

Changing Imaginaries: A Reply to Churcher
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Millicent Churcher's "When Adam met Sally: The Transformative Potential of Sympathy" highlights the way in which our reactions to others are structured through the imaginaries in terms of which we encounter them, particularly the imaginaries of the body. The importance of invoking the imaginary here is to point out both that our responses to others are mediated through images in the broadest sense of that term, and that these images yield a mode of experiencing others that has both cognitive and affective dimensions. As the imaginaries in play are often pre-reflective, or even unconscious, they condition our responses to others even when our rational reflective self would reject any explicit formulation, for example, of racist or sexist beliefs. As Elizabeth Anderson has pointed out (quoted in Churcher page 10), 'often the operation of our unconscious stereotypes and avowed beliefs are so insulated from one another that we do not feel dissonance from our contradictory mental states' (2012, 168). In the absence of this felt dissonance, we may fail to recognise that our judgments and behaviour require adjustment.

Reflection and Sympathy

As a response to this and as a way of overcoming the influence of pre-reflective and damaging social imaginaries Churcher invokes Adams Smith's discussion of the sympathetic imagination. She says:

Smith argues that our capacity to imaginatively enter into the experiences of others—a capacity he refers to as "sympathy"—is central to human sociability and moral agency. Our capacity to imaginatively step into another person's shoes and to experience "fellow-feeling" with their joys and sufferings is what binds us together as moral agents and motivates us to act ethically (2).

Addressing in particular cases of racial injustice, she suggests 'that sympathy ... through disrupting and transforming the way in which one experiences one's own embodiment,' together with that of others, can generate 'an understanding of racial injustice that implicates one's sense of self and one's will to act' (2).

Churcher illuminates this process at the individual level by means of a discussion of Sally Haslanger's account of the changes to her own responsiveness to black bodies consequent on her adopting black children.

At the more general level Smith suggests 'we have the capacity to exercise a critically reflective mode of sympathy [...] Exercising reflective sympathy of this kind involves imagining what an ideal and unprejudiced "Impartial Spectator" would feel in response to the other and her circumstances' (11). But Churcher is less convinced of the ease with which such a strategy could be adopted:

[I]ndividuals may only exercise reflective sympathy with great difficulty, impartially entering into the lived experiences of different others—particularly those who are marked out and devalued as “different” within the dominant social imaginary—would appear to demand at the very least an extraordinary degree of open-mindedness and imaginative flexibility from everyday individuals (11-12).

Churcher instead suggests that at a more general level, where personal interaction is lacking, the sympathetic imagination is engaged by both top down and bottom up initiatives to shift the dominant imaginaries in terms of which particular social groupings are experienced by others:

[I]ndigenous cultural awareness programs that have been introduced by educational institutions in North America and Australia [...] the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s ... are illustrative of movements that opened up [...] the racial imaginary to multiple contestations through counter-narratives and images that were evoked in street protests, public speeches and in the works of various artistic, literary and intellectual figures of the time (12-13).

She also discusses the protests following the Michael Browns shooting in Ferguson 2014. ‘The powerful images and slogans associated with the protests (“Hands Up, Don’t Shoot” “I Can’t Breathe” “Black Lives Matter”): ‘Resonant of Haslanger’s experience of racism as a transracial parent, it is through imagining oneself in the victims’ shoes that the problem of police violence becomes more than just a moral and political issue for observers; it takes on an embodied significance that moves one to act’ (14).

The sympathetic imagination can also and importantly be invoked through art, literature and poetry:

Through the use of metaphoric language Morrison creates a particularly powerful and harrowing image that compels her readers to enter into the experience of what it would be like to be raped, or to have one’s loved one be raped, only for that suffering to be met with a mixture of excited curiosity and contempt (14).

I am wholly in agreement with Churcher’s view that a cognitive/affective social imaginary is at play in our interactions with the bodies of others, and that where this imaginary is damaging there is an urgent question concerning how it can be changed. I am also in agreement with her examples of situations in which such changes can come about. I am, however, less comfortable with the picture of the workings of this imagination which comes with her adoption of Smith’s account of the sympathetic imagination (which, anyway, seems to me to sit in tension with some of her examples).

On Smith’s picture sympathy seems to be empathy, an imagining of the experiences of others, plus an appropriate response. We seem to use the imagination to provide us with,

to conjure up, some kind of phenomenological data, namely access to the experiences of others, which we otherwise do not have access to, and, then, such imaginative data (causally) produces the appropriate reactions in us. This reinforces a picture that the imagination is providing a route to data that is, as on the traditional other minds problem, otherwise out of reach. There are multiple problems with such a picture as the history of philosophy testifies. And there are additional problems with a conception of either empathy, or a sympathy that includes empathy, as invoking such a picture.

Despite Smith's injunction that we must not imagine ourselves in the others shoes but imagine them in those shoes Gadamer was at pains to point out, for example, that we could never shed our own positionality when engaging with the other, and that understanding others must not be construed on such a model. Both Wittgenstein and Merleau-Ponty also rejected this picture of other minds.

Public Bodily Expression

Both Wittgenstein and Merleau-Ponty reject an account of the mind as a hidden realm, and public expressions as signs or reminders, from which observers make inferences to the veiled subjectivity of others. Experiences, sensations, emotions are just what get expressed in certain ways, ways visible on the body, for us all to see. Thus Wittgenstein: 'consciousness in the face of another. Look into someone else's face and see the consciousness in it, and also a particular shade of consciousness. You see on it, in it, joy, indifference, interest, excitement, dullness etc.; the light in the face of another.'¹ 'Faced with an angry or threatening gesture [...] I do not see anger or a threatening attitude as a psychic fact hidden behind the gesture, I read anger in it. The gesture does not make me think of anger, it is anger itself.'² 'The smile, the relaxed face, and the cheerfulness of the gestures actually contain the rhythm of the action or of this joy as a particular mode of being in the world'³

Bodily expressions are therefore public. What is involved in the process of perceiving gesture is grasp of a certain kind of *gestalt*,⁴ recognition of a certain kind of patterning of the body as that of fear, or joy or grief. What we perceive, when recognising expressive content, is not, physiology, physical features as captured by scientific categorisation, but *physiognomy*, 'face or form as an index of character.'⁵ In the context of the present discussion such a form can be characterised as an imaginary. We perceive the experiences of others, expressed on their bodies, as a certain kind of image or *gestalt*. For these writers, understanding expressions is something we learn and are initiated into within culture. What we are being given with such training is a certain kind of *perceptual sensitivity* to patterns manifest on bodies over time.

¹ Zettel, 225.

² *Phenomenology of Perception*, 190.

³ *Phenomenology of Perception*, 192.

⁴ Both writers were reading and responding to Gestalt Psychology. See paper by Katherine Morris in this volume.

⁵ *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970).

Wittgenstein discusses perceiving expressions in the context of a more general discussion of seeing as. ‘Seeing the resemblance of one face to another, the analogy of one mathematical form to another, a human form in the lines of a puzzle picture ... all these phenomena are somehow similar and yet again very different.’⁶ He is insistent that ‘seeing’ is the correct word here. “I see that the child wants to touch the dog, but doesn’t dare”. How can I see that?⁷ ‘Do I learn the meaning of the word “sad”—as applied to a face—in just the same way as the meaning of [...]“red”? No, not in quite the same way, but still in a similar way.’⁸ Crucial here is both background and context. Behaviour is expressive only as contextualised, only against particular backgrounds, backgrounds which, Wittgenstein points out, are not themselves articulable. ‘What determines our judgment, our concepts and reactions, is not what one man is doing now, an individual action, but the whole hurly-burly of human actions, the background against which we see any action.’

For both writers the expressive content of a gesture is internally related to the response which it invites/requires from others. If to see bodily gestures as expressions is to grasp them as part of the weave of life of those whose expressions they are; it is also to grasp them as invitations for a response. To recognise expressive content is to grasp how that expression is woven into a pattern of *inter-subjective* life. Perceived bodily form carries inter-subjective significance. We perceive certain bodily shapes as requiring/suggesting responses of our own or others. That is, we perceive them *directly* as requiring or facilitating certain responds. Expressions of pain or grief, for example, prompt responses of comfort and solicitude from others.

For Merleau-Ponty the grasping of such bodily gestalts depends on a reciprocity between other bodies and our own. My body takes a responsive shape during my interactions with others and the shape it takes reveals the expressive content the body I am encountering has for me. As he points out ‘I do not understand the gestures of others through an act of intellectual interpretation [...] I join with it in a sort of blind recognition’⁹ ‘For both authors this way of experiencing others is distinguished from ‘an epistemic operation’. Wittgenstein famously writes ‘My attitude towards him is an attitude towards a soul. I am not of the opinion that he has a soul.’¹⁰

The reciprocal nature of our expressive perception allows, nonetheless, for the possibility that we might recognise that someone is expressing something we cannot grasp. A central fact in our relations with others is the extent to which they can elude our comprehension, confront us with a subjectivity which is always other to our own.¹¹ There are times when others remain quite opaque to us. We are not able to read their expressions and consequently find our feet with them. Expressions can be ambiguous, and our perceptions of them open to revision and re-evaluation. Both writers draw attention to the difficulties

⁶ *Remarks on Philosophy of Psychology Vol 1*, 316.

⁷ *Remarks on Philosophy of Psychology Vol 1*, 1066.

⁸ *Remarks on Philosophy of Psychology Vol 1*, 1071.

⁹ *Phenomenology of Perception*, 191.

¹⁰ [Philosophical Investigations II, iv.](#)

¹¹ Cf. Søren Overgaard, *Wittgenstein and Other Minds: Rethinking Subjectivity and Intersubjectivity with Wittgenstein, Levinas, and Husserl*, Routledge, 2007.

we may have in making sense of people from different cultural or historical contexts. For these writers, however, inference to something supposedly lying behind the expressions will not help. What is necessary is to be able to *see* the gestures in a certain way; a way that makes their position in the life of the subject, and ourselves, clear.

Conclusion

If we adopt this account understanding the other is, as stressed in the hermeneutic tradition, a kind of reading of their bodies. And we can fail at this and read in damaging and distorting ways, as a consequence of damaging and distorting social imaginaries. What needs changing, via a change in imaginaries, is our capacity to see the bodies of others in certain ways. And a transformation in ways of seeing is thereby a transformation of our own bodies in response, in just the way Merleau-Ponty characterises. It is just such a process that Churcher illustrates in her discussion of Haslanger's relation with her children. It is also what takes place in the other examples, including the examples of artistic practice. We are indeed implicated in such readings, and changes in the imaginaries in terms of which bodies are read is also a change in ourselves. But invoking Smith seems to me to suggest a problematic account of the processes which are at play here.

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