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FRAMING SPIRITUALITY IN MARTIAL ARTS

AN EMBODIED COMPREHENSION THROUGH PHENOMENOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to frame the notion of spirituality in martial arts through a phenomenological perspective as a philosophical and a methodological point of view. It considers martial arts as embodied experiences based on pre-reflexive acts in fighting processes. In these practices, the body constantly moves and there is not much time for the practitioner to reflect before choosing and executing each technique. Thus, it is a reflection on unreflected action, linked to an understanding of spirituality based in phenomenology. As discussed by Merleau-Ponty, a movement is not only related to what we think about the world, but also to what we can do in it. This involves not only perceiving the object, but also a specific situation and how to be able to do something in a certain time and space. This phenomenological understanding suggests that a movement is never randomly executed: we do something, always engaged in a specific situation. Through this perspective, when framing spirituality in martial arts, we highlight the relationship between subject and things considered meaningful to enable or enhance such practices. This sort of experience (spirituality in martial arts) consists of an act of which one may not be consciously aware.

INTRODUCTION

Spirituality has been conceptualised as informing a wide range of embodied practices. Nevertheless, its definition and characterisation remain imprecise. It is tied to ideas of non-physical aspects of human experience, as something powerful, 'supernatural' or 'sacred', and it is often related to religion, meditation and rituals [Maliszewski 1996]. However, while these latter practices can be seen as part of spiritual experiences, they cannot be considered synonyms.

Despite its conventional association with religion, this article proposes that spirituality can be better understood from a phenomenological perspective. At least as far back as thinkers like Stein [1917/1998] and beyond, spirituality has been proposed as a fundamental dimension of the human being. This work adds that it also relates to the possibility of creativity, through openness to others, the world, and ourselves. Indeed, it might even be argued that it can be connected to the experience of certain kinds of freedom [Coelho Jr. 2006].

Fighting practices have been attached to ideas of spirituality throughout their historical development in several countries and regions. Strong relationships between fighting practices and spirituality can be found in many different regions of the world [Green and Svinth 2001]. For instance, there are the well-known martial arts of the Korean peninsula, China and Japan, where the notions such as *mu* and *budo* have been developed through an intertwining of physical and spiritual virtues in *budoka* training. In Southern and South-Eastern Asia, with the ancient traditions in India, Thailand, and the Malay world, *pencak silat* has prospered, spreading through different versions in Malaysia, Indonesia, the south of Thailand and the Philippines and Brunei Darussalam. These practices are predominantly linked to religious training and ritual initiation. There are traditional fighting practices in Europe, such as in Turkey (oil wrestling) and in Greece, especially Ancient Greece (pankration, wrestling and boxing) whose origins can be connected to spirituality: in the latter, the ancient Olympic Games were organized in honor of the Gods, stressing again a relation with religion. In the African continent, some fighting practices are also tied to spiritual and religious experiences, such as the Senegalese wrestling and the Catch Fétiche (or Voodoo wrestling) in Congo. And so on.

These quick examples show the diversity of spiritual aspects that can be present across martial practices, whether they be religious, ritual and even ostensibly secular. Arguably, spirituality can be experienced even when mystical or religious dimensions are absent. In order to try to comprehend this phenomenon and its manifestation in martial arts and combat sports, this study aims to describe and analyse how the spiritual dimension can be discussed through a phenomenological approach.

PHENOMENOLOGY AND FIGHTING PRACTICES

A phenomenological perspective is adopted here as both a philosophical and a methodological resource. Initiated by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), phenomenology aims at comprehending the phenomena in our lived experiences. It flows between subjective and objective, refusing pure idealism as a way to comprehend phenomena around us. The phenomenological perspective also criticizes the idea of an intended scientific neutrality. Phenomenology is, rather, an attitude, a particular way to observe the world and grasp the structure of each phenomenon around us [Merleau-Ponty 1945/2000]. Fundamentally, a phenomenological attitude is guided by the concept of 'bracketing'. This involves an attitudinal stepping back from our taken for granted assumptions of the world. Starting from our lived – often unique – experiences, it is nonetheless possible to see common structures among differences. The phenomenologist is then engaged in an operation of translating and bridging different orders of meaning as a way to render the intelligibility of what is experienced. In martial arts studies, this operation is valuable and pertinent because of the agonistic situation of martial arts. This puts practitioners to the test, pushes people to their limits and forces them to innovate in order to find practical solutions to challenges. Although phenomenology is centered in lived experiences and on investigating subjective processes, according to Martínková and Parry:

it is not a kind of subjectivism. This it shares with qualitative research methods, which (in the main) try to do social science from the first-person perspective. However, phenomenology is non-subjectivist in a different way. While it also investigates the first-person perspective, it has to do with the universal-personal, not the particular-personal. [Martínková & Parry 2011: 94]

Moving from singular experiences to larger structures is important. For example, every martial artist fights in a particular way. Precise observation and description of this across individuals could form the basis of a phenomenological investigation, in order to grasp the broader structures of fights or specific aspects of fighting. Trying to follow this direction, this study explores the phenomenon of fighting to frame the experience of spirituality in martial arts practices.

This study proposes that framing spirituality in martial arts is best approached through the idea of intentionality, i.e. the relationship between the subject and things considered meaningful, which enable or enhance such embodied practices. As mentioned, spirituality can be defined from a phenomenological perspective as a creative way of connecting the inner self, others and the world [Coelho Jr 2006; Stein

1917/1998]. When explored in relation to martial arts, such a process is strongly related to how someone perceives the opponent, the situation, and is able to respond to this environment through an embodied process. In order to understand phenomenologically how the body moves while fighting, including the spiritual dimension, these three important processes will be first approached: *perception-action*, *otherness* and *habit*.

PHENOMENOLOGY AND FIGHTING PRACTICES: PERCEPTION-ACTION

Perception-action processes were explored by Merleau-Ponty [1945, 1953/2011] in the fields of philosophy and phenomenology, and they have also recently been studied by neuroscientists and researchers interested in embodied cognition and body-mind-environment issues [Gallagher 2005; Leder 1990; Nöe 2004, 2009]. These studies highlight how situated our bodies are. In recent research in phenomenology, neuroscience and cognitive studies (especially studies of embodied cognition), perception is often considered to be a type of action. Such acts are then considered in terms of perception-action processes [Noë 2004 2009]: once we perceive something, we act towards it, always in a certain way, time, space and situation. This is not a mere passive process. Moreover, it is from perception that the body starts to move.

According to Merleau-Ponty [1945], perception is the originary way in which we access the world. What we believe to be true and real is based on how we perceive. Perception is not only related to a perceived object, but also to a specific time, space, orientation and situation. We perceive something, here and now, but we are orientated by what we have previously perceived. However, once we perceive something for the first time, we become able to perceive even more, improving neuroplasticity. Approaching the mind-body-environment issue, perception-action processes are related to specific objects in a certain environment, in a mind-body-world intertwinement [Noë 2009]. Perception is fundamentally our way of accessing the world through the body and the mind.

Another important aspect of perception-action processes is that we are able to move towards something even if we cannot see the entire object. According to Merleau-Ponty [1953/2011], we can globally recognize something in opaque contours, enabling our actions from apparently separated information (hearing, seeing, touching, smelling, tasting). For example, I can recognize a friend by smelling his scent, hearing her voice or touching their arm. Even if these actions do not happen simultaneously, we can recognize an object or a subject by 'connecting

the dots'. Within martial arts, there is no way to wait for the opponent to finish a punch (for example) before defending against it. An experienced fighter is able to choose a defense by feeling the intention of the other's hit before their action is complete.

Perception-action is also a critical moment. As an originary process, we do not consciously choose to perceive something or not. We perceive and then are able (or unable) to react. If we hear a sound, we might choose to turn our head towards it. Furthermore, sense perception attests to an important difference between consciousness and awareness. When we move, we are not necessarily conscious as 'the body is in action before being conscious of it' [Andrieu 2017: 23]. Consciousness implies a reflexive relationship with the object while awareness can happen through a pre-reflexive act. We first perceive, then act and finally reflect on what we have done. This is crucial in starting to frame spirituality as something which is lived and perceived, although it is sometimes hard to recognize and describe.

PHENOMENOLOGY AND FIGHTING PRACTICES: OTHERNESS

In extant phenomenological research, otherness has been fundamental to the idea of a contest [Barreira & Telles 2019]. Within the martial arts there can be no fight without an opponent, even if they appear only in our imaginations, e.g. in karate kata or taijiquan forms, among others [Barreira 2017a & b; Telles 2018]. Along with perception-action process, the role of the other is crucial in fighting practices, enabling the fighter to deal with unexpected situations. Otherness can be characterized as something/someone different than myself. Even if both fighters come from the same modality and follow the same rules, it is not possible to predict exactly how the opponent might move or hit because they are different than myself. There is a silent challenge starting from recognizing the other near us. Even if they do not move, their presence is felt as a sense of vulnerability, because otherness is something beyond my control or knowledge. Thus, this intercorporeal relation during the fight is characterized by an attempt to accommodate these differences through combat, which directly relates to the idea of spirituality as a creative connection between the inner self, the other and the world.

According to Leder [1990] when we are used to specific moves and situations, our body seems absent. For example, if one is an experienced fighter, a defense against the opponent's attack can be made without thinking about one's own body. It is not the arm that blocks, but an entire body that is capable of moving quickly to defend. However,

exceptions are created when someone is hit, immobilized or feels some pain. Then, according to Andrieu [2017], there is a return to oneself and to one's own body. This is also described by Gallagher [2005], who notes that discomfort is a way to turn our attention to our bodies.

The more we are exposed to these unpredictable situations and discomfort, the more we are able to deal with these aspects of combat. In other words, the more we fight, the more we learn how to fight. An interesting aspect of dealing with such challenges is the ability to anticipate the other's moves in order to be effective in our techniques. It implies an observation of the opponent's previous movements during the fight and connecting these observations with those I am able to do: 'in most intersubjective situations we have a direct understanding of another person's intentions because their intentions are explicitly expressed in their embodied actions, and mirrored in our own capabilities of action' [Gallagher 2005: 224].

Thus, fighting involves a dynamic of letting the body act out previously learned movements while being placed in unexpected situations and relations with the opponent. It implies accruing bodily knowledge of what has happened and learning to anticipate what is likely to come, which emerges from a kind of bodily listening. This expression can refer to the ability of feeling the other through the body, as an openness to otherness. In this sense, the experience of spirituality can be related to the feeling of vulnerability and unpredictability while facing otherness as an unforeseeable object.

It is noteworthy that fighting practices become standardized and codified [Gaudin 2009]. However, due to the place and role of otherness, even with a rigid set of moves and rules, fighting remains unpredictable. There is a flow between expected movements and unforeseen ones, along with a specific space-time dimension intertwined with one's perception of the opponent. While fighting, a body is required to feel the other as an indispensable presence that moulds the ensuing moves, progressing via a sensible norm [Barreira 2017b]. Such pre-reflexive experience can be understood in terms of spirituality as a phenomenon with an important aspect of ineffability. This is because 'feeling' the opponent is necessary for achieving flow in fighting, and this is sometimes characterised as an indescribable experience.

PHENOMENOLOGY AND FIGHTING PRACTICES: HABIT

In order to perceive and act towards the other in/and/as the situation, one needs to learn how to fight until it becomes a 'natural' habit. This process is strongly related to the notion of body schema, characterized by 'certain motor capacities, abilities, and habits that both enable and constrain movement and the maintenance of posture' [Gallagher 2005: 24]. Such phenomena are also related to an ecologization process, once the body is able to perceive the environment and select the best ways to inhabit that space [Andrieu 2016].

Again, an opponent is fundamental in this process, as the other helps the body to generate new iterations of what one already knows how to do, challenging the body schema and developing further motor capacities and abilities. Body schema can also be considered as a marginal awareness of the body, as we do not usually access it, although it is always there. As Gallagher puts it:

Ordinarily, I do not have to attend to putting one foot in front of another when I'm walking; I do not have to think through the action of reaching for something. I may be marginally aware that I am moving in certain ways, but it is not usually the center of my attention. [Gallagher 2005: 28]

Similarly, most techniques in martial arts are studied precisely so that they can become habit, so that one does not need to consciously pay attention to the legs or the hips, to kick, or to take a look at the fingers, to make a good grip, and so on. These abilities and motor actions can only be carried out spontaneously once these movements are learned and processed as a habit, in which there is no need to reflect before taking the decision to move in a specific way. When referring to the phenomenon of habit, it is important to define it neither as an automatism nor a conscious knowledge, but as something tied to a bodily intelligence [Saint-Aubert 2013]. The habit enables further actions, in a motor and perceptive way.

Developing a habit is not an easy task and is related to training, confidence and embodied memory. Through the repetition of techniques, proprioception can be improved in order to allow the body to move without thinking before choosing the movements. According to Andrieu [2017], through the repetition of bodily practices one is able to know how their body moves as an embodied experience, in which different actions are possible depending on each situation.

For Saint-Aubert [2013], these characteristics of repetition in the phenomenon of habit allow the body to be able to anticipate and adapt

to new situations. It is a motor as well as a perceptual process. Thus, habit becomes an anchoring mode, enabling the development of a sense of trust in one's own body to engage in an appropriate way in a given situation. Habit is also a fertile way of forgetting – '*oubli-fécond*' [Saint-Aubert 2013: 98], manifest in the development of a style, a particular way of moving without prior reflection. Thus, it is also through habit that one can experience spirituality phenomenally, as being able to transcend the conscious self in a free and meaningful relation to the other and the world.

Once certain moves are exhaustively repeated, one is able to forget them and oneself in doing them, to act in accordance to others or the environment. The passage between the learning processes and the experience of habit involves the following steps in terms of an intentional relation to a specific movement: (1) thinking on how I can do something (learning) => (2) knowing I can do it (developing self-confidence) => (3) doing it (flowing according to the situation). Habit is the way of being bodily familiar with something. For example: (1) a novice first thinks of how to accurately posit the posture and the guard, training a specific gesture; (2) they pay attention to different parts of the body and repeat the move until it is learned and incorporated; and (3) once familiar with the new technique, the attempts to use it in a fight situation become more frequent and, little by little, there will be no need to think or pay attention to specific parts of the body to be able to do it. Finally, such gestures will naturally flow as a perception-action process that is possible through a specific body schema and habit towards the opponent in a particular situation.

TOWARDS A PHENOMENOLOGY OF SPIRITUALITY IN MARTIAL ARTS

Approaching perception-action, otherness and habit phenomenologically, fighting practices can be understood as both reflexive and pre-reflexive. The latter stresses that, while fighting, the body constantly moves and there is not often time for the practitioner to reflect before choosing and doing each technique [Telles 2018; Telles, Vaittinen & Barreira 2018]. Once we propose spirituality as phenomenologically involving a dimension of openness to a specific situation, it can be regarded as intentionally lived during a martial art encounter. Thus, spirituality is experienced as a perception-action process, tied to otherness and habit, and it is also related as an almost unrecognizable and sometimes indescribable force that leads us to do and keep doing something. Considering martial arts as embodied experiences, the phenomenon of spirituality can be grasped and understood during such practices through both reflexive and pre-reflexive acts.

Either in reflexive or pre-reflexive acts, a phenomenological approach relies on the notion of intentionality, stressing that a movement is not only related to what we think, but also to what we can do in the world – and through it [Merleau-Ponty 1945/2000, 1953/2011]. Thus an action is never randomly executed, but always related to an object and to a perceived part of the world. Even if we are not conscious of it, our body is aware of the environment, continuously engaged in a specific situation through perception.

Spirituality in martial arts can be understood as a phenomenon that one may not be able to describe. On the other hand, if there is no reflection about these acts, they will not be identified as such. This is why it is important to approach this experience in terms of both reflexive and pre-reflexive modes. Moreover, the phenomenon of spirituality does not refer specifically to a mystical or religious experience nor does it depend on a rough philosophical description. It can be usually lived as an 'I do it and can't describe it' or a 'it's so strong I can't describe' experience, which is related to something intangible, but strong enough to enable further and meaningful actions. These latter expressions were found throughout existing research especially in capoeira and karate [Telles 2018].

Spirituality can be regarded as one of the dominant themes of modern karate-do 'philosophy'.¹ This is amply illustrated, for instance, in the widespread idea that fighters must 'empty' themselves in order to be able to fight properly [Telles, Vaittinen & Barreira 2018; Telles 2018]. This concept of emptiness not only relates to the calm management of emotions, but also to the experiencing of otherness as a presence that is felt and turned within one's own possibilities of action. Similarly, the atmosphere of capoeira performance, which includes dancing and singing, can be understood as a way to feel both the rhythms and some sort of 'magic' through the body [Telles 2018; Valério & Barreira, 2016a & b]. Such descriptions have been made of the experience of playing in the *roda*, the organization of people in a circle format that enables practitioners to fight and dance in its center. Although it is not mandatory that one experience spirituality in capoeira, its practice is sometimes tied to mystical experience, especially related to Afro-Brazilian culture.

What these examples illustrate is that such practices must be lived bodily and not merely theorized through the explanation of techniques. The notion of embodiment as developed within the field

1 Considering changes in karate during the 20th century, one might underscore the conceptualization of modern karate as a 'dô', which emphasizes the spiritual aspect of such practice. This remark also relates to the idea of 'emptiness' as typical of such recent thought.

of anthropology [Csordas 1990, 1993, 2008] forwards the sense of the body as a subject in action in the world, not merely an inert object of research. Spirituality can be felt in and as embodied practice, but it cannot be taught via mere abstracted or isolated technique. In sum, one can only learn how to fight when fighting and embodied practices are experienced as pre-reflexive processes. Accordingly, framing spirituality within reflexive acts must also be considered as a reflection on the unreflecting [Barbaras 2008]. This claim acknowledges that while spirituality is not a simple technique to be taught, it remains a relevant dimension of the experience of fighting and fighting training. Through spiritual experiences, one is able to feel the other and the situation while fighting in a more creative and personal way, relating pre-reflexively to both dimensions.

Such moments are characterised by a marginal awareness, often without conscious perception. However, what happens when this moment ends, when we are not moving anymore? According to Andrieu [2017], when an embodied practice is finished it takes a while for the practitioner to elaborate a progressive (re)appropriation from the sensorial to the conscious, in order to allow reflection on what has been practiced. In addition, some psychophysiological procedures might help to turn from a pre-reflexive to a reflexive moment, such as regulating the body temperature, and paying attention and controlling one's breathing. Moreover:

there is always a reflexive gap between bodily experience and bodily practice. Even didactically prepared by the guidance of the intervention sciences, a bodily practice cannot produce the same bodily experience for everyone, placing each one before a personal elaboration of his own gestures: self-reflexivity favors in the course of action a modeling of his gestural style and the various associated experiences. ... Thus, as it is not enough to see an exercise to imitate it perfectly, it is not enough to live a physical practice to feel all the subjective interest. [Andrieu 2017: 34-35; my translation]²

2 In the original: 'il y a toujours un écart réflexif entre l'expérience corporelle et la pratique corporelle. Même didactiquement préparée par la guidance des sciences de l'intervention, la pratique corporelle ne peut produire pour chacun la même expérience corporelle, plaçant chacun devant une élaboration personnelle de ses propres gestes : l'autoréflexivité favorise dans le cours d'action une modélisation de son style gestuel et des différents vécus associés. Cet écart entre ce qui est vivant en nous et ce qui est vécu par nous prouve combien le corps ne vit pas de la même façon ce qui est mis en activité physiquement en lui que nous comprenons par l'explication technique de nos gestes et le vécu associé à cette conscientisation. [...] ainsi, comme il ne suffit pas de voir un exercice pour l'imiter parfaitement, il ne suffit pas de vivre une pratique corporelle pour en ressentir tout l'intérêt subjectif.'

Specially related to the experience of spirituality in martial arts as embodied practices, such an awareness refers not only to a creative openness to the opponent and the situation, but also to oneself. The key point here is not whether we are embedded in a reflexive or pre-reflexive situation but when, where and how we must rely on each of them when considering the spiritual dimension. The lived reality of spirituality in the martial arts is to be bodily immersed in a pre-reflexive experience, and then later struggling to reflect on an aura now passed.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Using a phenomenological perspective, we have claimed that the experience of spirituality in martial arts does not refer only to the mystical or religious aspect of these practices. Such an important dimension within embodied activities might be understood as a creative connection among the practitioner, the opponent and the situation they are in. This study may assist further investigations on the relationships among martial arts, phenomenology, embodiment and spirituality, especially regarding the relation between the body and pre-reflexive and reflexive processes in movement practices. Moreover, future research on the topic may include the relationship between spirituality and important concepts in sports psychology, such as the state of flow and the management of cognitive processes, e.g. perception, attention and memory.

Spirituality has also been considered here as a lived (albeit difficult to describe) experience which can challenge both fighters and coaches. As we have argued throughout this study, spirituality can be understood as a by-product of the embodied nature of the martial arts that is strong enough to enable certain movements and behaviours, even without prior reflection. However, once we are able to recognize such dimensions within our daily practice it may encourage practitioners to better deal with the aspects of spirituality that emerge through long-term training. Considered as a rich and meaningful connection between practitioners and their environment, spirituality can be experienced, lived and sometimes even described. Yet it cannot be taught as a mere technique. It is an aspect of the fighting experience that should not be neglected in training and can be experienced daily. It may even be a vital key to consistency and perseverance in the hard path of martial art practices.

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