-Ponty (1964, p. 187).

³⁷ Merleau-Ponty (2010, p. 165).

³⁸ Steinbock (1995, p. 14).

memory and the relationship that the subject maintains to the past, present, and future as if the traumatic event were to invade and extinguish all the potentially meaningful ways that gave direction to its existence. Restoring meaning becomes possible again thanks to the other's mediation and the awareness of our interdependency in and through the intersubjective constitution of the Lifeworld. As Husserl would say, the living present is precisely the *locus* of our responsibility—a living present stretched between fear (*Furcht*) and hope (*Hoffnung*) yet full of possibilities:

What happens if the achievable good continues to dwindle? Like when all the people I love die. When they die, wonderful treasures of art and science perish, and the humanity in which I live falls into degeneration. The good that I can try to develop in myself, or see in others, becomes infinitely small. Was that what I could hope for? What should I wish for? Furthermore, how can the world ever change if I have no hope? Moreover, if I have to judge the world as unreasonable, if the beauty of nature collapses in natural revolutions and my appreciation of humanity is lost, perhaps as a result of such a war, how can I live in a 'senseless' world?³⁹

Fear closes the individual on herself, where hope brings her back to the Lifeworld. In the Preface of *Signs*, Merleau-Ponty writes: "We are stunned by French affairs or diplomacy's clamorous episodes. But underneath the clamor, a silence is growing, an expectation. Why could it not be a hope?"⁴⁰ Hope is not the idealistic and somehow naïve expression of another utopian project or the hidden face of an ideological claim. Instead, it expresses the ethical sensitivity built upon the generative process of collective individuation. In this sense, acknowledging the ontological and existential vulnerability that shapes our interactions and recognizing our interdependency may well be the first step to be taken to avoid the tragic ways taken by nihilism and totalitarianism, which are the two dreadful masks consciousness, and the world can wear, when they deliberately close off the world-horizon or freeze it in a one-sided image.

Marc Richir noted this profound solidarity between personal and collective individuation. He even called this interdependency the paradox of our incarnation: "there is no incarnation that is not, *eo ipso*, the incarnation of a community, so that the incarnation that communicates in-depth with the phenomenality does so with a phenomenality or a common sense (the *sensus communis* of the third Kantian Critique), and that if there is a *solus ipse*, it is either as a school case, a '*lieu commun*' of philosophical discussion or an imaginary variation."⁴¹ The transformation of the Lifeworld and political action start with self-transformation. The correlation between the ethical and the political dimension of the Lifeworld is rooted in a proper understanding of personal individuation as the capacity to welcome alterity and excess, including in the very structure of one's existence. Richir asks: "If phenomenology takes the excess of living over lived experience not as an object but for the very place of its questions, is not everything to be reconsidered differently?"⁴² In

³⁹ Husserl (2014, p. 307). My trans.

⁴⁰ Merleau-Ponty (1964, p. 23).

⁴¹ Richir (1992, p. 73).

⁴² Richir (1993, p. 176).

this sense, the Lifeworld would become an operative concept and a limit-problem of phenomenology pointing to a new set of critical questions.

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