

A Bad Taste in Good Faith: Retrieving the Sense of Being Grounded During COVID-19

A Bit of Taste Wanted

Knowing our body is one thing; learning to accept it is another.

The second day after I learned one of my roommates tested positive for an epidemic viral pneumonia, my loss of taste and smell started. Using and living with my tongue for nearly 26 years, I have never had this experience of *not* feeling it being with me at all. Not until my symptoms threw my mind back to where I had good knowledge of what things tasted like and how the world smelled, did I realize this consequential change to my body. This change that happened to my tongue immediately caused a crisis to my whole body. When the content of taste is gone, all the textures surrounding the hollowness become ridiculously useless. Without the sense of heat, the sun looks no different than a meteorite. Since I cannot taste food or smell blooming flowers, my sense of disconnection from my body and this world engulfs my presence. I feel ungrounded like a blown off kite, stringless and detached.

As a person who used to be sensitive to all the tastes and smells, living in a body which does not have these functions seems like being imprisoned in a place where no exit exists. There is no freedom for me while confronted with the same body structure that used to empower me. The first meal I had after I lost my taste was a dish mixed with beef and broccoli. Chewing those carefully cooked ingredients now became an evil tryout. Each bite spoke to my incompetence directly and tortured my limited tolerance by its humiliation. My taste dumped me and I had no chance to do any begging but could only wait for its return. The missing piece of my lived body experience calls for its inquiry of pursuing completeness. Merleau-Ponty uses the term “body schema” to describe the “situational spatiality” of things in contrast with their “positional spatiality.” He argues that our body has a “situational spatiality” that is oriented toward actual or

possible tasks (102). Thus, the meaning of our body depends on how it is perceived from our experiences. In other words, the concept of bodily experience is always half-done at present and its meaning remains to be accomplished in the future.

Without a full scale of such experiences, can I still identify the fullness of body? This question is problematic itself. On the one hand, the defining process of what constitutes a full body experience is not a shared perception. In the sense of “situational spatiality,” our body’s existence as “being-toward-the-world”, a projection toward lived goals, is expressed through its spatiality, which forms the background against which objective space is constituted (137). Each individual’s experience is unique and so is his/her perceptions. Hence, my bodily experience is a fluid image determined by my changing perceptions. Our body is not a frozen landscape where all the frameworks are deadly fixed. However, our body dwells in the waves of living rhythm powered by our experience and all the emotional dynamics. In Schneider’s case, although he lacks the ability to “project” into virtual space because his injury has disrupted the “intentional arc,” the new understanding of his body is emergent. These new possibilities can be found in what Merleau-Ponty describes *intentional arc*: “it projects around us our past, our future, our human milieu, our physical situation, our ideological situation, and our moral situation, or rather, that ensures that we are situated within all of these relationships” (137). The relationship of the body within space is therefore intentional, although as an “I can” rather than an “I think”; bodily space is a multi-layered manner of relating to things, so that the body is not “in” space but lives or inhabits it. Thus, it is the space that provides opportunities for us to embrace the possibilities of our bodies.

On the other hand, the body always shows its fullness to us, but our awareness does not always follow its pace. “By remaining faithful to the phenomena in his investigations of

perspective, Cezanne discovered what recent psychologists have come to formulate: the lived perspective, that which we actually perceive, is not a geometric or photographic one” (4).

Merleau-Ponty examines Cezanne’s doubt, and points out that the lived perspective fulfills the unity among himself, his objections and his paintings. Such a lived perspective inspires me to revisit Cezanne’s paintings during my loss of taste. Interestingly, I tastes all the oranges from his paintings when I anchor myself in his paintings. Meanwhile, I noticed my tongue has the similar reaction that I normally would have when I taste food in my mouth or smell things through my nose. I feel like I inhale Cezanne’s colors in my body and these colors help me finish the reconfiguration of my new virtual “body schema.” For a moment, it seems my taste is back since I can taste green, yellow, and red.

The Taste of Pain

If the taste of food is mainly the tongue’s job, the taste of pain is the whole body’s business. “There is a necessary pain to a full life. The unavoidable pains that we encounter in our impersonal relationships, in our engagement with the world, and even within our flesh come as a direct result being dynamically part of interaction” (Mazis 223). Life without any pain is incomplete because recognizing the intimacy between our body and the world is not an easy process. Children learn how to walk on the earth usually through their painful lessons. Accepting the fact that my taste is gone is painful. By coping with this kind of pain, I suddenly lost a great deal of my appetite. At the same time, my body seemingly detected my thoughts and I started to feel less hungry than I used to be. As a person who likes cooking and tasting a diverse set of cuisines, entering the kitchen now becomes a difficult task for me. The same space has a new meaning to me.

Still, I feel ungrounded. Every familiar space becomes uninhabitable and I find no anchor for my disposition to gain insights into my body. The tongue betrayed me, but I can hardly have any blame on it. Deeply, I know it is my responsibility to take care my body. “We are dealing with a feedback loop, or what philosophers would call a ‘dialectical relationship’ – where each term emerges as a function of the other term” (Mazis 213). If we are dealing with a “dialectical relationship” with our bodies and this world, I failed this conversation. I lost the connection with my tongue, and a part of my body is out of reach. When I went back to things themselves, they abandoned me and left me nowhere to hide my defenseless frustration. The window to observe and seek the depth in our lived experienced is officially closed to me because my tongue signed a “non-essential” sentence on me.

This new reality shredded my well-established body rhythm, and I have no idea where I should start to recollect these pieces. *Or should I?* I have always treasured my sense of taste and been proud of it for it carries my memories and maintains my emotional equilibrium. Lacking the touch of taste upon my tongue is comparable to crying without tears.

A Call to Faith

“Belief is not a mere cognitive function. Belief is an assent” (Mazis 212).

The realization of my situation is significant in helping me determining my well-beingness in my lived experience. Although the loss of taste is a fact, using what gestures to deal with it is one of my privileges. Gestures speak for attitudes. “Calling into question what my presence to myself teaches me would result in the loss of the foundations of all my certainties” (Merleau-Ponty 458). Although the tradition of phenomenology calls for attention to “go back to things themselves,” most continental philosophers’ efforts indicate starting from things. When phenomenologists fill the gap where the ignorance of things themselves prevails, they

demonstrate the significance of paying close attention to our body, experience and relationships among things in our daily life. However, the encounter with my loss of taste helps me realize that there is another dimension called “beyond things themselves” in my consciousness that drives our sense of survival despite all the phenomena — it is called *faith*.

When it comes to the sense of displacement of our consciousness and the exchange between the world and our embodied existence Merleau-Ponty explains:

Consciousness can never objectify itself as sick-consciousness or as disabled-consciousness; and even if the elderly man complains of his old age or the disabled person of his disability, they can only do so when they compare themselves to others or when they see themselves through the eye of others, that is, when they adopt a statistical or an objective view of themselves; and these complaints are never wholly made in good faith: in returning to the core of his consciousness, everyone feels himself to be beyond his particular characteristics and so resigns himself to them. (459)

With a solid faith in my own autonomy, I become more patient and less angry in dealing with my situations and my embodied experience. By going back to things themselves, I perceive my body with its own latitude that shapes my perspective of viewing my existence in this world from multiple dimensions. On the other hand, such a faith gives me a pair of wings that allow me to freely perceive things beyond things themselves. Instead, I build a communicative channel to the full acceptance and gratification of phenomena as they are blessed beings in my journey to pursue the meaning of freedom through searching the depth in my lived experience.

Works Cited

Mazis, Glen A. *Earthbodies: Rediscovering Our Planetary Senses*. SUNY Press, 2012.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *Phenomenology of Perception*. Translated by Donald A. Landes, Routledge, 2012.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. "Cezanne's doubts [Cezanne tvivel]." *Paletten (sweden)*, no. 2, 1986, pp. 27-29. ProQuest, <http://ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/docview/1320451905?accountid=13158>.