

## THE VERTICAL AND THE VERTIGINOUS: A PHENOMENOLOGY OF THE MOUNTAINS

### I.

The notion of horizon plays a decisive role in traditional phenomenology. Both beings and events, phenomenologists tell us, emerge against a background of meaning that makes experience possible but that is, nevertheless, itself situated outside this experience and remains un-thematized (Hua 1, §19; Husserl 1950a: 81–83). The world, for Edmund Husserl, is “the horizon of all horizons,” delimiting the perceptual field (Hua III, §27; Husserl 1950b: 56–58). It is the horizon that opens up visual perspectives by foregrounding the spatio-temporal relations among objects and, at the same time, receding from the subject’s conscious grasp. This dimension of the world predates whatever or whoever appears on the horizon and, by its very appearance, disrupts the horizon’s ideally smooth boundaries with rugged vertical outlines.

The phenomenological idea of the horizon is, in the first place, precisely that—an *idea*. Derived from visual experience in vast open spaces (the sea, desert, fields, etc.), where the curvature of the earth becomes readily palpable, it is applied to meaning as such, delimited by the total context of significance, against which whatever happens to be singularly meaningful temporarily stands out. But even the perceptual horizon tends toward ideality and indifferenciation. It presents itself as an imaginary line—continuous, unbroken,

---

and homogeneous. The differences registered in the visual foreground are made possible by the indifference of the background and, especially, of the horizon that delimits it. In dialectical terms, the being-horizon of the horizon is an abstract universal: not yet explicitly filled out with concrete content; home to infinite possibilities; indeterminate and underdetermined. In fact, it will never be filled out or determined, seeing that nothing ever changes *in it*, even if, *on it*, everything is in flux, with various beings kaleidoscopically attaining salience, only to give place to others.

230 Together with the world, the body might be also considered “the horizon of all horizons”, whence sensory experience departs and whither it invariably returns. While the horizon of the world is itself horizontal, that of the body (the human body, that is) is vertical, in keeping with the axis of our embodiment that runs from head to feet and that has given rise to a variety of metaphysical speculations. To be sure, the vertical horizon of the body is not abstract; it is, from the outset, a concrete universal achieved through tremendous efforts of mediation and comprising a material register of the modifications it undergoes. Neither human infants nor our primate ancestors are privy to the verticality of the bodily horizon, which, at least for the former, is a task to be accomplished (learning to sit, crawl, and finally walk) through a series of dialectical self-negations of the body and its physical positions. Assuming that the child masters this task, what comes about is a dual horizon: the horizontal horizon of the world and the vertical horizon of the body, the one ensconced in the other. Human embodiment is the interplay between these two horizons.

Recently, American philosopher Anthony Steinbock has noted what we might call “the horizontal prejudice of phenomenology”. The prejudice is by no means unique in the history of philosophy. As Steinbock writes, “In philosophical literature the concept of verticality has been largely ignored or suppressed” (Steinbock 2007: 13). The accusation is more grave than it sounds: the suppression of the vertical would be nothing less than the suppression of the body’s default position vis-à-vis its lived space, with the exception of the developmental stages I have briefly outlined or time spent sleeping. A purely horizontal phenomenological experience lapses into one-dimensionality and runs the risk of becoming flat. Worse still, it exhausts its capacity to articulate the experience of the body and of the world, of a living body *in* the world.

That said, Steinbock's proposed solution to the massive blind spot is bizarre, to say the least. Associating verticality with the idea of transcendence, he defines it as "the vector of mystery and reverence" (ibid.). Indeed, "vertical experience" may be ultimately ungraspable because it is not given in the same manner as the controllable objects populating the world. However, neither is the horizon ever given as such, which means that it, too, can become a vector of mystery. More than that, "vertical experience" at its most concrete is that of a standing, walking, or running body, unto which "up" and "down," "left" and "right" are first grafted. If we are to be faithful to the phenomenological method, we ought to look for verticality without diluting it in the ideality of transcendence, that is to say, without abandoning Husserl's injunction "Back to the things themselves."

What are the phenomena that epitomize the vertical? On the margins of literature and philosophy responses vary. Paul Claudel ascribes this feature to plants and humans. "In nature," he concludes, "the plant alone [...] is vertical, along with man." (Claudel 2000: 148; transl. M.M.) The verticality of the human was already significant in the eyes of ancient Greek philosophers, who not only equated moral and physical uprightness but also, as in the case of Plato, mapped the faculties of the soul—the appetitive, the emotive, and the rational—onto an ascending line culminating in the head, a part of the body that was closest to the *topos ouranios* of Ideas. Gaston Bachelard, in turn, prefers to treat the house as the prototype of verticality: "The house is imagined as a vertical being. It rises upwards. It differentiates itself in terms of its verticality." (Bachelard 1994: 17)

Needless to say, the vertical configurations of a house, a plant, and a human are quite distinct. A house is a statically vertical being, inserted into a given place within the natural landscape or a cityscape, which it, at the same time, molds. A human is a mobile vector of verticality, persistently negating the place occupied at the moment on the way to another transient place. A plant is a dynamic vertical ensemble of growths, embedded in a particular locale and expanding outwards from it in such a way that its lived interpretation of environmental conditions constructs a sense of place from its own phytophenomenological perspective (cf. Marder 2015).

---

What is above and what lies below different vertical beings vary in keeping with their respective emplacements. A house articulates the foundations and the roof as what secures it on the earth and establishes the limit between the domestic sphere and the open sky. A human treats the earth as a substratum on which life exists and which is breached to procure the “natural resources” it contains, while transforming the sky into space, the realm of satellite communications, global surveillance, and star wars. A plant uses its sense of gravitropism to distinguish “up” from “down”, germinating in both directions at once, seeking sunlight in the former and rooting itself in the latter.

Whether it is a plant or a house, the epitomes of verticality are suited to our own scale, to the verticality of the upright human body, and are hence domesticated, like anything that appears against the horizontal horizon of our lifeworld. Horizons of verticality habitually revert back to finite existence, dovetail with our spatio-temporal orientation, and confirm the anthropocentric bias of using ourselves as the yardstick for everything other than human. In turn, the verticality of mystery that shifts the entire problematic into the domain of transcendence overreacts to the ethos of daily immanence and loses track of its existential horizons. Sorely missing are the mediations between the two levels of the vertical. Between the highest heights of divinity and the folds of everyday life, the overwhelming (albeit still immanent) verticality of high mountains is an optimal vantage point for the phenomenological exploration of this vector of existence.

**232**

## II.

If I turn to the mountains as mediations between the immanent and the transcendent notions of verticality, that is because their scale is no longer domesticated on the horizons of human embodiment and, therefore, surpasses the anthropocentric bias operative with respect to the rest of our surroundings. To state my thesis succinctly, *mountains are the places where the vertical is converted into the vertiginous*—where the horizon of the world disappears even as that of the body is suspended in solitary, virtually worldless, indecision. That is, perhaps, the reason for the sublimity of the mountains: in addition to turning our heads up to face their peaks, we feel

that the distant targets of our regard make our heads turn. Far from something merely intended by our intentionality, they command the intending gaze and shower the subject who contemplates them with unintended effects. After all, the etymologies of the vertical and the vertiginous merge in the Latin verb *vertere*, to turn, which is also the source of the nouns *vertex*—the highest point, the turning point, an angular point where two sides meet—and *vortex*—an abyssal whirlpool or whirlwind that, in a spiral, sucks everything into itself. Verticality is not the site of transcendence but the intersection of the highest and the lowest, the earth and water or wind (air), the summit and the abyss, actively turning toward and passively being turned or spun around, almost losing one's head, the peak of the body's own vertical horizon, etc. In the mountains, these extremes enter into an infinite commerce with one another, which is something impossible against the flat neutrality of the world's horizon.

Unlike ordinary objects of intentionality, the mountains strike back at the subject and impose their verticality as the only horizon for experience and as the limit to our sense-making activities. In other words, they supersede the very horizontality of the horizon, along with a measured or gradual disclosure of phenomena, and so throw us back onto the vertical horizon of the body extracted from the horizontal horizon of the world. The clearest instance of this strange phenomenology *avant la lettre* is Jean-Jacques Rousseau's description of the mountains in *Julie, or the New Heloise*. In the twenty-third missive to his beloved, the protagonist Saint-Preux observes that "the perspective of the mountains being vertical strikes the eye all at once [*frappe les yeux tout à la fois*] and much more powerfully than that of the plains, which can be seen only obliquely, receding into the distance, and in which every object conceals another from view." (Rousseau 1997: 63) Traditional phenomenology—which, as we now realize, is that of the plains—contends that objects appear obliquely against the horizon and are given through adumbrations, *Abschattungen*, or distinct spatial profiles, each of which conceals some of the other sides or dimensions. Rousseau's "phenomenology," on the other hand, emphasizes the simultaneity of vertical givenness. His mountains are the landscape (and the theater) of truth, mixed with power, directness, and simultaneity. This is the source of his belief

---

that the people living there are more honest, more morally upright, more straightforward, and finally more truthful, just like the mountains themselves. We might thus say, by implication, that the mountains also reveal the truth of human embodiment, given all at once outside the horizon of the world. Vertigo ensues as an aftereffect of being struck by this revelation.

The shift in perspective Rousseau describes is much more than a theoretical, specular, or spectacular turn, for it induces a strong psychological effect. The hero of *Julie* undergoes something like a *conversion* (literally, a turning of the soul) under the influence of altitude and mountain air. Few notice that “in the mountains where the air is pure and subtle, one breathes more freely, one feels lighter in the body, more serene of mind; pleasures there are less intense, passions more moderate. Meditations there take on an indescribably grand and sublime character, in proportion with the objects that strike us...” (ibid.: 64) Once again the mountains “strike us,” inverting the movement of intentionality. Except that this time, it is not the eye but the soul itself that is struck, turning away from violent passions to sublime meditations. Rarified air, a lighter body, free breathing—all these are the signs of a spiritualized corporeality and a materiality that remains irreducible, even in its most subtle or sublime variation. The verticality of the mountains carries the subjects in its grip from the sensuous to the transcendent, without letting them flee the sphere of immanence. It recalls them to the vertical horizon of the body nearly deprived of the world’s horizontal horizon.

**234**

It would not be surprising that, having been struck by the mountains, body and soul, we would feel the vertigo inherent in the experience of verticality. This is precisely what happens in *The Confessions*, where Rousseau affirms his ideal of a “beautiful country”—“No flat country, however beautiful, has ever seemed so to my eyes”—and reports on his journey in the mountainous region near a Southern French city of Chambèri: “Along the side of the road is a parapet to prevent accidents, which enabled me to look down and be as giddy as I pleased; for the amusing thing about my taste for steep places is, that I am very fond of the feeling of giddiness which they give rise to, provided I am in a safe position.” (Rousseau 1996: 167) Craving a controlled loss of control, Rousseau has recourse to the verticality of the mountain so as to open himself to a sense of vertigo, feeling his body feel all by itself, thrown back onto itself,

almost outside the world, at the world's edge, at the rim of an abyss, no longer in the context of a familiar horizontal horizon. His strategy corresponds to Kant's later formulation of the dynamic sublime, which is terrifying, yet which may elicit feelings of joy if moderated by one's safe distance from the spectacle. The list of opposites united in the mountains would be thus incomplete without the beautiful and the sublime.

Still, the loss of control, culminating in the vertiginous turning of the subject's head exposed to the experience of verticality, cannot be easily mitigated. When the mountain presents before you a scene that "ravishes the spirit and the senses," "you forget everything, even yourself, and do not even know where you are." (Rousseau 1997: 65) Rousseau, of course, sought such self-forgetting in his reveries, in the course of which, on flatter surfaces, he passionately desired to lose himself "like an insect among the grasses of the meadows." (Rousseau 2000: 174) But, in the mountains, oblivion to one's insignificant self grows out of the vertigo of verticality, which, likewise, expands and redefines the horizontality of the horizon as uncontainable: "the horizon presents more objects to the eye than it is able to contain" (Rousseau 1997: 65). It is as though a new embodiment can be sought there, a possible reconstitution of oneself and of the world on the basis of the limit experience of vertiginous verticality. Deprived of the world's horizontal horizon, the subject is reduced to the vertical horizon of the body. Vertigo results from the loss of old ground, when the new one has not yet been discovered. Then, the horizontal horizon of the world is viewed afresh, not only because it appears wider when seen from the summit but also because its mundane horizontality presents itself as inexhaustibly rich, in excess of the capacity wielded by the transformed sight.

I would be remiss if I were to ignore the majestic verticality of certain plants, in particular certain trees, capable of inducing the same effect in human subjects as high mountains. The sequoia is probably a privileged example here, as anyone who has ever been to California's Sequoia National Park can attest. Try as we might, these imposing plants cannot be domesticated or mapped onto a human scale. In the immanence of their existence, they point toward transcendence, suggested in their comparison with places of religious worship, as in "Cathedral Grove" growing on Vancouver Island in British Columbia, Canada. Being among sequoias is a vertiginous experience of verticality,

---

which, unlike that of a mountain (conceived not as an assembly of organic and inorganic entities but merely as a geological structure), confronts us with its own embodiment, standing over and against the human. Rather than deprived of our horizontal horizon next to them, we sense the incomplete overlap, indeed a veritable encounter, of two worlds, two redoubled—vertical and horizontal—horizons: ours and those of the plants themselves. This encounter suffices to knock the ground from underneath our feet, that is to say, to effectuate a loss of ground which, though not absolute, is nonetheless far-reaching, insofar as it cuts through the illusion that *our* footing is the first and the last, the principle and the culmination of all that is. But without the horizontal grounding referent, verticality itself ceases to make sense; hence, once again, the vertigo we already experienced in the mountains.

### III.

236

To the mountains we flee from the world and from our selves, rid of the vertical dimension of existence and nearly dissolved into the indifferent horizontality of our environment. In effect, Jean-Paul Sartre seems to echo Rousseau in *Being and Nothingness*, exemplifying the subject's evasion from its own being with reference to a climber's gaze directed to the peak of the mountain. Imagine, Sartre suggests, that I am "the one who has still an hour to climb before being at the top of the mountain." At this precise moment, "when I look at the mountain top [...], we are dealing with an escape from myself accompanied by a reflux which I effect in terms of the summit of the mountain toward my being-there in order to situate myself." (Sartre 2001: 468) What this means is that, turning my head and my gaze up to the peak, I temporarily forget my spatio-temporal position "one-hour-from-the-top" and project myself to the desired destination of my climb. I momentarily become free by negating the "here" of my place and the "now" of my time (ibid.). Thus far, the relation of my present self to my future self, who is going to complete the climb in an hour, is identical to that Martin Heidegger described in *Being and Time*. But does anything change qualitatively when my projection, along with the flight from myself that it entails, are vertical? Is not the freedom of the Sartrean mountain climber vertiginous because it redoubles what he terms the



“original transcendence” of the subject in time with the vertical transcendence within the immanence of space? If phenomenology procures its method from the matters themselves (*die Sache selbst*), then it cannot simply transpose a generic structure of experience onto the experience of being in the mountains.

Let us pause for a moment and focus on two still frames: Rousseau peering down from a mountainous road and Sartre’s climber looking at the summit. In both cases, the physical act of raising or lowering one’s head and gazing up or down acquires a transcendent sense, in light of the withdrawal of the world’s horizontal horizon. Without actually tumbling down, one falls under the sway of the vertical: to the upright position of one’s body is superadded the elevation of the mountain, which, simultaneously, mirrors and dwarfs the standing subject. Futile are the considerations of embodiment outside its environmental frame, which, besides negatively delimiting, determines its outlines. *Embodiment is inextricably tied to emplacement*, and a radical change of place, let alone being in front of a geological structure that might not be a habitable place at all, induces a similarly sharp about-face in our embodiment. The point, however, is that “the environment” is not a homogeneous category and that its physical texture itself is vital as a horizon of embodiment, be it the horizontal horizon of a world conceived essentially as a plain or the majestic verticality of the mountain overwhelming the vertical horizon of the body.

In religious experience, there is yet another kind of verticality, which is non-spatial and purely transcendent—higher than the highest point in physical space. The mountains often function as a conduit between two verticalities, the material and the ideal. Just think of the opening verses in Psalm 121, “A Song of Ascents”: “I lift my eyes up to the mountains; / Where will my help come from?” There, in a gradation of ascents, the mountains are a transitory station between a hopeful human gaze, which travels up, and divine salvation, which would have come down upon the world. They are at the intersection of the ordinary and the extraordinary, of the present and the future, and of physical and spiritual elevations. It is the transformation of the first element in each pair into the second that causes vertigo; the conversion of immanence into transcendence, within the realm of immanence itself, makes our heads turn. Even for the phenomenology of religious experience, therefore, the mountain is neither a stage prop nor a piece of scenery; it is the verticality and the vertigo

---

of a transition from one regime of visibility to another, from the obscure human vision St. Paul characterizes as “enigmatic” to divine sight, *theoria*. Could we, perchance, say that the verticality of religious experience, mediated by the mountains, is, in the first instance, that of time as opposed to space? In other words, is not spatial elevation but a figuration (or a prefiguration) of temporal difference, the unevenness of time beyond any *horizon* of expectation?

The mundane horizons of human embodiment, too, cannot be purely spatial because the body is a constantly metamorphosing process, never embodied once and for all. These temporal horizons, still operative for Sartre’s climber, follow the logic of Husserlian time-consciousness, where the past is the already bygone present and the future is a present still underway. Temporal verticality, on the other hand, is a stand-alone instant exempt from the mutations of the present and irrupting on its horizon with an unexpected and inexplicable force. Such instants are analogous to mountain peaks peppering the continuum of time and disrupting its horizontality, be it in the shape of Friedrich Nietzsche’s monumental history, or in Emmanuel Levinas’s absolutely immemorial past, or Jacques Derrida’s messianic future “to come.” Faced with a temporal peak (or a chasm), we are subject to the same vertigo as when we glance at a spatial summit (or an abyss). The present present no longer seamlessly extends back to past present and forward to future present; in fact, its timeless horizon melts away when it is converted into a site for the vertical irruption of the event. With no safety nets on the temporal horizon, the subject is thrown back onto itself, just as we saw it happen in the mountains. In the throw, the sense of “before” and “after” is unsettled as thoroughly as the spatial difference between “up” and “down”. *Incipit vertigo!*

**238**

On the basis of concrete experiences of verticality, with their corresponding vertigos, it is possible to venture a generalization of what both exceeds and precedes the horizontality of the phenomenological horizon. The places where the questioning of the horizontal takes place matter. Although the mountains are hardly the symbols of the lifeworld, they are the *preferred milieus for the intersections of different verticalities*—the mediating surfaces between the human and the divine, the physical and the spiritual, immanence and transcendence. If, finding ourselves there, we feel our heads spin, that is a sure sign that the passage from one dimension to the other is well on its way. Be this

as it may, the spatial and temporal disruptions of horizontality in the mountains are the harbingers of a fleeting truth, which, phenomenologically speaking, reduces the subject to its body outside the bounds of a familiar world. As such, they effect a practical deconstruction of the everyday experience's horizons and of the very idea of the horizon constitutive of our experience.

### **Bibliography**

Bachelard, Gaston (1994): *The Poetics of Space*, transl. by Maria Jolas, Boston: Beacon.

Claudel, Paul (2000): *La Connaissance de l'Est*, Paris: Gallimard.

Husserl, Edmund (1950a): *Cartesianische Meditationen und Pariser Vorträge*, S. Strasser (ed.), The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.

Husserl, Edmund (1950b): *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie. Erstes Buch: Allgemeine Einführung in die reine Phänomenologie*, W. Biemel (ed.), The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.

Marder, Michael (2012): "On the Mountains, or the Aristocracies of Space" *Environment, Space, Place* 4 (2), 63–74.

Marder, Michael (2015): "The Place of Plants: Spatiality, Movement, Growth" *Performance Philosophy* 1, 185–194.

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques (1996): *The Confessions*, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Classics.

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques (1997): *Julie, or the New Heloise: Letters of Two Lovers Who Live in a Small Town at the Foot of the Alps*, transl. by Philip Stewart and Jean Vaché. The Collected Writings of Rousseau, Vol. 6. Hanover, London: Dartmouth College Press.

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques (2000): *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker, Botanical Writings, and Letter to Franquières*. The Collected Writings of Rousseau, Vol. 6. Hanover, London: Dartmouth College Press.

Sartre, Jean-Paul (2001): *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*, transl. by Hazel E. Barnes, New York: Citadel Press.

Steinbock, Anthony (2007): *Phenomenology and Mysticism: The Verticality of Religious Experience*, Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.