



Title: Phenomenological Approaches to Coenesthesia

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Abstract : Authors of the French Enlightenment introduced the notion of a feeling of existence (sentiment d’existence), often described as a bodily feeling, sometimes contrasted with, and other times intimately related to, a feeling of selfhood (sentiment de soi). The idea of a bodily feeling of being a self not only prefigures certain themes we now approach through the notion of existential feelings (as explored, for instance, by M. Ratcliffe) but has already explicitly formed the basis for research in neurophysiology and psychopathology.

J.C. Reil, a German physician who also coined the word psychiatry, and his student, C.F. Hübner, proposed to describe this feeling with the concept of coenaesthesia, which Maine de Biran critically engaged with, likely introducing the term into the French language. The concept of coenaesthesia, understood as the bodily foundation of the feeling of selfhood and existence, became central in the French tradition of psychiatry. This focus on disturbances of coenaesthesia, labeled cenesthopathies, was mainly considered in terms of forms of depersonalization.

Far from being a mere historical curiosity, the concept remains relevant in Basic Symptom Research and even appears in the Examination of Anomalous Self Experience (EASE). Additionally, it can be directly related to the development of the notions of interoception and proprioception.

In this talk, I revisit historical insights concerning coenaesthesia as a pre-reflective bodily feeling of being a self from a phenomenological perspective. I argue that recent developments in phenomenology can account for this anonymous bodily feeling, which already constitutes an incipience of selfhood, preceding reflective subjectivity and even minimal for-me-ness as their fleshly element.