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# **Dangerous Play with the Elements - Towards a Phenomenology of Risk Sports**

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of the article is to present a phenomenological description of how athletes in specific risk sports explore human interaction with natural elements. Skydivers play with, and surf on, the encountering air while falling towards the ground. The kayakers play on the waves and with the stoppers and currents in the rivers. The climbers are ballerinas of the vertical, using cracks and holds in the cliffs to pull upwards against gravity forces. The theoretical background for the description is found in the phenomenology of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. The phenomenology of Husserl focused on the theoretical intentionality of the transcendental ego. With Heidegger the human being's concrete and practical interaction with the enviroing world moved to the foreground. Heidegger's analyses of 'equipmentality' throw important light also on the equipmentality in sports and how we deal with tools and equipment in sports. However in Heidegger's analyses the body resides in the background both as subject and object. The importance of the active body-subject is well documented in the work of Merleau-Ponty, and also Todes. The human being is a bodily 'being-in-the-world' and the body is the active medium through which the world is grasped. The body is however also situated and aligned with the fundamental dimensions of the world, with the vertical gravity and the horizontal action space. In the article I show in a concrete way how we in some sports use fundamental characteristics of the enviroing world in a mode of playfulness. In these sports human beings play in an extreme way with fundamental elements of nature. The

article thus puts phenomenology to a test. It should be able to move from general characteristics to specific features of our bodily human involvement with the environing world.

## **Introduction**

How can phenomenology contribute to a better general understanding of ‘moving bodies’, as experienced in sport and other settings? Can phenomenological description give us a better and more precise understanding of specific types of human interaction with the environment in sports? In this article I will test out whether a phenomenological approach can help us to get a better grasp on the specific issue of the athletes’ interaction with natural elements in three specific risk sports; climbing, skydiving and white water kayaking.

During the last 10 years we have witnessed an increase both in number and, I think, quality of phenomenological studies of sport. These studies have focussed on two or three main areas of investigation. Firstly, the general study of human movement and the specific study of expert performance in sport have been approached with phenomenological tools. The tradition from Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and the Dreyfus brothers has been used to attack the information-processing model used by cognitivism (Moe 2005), and instead a phenomenological approach to human movement and expertise has been developed (Moe 2007; Breivik 2008; Eriksen 2010). The Dreyfusian approaches have also been criticized and nuanced by several authors (Breivik 2007; Hopsicker 2009; Eriksen 2010). Secondly, phenomenology has been used to address

some of the ontological and metaphysical aspects of sports. This has been especially typical in Eastern European studies (Jirásek 2007), but also in studies of specific natural elements and sports, like water sports (Anderson 2007). Thirdly, phenomenology has been useful in studies of new sports like snowboarding (Loland 2007), and even more risk sports where the extreme situation of facing danger and possible death makes deep existential structures visible in a peculiar and salient way (Jirásek 2007; Breivik 2010).

It is the risk sport perspective that will be further pursued in this article<sup>i</sup>. The main focus will be on the relation between the risk sport performer and the environing world. This necessitates a discussion of what kind of phenomenological approach is appropriate in such a study. The methodology must be able to give a proper understanding of some of the general features of the moving human being and the relation between humans and world. This then leads to an investigation of the bodily moving athlete in risk sports, and how the athlete is attached to, and is playing in, on and with, the environing world. I will focus on three natural elements and see how they enter ‘the world’ of the performers in three different sports. Climbers are attached to and play with hard rock. White water kayakers are immersed in and play with running white water. Sky divers fall through and play with air in an empty space. I have selected some main aspects of the risk athletes’ ‘being-in-the-world’ that will be described in some detail; the goals, skills, equipment, body posture, temporality, spatiality/environment, decision-making, and ultimate fear.

### **Phenomenology - a Heideggerian approach**

Phenomenology comes in many versions. Phenomenological methods used in social scientific research covers a wide variety of approaches. In many cases a 'phenomenological method' or 'phenomenological approach' means an approach that focuses on individuals' or groups' 'experiences', and the 'meaning', or 'meaningfulness', of such experiences (Thomas and Nelson 1990: 240-245) ). This is far away from Husserl's idea of a pure description of eidetic structures. It is even farther away from his later ideal of a transcendental ego relating to an essence, or *eidōs*.(Moran 2000). Everything is then going on in a closed sphere where the pure ego relates to the *noema*, the pure eidetic content or gestalt, through a process, *noesis*. Without going into a discussion of Husserl, let me just state briefly that Husserl's phenomenological approach, especially his transcendentalism, and consequently idealism, is not well suited to get a grip on sport. I maintain this in spite of Vannatta's (2008) use of Husserl, and the idea of 'passive synthesis', to understand intuitive and 'unconscious' play in sport. I think Heidegger is a better choice. Heidegger wanted in his early philosophy to study the basic processes and structures of human existence as these unfolded in daily life. Sport belongs here; the sport world is part of daily life, as Heidegger himself showed, skiing from his hut in Todtnauberg to lectures at the University of Freiburg (Moran 2000).

Heidegger's idea of phenomenology was thus to describe the basic structures of Dasein, the basic modes of existence (Heidegger 1962). He wanted to uncover the *existentials*, the invariances of human existence. He found three or four basic structures; *understanding, state-of-mind, falling and discourse*. The human being always understands him/herself in a certain way, being in a certain state of mind, with a tendency to lose oneself in the world and communicating with oneself and others in a certain way.

These modes of being have authentic and non-authentic forms. Confronting one's own death, in anxiety and resoluteness, is a way of becoming whole and authentic. The Dasein's life is unfolded in three temporal dimensions. In our *understanding* we are always ahead of ourselves, projecting our existence towards new possibilities (*future*), but also being in a certain *state of mind*, determined and influenced by our background and life history (*past*), and all the time in *discourse* with, and *falling* into, situations and persons (*present*). The three temporal dimensions are thus staging and unfolding the basic invariant structures of Dasein in a certain way.

### **Phenomenology as methodology; some clarifications**

A phenomenological study of risk sports must take its point of departure from Dasein and its basic structures. It must show how, for example, a climber plans a new route, projects the next moves, is in a certain state of mind, communicates with other climbers and interacts with the mountain. However, phenomenology should also be able to delineate finer discriminations; structures that are dependent on, and are made possible by, the basic structures. Heidegger showed in *Being and Time* how certain situations and certain phenomena are unique and must be understood in their difference to ordinary situations. Not only average daily life, but also extraordinary situations, like boredom, love, fear and anxiety, must be studied. My goal is therefore not only to put all risk sports in one basket and show the invariant structures that characterize Dasein under risk. I will also look at differences between certain risk sports. But let me start with some common features of the active Dasein being involved in a risk sport.

Heidegger's idea of phenomenology was that the phenomena a) should show themselves, b) from themselves, and c) how they are in themselves. 'Thus the term 'phenomenology' expresses a maxim which can be formulated as 'To the things themselves!' It is opposed to all free-floating constructions and accidental findings;' (Heidegger 1962, 50). Heidegger is not much concerned with the subject, the person, that the appearing or showing happens to. In order to unveil the deeper structures of daily human life it suffices to be a normal human being and investigate what is common to all of us. One strips away the peculiarities, tries to find the commonalities (what is common to all of us), and digs for the deeper structures, invariances, and essences, that characterize human existence.

This is close to what Thomas Nagel (1986) characterizes as the phenomenological approach. He holds that there are two main perspectives on the world, the subjective view and objective view. Whereas the subjective is characterized by the peculiarities and idiosyncrasies of an individual person, the objective view is the view of natural science, which is a 'view from nowhere'. But between the subjective and objective view there is a third perspective, which is obtained if one strips away the peculiarities of the individual and his/her perspective, and gradually extends the person's situation and view to include others and take a many-person view. Nagel's view permits a flexible extension from the single person to the group of people one wants to include, and finally to all humans.

One interesting question concerns the epistemological status of the phenomenological investigator. Is it mandatory that in order to study risk sports one has to be a performer oneself? And in how many risk sports? Can lessons be learned, and

experiences be obtained, in one risk sport and then be applied to other risk sports? Or should one only speak about the sports of which one has had personal experience? Many aspects of risk sports can be studied without being a performer oneself. But if one wants to say something about what Nagel called ‘the feeling of’ aspect, the *phenomenal*, one needs to be actively involved in the specific sport in question. One should, maybe in addition, not only be a beginner, but have reached a level at which one has an experience of the full-blown version of the sport. For most purposes the level of mastery is sufficient, but some features of a sport are only revealed to the experts. My own experience in the three risk sports I study in this article is on the mastery level, in white water kayaking above, in skydiving a little below, and in climbing at average mastery level. Maybe this is relevant only in theory, since I do not go deep into special experiences. But I think the principle is important. Phenomenological studies should be based on mastery of the subject area, as well as a clear delineation and reflection on what phenomenology means.

### **Theoretical groundwork - the risky bodily being-in-the-world**

Let me build the analysis from the ground up. I have already shown (Breivik 2007) how Heidegger is relevant and important for sport. Firstly, the athlete is a *being-in-the-world*, which means that the activity of the performer must be studied in an environmental context. Furthermore our primary involvement with the world is not theoretical understanding; we are not isolated from the world, but enmeshed and interwoven with it. Athletes are practically interacting with each other and the environing

world through play and competition (Taylor 1995)<sup>ii</sup>. In risk sports, people are interacting in a strong way with the environment, more specifically with certain natural elements. Climbers are playing with, and on, rock. Sky divers are playing in empty space, with air, and on air pressure. White water kayakers are immersed in running water, in rivers, and are playing with currents, waterfalls, waves, and so on. It is this practical and direct interaction with the different ‘worlds’, characterized by different natural elements, that are the contexts.

Secondly, the basic activity of Dasein is practical involvement and circumspection of the environing world by the use of equipment. Humans are dealing with, and using, human artifacts and natural elements as equipment to realize human goals. Pieces of equipment are ordered in structures of reference. The kayak is there in order to be able to float on water, the paddle is there in order to move the kayak, and the spray deck is there in order to keep the water out. The kayak, the spray deck, and the paddle are devices that make kayaking in white water possible. Similarly the parachute makes skydiving possible. Pieces of equipment are ready at hand *in-order-to* (um-zu) be used, and they refer to each other *for-the-sake* of the goal they help to realize. Pieces of equipment thus refer to each other; they have references and meanings inside a practical context. The climber uses special shoes, climbing harness, rope and belay devices, in order to make well-protected ascensions of vertical walls.

What is lacking in Heidegger’s analysis of our practical dealing with the world, in daily life as well as in sport, is the use of the body. The bodily aspect of our being-in-the-world is disappearing. The hand that holds the hammer or the upper body that propels the kayak forward by use of arms and paddle, is absent. The bodily subject, the active bodily

involvement with the world, is not properly taken care of. Merleau-Ponty's analysis of our bodily being-in-the-world extends and improves Heidegger's account on this point. For Merleau-Ponty the body is the active agent defined in relation to situations and tasks. The body defines a *here*, that in its turn is a laying down of the fundamental coordinates that anchor the active body in an object. By following the coordinates and anchoring itself in the surrounding objects, the active body faces and takes on its tasks. According to Merleau-Ponty the body not only *is* in space but it *inhabits* space. And this is best seen in movement and its specific forms of intentionality. In one way we feel as agents that move towards objects to deal with them, but at the same time the objects seem to invite us. Our bodies surge towards the objects we want to grasp as if called upon. It is thus not the agent that initiates movements and responses, but rather "the task to be performed elicits the necessary movements from him by a sort of remote attraction, as the phenomenal forces at work in my visual field elicit from me, without any calculation on my part, the motor reactions which establish the most effective balance between them"(Merleau-Ponty 2002:120). In sports, and especially in risk sports, such immediate and well-informed reactions to environmental cues and happenings are of the utmost importance.

Our actions in sport take place in an environment that is structured as a spatio-temporal field. Both Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty discussed this to some extent, but the studies of Todes (2001) went deeper into the matter. I will briefly mention some of his points. The spatio-temporal field has two dimensions, a horizontal and a vertical. The horizontal field is the field of experiences where we meet and confront persons and objects. The horizontal field is anchored in us and centered in us, which means that the

objects have positions relative to us. This is in contrast to the vertical field, which is not anchored and centered in us. Instead it is we who have to orient ourselves in relation to the field. We are located together with other persons and objects at the bottom of the vertical field, near the ground. The field is opened up between earth and heaven and is “a down-graded vertical field directed from heavens to the earth.” (Todes 2001:123). In a sense the vertical field is more important than the horizontal. It is only if we are well balanced that we are able to do well in the horizontal field. Todes calls this ‘poise’. Sports play *in and with* the horizontal and vertical fields in many different and interesting ways. Some sports are totally dominated by activity in the horizontal field. The vertical field only plays a role because of the gravitational forces and the necessity of keeping balance and poise. Running and curling are two quite different examples of movement in the horizontal field. Skydiving and climbing are activities that play in and with the vertical field. Many sports involve combinations. In football the horizontal dominates, but the vertical field also plays a role in jumping and heading, gravitational forces influence the curve of the ball, and so on.

It seems that most sports explore the horizontal more than the vertical, since there is more activity related to transporting oneself horizontally than vertically. The vertical is the constant gravitational factor in relation to which one has to adjust one’s bodily position and which will influence the curve of all moving objects.

### **The performers and their performance**

I need to say more about the general and specific aspects of the performers, the activity and the environment in risk sports. Let me start with the performer. Phenomenologically speaking the performer in risk sports is a being-in-the-world. Through the body the performer explores the environment in an intense way and under risk. The body is the medium through which the performer has a 'world', the world of the specific sport s/he is involved in. In the bodily operations the performer uses equipment as extensions of the bodily repertoire, and as protective means. The performer's operations take place in a world organized by horizontal and vertical dimensions, which make possible and limit the performer's actions.

In risk sports athletes *play*, and are played with. Gadamer (1965) has a notion of play that extends beyond human play to the natural environment.<sup>iii</sup> Nature plays. While human play is characterized by freedom, nature plays when it follows its inherent and regular, albeit surprising, processes, in a seemingly effortless way. Human interaction with nature is thus a two-way process. When we play we are also played with. This is experienced by the kayaker who is caught by a stopper and tipped around, or by the climber who is stuck on a big vertical wall in bad weather. Play can be shallow or deep. Following Clifford Geertz's study of the Balinese cockfight one could say that 'deep play' is the ecstatic form of play, where the play is taken to intense and transcendent heights. This is in accordance with the etymological roots of the word 'play'. It comes from the Indo-European word *plegan*, which meant to risk, chance; expose oneself to hazard (Ackerman 1990). Risk athletes are thus involved in dangerous play.

The activities in dangerous play are characterized by being risky. What does that mean? A risk sport can be defined as an activity where there is a serious possibility of

severe injury or death. Of course, if one is careless it is possible to die in stupid ways, even in low risk settings, especially if the athlete is careless and has a happy-go-lucky attitude. However, most risk sport athletes are not of this type. Quite the opposite; they tend to be control freaks, because they know they are entering an arena that is dangerous. In a flat field a happy-go-lucky person can do whatever s/he wants. On a vertical wall, a climber needs to be very careful and safety-oriented. In risk sports athletes explore risky arenas through safe actions. Not only attitude but certain characteristics of the activity itself are also important. One may climb a vertical wall by top-roping it, which reduces the risk to close to zero. One may climb the same route solo, without any protection, and the risk may be considerable. The solo climber needs to be much more cautious than the top-roper. The phenomenology of risk sport thus places the main aspect of risk in the specific interaction between person, activity and arena. It is the combination of a vertical wall and solo climbing that makes this type of activity a high risk sport. In addition, the attitude of the climber may increase the risk - for example, if s/he is careless.

Since risk means confrontation with danger, and the possibility of death, risk athletes are reminded of their own mortality during their sport activities, and of their own 'being-towards-death' (Heidegger 1962:179-182). Heidegger makes a distinction between anxiety and fear. Fear is a mood in which Dasein is afraid of something. Fear is directed in a specific direction, toward something specific that is experienced as fearsome. It could be a snake, a fire, or an approaching robber. And this fearsome something threatens Dasein in a specific manner. In anxiety, however, the world as such glides away from under one's feet. Anxiety is characterized by its indefinite character; it is nothing and nowhere. Anxiety does not come from a specific direction, or in a specific

manner. One does not know what one is afraid of, where the anxiety comes from, and what one is concerned about. Heidegger maintains that in anxiety, Dasein is afraid and concerned about itself and in face of itself. “That in the face of which one has anxiety is Being-in-the-world as such.” (Heidegger 1962:186).

For Heidegger, 'being-towards-death' makes it possible to get a grip on one's life as a whole. The confrontation with death can lead to fight or flight. If one meets the possibility of death with resoluteness, one is turned back on oneself and what life is about. This is called 'Eigentlichkeit' in German, and is translated as 'authenticity', which has connotations slightly different from the German word. Authentic living means taking responsibility for oneself and one's own life project, living a life that is honest to one's own deeper projects and goals. One could say that risk athletes have a common situation, facing death and anxiety, and through encounters with this situation they have a special possibility for more authentic living (Breivik 2010). However, the way in which they confront death, and the manner in which they experience fear and the fearsome, are different in different risk sports. I will later try to describe 'the ultimate fear' in climbing, skydiving, and white water kayaking.

We have staged the scene with the full-blown version of three different activities; climbing, skydiving and white water kayaking. The actors are skilled, not beginners, but not necessarily experts at the highest level. The climber should be able to operate on a vertical wall, 200 meters above the ground, on a difficult climb with small holds and narrow cracks.<sup>iv</sup> The white water kayaker should be able to operate the kayak in a river with strong currents, big waves, stoppers, drops and hindrances.<sup>v</sup> The sky diver should be

able to make somersaults, twist and turns, and control the body in acrobatic moves while falling.<sup>vi</sup>

### **The stage - ‘worlds’ of natural elements and landscapes**

Risk athletes perform their activities and play their roles on a stage consisting of natural elements and landscapes that are parts of the earth. They have “the opportunity to take part in sport activities under conditions that make it possible to engage with natural features more powerful than any conceivable human being.” (Krein 2007:91) In risk sports natural elements are drawn into the human ‘world’. The exploration of the environing world that takes place in risk sports thus means that landscapes and natural elements are drawn into specific ‘risk worlds’ because they have features that make possible the types of activities and actions that risk athletes perform. This goes two ways. The climber may look for a certain type of rock face for the climb that s/he has an interest and a capacity to attempt. But on the other hand a certain mountain wall may invite and afford a certain type of action, a specific way of climbing it. Adaptation thus goes both ways. Humans feed on natural landscapes. Natural elements and landscapes invite and elicit human actions.

Landscapes have certain general and specific characteristics. The Norwegian philosopher and climber Arne Næss thought that natural environments had a *gestalt*-like character (Næss 2008). Mountains or storms have *gestals* in the same way as a piece of music or a painting. This is immediate and common knowledge to risk athletes. For a climber the rock face has a certain character. A dark north wall, like the North Wall of

Eiger, may show an ugly and unwelcoming *gestalt* through rain, snow, frost, and avalanches. Mountains may also show a pleasant and welcoming *gestalt* in good weather, with inviting holds and ledges, chimneys and cracks. Similarly, air is penetrable and invisible, but may show a dark or light *gestalt*. Clouds, storms or fog are disabling and may disallow any skydive. But on sunny days, clear weather and good landing conditions, the empty space may invite exploratory skydiving. Rivers are dynamic processes, moving and penetrable, but may be forceful and dangerous. They may show their ugly side with huge waterfalls and stoppers, hidden rocks, submerged trees, and steep river banks that decline and reject approaches by kayakers. But rivers may also show a nice side, with inviting currents, waves, drops and backwaters.

Athletic being-in-a-risky-world means encountering different natural gestalts, with elements and landscapes that sometimes show their nice and inviting side but other times an ugly and unwelcoming side.

### **From being-in-the-world to being-in-different-worlds - differentiations**

Phenomenological descriptions can address different levels of the being-in-the-world. Heidegger operated in *Being and Time* at the most general level - the level of what is common to all human beings. All human beings are in a world, but there are specific worlds, like the 'world of work', the 'world of art', or 'the world of sport'. Inside the world of sport there is the world of risk sports. And inside the world of risk sports there are the worlds of climbing, skydiving and white water kayaking. These specific worlds

should also be phenomenologically explored and depicted. In the following I will try to give a sketch of what such a phenomenological description might look like, selecting a few elements that I will focus on. Since climbing covers a lot of specialties like high altitude climbing, rock and ice climbing, big wall climbing, bouldering, solo climbing, and so on, I shall concentrate on what many would consider a typical full-blown version of climbing; rock climbing on a varied 2-300 meter high vertical cliff. Similarly I have chosen typical forms of skydiving and white water kayaking in order to describe some important aspects of such sports.

## **Climbing**

I have already said that the nearest *telos* of a climber is to get upwards, to get beyond the next difficulties. The distant goal is often, but not always, to reach the top of a mountain. The climber needs several specific *skills*, the most fundamental of which is balance. Climbers are “ballerinas of the vertical”. To keep one’s balance, with the right *body posture*, is of utmost importance. Climbing means having close contact with a rock surface, and the strength of the finger grip and the precision of the footwork are decisive skills. The experience of climbing is a combination of tiptoeing on small ledges or protrusions and using a firm finger grip and the arms and lower body to haul the body upwards. Climbers may use a minimal amount of equipment. Special boots or shoes and magnesium (on the fingers) are the only types of *equipment* that are necessary for a solo climber. But difficult and exposed climbing necessitates in most cases means of protection such as karabiners, belays, ropes, and helmets. This means that, in its stripped-down version (solo or bouldering), climbing is an activity that needs little equipment or

gear; but as technical big wall climbing, or Himalayan expedition climbing, it can be quite equipment-intensive.

Sports have specific forms of *temporality*<sup>vii</sup> and spatiality. The temporal rhythm in climbing is a combination of intense bursts of action and then relaxation. The climber may climb intensely a few meters upwards and beyond a crux, or a difficult and long pitch up to a ledge. At the ledge there may be a belaying point and time to relax, to look at the surrounding landscape, at what is close by, the emptiness below, and the distant mountains and horizons. The pulse of climbing is thus a switch between on and off. However there is no high speed in climbing. The pace is slow, even if the activity is experienced as intense.

The *spatiality* of climbing is, like the temporality, a contrast between extremes. On the one hand there are the small details of a narrow- and near-sighted view of the minute details of the rock in front, as one searches for small cracks and holds for one's fingers and toes. On the other hand there is the vast landscape around; distant mountains, empty space below, the sky above, and the horizon. The world of rock-climbers is a combination of extreme nearsightedness and farsightedness. One of the most important skills of a climber lies between these extremes; the ability, when looking at a wall in the middle distance, to find the right route to the top. Reinhold Messner said in an interview: "If you have a lot of experience, you know this gully will go to the left or right of you. You'll see it instinctively from the rock, from the geology. And this I got when I was a child, without even thinking" (O'Connell 1993:23-24).

Based on temporality and spatiality each sport has a certain form of *decision-making*. Since the rock is immobile and constant (except for the weather and for when it

crumbles) the climber is in no hurry. S/he can plan and think about moves and step down again, in many cases, if the crux is too difficult. There is in many cases a possibility to change one's mind, find another way or go down by climb or rappel. Decision-making is often *reversible*.

We have earlier found that the possibility of death in risk sport invokes anxiety, but at the same time that risk sports have their specific form of *ultimate fear*. The fear in climbing is losing balance and falling. And not only falling, but seeing the belay being ripped off the rock face while one is falling and not stopping, ultimately hitting the rock or the ground and dying. The combination of fear and intense concentration may lead to strange experiences in which “the doors of perception will be opened wide. The climbers involved may experience a more lasting state of heightened awareness, and may even reach a truly visionary, if not mystical, state of being which transcends normal human comprehension.” (Scott 2005:441). Similarly Reinhold Messner says “...climbing is for me praying, because if I climb I am so concentrated that I become empty and open for new experiences.” (O’Connell 1993:32)

## **Skydiving**

In skydiving the proximate *telos* is to dive in a certain way, alone or as part of a formation of divers. The goal is often to make certain moves - turns, twists, and somersaults, while falling, and then to fly the parachute with a certain style and elegance, making spins and hook turns and then landing with ease on the ground. The *body posture* in skydiving is special, since one is not working against gravity forces. One is not acting against the gravity, not resisting it, but using it, working with it. Skydiving is thus an

exception to Todes' idea of verticality being the primary dimension. Balance and poise in the vertical are not important factors. While one is falling through the air one is in a 'different world' where the air pressure is the only resistance, and where this resistance makes it possible to turn and twist. Horizontality is the primary reference dimension.

*Skill* in skydiving consists of small motor movements; no force, just precision with hands, legs and feet. And one needs to have balance, not vertical balance but balance on air pressure. Many lay persons think that jumping out of the plane and hanging in the parachute are the two important parts of what is called "parachute jumping". But the modern full-blown version is properly called "skydiving" because free fall for 50 seconds is what matters and is most important to the sky divers. One needs little or no *equipment* to do the free fall part. It is preferable to have an altimeter to keep track of height, and maybe goggles and helmet. The parachute is of no use in the free fall. It is just a way of getting safely to the ground, even if many sky divers make flying the parachute down into an acrobatic event.

The *temporality* in skydiving has several different rhythms. The period before the jump is characterized by sitting still, hearing the engine, maybe looking out at the landscape, and concentrating. When the door is opened one is struck by the roar of the engine, and the air rush. As one exits one feels the turbulence and increasing wind pressure as the speed increases. The speed is, however, only properly noticed when falling close to a cloud or a mountain side (as in BASE jumping). Otherwise the sky diver only feels a gradual approach to the ground, in contrast to BASE jumpers who feel a 'groundrush' (Jakeman 1992). The free fall part is a period of high intensity, air pressure, falling, but then after the sharp stop, when the parachute unfolds, one is suddenly hanging

in a still and noiseless world. The pace and rhythm is suddenly switched to slow, and there is time to look around at the landscape. There is a new feeling of action as one is landing. Often the period while free falling, and also while flying the parachute down, are filled with tasks-to-do. There is little time to take in, and experience, the surroundings.

The *spatiality* of skydiving is characterized by a contrast between the small 'world' close to the body and the huge surrounding sky and the vast landscape below. On one hand, during the free fall, one is focusing on the small bodily movements, the skydivers close by, the altimeter, and so on. One is marginally aware of the landscape far below and the emptiness in-between. From lower down, while flying the parachute down, the landscape is much closer, one has the possibility to enjoy the surroundings. The being-in-the-world of the sky diver is experienced, at the beginning, when one is a novice, as a being-in-the-void (Breivik 2010). While one is falling, there is no world, just emptiness. The experienced sky diver, however, has established a world, and during the free fall one is able to maneuver, and move oneself on the air pressure. The void has become a world that it is possible to inhabit.

The *decision-making* in skydiving is relatively simple. It is impossible to jump a little out of the plane. Either one jumps or one does not. And when one has made the jump there is no way back. Skydiving is *irreversible* and one has to make fast decisions. Things happen very fast. If the parachute does not open properly one has to perform an emergency procedure. One must do it fast and in the right way. The *ultimate fear* in skydiving is falling to the ground without being able to open the parachute, or to open it properly. Skydiving is here similar to climbing, or *vice versa*. The fear of falling without stopping is at the back of the mind of both climbers and skydivers. As with climbing, the

intensity of sky diving leads to new experiences. Ilundáin-Agguruza (2007) uses the concept of the sublime to characterize the experience of skydiving. The sublime is a contradictory state of pleasure and pain, joy and anxiety, which represents a going beyond the mere extreme.

### **White water kayaking.**

White water kayakers also have both a near and a more distant *telos*. The immediate goal may be to handle a certain drop or fall in the river, or a stopper, or a combination of waves.<sup>viii</sup> A part of the goal is often to avoid certain dangers; a submerged tree, a hidden rock, a dangerous drop. Often a longer stretch in the river is the goal; something that has not been paddled before, or is dangerous, or has a very difficult combination of passages. Unlike the sky diver, or climber, the kayaker needs a specific type of *equipment* to be able to perform. The lower part of the body, the legs and the feet, are not only situated in a kayak, but are in a locked position. The kayak is therefore experienced as an extension of the body.

*Body posture* is characterized as being in an upright sitting position, with the lower part of the body being locked inside the kayak. Balance is of vital importance since the kayaker is constantly being moved and played with by the river, its currents and waves. The paddle is used for balance, and as support on the water, but primarily to propel the kayak forwards, sideways or backwards. Similarly to the sky diver, the kayaker may find him/herself upside down, and must get upright again with an Eskimo roll. The feeling of being upside down in a river, locked in a kayak, and in need of oxygen, is a stressful situation. The *skill* of a kayaker is first of all to be able to

understand the behaviour of rivers, being able to read the currents and the flow of water. Next come balance and being able, through foresight, to use and play with waves, currents and stoppers. The skill with the paddle is decisive; it is an extension of the arms.

*Temporality* in white water kayaking is characterized by bursts of intensity and then some pauses and breaks. Intensity is experienced in various ways; being thrown around in a stopper, riding on big waves, doing a difficult traverse, or following and falling with the water through a drop in the river. Bursts of activity are followed by periods of smooth paddling, nice back currents and slowly rolling waves. In these moments it is possible to take in the beauty of the surrounding landscape. The *environment* for the kayaker is the moving, penetrable, element, called water, which may be smooth but also very strong. Primarily, the white water kayaker is a river person, but the environing landscape plays an important role, since it makes the river fall, drop, twist and turn the way it does. And it plays a role when the river is inspected, as the kayakers walk along the river banks to find out whether it is possible to paddle the river. Prior inspection of the river is important, since the route one takes may be decisive.

*Decision-making* in white water kayaking is similar to skydiving, since on hard river stretches it is not possible to turn around or re-make the decision. And it is not possible, as in climbing, to wait and think, since one is being carried away by the river while one thinks. River kayaking is the ultimate example of decision-making under stress and time pressure. Decisions must in many situations be taken on the spur of a moment, and they may be fatal. The *ultimate fear* of kayakers is to become submerged under water and getting stuck, in one way or another. The kayak may be jammed between stones, upside down, or one may be forced under a tree, or fall into a huge stopper at a

ledge in the river.<sup>ix</sup> Also the white water kayaking experience leads to deep insights and strong paradoxical feelings. According to Anderson (2007), kayakers are metaphysicians who experience a world in flux, being in movement, perceiving and understanding flow. They know through immersion and they experience a oneness with water that exemplifies the intimate bonds between humans and nature

## **Conclusion**

The phenomenological study of sport has received increasing attention in the last few years. I think this is important since phenomenology, more than other philosophical directions, represents an approach that lets the phenomena present themselves.

Phenomenology is thus a middle ground between the objective view, represented by natural science, and the subjective views that are collected in many psychological and sociological studies. Building on Husserl, and especially Heidegger, a phenomenological analysis can be performed that adds understanding and knowledge to the field of sports. Philosophers of sport should therefore explore the phenomenological approach, both in relation to sport as such, and also in relation to specific types of sport. I have in this article tried to show how risk sports can be analyzed from a phenomenological point of view.

I think Heidegger's idea of humans as closely and intimately attached to the world is fruitful, since the human being is a being-in-the-world and cannot be understood and analyzed without this close relation to the environing world. I furthermore think that Heidegger's idea of the primacy of equipmental dealing with the world is fruitful. Humans are originally, and most of the time, encountering the world, not in a theoretical,

but practical way. Heidegger's analysis of equipmental dealing is, however, incomplete, since the bodily aspect of our being-in-the-world is not taken sufficiently into consideration, but this can be remedied through Merleau-Ponty and Todes. The human being operates in a world with experiential time-space coordinates, which means that our being is always oriented bodily in space and time, and in relation to things (equipment). The general aspect of our bodily and space-time-oriented being in sport shows only the general features of the athlete.

In this article, therefore, I wanted to show how these general characteristics can be specified in relation to a specific type of sport, such as risk sports, and I showed how the importance of the environment can be exemplified by choosing three sports with quite different environmental characteristics. Climbing, skydiving and white water kayaking play on, and use, three different natural elements: hard rock, empty air and flowing white water. These three natural elements show themselves for the performers of the sports with a certain Gestalt, depending on the specific interaction. The performer uses the environing world but is also dependent upon, and to a certain extent played with, by the natural element. The specific interaction was exemplified through key aspects such as goal, body posture, skills, equipment, time, space, decision-making and the specific kind of fear. Through these aspects we can see the common and general aspects of the specific sports. All kayakers, at a certain performance level, have to deal with these aspects. But each person will experience and exemplify these aspects in a certain way. Where phenomenology leaves, individual psychology enters.

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<sup>i</sup> There are several alternatives when trying to define what is a 'risk sport'. Common to risk sports is obviously the element of risk. It is not my point here to discuss the concept of risk sports. Let it suffice to

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make one example of a definition: By ‘risk sport’ I mean in the context of this article all sports where one must reckon with a serious possibility of severe injury or death as part of and a consequence of the activity.”

ii As an illustration of “the tremendous contribution of Heidegger” when it comes to overcoming the subject-object dichotomy, Charles Taylor takes us right to sport: “We can draw a neat line between my *picture* of an object, and an object, but not between my *dealing* with the object and that object. It may make sense to ask us to focus on what we *believe* about something, say a football, even in the absence of that thing; but when it comes to *playing* football, the corresponding suggestion would be absurd. The actions involved in the game can’t be done without the object; they include the object. Take it away and we have something quite different – people miming a game on the stage, perhaps.”(Taylor 1995,12).

iii Gadamer says: “Das Subjekt des Spieles sind nicht die Spieler, sondern das Spiel kommt durch die Spielenden lediglich zur Darstellung”. Gadamer 1965, 98 (“The subject of the play is not the players, but the play is only displayed through the players”)(my translation)

iv I will use typical outdoor free climbing in my discussion. There are a lot of different forms of climbing that have appeared on the scene during the last decades. Dornian (2003) describes very well the fascination of competitive indoor climbing while Donnelly (2003) discusses the different worlds of sport climbing versus adventure climbing.

v The development of different forms of white water kayaking is described by Mounet and Chifflet (2003).

vi The different forms of skydiving include freestyle, skysurfing, and freeflying. Koyn (2003) describes how in freeflying one can make totems, one skydiver standing on the shoulders of another skydiver, and the effortlessness and strange feeling that accompany movements in the air.

vii By temporality is meant temporal rhythm and timing and not Heidegger’s use of temporality as a fundamental characteristic of Dasein’s being-in-the-world.

viii Watters (2003) describes how he almost collided with another kayaker and landed in a backwash of water called a hole. He tipped over but managed to roll up again, “I stayed for a moment, then the powerful currents of the hole slapped me up side again. Under the water, I was tossed from side to side like

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a rag doll clamped between the jaws of a dog. It was everything I could do to hang on to my paddle.”

(Watters 2003:258)

<sup>ix</sup> The ultimate fear is well described through the story of Walt Blackadar who tried to paddle the South Fork of the Payatte. There was a log almost across the river which Blackadar did not see “He was suddenly jarred when his kayak hit the submerged tree. The bow immediately dove under, and the onrushing water slammed his body against the log.” (Watters 2003:265) The other kayakers were not able to help him. “As the current bounced the boat, he was pulled deeper and deeper into the water. He held bravely on to the high brace, even as his head slowly disappeared under the water. The back end of the boat rose up, stood vertically and collapsed against his body. The boat and Blackadar were completely trapped and immersed.” (Watters 2003:265). Walt Blackadar died on the river.