

The Noisy World of the Flesh.

Autism, the Feldenkrais Method and Merleau-Ponty's Ontology

1. What's the matter?

My proposal here is an attempt to show that Merleau-Ponty's conception of the body and the relation with the other is suited to account for the experience of somatic practices. But in fact it's perhaps not radical enough to account for the discoveries arising from them. Merleau-Ponty claims that you can't have the sensation of touching and of being touched at the same time. But if the flesh is a realm where subjecthood and objecthood are confused, where self and other are not yet distinct, where moving and perceiving are the same, then the non-coincidence between touching and being touched must be relevant only at the level of explicit consciousness, but at the prereflective level, one might suppose a possible confusion. Many somatic practices explore the prereflective level of awareness to one's body and use various techniques to mobilize the motor, perceptive as well as cognitive capacities of the subject. Among those practices, the feldenkrais method shows perhaps the biggest theoretical potential if one is to develop Merleau-Ponty's approach to the realm of the flesh. In particular, this method explores the realm of prereflective selfawareness and constitutes thus a favorable field to better understand the structures of the self-other relation. By discussing the case of Rebecca, an autistic young girl, I want to suggest that the isolation of the autistic persons is neither a solitude nor a silence as it is ordinarily considered. The autistic subjectivity is characterized by an incapacity to sustain a relation with the other, and the machinic aspect of their behavior expresses their strategies in order to cope with the invasive

presence of the others. But in order to justify this claim, we must better understand how the space of the relation is structured: is it just the crossing point of the chiasm, or is there a whole space where the self and the other might mix together?

2. Rebecca, the little wild girl

Rebecca is 3 years and 9 months old when she starts her sessions with Mara Vinadia. She shows heavy autistic symptoms. Vinadia describes her as the “little wild girl deeply immersed in autism”: there is no way to get into eye contact with her, she never gets closer than 3 meters with anyone else than her parents, facing any frustration, limit, alterity, she immediately reacts with violence, arching her body backwards, screaming loudly and hitting herself on the ground. She generally is not articulated both concerning her lacking the use of language and concerning the articulations of her body that remains rigid, in “hyperextension”. In general, there is no way to make her do any step in direction of the other, no response from her upon an appeal to play, to come, or whatever. “The relation is one way, I’m going towards her, I meet her where she is – a simple request like ‘come Rebecca’ doesn’t generate any response from her”, as Vinadia terms it in her clinical description¹. Moreover, Rebecca has experienced several quite heavy traumas, such as deaths in her near family, successive changes of residence, the absence of the father during longer periods, and several difficult surgeries.

The first time Rebecca met with Vinadia for a Feldenkrais session, she stayed at a distance of at least 3 meters from her, and neither looking at her, nor accepting to be gazed at by her. Vinadia is telling that it was impossible to direct her body or even her eyes towards the girl, and that any movement from her towards the little girl would

¹ I’m quoting from Mara Vinadia’s notices, dated from the time of her sessions with Rebecca. The description is moreover based on intensive conversations with her, held in April 2012.

make her yell and scream. Even when she would think of making a movement, the girl would somehow feel it and be troubled. Vinadia tells that she then suddenly had the idea of making a series of statues with her body while keeping Rebecca in her peripheral vision, but without orienting her attention towards her. You have to imagine a situation where the practitioner looks the other way and the girl keeping her distance doing as if she didn't notice. Mara took a few steps, stopped, made a series of figures making sure Rebecca would notice in her peripheral vision. Rebecca didn't react right away, so she continued, took a few steps, stopped and made a new series of statues. When she began her sixth series, she noticed the girl had stayed up and tried to imitate her. But she didn't imitate the series she just saw; she imitated the first one, so Vinadia had to start again and make the whole process anew. Rebecca would faithfully imitate her figures, but six actions afterwards².

One quite astonishing observation she makes is that in the course of the sessions, Rebecca imitated the figures more and more near, not only in time, but also in space, while accepting gradually to turn towards Vinadia. In the third session, she imitated five series later while tolerating Vinadia's presence a little nearer; in the fourth session, the delay decreased, as did the distance between them. After a few more sessions, Vinadia managed to reach to the point where the girl accepted not only her bodily presence within reach, but also a face to face situation, and she describes with great emotion the way Rebecca finally accepted to face her gaze directly, without showing the usual panic. The sessions then continued for a few months, confirming the progress both in the capacity to relate with other people and in the articulation of

² In recent research, even positivistic approaches have recognized that autistic persons are in fact able to imitate. Cf. Jacqueline Nadel 2011: *Imiter pour grandir. Développement du bébé et de l'enfant avec autisme*, Paris, Dunod.

the body movements. According to the testimony of the parents, Rebecca's situation continued to improve after they left Geneva.

In this case, several aspects can be made clear already after this short description. First, in this process, the diagnostics in the medical sense is far less important than the structure of intersubjective (intercorporeal) space and time. The practitioner doesn't project any "interior", "mental" state into the girl's consciousness³, rather she exclusively works to structure a space where the relation might be possible. In her telling, the story of this process is a story of building up and extending a sort of transcendental relational space; in the present case, this space has the form of a spiral where the two protagonists get nearer and nearer while turning more and more towards each other. Second, from the side of Rebecca, one notices a very sharp sensitivity to the presence of the other: the refusal of the relation is not a symptom of indifference, but rather a sign of hypersensitivity to the other's presence. She acts as if she were totally invaded by the other and seemed to try to escape it's presence by any means. Third, this attitude of escaping the other's presence is accompanied by a spectacular rigidity of the girl's body⁴, of an absence of contact to the ground and the impossibility of being touched by anyone on any place of the body except (rarely) the feet. My claim here is that these bodily manifestations are not just symptoms, but are an integral part of her suffering.

3. Excursus on somatic practices

Many somatic practices, such as the Feldenkrais method, the Alexander method, or the Body-Mind Centering, show an interesting contradictory situation. While they

³ Most of the recent literature on autism seems to be largely contaminated by the positivistic theories of empathy, such as the theory-theory. One will find a useful critique of those approaches in D. Zahavi 2005, *Subjectivity and Selfhood. Investigating the First-Person Perspective*, MIT Press, 2005, chap. 7.

⁴ In psychosomatic trauma therapy, the body's rigidity is seen as the sign of suppressing feelings.

can prove to have relevant therapeutic results and show an increasing success in the course of the years, they nevertheless still lack an adapted theoretical discourse. As Isabelle Ginot remarks in an article on Richard Shusterman's somaesthetics⁵, the discourse of the feldenkrais method is characterized by a kind of strabismus: on the one hand, one finds a series of personal singular anecdotes or exempla told on the model "I had a serious injury – the physicists didn't have a clue – then I encountered an XY practitioner and I finally managed to fix my problem through hard work". That's the narration of a personal experience. On the other hand, there is an intensive use of scientific vocabulary and modes of discourse, probably because the proponents of the method are trying to gain the favor of the medical scientific world. Needless to say those two modes of discourse don't fit together, and they both miss the point, which is to speak about what is in the center of the practice, the body-subject. Isabelle Ginot writes:

Whereas somatic practice incessantly exposes differences in and the immaterial and elusive nature of sensing, scientific discourse inscribes vertiginous individual experience into a larger scheme whose uniformity promotes generalization. Somatics induces us to *believe* in the "scientific," universal, and "provable" nature of experience, in order to provide a stable collective context for what is fundamentally an unstable, highly individualized experience.⁶

In fact, somatic practices are a very fecund field to test and develop Merleau-Ponty's ideas on corporeity, sensitivity, movement, empathy, precisely because he always tried to cut in between scientific objectivity and personal private experiences. Here the very task of phenomenology, i.e. the task of producing general concepts out from singular experiences is all the more urgent that those practices are quickly developing and in need of a discourse fitting the kind experience they give rise to.

⁵ Isabelle Ginot 2010: "From Shusterman's Somaesthetics to a Radical Epistemology of Somatics", *Dance Research Journal*, 42/1, pp. 12-29. For a general and comprehensive introduction to the feldenkrais method, see Moshe Feldenkrais' books, as well as...

⁶ Ginot 2010, p. 15.

4. The zone of the joint

As I argued, Vinadia's strategy consists in the laying out of a relational space, a space (and time) of shared intentions, on a carnal level. In fact, this is precisely the space Merleau-Ponty talks about in length in *The Visible and the Invisible*. There are a range of keywords signifying a zone of the in-between, such as *jointure*, *membre*, *armature*, *intersection*, etc. In general, those terms refer to the invisible structure of being, to the matter the ideas or the essences consist in. But the intersubjective nature of this in-between tends to remain quite implicit. A superficial reading could lead to the idea that the merleau-pontian self is first constituted in front of the world and only then confronted to the presence of other selves. This impression is false, for at least two reasons: first because he claims, already in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, that the essences are built upon speech, and since language is a social phenomenon, intersubjectivity is conceived at the root of the realm of the ideas. Second because there are in fact several passages in *The Visible and the Invisible* where Merleau-Ponty explicitly puts on the same level the joint between me and the other and the joint between me and the world. The following passage shows clearly that the presence of the other is essential (and perhaps even prior) to my relation to the world. This is what we might call a transcendental relational space.

Qu'il s'agisse de mes rapports avec les choses ou de mes rapports avec autrui [...], la question est de savoir si [...] tout rapport de moi à l'Être jusque dans la vision, jusque dans la parole, n'est pas un rapport charnel, avec la chair du monde, où l'être «pur» ne transparaît qu'à l'horizon, dans une distance qui n'est pas rien, qui n'est pas déployée par moi, qui est quelque chose, qui donc lui appartient à lui, qui est, entre l'être «pur» et moi, l'épaisseur de son être pour moi, de son être pour les autres, et qui fait finalement que ce qui mérite le nom d'être ce n'est pas l'horizon d'être «pur», mais le système des perspectives qui y introduit, que l'être intégral est non devant moi, mais à l'*intersection* de mes vues et à l'*intersection* de mes vues et de celles des autres, à

l'intersection de mes actes et à *l'intersection* de mes actes et de ceux des autres, que le monde sensible et le monde historique sont toujours des intermondes [...].

(VI, p. 114; my emphasis)

Merleau-Ponty seems to think that a fusion of my subjectivity with the subjectivity of the other is impossible, just like the coincidence of my touching and my being-touched is impossible. As he writes in the first pages of *The Visible and the Invisible*, “Ma main gauche est toujours sur le point de toucher ma main droite en train de toucher les choses, mais je ne parviens jamais à la coïncidence” (VI, p. 24). But on the other hand, in the last chapter, he clearly considers the possibility of touching the other’s capacity to touch: “Si ma main gauche peut toucher ma main droite pendant qu’elle palpe les tangibles, la toucher en train de toucher, retourner sur elle sa palpation, pourquoi, touchant la main d’un autre, ne toucherais-je pas en elle le même pouvoir d’épouser les choses que j’ai touché dans la mienne?” (VI, p. 183)⁷ Mara Vinadia, as most feldenkrais practitioners, claims that she does indeed feel the touching and being-touched at the same time, not only on her own body between the left and the right hand but also between her own body and the other⁸. She speaks about the risk, even the danger, of confusing your own sensitivity and the others’. Especially in the case of children and fragile people, the practitioner must be careful, she says, and not begin to direct the other’s sensitivity, rather lead her/him to an increased autonomy. If they are right in their claim, if there really is a coincidence between my touching and being touched, between my touching and the other’s

⁷ Rogozinski discusses the coincidence of touching and being-touched, and criticizes rightly Merleau-Ponty for conceiving the question as a temporal question, whereas it should be considered on another level. But he doesn’t confront his discussion with phenomenological experiences. Cf. Jacob Rogozinski, *Le moi et la chair*, Paris, Cerf, 2006, in particular pp. 186-193.

⁸ Kym Maclaren evokes the possibility of confusing my body schema and the one of the other; cf. “Embodied Perceptions of Others as a Condition of Selfhood? Empirical and Phenomenological Considerations”, *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 2008, 15, 8, p. 80.

touching⁹, this would mean that the unity of my own body is not only due to the reversibility of touching and being-touched, but also by the possibility of their confusion, that the unity of my perceived world and the perceived world of the others is due to the possibility of intertwining the body schemas. Then the zone of the joint is really an extended space, and not just the point where the lines of the chiasm cross each other. In order to illustrate this suggestion, I'd like to show a sequence of a session with another little girl, Héloïse. We will see how manifestly there is a profound unity of her moving a toy, her being moved by the educator, and her seeing her mother move another toy.

[video of Héloïse with Vinadia and her mother: 1 min.]

5. Relational space and transitional objects

We are witnessing through this video an ephemeral sentient community (*une communauté du sentir*), where the movement suggested by the educationer is simultaneous and identical to the movement the girl is doing to her *doudou*, and to the act of the girl gazing at her mother doing the same. In other cases, Vinadia uses very interestingly those objects, for example when the child doesn't want to be touched. She does the movements she wants to do with the child to the *doudou* as a strategy to make the child accept the relationship. The child will observe the peculiar movements, she will imitate them on her own *doudou*, either directly or at home afterwards, and progressively will agree to be touched herself by the educator. Here the “transitional object” cannot be considered as the representative of the mother or the parents as Winnicott suggested, but rather as the representative of the self. In fact,

⁹ As Merleau-Ponty writes in a famous passage of *The Visible and the Invisible*, “If my left hand can touch my right hand while it palpates the tangibles, touch it while it is touching, return its palpation on it, why wouldn't I, while touching the hand of someone else, touche the same power of espousing things as I touched in my own hand?” (my translation) (VI, p. 184)

we must question the very notion of representation here: Winnicott affirms that the transitional object is a substitute for the breast or the mother¹⁰, which would entail that the baby already has a notion of “mother” or “breast” and that his teddy bear would stand for the breast. But the 6 or 8 months old baby probably doesn’t possess those notions – the teddy bear simply helps her to open up the space to establish a relation with herself. As Vinadia’s practice suggests, the *doudou* is equally a representative of the self in construction and in relation. Rather than a substitute of an already existing being, the *doudou* is a device allowing the child to accept to be observed / touched / moved by others, since those acts are first exerted upon the toy. The “transitional object” is a repository of different possible affective stances towards the world and the others. Vinadia uses intensively such objects in her practice with children; she has even formulated a protocol for different educational contexts, focusing on the fact that children spontaneously use them to express their feelings toward their situation, such as for example their anger in front of the birth of a younger sister/brother. In sum, the behave with “transitional objects” generally as representatives of themselves, rather than of other persons (such as the mother).

If we come back to the case of Rebecca, the not surprising observation is that she didn’t have any transitional object at the beginning of the sessions; no teddy bear or any beloved thing that might function as a projection of her self and the affective bonds relating her to others. Since she always tries to escape the presence of the others by running away, screaming, hitting, etc., she doesn’t assume the relational space where she is bound to let her self be transformed by this very presence. The introduction of transitional objects in the educational process is a way of evaluating

¹⁰ Winnicott seems to think the transitional object compensates the failure of the mother – but he could also have thought that it is function of the capacity of the child to be autonomous (cf. *Jeu et réalité*, Gallimard, coll. Folio, pp. 42-43).

the progress of the child towards a liberated relation to the other. So it was in Rebecca's case, according to the practitioner. It would be a whole new research project to compare the merleau-pontian chiasmatic intersections and the winnicottian transitional phenomena. The problem with Winnicott in this respect is that he presupposes the existence of an inner world of the infant opposing the outer world of the parents and the society. A merleau-pontian approach would suggest that the "transitional space" is in fact a primary space, from where a self in the full sense might emerge. But of course, there must be also a kind of fundamental implicit self-awareness at play, which constitutes the very ground of this emergence. As Zahavi remarks, "There is nothing to suggest that autistic persons lack first-personal access to their own occurrent experiences, perceptions, desires, thoughts, and emotions."¹¹

6. The diacritical institution of the self

What is thus the relation between the primitive implicit bodily self-awareness and the self in the full conscious sense? Is Kym Maclaren right in claiming that there actually is no self-awareness "before" the advent of the other? In other words, how should we evaluate Rebecca's self, when she arrived in Vinadia's practice? Was it non-existent? Was it mutilated? Undeveloped? Embryonic? The answer to that question lies in a phenomenological description of bodily existence. Merleau-Ponty noticed that one's own body image includes the presence of the other. More precisely, we can read in *The Visible and the Invisible* that my awareness of myself is the other face of the gaze of the other upon me. As he writes in the chapter on "Interrogation and Dialectics", "nous-mêmes n'avons pas, de quelqu'un et de nous, deux images côte à côte, mais une seule image où nous sommes impliqués tous deux, que ma

¹¹ Zahavi 2005, p. 215.

conscience de moi-même et mon mythe d'autrui sont, non pas deux contradictions mais l'envers l'un de l'autre." (VI, p. 113)

In the case of Rebecca, we are witnessing an advent of her selfhood, in the very interaction with the other. In Vinadia's narrative, the gaze is of utmost importance: in the first sessions, she tells, it was absolutely impossible to gaze directly at the girl, just as the girl wouldn't ever gaze at her. Her imitation of the movements suggested by Vinadia were possible through the peripheral vision, i.e. by doing as if her presence were indifferent to the girl. Everything goes as if an unpersonal space had to be opened, a space free from the controlling, intruding, examining gaze of the other would be banned. But evidently, the gaze is not absent, it is so to speak neutralized for the subject. Progressively, the space (and time) between the two gets narrower, they turn more and more towards each other, and this process allows her to take initiatives herself for a common activity. As Maclaren shows in the above mentioned article, the emergence of a sense of the self is preceded by a specific gaze and behavior of the other, and the sense of the self that emerges is constrained by the child's bodily capacities.

The emergence of a shared space is thus a condition for the emergence of selfhood¹², i.e. for the emergence of the child's capacity to feel in the first person; before that, Rebecca was unable to concentrate on an activity more than a few seconds and she would inflict pain on herself by hitting her head on the ground. Both those symptoms show that her sense of her self was impaired because she was unable to dwell with her own perceptive experience, and she had to hit herself in order to make sure of her own existence. Moreover, the rigidity of her body, especially when

¹² In merleau-pontian terms, one could say that the body schema, is both explanation of the singularity of each person and of the shared substance of being (the flesh).

other persons is felt as a menace, her absence of contact to the ground with her feet express a failure to be part of the flesh: the body remains rigid and straight and doesn't give rise to any relation to itself through the characteristic curve of the flesh.

As Merleau-Ponty writes in a working note dated January 1960,

Quand l'organisme de l'embryon se met à percevoir, il n'y a pas création par le corps en soi d'un Pour soi, et il n'y a pas descente dans le corps d'une âme préétablie, il y a que le tourbillon de l'embryogenèse soudain se centre sur le creux intérieur qu'elle préparait (VI, p. 282).

7. The transcendental noise of the flesh

In Merleau-Ponty's thinking, silence is the contrary of speech. But his insistence upon that term has lead generations of commentators to imagine the prereflective realm as being without noise. When he writes that the philosopher should keep silent and just listen to the silence within him, it has been understood in a metaphorical sense. Listen to the silence is a paradoxical expression we don't need to take literally, or do we?

Le philosophe parle, mais c'est une faiblesse en lui, et une faiblesse inexplicable: il devrait se taire, coïncider en silence, et rejoindre dans l'Être une philosophie qui y est déjà faite. Tout se passe au contraire comme s'il voulait mettre en mots un certain silence en lui qu'il écoute. Son «œuvre» entière est cet effort absurde. Il écrivait pour dire son contact avec l'Être; il ne l'a pas dit, et ne saurait le dire, puisque c'est du silence. (VI, p. 164)

The flesh is defined as a realm without language. Since it is undifferentiated, it must be silent; there's no sound in the flesh. But the behavior of Rebecca, the autistic girl, leads to think that the realm of the flesh is not silent but rather noisy; listen to the silence can thus be understood *à la lettre*, as a way to lend the ear to the wild sounds of the flesh. Autism, as I tried to show, is thus a state where the subject doesn't get an access to a sense of solitude, but seeks to protect herself from the intrusion of otherness. The autistic person is neither in a state of solitude nor silence – on the

contrary she is constantly trying to cope with an invasive presence of alterity and thus also an invasive noise preventing her to rest and establish a relation to herself. This invasive otherness is also an unbearable noise expressed by Rebecca herself by screaming, rattling, hitting her head on the ground. Characteristically, the dominance of those noises goes with a loss of language. Rebecca didn't speak at all when she began her sessions, which is also a process of reconquering the use of language. In the course of the sessions, she progressively begins to speak again, first by saying short words or bits of sentences, then by longer not entirely understandable sentences. Vinadia explains that "one clearly recognizes the melody of a sentence: beginning, accents, suspensions, breathings, end. The sounds sing within the structure of the sentence, although some words are incomprehensible."

How, then, does speech enter into Rebecca's world again? As Merleau-Ponty suggests in another working note, speech gets unto the child *through* silence, *as* silence. He means by that, in my view, that speech in the genuine sense is called upon by a silence that is experienced as the absence of speech. Speech cannot penetrate into her world as long as she is invaded by the terrible din of the others. The way she might dispose herself to let speech penetrate her again is closely linked to the way her body lends itself to be bent.

Il faut bien que la parole entre chez l'enfant comme silence, – perce jusqu'à lui à travers le silence et comme silence [...] – Silence = absence de parole due. C'est ce négatif fécond qui est institué par la chair, par sa déhiscence – le négatif, le néant, c'est le dédoublé, les 2 feuillets du corps, le dedans et le dehors articulés l'un sur l'autre (VI, p. 311).

The idea of speech *as* silence shows that Merleau-Ponty would admit a noisy conception of silence. In other terms, speech is what makes silence possible, and likewise, the presence of others is what makes solitude possible.