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The Earth Does Not Move and the Ground of the City

Die Erde bewegt sich nicht und die Stadtfläche

Abstract

Taking as a starting point the Husserlian understanding that the Earth does not move – by which is meant that in everyday experience we do not feel the movement of the Earth – this article introduces central concepts from the writings of the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) to a discussion about the possibility of a phenomenology of the city. According to Merleau-Ponty, ‚philosophy understood as the study of the Sinnesboden is to be taken literally: natural Boden [the earth] and cultural-historical Boden which is built on the earth‘ (Merleau-Ponty 2002a:67-68). In his late work, Merleau-Ponty orients his philosophy towards what he calls the depth, the ground, the visible, and not in the heights, in the ideas, in the invisible (Merleau-Ponty 2000). The aim of this article is to connect this philosophical framework to questions of architecture and the city by suggesting to substitute what Merleau-Ponty calls ‘cultural-historical Boden’ with ‘city’.

The aim of this article is not a complete interpretation of the selected texts – in fact, the nature of Merleau-Ponty’s writing makes it resist such attempts at categorisation. This should, however, be seen as part and parcel of what makes phenomenology methodologically difficult to use when it comes to questions of the built environment – an openness that sometimes makes the original philosophical texts slippery at the same time as it makes them prone to the misinterpretations.

Nevertheless, capturing the city as a cultural-historical Boden or ground using a phenomenology vocabulary of order means that it can be described both as a shared horizon for individuals living in it – providing orientation and thus a sense of order – and as a topographical structure for praxis, with a particular ordering. This means that phenomenological understandings of the relationship between earth and world allow an articulation of the city as common ground, in a way that concomitantly indicates its quality as a civic order. This article considers the implications of this proposed understanding of city, of seeing the city as a cultural product that forms a silent background to human life but also as an entity with a particular order, thus tying together aspects of cultural praxis with architectural or built structures in their conjoint development.

Keywords:
Phenomenology, Architecture, the City, Merleau-Ponty, Husserl

Inhalt:

Ausgehend von der Husserlianische Idee, dass die Erde sich nicht bewegt – genauer: dass wir die Rotation der Erde in unserem täglichen Leben nicht spüren – wird dieser Aufsatz zentrale Begriffe des Philosophen Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) wird dieser Aufsatz zentrale Begriffe des Philosophen Maurice Merleyu-Ponty (1908-1961) einführen und sie im Kontext einer möglichen Phänomenologie der Stadt diskutieren. Merleau-Ponty schreibt: „‚philosophy understood as the study of the Sinnesboden is to be taken literally: natural Boden [the earth] and cultural-historical Boden which is built on the earth‘ (Merleau-Ponty 2002a:67-68). In seinem Spätwerk, beschäftigt Merleau-Ponty sich mit dem, was er „das Sichtbare“ nennt, die Materialität, im Gegensatz zu „das Unsichtbare“, zur Ideenwelt. Dieser Aufsatz hat zum Ziel, diese philosophischen Ideen mit Fragen der Architektur und der Stadt zu verknüpfen. Was Merleau-Ponty als „kulturhistorischen Boden“ definiert, wird hier als Synonym für „Stadt“ begriffen.

Ziel des Aufsatzes ist keine vollständige Interpretation der Texte Merleau-Pontys. Zum einen ist dies nicht möglich, weil die besprochenen Schriften einen unvollständigen Charakter aufweisen. Diese gewisse Offenheit ist jedoch für sein Spätwerk charakteristisch, wodurch die Texte oft hermetisch wirken oder zu Missverständnissen führen. Zum anderen ist diese Offenheit ein wesentlicher Bestandteil dessen, wodurch es methodisch schwierig wird, Phänomenologie im Rahmen einer Untersuchung der gebauten Umwelt zu verwenden.

Dennoch werden wir mit Hilfe eines phänomenologischen Begriffsapparats die Ordnung der Stadt als sogenannten „kulturhistorischer Boden“ fassen können. Sie lässt sich sowohl als geteilter Horizont der Menschen in der Stadt verstehen (sie gibt Orientierung und vermittelt dadurch ein gewisses Verständnis von Ordnung), als auch als eine topographische Struktur, die menschliches Handeln ermöglicht (und dadurch ebenfalls in einem gewissen Sinne ordnet). Der phänomenologische Gebrauch der Begriffe Erde und Welt gibt uns die Möglichkeit, die Stadt als eine gemeinsame Ebene (common ground) zu verstehen. Dadurch kann in der Folge die Qualität oder Möglichkeit der Stadt als eine Gruppierung von Menschen mit einem gemeinsamen Ethos (civic order) beschrieben werden. Dieser Artikel erläutert die Konsequenzen dieser Vorstellung von Stadt: Stadt kann sowohl als ein kulturelles Produkt verstanden werden und so einen Hintergrund für menschliches Leben bilden; Stadt kann auch ein Gebilde an und für sich sein und eine eigene innere Ordnung aufweisen. Das heißt, dass in diesem Aufsatz Aspekte kultureller Praxis mit architektonischen oder gebauten Strukturen in ihrer Zusammenhang erfasst werden.

Keywords:
Phenomenology, Architecture, the City, Merleau-Ponty, Husserl

Preliminaries: Phenomenology, Architecture and the City

As one of the most significant traditions of philosophical thinking of the twentieth century, phenomenology has an important place in theories of architecture. The works of the philosophers Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty have been particularly central, and even in architectural practice, phenomenology is cited as a key source of inspiration by contemporary architects as different as Peter Zumthor, Daniel Libeskind, Steven Holl and Juhani Pallasmaa. Key seminal publications from the second half of the twentieth century that have been fundamental for transporting phenomenological thinking to the realm of architectural practice include Gaston Bachelard's La poétique de l'espace (1958) and Steen Eiler Rasmussen's Experiencing Architecture (1959) as well as Christian Norberg-Schulz' Genius Loci – Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture (1980). These works, which introduce central phenomenological concepts to architectural discourse, still feature centrally on the architecture curriculum. They have been instrumental in shedding light on the complex sensory aspects involved when an individual encounters a particular architectural context, and focus has been on cultural, bodily and imaginary elements that in different ways inform this process. At the same time, however, these publications, and the tradition of interpretation that follows from them, often go in the direction of a romanticised preoccupation with individual experience and personal or poetic imagination (Haddad 2010). To a large extent, they focus on the individual in a way that is far from – and in fact completely contrary to – the anti-Cartesian understanding that is central to phenomenology as a philosophical project. This means that the use of phenomenology within architecture still calls for a fundamental re-reading of the original philosophical texts.

If phenomenology may provide a philosophical vocabulary to understand not so much the individual but the over-individual and shared aspects of the encounter with the built environment, the question is what the most appropriate in-road to open these questions may be. In this article, the attempt will be made to bypass the focus on individual experience by moving away from concrete settings or individual buildings and rather to consider the city as a manifestation of the collective dimension of the built environment. This collective dimension may, in turn, be described as a particular species of urban order.

The way in which the word city is used in the present context is based on the understanding that the development of urban built environment over the course of history displays an intricate interplay between architectural, socio-cultural and representational elements displaying both local and global characteristics. The word city is used to designate a concrete architectural frame for the life of a group of people so big that not everyone will know each other nor be familiar with every place in the city, making anonymity an important condition of urban life. If city as a built entity is a concrete manifestation of a horizon shared by all citizens, and thus in its very nature oriented beyond the individual, the nature of urban order comprises more than what we may learn from studying forms and types of the built environment (Carl 2011). It arises in an intricate interplay between material culture and human praxis. Urban order can thereby be seen as a manifestation of the mediative structure between what in a phenomenological vocabulary is called earth and world.

In phenomenological thinking, the word earth is used to capture that which is most embodied and least influenced by human culture and the word world is used to designate those aspects of human, cultural activities which are most articulated or arise through praxis. It is significant to avoid representing the relationship between earth and world as a clear-cut dialectics. When it comes to the city, to grasp urban order as a mediative structure by means of a phenomenological enquiry, the word order refers to a continuum of levels or strata, which include and lie between earth and world. That is, a structure spanning elements such as topographical structures and the cultural ideas that are embedded in urban planning, the built fabric of the city, its institutions and patterns of everyday life. It is the way this differentiated structure displays a particular order which lies at the crux of what phenomenology can contribute to our understanding of the city as a predicament – that is, to parcel out its particular urban characteristics (Vesely 2004, Carl 2011). To develop an understanding of this structure in relation to concrete topographies of cities in their different culture and historical contexts can thus be said to be at the centre of a phenomenological analysis cities.[1]

The aim of this article is to begin to develop the philosophical, conceptual framework for a phenomenology of the city. A framework which may, in turn, be carried over to concrete analyses of cities in their different geographical and historical contexts. The article itself thus largely remains on the level of close reading of philosophical texts and is, therefore at the same time, more descriptive than analytical.

The article centres on close readings of excerpts of the work of the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961). First, focus is on a couple of passages from Phenomenolgy of Perception where Merleau-Ponty writes about the experience of Paris. Then, sections from the late work of Merleau-Ponty are discussed in conjunction with the Husserlian idea that the Earth does not move – by which is meant that in everyday experience we do not feel the movement of the Earth – centring on the statement that ‚philosophy understood as the study of the Sinnesboden is to be taken literally: natural Boden [the earth] and cultural-historical Boden which is built on the earth.‘ (Merleau-Ponty 2002a:67-68). By suggesting to substitute what Merleau-Ponty calls the cultural-historical Boden with city, this philosophical framework can be connected to questions of urban order more generally. Capturing the city as a cultural-historical Boden or ground in this way means that it can be described both as a shared horizon for individuals living in it – providing orientation and thus a sense of order – and as a topographical structure for praxis, with a particular ordering. This means that phenomenological understandings of the relationship between earth and world may be used to develop the foundation for a phenomenology of the city;

3 For a more detailed discussion of this matter see my forthcoming article Steiner 2013.

it allows an articulation of the city as common ground, which at the same time indicates its quality as a civic order. This article considers the implications of this proposed understanding of city; of seeing the city as a cultural product that forms a silent background to human life but also as an entity with a particular order, thus tying together aspects of cultural praxis with architectural or built structures in their conjoint development.

The aim of this article is not complete interpretation of the selected texts – in fact, the nature of Merleau-Ponty's writing makes it resist such attempts at categorisation. This should, however, be seen as part and parcel of what makes phenomenology methodologically difficult to use to when it comes to questions of the built environment; an openness that sometimes makes the original philosophical texts slippery at the same time as it make them prone to the above-mentioned misinterpretations. The present argument thus aims at a preliminary mapping of a vocabulary building on Merleau-Pontian thought in order to develop a foundation for a phenomenology of the city based on these philosophical textual sources. It will do so in order to be able to formulate an argument about the relevance of the city also in the current cultural predicament. To do so, the concluding section of the article will allude at how the proposed philosophical framework can be used in practice by means of an example – a critical evaluation of a much-discussed current discourse on the urban condition, namely that of the smart city.[2]

In short, the argument is that the smart-city-discourse extrapolates a vision of civic order from the idea that there exists something like a common goal of optimisation which would make purposiveness and meaning come together in the built environment. While the idea of the smart city thus constitutes an attempt at formulating a vision of civic order, it simultaneously raises questions about whether this may be thought of as a system. Phenomenology allows us to appreciate that in the urban context, civic order resides in the way in which we commit to the city as an entity but in a way that is connected to daily practices of concrete individuals, always situated with respect to the concrete built environment and attuned to the rhythms and moods of the larger structures of everyday life. This makes the idea of urban, civic order as a system of optimisation seem highly unlikely. It must follow a logic that is based on partiality rather than on expediency and optimisation. Civic order in an urban context – or, put otherwise, the city seen as a cultural-historical ground implying a meaningful relation between the concrete material environment and praxis – rests on understandings so partial and distant that they may best described through phenomena such as misunderstanding and conflict.

This gives rise to two questions. First, to which extent are discourses available that tackle the question of urban order in a more affirmative way? Second, what kind of vocabulary is necessary for this inquiry and how should the investigation be structured? This article suggest that these questions can be broached by means of an involvement with original philosophical sources from phenomenology, aimed at developing a phenomenology of the city. To apply

this conceptual framework on a concrete urban topography is not possible within the framework of the present article. Yet, the suggestion to challenge contemporary theories of betterment of culture that see the city as a system which can be controlled, as is the case with the smart-city-concept, will illuminate the relevance of a phenomenology of the city in the light of current urban developments. Developments that get ever more complex and compel us to re-think the categories we use for describing urban formations and to continue to be sceptical about to utopian projects of betterment in relation to cities, as these continue to take on new forms and faces. The article captures the city as a horizon within the cultural-historical predicament. One with a particular capacity to provide act as a background for human practice, providing orientation as a common ground, and one which may be seen as an institution in and of itself comprising many institutions in it, but precisely not one bereft of conflict, difference and contradiction.[3]

From Paris to the Ground of the City

Maurice Merleau-Ponty's magnum opus *Phenomenology of Perception*, published in 1945, is a key work in the phenomenological tradition and one which has had an impact on many disciplines ranging from psychology to the arts. In relation to the built environment, the central contribution concerns the anti-Cartesian understanding of the centrality of the body to perception. Merleau-Ponty pictures the body as being 'out there' amongst the things and objects of the world which, in turn, may be understood, even perceived, only by means of this embodied process of knowing. A couple of passages from this extensive work concern the experience of the city, more precisely, the city of Paris. They describe the process of perception that occurs when the embodied subject meets the urban environment, at the same time as they begin to reveal central aspects of what might be at stake if we were to develop a phenomenology of the city from the writings of Merleau-Ponty.

„*In the natural attitude, I do not have perceptions, I do not posit this object as beside that one, along with their objective relationships, I have a flow of experiences which imply and explain each other simultaneously and successively. Paris for me is not an object of many facets, a collection of perceptions, nor is it the law governing all these perceptions. Just as a person gives evidence of the same emotional essence in his gestures with his hands, in his way of walking and in the sound of his voice, each express perception occurring in my journey through Paris – the cafés, people's faces, the poplars along the quays, the bends of the Seine – stands out against the city's whole being, and merely confirms that there is a certain style or a certain significance which Paris possesses.*" (Merleau-Ponty 2002b:327-8)

In this account, the movement through Paris gives way to a description of the character of the sensorial process that occurs in the meeting and interaction between a perceiving body and the city. Paris is compared to a human being; a familiar person whose characteristic features, movements and gestures embed in them a certain unarticulated knowledge which Merleau-Ponty even describes as an essence.

The recollection of a journey through the city of Paris thus reveals ‚a certain significance' that this city possesses, one which is exposed through a dialectic between the singular, situated impressions of the city and its general character. This indicates that to Merleau-Ponty, the city may be seen both as a unity of difference and as a horizon which provides orientation. This is broken down into topographical and architectural elements as well as to social institutions when Merleau-Ponty writes that against the ‚city's whole being' stands the deeply ingrained topographical traits of the ‚bends of the Seine', the more short-lived ‚poplars along the quays', the even more temporary ‚cafe's' with their social life and the micro-perspective of ‚people's faces'. These are not only obvious typicalities of the Parisian urbanity – all grasped during an imaginative journey through the city – but concern the interplay between the local and the universal which adorns the urbanity of Paris both with particularity and stability. They also imply what may be called the strata or levels of the mediative structure between what in the heideggerian tradition lies between da and sein, that is, between the conditions or embodiments, earth, and possibilities or articulation, world (Carl 2011:43).

„And when I arrived there for the first time, the first roads that I saw as I left the station were, like the first words spoken by a stranger, simply manifestations of a still ambiguous essence, but one already unlike any other. Just as we do not see the eyes of a familiar face, but simply its looks and expressions, so we perceive hardly any object. There is present a latent significance diffused throughout the landscape or the city, which we find in something specific and self-evident which we feel no need to define ." (Merleau-Ponty 2002b:327-8).

To Merleau-Ponty, understanding urban order is a process that can be compared to what it means to understand language; the process of coming to understand the city thus is likened to the idea of coming to understand ‚the first words spoken by a stranger'. If the complexities and intricacies of sensorial perception is one of the main themes of Phenomenolgy of Perception, here, an intimate correlation is drawn up between the way in which the body as a sensory apparatus encounters the claim of the world and the way in which world or city can yield meaning, structure, even order. The person visiting Paris is familiar with the layout of urban environments, but not this particular one; he is both oriented and partially disoriented, and already in his very first meeting with the city, it presented itself as being ‚already unlike any other'. The above quotation explores how concrete sensations have the potential to open up a dialogue between the visual experience, ‚the first roads that I saw', and a less tangible understanding of urban order, which is described as ‚something specific and self-evident' and therefore as something ‚which we feel no need to define'. Sensorial perception and the capacity for meaningfulness of the material structures of the city are thus tied together, a process which inevitably goes through the body. This points to the central argument of Phenomenolgy of Perception, at the same time as it opens up the possibility to move from a phenomenology of perception to a phenomenology of the city.

The correlation between the sensorial process, which makes experience possible, and the way the city has order is explored further in the following quotation:

„I never wholly live in the varieties of human space, but am always ultimately rooted in a natural and non-human space. As I walk across the Place de la Concorde, and think of myself as totally caught up in the city of Paris, I can rest my eyes on one stone of the Tuileries wall, the Square disappears and there is then nothing but this stone entirely without history: I can, furthermore, allow my gaze to be absorbed by this yellowish, gritty surface, and then there is no longer even a stone there, but merely the play of light upon an indefinite substance" (Merleau-Ponty 2002b:342).

In this quotation Merleau-Ponty describes a ‚natural and non-human space' which sustains ‚human space' and ensures the rootedness of human existence. According to this understanding there is a ‚natural world,' which underlies the ‚human world' of habits, communication, and the idea of self-hood, and with which it is acted out in a dialogue. In the city, it is possible to lose oneself in the sensorial experience to an extent that the distinctions fade and the perception becomes self-referential. Nevertheless, merely taking the sum of these tactile, visual or auditory impulses on its own does not explain how sensorial perception is given meaning and structure. This provides the philosophical background to the following statement:

„My total perception is not compounded of such analytical perceptions, but is always capable of dissolving into them, and my body, which through my habits ensures my insertion into the human world, does so only by projecting me in the first place into a natural world which can always be discerned underlying the other, as the canvas underlies the picture and makes it appear unsubstantial" (Merleau-Ponty 2002b:342).

The city fabric thus can be seen to constitute a thoroughfare for sense perception, and it is in the relationship between the perceiving body and the city that Merleau-Ponty can conclude that ‚we have said that space is existential; we might just as well have said that existence is spatial' (Merleau-Ponty 2002b:342). What is called the human world by Merleau-Ponty can be equated with the built fabric and social institutions of the city. Merleau-Ponty thus infers a dialectic between what he calls the non-human and the human world, as both are part of the ground that make experience possible. The remaining part of this article considers what it might bean to emphasise city in this way; as a cultural product that at the same time forms a silent background to human life and therefore a privileged topos for a phenomenologically oriented investigation. As an entity it has a particular order – unlike any other – though its order can only be uncovered tentatively as a (back)ground for experience. Emphasis is on the idea not of a clear-cut dialectical structure but of a continuum of levels or strata between topographical elements, which escape manipulation by humans, and the cultural setting of the city from planning and architecture to social institutions. A structure which ultimately needs to be explored in concrete

analysis of particular urban environments.[4]

The search for a vocabulary to tackle these questions takes us outside the question of the meeting between the city and the sensing body and concerns the search for a conceptual apparatus for a phenomenology of the city. One which is based on a more radical dissolution of the dialectic between subject and world as is characteristic of Merleau-Ponty's later writings.

The Earth Does Not Move

An important part of Merleau-Ponty's work that dates after the publication of Phenomenology of Perception, and which deals with the relation between what was called the human and the non-human space above, concerns a move towards an ontology of nature. Moving from Phenomenology of Perception to the later work, the text pieces that will be considered here include fragments of the unfinished book manuscripts The Visible and the Invisible, published posthumously in 1964, the publication The Prose of the World as well as the lecture notes published in English as Themes from the Lectures at the Collège de France, 1952-1960 and Nature – Course Notes from The Collège de France.

As the commentator Claude Lefort writes, in The Visible and the Invisible Merleau-Ponty takes up again ‚the early analyses of the thing, the body, the relation between the seer and the visible' (Lefort 2000:xxi). This is done, ‚in order to dissipate their ambiguity and in order to show that they acquire their full meaning only outside of a psychological interpretation, when they are enveloped in a new ontology' (Lefort 2000:xxi). A continuation of Merleau-Ponty's criticism of transcendental philosophy, it concerns, in particular, the notion of subjectivity. The Visible and the Invisible develops and deepens this criticism, contending that reflection is always situated. This is summed up by the philosopher Bernhard Waldenfels in a paragraph that it is useful to quote at length:

„In the course of the attempt to find an intermediate sphere which no longer functions as a preceding area of consciousness or an antechamber to the ego, the earlier Phenomenolgy of Perception and one's own body (corps propre) becomes an ontology of seeing (vision) and flesh (chair). Seeing is no longer a subjective act but an event which occurs between the seer, the visible, and the co-seer, enveloped in a sphere of visibility called ‚flesh'. This flesh of the world, one's own body and the body of others, of time or language, must be thought of not in terms of substance, but functionality, as texture, articulation, framework, joints, as an element in which we live and move […]. An intertwining (entrelacs) forms between things, others, and myself, a chiasmus or a chiasm, as Merleau-Ponty calls it." (Waldenfels 1998: 288-289)

The lecture notes from the same period, parts of which are published in translation in the volume Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology (2002a), illuminate Merleau-Ponty's understanding of this fundamental intertwinement. In the present context, it is the problem of the city as a part of the ground for experience – a setting whose

ordering into levels or strata between earth and world may be investigated by means of a phenomenological enquiry – which necessitates this primary level of discussion. While the idea of a chiasmus or chiasm emphasises a dialectic structure, in order to retain an understanding of a mediative structure between earth and world, the implicit polarisation must be questioned with reference to Phenomenology of Perception. At the same time as we can begin to appreciate the difficulty in dealing with the text fragments that constitute the lecture notes, however, the following paragraph introduces an important part of the philosophical project they represent:

„The theme of φ <'philosophy'> is the horizon of the horizons. […] It is the formulation of its structure as horizon of culture (implication in Kultur-Gegenwart of Kulturvergangenheit with Traditionalisieren in strömendstehender Lebendigkeit). But this ‚structural' or concrete a priori is neither a Kantian category nor even a Hegelian idea; it is the allgemeinen Sinnesboden <'universal ground of sense'> = the sense finally, far from being an idea, is a ground. φ <'Philosophy'> Philosophy seeks in the archaeology of the ground, in the depth and not in the height (the ideas)." (Merleau-Ponty 2002a:67)

Merleau-Ponty is orienting his philosophy towards what he calls the depth, the ground, the visible, and not, as he says, in the heights, in the ideas, in the invisible. Before it will be possible to emphasise these considerations to questions of architecture and the city more directly, it is necessary to take a step back and to consider the philosophical framework for Merleau-Ponty's investigation in more detail in particular its Husserlian heritage.

For Husserl, the Earth is pre-objective and pre-Copernian and he aims at outlining the foundations for a phenomenological doctrine of spatiality and corporeality. Husserl argues that in spite of the modern view of the Earth as a body moving through infinite space, in fact the Earth is for the experiencing human body a ground that ‚is not experienced at first as body but becomes a corporeal ground at higher levels of constitution of the world by virtue of experience' (Husserl 2002:118). Therefore, it is possible to say that, in experience, the Earth itself does not move, it itself knows neither movement nor rest; rather it is in relation to it that movement and rest are given. While this understanding is reflected in the experience of one's own body, it can only be accepted in a primordial way, outside a scientific model of explanation (Husserl 2002:126).

According to this argument, the Earth is constituted with carnality and corporeality and Merleau-Ponty states that, as a corollary, ‚philosophy understood as the study of the Sinnesboden is to be taken literally: natural Boden [the earth] and cultural-historical Boden which is built on the earth' (Merleau-Ponty 2002a:67-68). The idea of urban order and of the built environment as a common ground finds its most basic interpretation in this idea of a cultural historical ground which is built on the Earth. If earth is a condition for world, in heideggerian language, or, differently put, ground is a condition for culture and history, this formulation emphasises how the city may

be seen as a primary institution that may reveal the strata or layers of the mediative structure between earth and world. This is so because it is stretched out between what is most embodied – topographical features, built structures – and what is most articulated – urban cultural and social institutions. While this formulation recognises the cultural character of urban structures, the definition is simultaneously concerned with the notion of Earth or ground, implying that ‚what is built on the earth‘ has the capacity to carry meaning and thus to provide orientation. This emphasises the preoccupation with embodiment in the phenomenological tradition and the vexed question of a ground for thought or culture thus may be understood through the concreteness of human situations that give access to what is at stake in our involvement with the built environment of cities (Vesely 2004:78-9).

In line with this interpretation, for Merleau-Ponty, the Earth also constitutes a ground for experience, an Erfahrungsboden (Merleau-Ponty 2002a:69). This has to do with how meaning is formed; what Merleau-Ponty calls the Sinnesboden, the ground of meaning, which according to the above formulation is at the centre of that to which philosophy should be oriented. This also echoes the comments in Phenomenology of Perception on the problem of self-evidentiality in relation to how the city provides orientation. The coupling of the problem of meaning in culture with the problem of built structures further indicates how to open the problem of a phenomenology of the city using Merleau-Ponty‘s writing. While it leaves us questioning how urban order may be experienced in the richness of the stratification or layers of the mediative structure in its concrete manifestation, it indicates the level at which the city may be seen as a shared horizon or common ground.

More particularly, Merleau-Ponty distinguishes between an Earth-space, Erdraum, and an Earth-ground, Erdboden, as aspects of the way in which our experience of the Earth has a particular spatiality and a way of constituting a ground (Merleau-Ponty 2002a:68). Concomitantly, he writes that the surrounding space is given as a system of what may be seen as orientations – that is, what Merleau-Ponty calls a system of possible terminations of motions of bodies (Merleau-Ponty 2002a:70). That this is an arrangement where the Earth itself has no place, it constitutes a ground, makes Merleau-Ponty conclude that since the Earth as a ground provides all possibilities for movement, for experience, ‚the possibles (even of thought) are possibles of the Earth, of the Weltmöglichkeit‘ (Merleau-Ponty 2002a:68).

The difficult language of these citations may not only be tied to the unfinished nature of the texts but arises from an attempt to render into the most articulate horizon of interpretation the very opposite dimension of existence: the phenomenon of concreteness itself. By emphasising the dimension of the conditions for our being-in-the-world in the heideggerian sense, the quotations underscore the idea that the city forms an ultimate horizon within the cultural-historical predicament; that also the city has the capacity in a concrete sense to make meaning possible and to constitute a ground for experience. They thus provide the

conceptual framework necessary to expand the understanding of the city to a variation of or an aspect of that which makes all ‚possibles‘ possible in the Merleau-Pontian formulation, mediating between earth and world.

Institutions between the Visible and the Invisible

The idea of a divide between a natural and a cultural historical ground in the above Merleau-Pontian formulations may be interpreted as an atemporal understanding of order. This understanding would, however, go against the nature of the reciprocity between earth and world within the phenomenological tradition of thinking as seen in the above discussion of Phenomenology of Perception. Merleau-Ponty addresses the issue of temporality in relation to the Husserlian concept of Stiftung; a term he discusses in The Prose of the World:

„*Husserl has used the fine word Stiftung – foundation, institution – to designate, first, the unlimited fecundity of each present which, precisely because it is singular and passes, can never stop having been and thus being universally. Above all he has used Stiftung to designate that fecundity of the products of culture which continue to have a value after their historical appearance and open a field of work beyond and the same as their own.*" (Merleau-Ponty 2002a:68)

What is of interest here is Husserl‘s concern for how a historical tradition is instituted or sedimented, gestift, but always available for reactivation, Nachstiftung.[5] As Merleau-Ponty writes, this means that the ‚fecundity of tradition‘ guarantees that new expression will always be possible. It indicates that also for Merleau-Ponty, tradition constitutes something like a historical unconsciousness, which is always already there. Tradition, therefore, shapes what Merleau-Ponty calls a horizon of humanity (Merleau-Ponty 2002a:39), of meaning, in which the individuals are inevitably implicated. At the same time, though, Merleau-Ponty states that in opposition to tradition, nature is there from the first day, before the institution of tradition (Merleau-Ponty 2003b:4). This conceptual division expounds the opposition between a natural ground and a cultural-historical ground rather than explaining its structure, and thus frames the issue in an apparently stifled dialectics that reiterates the usual conceptual dualities of physis/nomos and, ultimately, world/earth. One should therefore be careful when considering that nature, in this understanding, is regarded as an absolute past, as the other side of man, and as Merleau-Ponty writes in the foreword to the course notes Nature, nature is ‘the primordial – that is, the nonconstructued, the noninstituted’ (Merleau-Ponty 2003b:4).

Nevertheless, Merleau-Ponty‘s ideas of the reciprocal and structured relationships between earth and world, the invisible the visible, embodiment and language, also may be explored in terms of the relationship between silence and expression. In this context, silence is not necessarily the contrary of language: silence or muteness is part of the background to language, the unarticulated background. In line with this idea, Merleau-Ponty makes the following

statement in the course notes:

1.   „*before language, a ‚mute' experience and an experience which calls from itself for its ‚expression,' but a ‚pure' expression, i.e., foundation and not product of language. Therefore a Vor-sprache, a down-side or ‚other side' of language, an Ur-sprung of language.*

2.   *after language, through it, constitution of a universe of the nameable, of Dinge ueberhaupt, of objectivity, coextensive with the Welt.*" (Merleau-Ponty 2002a:43)

The first idea to be considered springs directly from the nexus of silence, muteness and the invisible. In Phenomenolgy of Perception Merleau-Ponty discusses the idea of expression as a giving form to.[6] This understanding clarifies that for Merleau-Ponty silence is by no means emptiness, but something that has no form, what he calls gestaltlos (Merleau-Ponty 2002a:47). As something that provides latently a possibility for an utterance or for a thought, silence is tied up with speech and language through an intricate relationship both of opposition and interdependency. Language is therefore something which already has form, but which also posits a formless state where it requires form, expression, what is called a fore-language, Vor-sprache. The understanding of a continuum between silence and expression can be transposed to other means of representation than language. An example is architecture with its predominantly silent and embodied characteristics, but which is still open for participation and which conveys its own embodied kind of non-articulated meaning (Vesely 2004:60). In order to use this insight more directly within the framework of a phenomenology of architecture or the city, language should be shifted away from having a primary position in the analysis; a line of inquiry about which Merleau-Ponty is not very explicit (Lawlor 2002:xxvii).

One clue is, however, given in relation to the theme of institutions. In Phenomenolgy of Perception, Merleau-Ponty writes:

„*The use a man is to make of his body is transcendent in relation to that body as a mere biological entity. It is no more natural, and no less conventional, to shout in anger or to kiss in love than to call a table ‚a table'. Feelings and passionate conduct are invented like words. Even those which, like paternity, seem to be part and parcel of the human make-up are in reality institutions.*" (Merleau-Ponty 2002b:220)

This demarcation of the institutional background to human life or culture is central to the way Merleau-Ponty discusses the concept of institution. In the manuscript to the lecture ‚Institution in Personal and Public History' (1970), the concept of institution is presented as a way of challenging the conventional ideas of a philosophy of consciousness. In line with the above quotation, Merleau-Ponty states that the subject itself is instituted rather than constituted, and he uses the concept of institution to show how subjectivity itself is situated and rests on a set of cultural-historical features. In fact he claims that what he calls the instituted subject exists ‚between others and myself, between me and myself, like a hinge, the consequence and

the guarantee of our belonging to a common world' (Merleau-Ponty 1970:40). Opening the problem of institutions more generally, Merleau-Ponty states the following:

„*Thus what we understand by the concept of institution are those events in experience which endow it with durable dimensions, in relation to which a whole series of other experiences will acquire meaning, will form an intelligible series or a history – or again those events which sediment in me a meaning, not just as survivals or residues, but as the invitation to a sequel, the necessity of a future.*" (Merleau-Ponty 1970:40-1)

Here, the idea of institution is close to that of horizon, most prominently discussed in the phenomenological tradition by Hans-Georg Gadamer in Truth and Method (2001:300-307). For Merleau-Ponty, however, emphasis is again on the duality of something atemporal, ‚events that sediment in me meaning', and something temporal, ‚the durable dimensions', ‚an intelligible series or a history'. Merleau-Ponty explores the concept of institution in relation to four levels, where the first three concern what he calls personal or intersubjective history and the last deals with what he calls public history. The four levels make it possible to connect this understanding of institutions to the idea of a mediative structure between earth and world. In this way, a central building block is provided to grasp the city as an institution comprising many institutions in it at the same time as it is a background for human practice, providing orientation as a common ground and horizon.

The first level on which Merleau-Ponty identifies an institutional relation concerns a set of deeply ingrained ways in which we interact with other people on the most intimate level – which approaches biology:

„*There exists something comparable to institution even at the animal level (the animal is impregnated by the living creatures which surround him at birth) – and even at the level of human functions which used to be considered purely ‚biological' (puberty reveals a conservation rhythm – the recall and transcendence of earlier events – relevant here is the oedipal conflict – which is characteristic of institution.) However, in man the past is able not only to orient the future or to furnish the frame of reference for the problems of the adult person, […] so that it becomes impossible to explain behavior in terms of its past, anymore than in the future.*" (Merleau-Ponty 1970:40)

The second level is explained by means of an example: the institution of a painter's work or of a style in the history of painting (Merleau-Ponty 1970:42). Merleau-Ponty claims that a painter learns to paint by means other than sheer imitation of his predecessors. Rather, he states that there is a deeper sense of temporality in play. What was painted before influences a given work, yet from what has been painted, one cannot infer what is to come, which also is close to what is involved in the idea of Stiftung (Merleau-Ponty 1970:42-3). This also counts on the more general level with respect to the history of painting. Here, Merleau-Ponty is interested in two things: the way in which the cultural praxis

of an individual relates to a temporal dimension and how this is tied up with common concerns and predicaments.

At this point, the analysis still concerns what Merleau-Ponty calls personal or interpersonal history and also the third level talks about this domain. Here, Merleau-Ponty inquires into the development of knowledge as such, and he finds ‚the same internal circulation between the past and present which has been observed in other institutions‘ (Merleau-Ponty 1970:43). This means on the most general level that even the prevalent understandings of truth are historical and endowed with weight through the way in which they develop in the interplay between people in a historical present. Accordingly, the third level can be seen as a generalisation of the second. Because of its scope it appears more radical, but in fact it rests on a similar understanding and investigation of how the personal connects with the interpersonal. On the fourth level, this is taken further as a kind of meta-conclusion when Merleau-Ponty makes the following point:

„Thought only has access to another historical horizon […] through a lateral penetration and not by a sort of ubiquity in principle […] it produces a table of diverse, complex probabilities, always bound to local circumstances, weighted with a coefficient of facticity, and such that we can never say of one that it is more true than another, although we can say that one is more false, more artificial, and less open to a future in turn less rich." (Merleau-Ponty 1970:44)

Here we leave the level of personal history and approach what Merleau-Ponty calls public history. In the same move, we come closer to describing the way in which institutions have to do with the common-to-all and thus with civic order when it comes to an urban context even at that level which Merleau-Ponty calls personal or inter-subjective. If thought is always situated, dependent on the particular setting but also always relational, it provides a means to assess the level of what Merleau-Ponty calls public history. While the claim of the institutions finds a very direct interpretation in this understanding, it operates on a level where it is difficult to infer directly what constitutes the claim: identifying the cultural-historical background, the concrete city. Concerning the search for a phenomenology of the city, it might be the case that it is necessary to build up a phenomenology of the city as a phenomenology of institutions. This would mean discussing urban order as an institutional order and uncovering this aspect of common ground through concrete investigations of the city as an institution with many institutions in it that develops in and through history.[7]

Towards a Phenomenology of the City

The turn to primary phenomenological discourse given in the references to Merleau-Ponty adds a new dimension to the questions regarding urban order and the need for an understanding of the city as a cultural-historical background. The winding nature of the quoted text fragments at times makes them about to recede into obscurity. The reason for this particular writing style is not only the incomplete nature of the manuscripts, however: it is an attempt to avoid

an objectifying, academic discourse. Without attempting a complete interpretation of the Merleau-Pontian discourse, the aim here has been to evoke particular philosophical themes in a way that allows this concreteness to be retained. This makes possible a number of conclusions.

First, Merleau-Ponty's vocabulary makes possible a formulation of the urban lifeworld of the city as being part of background of meaning that provides orientation in everyday life. The differentiation in Merleau-Ponty's thought between a natural ground and a cultural-historical ground seems at first sight to move focus away from the idea of a mediative structure between earth and world. And yet, it makes it possible to discuss the latter more specifically as the way in which the city provides a kind of ground of meaning and a background which rather works at the level of stratification between world and earth. This makes it possible to include questions of architecture and urbanity very directly in the discussion. Second, if the processes of Stiftung that regard cultural production and the establishment of shared structures of meaningfulness and also concern what ‚is built on the earth‘ and thus the building of cities, it is necessary to take into account a temporal structure of this constitution, which is dynamic and has to do with tradition and change. A vehicle to open these questions can be found in Merleau-Ponty's understanding of institutions. This illuminates what might be at stake in a phenomenology of the city in the Merleau-Pontian tradition: an understanding according to which urban order is a latent order, part of the ground for experience, yet as negotiable, changeable and dynamic. This is significant because it avoids normative-ideal or moral statements but addresses the problem of urban context both as a concrete background for human practice and as an ultimate horizon.

One example of current discourse on the urban condition that it is favourable to discuss in the light of these ideas is represented by the concept of the smart city. This idea describes the city as a system of information and flow that, although complex and wayward, can be controlled, manipulated and optimised to increase efficiency in sectors such as transportation infrastructures, health care, etc. The aim is no less than the betterment of culture as a whole. With respect to infrastructure, for example, a concrete proposition is complex and self-reflexive computations of streetlights that are monitored through sensors and constantly adapt to the ever-changing traffic flow, thus aiding people's way through the city. From such propositions, the smart city propagandists move directly to visions of a more beautiful, seamless and happy society. This way of thinking takes for granted that the city is an entity which is experienced and comprehended in the same way by everyone in it and that there exists something like a common goal of optimisation which would benefit the larger whole of the city and which would make purposeness and meaning come together in the built environment. But just as it is evident that our individual experiences of passing through the city rarely cohere with smooth and linear representations of flow and unhindered passage, it also should be clear that every one of us approaches the urban realm

with our different backgrounds and levels of understanding, interests and attention. What may be experienced as smooth and seamless is dependent on many more factors than when red lights are seen as a nuisance. We might, in fact, take pleasure in taking a little break in front of a red light and use this time to relax, contemplate, listen to the radio, look around, get to know a place, etc.

This argument also calls attention to the fact that the way in which we commit to the city as an entity that happens through daily practices, which are attuned to the rhythms and moods of the larger structure of (our) everyday life, and which are always situated with respect to the concrete built environment. The way in which meaning is generated thus has little to do with optimisation of large-scale systems. And yet, despite these partial involvements, when we call ourselves citizens of a city we place ourselves in relation to the urban context as a larger horizon. If we were to investigate how the built environment adds meaning to our culture in a fundamental sense, thus posing the question of relevance, understanding the civic order of the city is an important undertaking. It is in the urban context, in the longue durée of the development of culture, that the link between cultural meaning and architectural form has developed explicitly. But if until the end of eighteenth century, ideal cities were based on historical precedents as well as on contemporary literature, philosophy and political thinking and thus were a result of a broad cooperation and accumulated knowledge (Carl 1995), current visions such as the smart city reduce the relation of meaningfulness to that of the optimised seamless workings of a computerised system.

The way in which we commit to the city may be egocentric if this commitment means that we try to make use of the city to reach a personal goal. Nevertheless, even if we may have little in common with our fellow citizens, the minimum of what is shared is the partiality of this greater orientation. The argument of the present article is that even if this shared orientation may rest on understandings so partial and distant that they include phenomena such as misunderstanding or even conflict, this is precisely the place where relationships of meaningfulness develop, which makes it helpful to turn to the Merleau-Pontian vocabulary and see the city as a species of the cultural-historical ground or Boden. That this is where we can locate something like the relevance of the city even in the contemporary culture of fragmentation of meaning, and by seeing the city as the cultural-historical ground of meaning – as proposed in the present context – this becomes both plausible and a desirable direction of philosophical questioning to be worked out in detail in future work.

In summary it can be said that the present article has provided a preliminary mapping of the philosophical or interpretational field of the problem of a phenomenology of the city. This has been done by means of close reading of selected fragments from the philosophical oeuvre of one of the central phenomenologists of the twentieth century, Maurice Merleau-Ponty. The idea of substituting the Merleau-Pontian idea of a cultural-historical ground with city has been read in conjunction with his

ideas of a fundamental co-dependency between human practice, the body and the surrounding environment, built or non-built, or world. The dialogical nature of human behaviour – which includes themes of silence, misunderstanding – that is a central understanding here means that to grasp the order of the city also includes the order of conflict or chaos. It is this framework that should be carried over to concrete analyses of cities in their different geographical and historical manifestations within the framework of a phenomenology of the city.

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