

# WORLD AT YOUR FEET: INTRODUCTION

by  
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The contributors to this volume in the RASK series were asked to relate their research to the metaphor of the ‘world at your feet’. The engagement with this metaphor connects the present research publication to the culture project *World at Your Feet* which was a part of the official program of Aarhus—2017, *European Capital of Culture*.

To inspire reflection it was suggested in the invitation for contributions that we may see the ‘world at your feet’ as a general, binary metaphor the meaning potential of which goes way beyond its conventional idiomatic meaning. On the one hand the world at your feet can be seen as the world you know inside-out, the close world, the intimate world, the mastered world, the familiar world, the historical world, ‘our’ world, etc. On the other hand the world at your feet can be seen as the world that is projected before you, the untrodden world or the uncertain or unknown world.

When addressing the world at your feet as a problem, a range of issues may present themselves. One important perspective that immediately pops up when considering the engagement with the world at our feet is how we manage to handle it. Thus as a specific task the contributors were asked to consider French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s (1962) notion of a maximum “grip on the world”, either in terms of Merleau-Ponty’s own specific presentation of the notion or as an extension or further metaphorical application of the phrase.

Dreyfus and Dreyfus explain the notion as follows; the second and third paragraphs are two quotes from Merleau-Ponty (1962):

According to Merleau-Ponty, higher animals and human beings are always trying to get a *maximum grip* on their situation. Merleau-Ponty's inspiration for his notion of maximum grip comes from perception and manipulation. When we are looking at something, we tend, without thinking about it, to find the best distance for taking in both the thing as a whole and its different parts. When grasping something, we tend to grab it in such a way as to get the best grip on it.

'For each object, as for each picture in an art gallery, there is an optimum distance from which it requires to be seen, a direction viewed from which it vouchsafes most of itself: at a shorter or greater distance we have merely a perception blurred through excess or deficiency. We therefore tend towards the maximum of visibility, and seek a better focus as with a microscope.' [Merleau-Ponty 1962: 302]

'My body is geared into the world when my perception presents me with a spectacle as varied and as clearly articulated as possible, and when my motor intentions, as they unfold, receive the responses they expect from the world.' [Merleau-Ponty 1962: 250] (Dreyfus & Dreyfus 1999: 113-14)

When seeing the engagement with the world at our feet in terms of the effort to acquire a grip on it, two fundamental states emerge. In the desired state we are establishing what may be considered a 'competent', 'useful', 'necessary', 'able', 'skillful', 'correct' or 'normal' gestalt with the world. Herein may already reside the sensation of a mastered, trodden, intimate and familiar micro-cosmos, although the grip may also simply constitute an obligatory component in the further effort to create a 'homey' experience. Without a grip, however, one is left in "disequilibrium" (Dreyfus & Dreyfus 1999: 114) with the world at one's feet. Thus in the undesired state where we fail to achieve a grip we may be seen to fail to be 'able', to fail to be ones 'who can'. Here we cannot achieve, or will have a hard time achieving what is useful, normal, desired, or even necessary.

Merleau-Ponty was first and foremost a philosopher of perception. However, in so far as the effort to achieve a grip is an eternally repeated

effort involved in any human activity, in so far as there is no given or natural barrier between the innate body, other bodies, and their environments, in so far as we may consider the effort to achieve a grip not only as a motor effort but as one that has the motor effort as its prototypical instantiation, we may consider these matters in a broader context and extend them more or less metaphorically. Thus, we may in a meaningful way expand the issue of achieving a grip to cover all the faculties, technologies, artefacts, methods and resources in and through which living, thinking, talking, acting and interacting bodies gear into the world at their feet, together or alone, and attempt to get a maximum grip on it, be it a physical, perceptual grip or something like the sensation of a 'skillful' or 'able' approach, plan, attitude or understanding.

Furthermore, we may, especially in the context of the notion of the world at our feet, let considerations of achieving a grip open the door to further profound matters of human existence. We may let our reflection involve issues attended to by the existentialist family of thinkers and writers which Merleau-Ponty may be seen as more or less representative of.

And if it may now seem like we are in danger of moving way beyond the interests, scope and methods of work by researchers in a university department of language and communication, this is where we might find the central epistemological claims of this volume. All contributions to this volume are already informed to a greater or lesser extent and more or less explicitly by currents in 20th century philosophy, and in particular phenomenology. However, at the same time they represent theoretical elaborations and syntheses, empirical foci, methodology, respecifying or even correcting definitions and perspectives, whereby they depart from their philosophical heritage while maintaining a philosophical profundity. So while the following articles may not offer the philosophers a treasury of insight to help them develop their philosophically framed problems, they and others will certainly find another 'body of knowledge' and indeed 'love of knowledge' which in its own, distinct ways address basics of human existence and even challenge the ways philosophy has framed them.

The readers should then not expect to find existentialist philosophy per se in the following articles, and they should not evaluate the articles according to such a framework. Instead they may expect to find a sort of ‘practical’ and ‘empirical’ existentialist philosophy as seen from ‘inside’ everyday life, mostly in the form of ‘naturally occurring data’. As Canadian philosopher Paul Fairfield writes:

Beneath the preoccupations of everyday life is an ontological understanding of being and of human being, and an imperative to impose some order on an existence that always threatens to dissolve into nothingness.  
(2015: 1)

We tend to agree with Fairfield, except for the term “beneath.” As the contributions to this volume all demonstrate to a greater or lesser extent, such “ontological understanding” may be “seen but unnoticed” (Garfinkel 1996: 11) – not something we subject to explicit contemplation or even comment on – but it is right there for, in and of the preoccupations of everyday life. Hence the work that these contributions represent could be seen as setting the stage for bringing abstract philosophical thinking ‘down to earth’ (while in no way simplifying it!) by exploring and demonstrating how to explore what in fact amounts to an existentialist order of concerns simply as part and parcel of people’s mundane, everyday activities. Or, to use Viktor Frankl’s phrase, the contributions may be seen to show just how the “will to meaning” unfolds and how social and communicative actions are composed and recognized as “find[ing] and fulfill[ing] meaning and purpose” (1969: 35) in the world at our feet.

The first article, by **Sarah Bro Trasmundi**, “The ecological subject and visual perception” takes us inside the emergency ward at a Danish hospital to study the dynamics of visual perception as a group performance by a medical team. Her analysis and discussion are based on a cluster of theory and methodology (e.g. Cowley 1998, 2009, 2011;

Gibson 1979; Goodwin 1994, 2002, 2003, 2007; Hutchins 1995; Noë 2004 2010; Pedersen, 2015; Pedersen & Steffensen 2014; Steffensen et al. 2016; Steffensen & Pedersen 2014; Steffensen 2013; Trasmundi & Steffensen 2016) that is anti-representationalist and socio-interactional and which views meaning and cognition as a matter of how ecologically and intercorporeally embedded bodies gear into the world in accordance with and relying on such things as social norms and the history of practice. Hence visual perception is seen as a “context-specific activity that blends norms of seeing with tasks and concrete material features” and which includes the whole, moving body. To illustrate these points she conducts a microanalysis of an 18-second video-clip in which a medical team (consisting of a doctor, a nurse, a paramedic and a gastrointestinal surgeon (with a medical student observing from a distance)), led by the doctor’s movements, reorganises its group position and configuration in attending to a patient lying on a bed. Among other things her analysis may thus be seen to provide empirical support for the notion of a grip on the world as achieved by skilfully moving bodies, which in this case would then be medically skilful bodies that achieve a maximum medical visual grip on a patient. Importantly, however, according to Trasmundi this grip is not just the random grip by bodies of flesh; it is the grip by particular, historical, remembering, interactionally coordinating bodies acting in a “sense-saturated” environment of affordances.

The second article, “The world between us - The social affordances of metaphor in face-to-face interaction” by **Thomas Wiben Jensen** builds on a theoretical and methodological framework that overlaps considerably with Trasmundi’s. Jensen refers to this framework as “ecological cognition” and adds to it Linell’s (2009) notion of an “interworld.” However, while Trasmundi’s whole-bodied perspective zooms in on the coordinated body movements themselves, the focus of Jensen’s analysis is on the construction and affordances of metaphor, now in the contexts of interaction between a female pedagogue and three children in a Danish kindergarten and a couples therapy session including a married couple

(man and woman) and a female couples therapist. There are thus several central points on the agenda in Jensen's contribution. First, relating his analyses to a recent development in metaphor theory where focus has shifted from the stable, mental, cognitive underpinnings of metaphor (e.g. Johnson 2007; Lakoff & Johnson 1980, 1999; Kövecses 2005) to the dynamic instantiation and life of metaphor or "metaphoricity" (Cameron 2007, 2011; Gibbs & Cameron 2008; Müller 2008; Müller & Tag 2010; Gibbs 2013; Jensen & Cuffari 2014; Jensen 2017) in discourse and social interaction, Jensen illustrates how ecological cognition offers a research framework for practicing that shift. Secondly, by studying how metaphor is "a doing in the world that is embedded in the environmental structures of the interpersonal ecology", Jensen aims at illustrating how metaphor can be seen as affording the creation of a grip on the world together as a joint cognitive process in and of "the fast flow of human interaction". Jensen therefore emphasizes that while Merleau-Ponty's descriptions focus on the individual's engagement with the world, there is an alternative way of getting a grip on the world which "is tied to the way that people make sense together in and through metaphorical action, i.e. metaphorical language infused with inter-bodily behavior".

Whereas both Trasmundi and Jensen stress the importance of social interaction and indeed intercorporeality for the way people achieve a grip as a practical everyday accomplishment, **Gitte Rasmussen** the third article, "What World at Whose feet? - On the Social Constraints of Having a World," pushes 'the social' to the heart of the matter. She thus poses social situatedness and "human bodied individuals'" eternal local effort to establish actions as 'accountable' as necessary, fundamental existential conditions relative to which and only as a consequence of which there can be any understanding of people having some world at their feet and achieving or failing to achieve some grip on it. She bases this existential point on the ethomethodological (Button 1991) interactional analysis of embodied interaction involving an elderly woman, Karin, diagnosed with severe dementia, members of staff at her care facility and a visiting

researcher. The analysis shows that whereas in the world of ordinary people – which Karin cannot escape as a premise for the meaningfulness of her behavior – she does indeed become someone who knows *how* to do things, she fails to become someone who knows what she is doing. And this in turn is suggested to illustrate the general existential point that the individual can only claim to take hold of her existence and assert herself in so far as her actions are of the always already social world. “It takes ascribed membership in ‘this world’ to have ‘it at your feet’”, Rasmussen concludes.

In the final article, while maintaining the other contributors’ shared, general take on the notion of a world at your feet and the effort to achieve a grip on it as a social accomplishment, **Anders Hougaard’s** “World at Your Phone: How ‘snappers’ embody the digital world” addresses the volume’s thematic issues in the context of digital connectivity. Here he engages with mainstream as well as phenomenologically (e.g. Dreyfus 2009) and psychologically (e.g. Turkle 2015) based claims about existential loss in ‘digital living’. Specifically, as counter-evidence he analyses the way in which a “hyperembodied” and thus intimate though disembodied (or rather hybrid re-embodied) experience of another may be created for a receiver of a Snapchat selfie when sender and receiver collaborate through their use of a smartphone. Situating his analysis in the context of existentialist media philosophy (e.g. Lagerkvist 2017) and drawing upon theory which carries on the tradition from Merleau-Ponty (1962), he thus attempts to show that the digital user’s experience of a close interpersonal encounter can not only be extended into embodied engagement with digital representations and devices but even be reinforced and enriched in such engagement in and through a hybrid embodied grip.

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