

## Posudek oponenta disertační práce

Název práce: **Phenomenological notion of the body and its possible consequences for practice of body-oriented disciplines**

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Počet stran 135

### **1. Topic and title of the thesis**

The chosen topic corresponds to the specialization of doctoral studies at FTVS UK, but the title does not accurately describe the way of its comprehension. If the first part corresponds to the submitted text, the announced "possible consequences for practice" do not seem to be clear and fully understandable to the opponent.

### **2. The aim of the work**

The aim of the thesis is not explicitly stated, but it can be at least partially inferred from the text by the expected contribution, namely if all experts in the field of the body would ask questions focused on the evidence-based approach, on the combination of exactness and creativity, on the foundations of their own practice. And the author responds to the poetically phrased questioning with the hope that the work can guide them towards answers (p. 4). Not only because I have no idea whether practitioners actually ask such questions, I cannot answer whether such a vaguely formulated goal could have been fulfilled at all. Indeed, the hidden but significantly ambitious aim of the dissertation is corrected and relativized by the author himself: "Given the scope of this thesis, it is of course impossible to live up to the ambitions it has raised." (p. 118).

### **3. Structure of the work**

The structure is very well thought out and is logically organized in a meaningful way. After an introductory exposition of the topic, the first part, a recapitulation of the ideas of selected thinkers from the history of philosophy (9-74), is presented, followed by a potential application section (75-112) and a final summary. The expression is clear and distinct, but quite often unnecessarily repetitive in terms of ideas - the reader would certainly retain the information even with a single presentation, without repeatedly returning to it in different parts of the work (e.g. the repeated emphasis that this is a philosophical work, that the body is not an object, the repetition of the position of Descartes and Husserl even in the section on Merleau-Ponty, etc.).

#### ***4. Methodology***

In the section devoted to methodology the author briefly declares (p. 8) that this is a philosophical treatise, i.e. a theoretical and non-empirical interpretation of selected works of phenomenological philosophy. The first part is thus a de facto study in the history of philosophy. The second part promises "a theoretical level possible implications and consequences of presented findings for the theory and practice of body-oriented disciplines". However, the deliberate departure from empirical approaches, in my reading, greatly reduces the application potential for real-world practice.

#### ***5. Content evaluation of the work***

I was a bit scared when reading the first sentences of the abstract (namely "the possible projection of phenomenological findings about the body into the body-oriented disciplines. The interpretation of René Descartes, Edmund Husserl and, above all, Maurice Merleau-Ponty"), since this is how the text pretends that Descartes belongs to phenomenological philosophy. Fortunately, this is an inaccurate abbreviation, which the text itself refutes, or rather correctly specifies, the opposite of the phenomenological demarcation against the prevailing Cartesianism. The text is spared similar inaccuracies in other places, and the author succeeds in presenting the ideas shared in a patient and progressive series of ideas entering into detail, written with an extraordinary degree of precision and rigor.

Perhaps somewhat surprising is the over-emphasis on touch and the body without reference to the wider context, which may, for example, in Husserl, imply a certain degree of reduction of his overall schedule. Let us not forget that Husserl's thought deliberately follows Cartesianism in that he is concerned with and analyses consciousness (including, e.g., time exhibited exclusively in the form of internal temporal consciousness). Surprisingly, the topic of "lived experience" lies aside from detailed attention (although the author gives the example of flow), and despite a verbal appeal to a phenomenology that rejects Cartesian dualism, the primary focus remains on the body (of the "how we are our bodies" type, p. 58) rather than on holistically understood existence, that is, in the traditional pressure of segmentation separating the body from other forms of human ways of being.

The basic question: "Is there a general theory of what the body is and how to affect it?" (p. 3) seems to be rather rhetorical: for scientific grasp, as well as evidence-based practice, it is of course anatomy and physiology, not philosophy or other types of speculation (mythological, religious, "esoteric", etc.). The ideological background of these scientific approaches is Cartesianism and positivism, which have long been rejected in contemporary philosophy but persist precisely in scientific thought. I am therefore not sure how the author understands the "contemporary situation" he is defining himself against, and he does so with the help of a philosophical trend that has been known for a century. Not to mention that the author himself in his attempts to



approximate the most accurate description does not do without terminology necessarily based on the criticized anatomy and physiology, such as "enthesopathy of tendons on lateral epicondyle of humerus" (p. 88). Isn't that breaking in an open door? No one in philosophy is likely to protest against phenomenological postulates. From what does he infer a real chance for the announced change just now? Is this not rather an idealistic intention?

Wouldn't it be better to refer to the criticized position not as "current notion of the body" (p. 4) but rather more accurately as "scientific notion"? See also p. 42: "Science is an explanatory framework dominating for at least three centuries and so pervading contemporary world" The problem is that the "current notion" is certainly not uniform: not only the century-long struggle between scientific reductionism and phenomenology (which is also mentioned by the author on p. 9), but especially the contemporary struggle between trends that are dismissed as charlatanism (because they contradict science) but lack sufficient philosophical justification. The author is well aware of this ideological struggle when he states that opponents of scientific rigor „lean towards some of the many alternatives or even esoteric directions and thereby earn the label of charlatans, or they pretend that their abilities lie in their scientific exactitude, although they actually rely to various extent on their developed bodily empathy“ (p. 118).

But where is the difference between charlatans and empathetic individuals? Who determines not only the effectiveness but also the philosophical relevance of a particular approach? Compared to the reference to phenomenology's century-long struggle with Cartesianism, would not a dialogue with those who conceive of consciousness in a very different way than a mere product of the brain, while not basing their ideas on phenomenology, be a greater philosophical challenge? That is, contemporary opponents of "mechanistic physiology" and those standing on "pre-conscious" experience, i.e. thinkers like Grof, Sheldrake, Hellinger, Rak etc.? Confronting these contemporary attempts at an alternative to science with the phenomenological possibilities of philosophy (e.g. the topic of intercorporeity and transpersonal psychology) would be a greater adventure than defining oneself against the prevailing but long-criticized practice.

Although I can agree with the statement that "disclosing objective physiological structures and causal relationships between them alone does not make it possible to design optimal therapeutic intervention" (p. 89), the application to practice remains elusive to me. What, specifically, will make it possible to design such a successful intervention? One cannot disagree with the critique of research and practice, but how do we get to targeted "bodily function or functionality"? The application of concepts (but only concepts!) is understandable, but this is not yet the application of phenomenology in practice using the body-schema and other concepts rooted in phenomenology. Or should we really consider the application of phenomenology to body work in the words "ability to drink while walking or even running, the ability to look to the side while

maintaining the direction of cycling, the ability to open the door with the elbow or the flank when hands are full etc." (p. 96)?

Similarly, "Their aim should be to develop subject's body-schema in order to be more differentiated, adaptable and variable. Naturally, such categories would never be measurable, objectifiable, standardizable and statistically verifiable. But this in itself does not mean that it will not lead to better results of therapy or training." (p. 100). If we do not know how such development may take place, in what specific ways the expected change is to occur, it is difficult to verify whether it will lead to better outcomes. The mere emphasis on the fact that averages and statistics will not help and that an individual approach is better is a somewhat insufficient to confirm that this is a consequence of the phenomenological approach.

### ***6. Proposed defence questions***

From the previous objections, some of the points that could be discussed in the context of the defence can be selected. For example:

1. Although I understand the attempt to focus as much as possible the topic and its treatment on the field of physiotherapy understood as working with the body and not with the personality, it also seems to me that this may be part of the criticism presented. If one were to use "lived experience" rather than "body" as the basic concept (although there would probably have to be a slight shift from Merleau-Ponty to Heidegger), this could arguably provide new impulses for physiotherapy in particular. What do you perceive as the potential advantages and disadvantages of such a possible change in the basic term?
2. You refer to contemporary alternative approaches that define themselves against scientific reductionism as "esoteric directions" and "charlatans" (p. 118). Do you see some positives that these alternative approaches, based on the spiritual notion of trans-personal belonging, can offer for physiotherapy in particular?
3. How can we imagine "optimal therapeutic intervention" (p. 89) in practice? That is, how will the physiotherapist's activity (not just his/her way of thinking) be different if s/he accepts phenomenology-derived terms such as body-schema, etc.? Can you give specific examples of practice rather than philosophical terms?

### ***Conclusion***

In his dissertation, the author has demonstrated his creative abilities in the field of research. I recommend the thesis for defence.

Olomouc, 27th February 2024



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