

# The Manifold Senses of Presence: Interdisciplinary Perspectives

## Introduction

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Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic the term “presence” has gained a prominent place in our daily vocabulary. Yet, despite its widespread use, the philosophical question of what constitutes our experience of presence remains open. Phenomenology offers a valuable framework for understanding how human experiences come into being. According to Edmund Husserl, the presence of the world is not a given fact, but rather involves the active participation of our consciousness (Husserl 2009, 61). Understanding how our consciousness relates to our sense of presence requires an examination of various key aspects of phenomenology, such as perception, subjectivity, temporality, and corporeality.

The present can be distinguished from the past and the future. It is therefore a temporal phenomenon, which we can also call the “experienced now”. However, the present moment, or the “now,” is difficult to grasp; even when we say the word “now,” the actual moment has already passed. Despite the fleeting nature of momentary sensations, we experience a stable reality. Husserl’s analysis of time shows that we can only experience a stable reality because our consciousness forms an intentional totality out of the multitude of fleeting now-moments (Husserl 1996). The presence of even the most daily things is not a given fact, but an achievement of intentional consciousness (Husserl 2009, 187). Intentionality, therefore, becomes the key concept for understanding presence.

However, presence has not only a temporal dimension. Understanding presence as “being there” emphasizes the bodily experience of presence. Merleau-Ponty has highlighted the importance of corporeality (*Leiblichkeit*) for phenomenology (Fuchs 2000, 63). For him, the body is not simply a physical object with assigned properties like size, shape, and weight, but rather a sensitive and perceiving medium through which we experience the world (Merleau-Ponty 1966, 275f). The body therefore plays an integral role in the constitution of reality (Waldenfels 1968, 351). This embodied view on experiences is gaining importance in current phenomenological research (Fingerhut & Hufendiek & Wild 2013; Fuchs 2020).

Moreover, an examination of the experience of presence cannot overlook its perhaps most significant dimension: the presence of the other. While tables and chairs are given to us as objects, we perceive other people not merely in their physicality, but as subjects. The subjectivity of others is less graspable - their intentions, feelings, and motives are not given to us in the same way that we see colours or hear sounds – which adds more complexity to the concept of presence. Linguistically this intersubjective understanding of presence is especially usual in German, where the term implies the bodily presence of others. For instance, virtual meetings are often contrasted with meetings “*in Präsenz*” (in-person). The presence of the other is thus closely linked to their corporeality.

Summing up, it can be said that the concept of presence – in the sense of something (or someone) being given to consciousness – binds together numerous fundamental questions in

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phenomenology. The current special issue focuses on presence in an emphatic sense. As it is shown repeatedly in the contributions to this issue, presence is not an on-or-off-phenomenon but underlies changes in quality and intensity across time and situations. We choose not to define presence beforehand in this editorial, however, reviewing the working definitions offered by our authors, it becomes clear that this concept not only refers to the mere fact of experience itself, but also to the immediacy, constancy, concreteness, availability, intensity, or authenticity of certain experiences.

In this issue, we present a variety of perspectives on presence in this sense, spanning from philosophy over cognitive science to literature studies. Most articles do not directly address the question, how presence – in the sense of certain experiences having a unique quality or intensity – is constituted. Rather, what binds all contributions to this issue together is the interest in phenomena where the experience of presence is altered or shows itself in an unexpected light. Bringing together various contributions that analyze these alterations and particularities of presence, can serve as a necessary first step towards defining this concept, although in this context a final definition cannot be offered.

Psychopathological analyses are of particular interest in this context, insofar as they offer systematic and well documented variations of “common” experience (Carel 2021). In this issue, Jannis Puhmann (“Nicht ganz da”, 7-17), Monika Knack („Trapped in the mirror maze“, 18-27), and Niklas Noe-Steinmüller (“Pain-related suffering as precarious presence”, 28-35) offer descriptions of altered experiences of presence that stand in the tradition of phenomenological psychopathology. Jannis Puhmann describes Depression and Mania as changes in the experience of presence, which he understands as “the pre-reflective and undirected background feeling that a world exists and one is part of it” (Puhmann, this issue, xx, our translation). His analysis illustrates that mania can be understood as an exaggerated feeling of connectedness to the world, while depression involves feelings of separation and isolation. Beyond offering a mere description of these phenomena, Puhmann shows which transcendental structures underlie the described changes of experience in depression and mania and thereby offers a phenomenological explanation (Fuchs 2022) for them.

In her article “Trapped in a mirror maze”, Monika Knack provides a phenomenological analysis of hallucinations experienced during a psychosis. Her main inquiry centers around the question of how patients with schizophrenia experience the presence of hallucinations. Drawing on interviews with patients, Knack highlights that hallucinations are not typically perceived as sensory impressions. Instead, patients often describe a vague sense of presence without any corresponding visual or auditory stimuli. To understand this phenomenon, she draws upon Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of hallucinations as embodied experiences. Through this approach Knack demonstrated how the embodiment theory can be used to analyze the notion of presence.

In his analysis of pain-related suffering, Niklas Noe-Steinmüller brings a phenomenon into view that has been neglected by phenomenological psychopathology in the past. Building on Husserl, he understands pain as an involuntary “sensing” (Husserl 1952, 146), that is forced upon the subject and that – in chronic pain conditions – changes the entire lifeworld of the affected individual. This change is described with the term precarious presence: The continuous loss of control and the breakdown of the intentional structure of experience that comes along with chronic pain makes presence in an emphatic sense unachievable for the patients. Their experiences feel unhomelike and as if they can never be taken for granted.

While these psychopathological analyses mainly describe a lack of presence, several contributions to this issue focus on situations where presence is experience that favor the experience of presence. Hiroko Taguchi (“Therapeutic presence”, 36-46) describes the therapeutic encounter as a context where presence can even be used intentionally. She specifically understands presence as a form of empathy that requires authenticity and awareness, and that can lead to “now moments” in psychotherapy, i.e., windows of opportunity for therapeutic change. Drawing on

different intellectual and therapeutic traditions, she offers a case vignette to illustrate this form of intersubjective presence.

Bruno Glöckner (“Präsenz und Existenz”, 47-61) draws on an analysis of two fictional texts to ask how experiencing the finiteness of one’s own existence can sharpen the individual’s sense for the experience of presence. Using Jaspers concept of “limit situations”, he describes how experiencing the possibility of death can lead to a specific kind of immediacy of experience. This article illustrates nicely, how the phenomenon of presence is of interest to different disciplines and how the same structures of experience can be detected by a variety of methods.

Finally, Angela Zhao (“Loneliness as an experience of emptiness”, 62-69) and Oblak et al. (“The (trans)modality of presence”, xx-yy) while focusing on different phenomena and using different methods, both illustrate that there is a peculiar dialectic between presence and absence. Oblak et al. define presence as a specific kind of relationship between a subject and (aspects of) its environment. They argue that this relationship does not depend on the “modality” of a concrete experience, i.e., they suggest that if something is present to consciousness in an emphatic sense does not depend on its representation by different sense modalities. For instance, they argue that while one may visually distinguish to objects as being distinct entities, they may still be present to consciousness in a unified manner that depends on the lived body and lived space that is organized around it.

Angela Zhao argues in her article “Loneliness as an experience of emptiness” that the often proposed phenomenological description of loneliness as “absence” is inadequate. Instead, she suggests that loneliness should be understood as the “presence” of emptiness. According to Zhao, the concept of loneliness as absence does not capture the actual experience of feeling lonely. Zhao therefore explores the embodied experience of loneliness as the presence of emptiness. For instance, she describes the feeling that a loved one who passed away is somehow still present. Zhao finally also mentions other forms of loneliness, including loneliness in empty environments like deserts.

To sum up, this journal aims to demonstrate that presence is not a static form of experience. It can vary considerably in intensity, from extraordinary experiences of presence after confronting one’s own mortality to a diminished experience of presence in depression. Psychopathological perspectives on presence highlight this variability of the experience of presence. Because of its variability and context-dependence, the concept of “presence” remains difficult to define. Indeed, like the passing “now”, it often eludes reflection.

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