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Publication date:
2019

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (APA):
Boldsen, S. (2019). *Material intercorporeality and the style of autism*. Paper presented at 2019 Annual Conference of the Society of Phenomenology & the Human Sciences, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, United States.

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Material intercorporeality and the style of autism

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Introduction

In the 1940's, Leo Kanner (1943) and Hans Asperger (1944/1992) each note a striking difference in the way autistic individuals interact with persons and the way they interact with objects. According to these two autism pioneers, persons are often treated in an instrumental way as if they were objects, whereas the objective world easily draws in the autistic individual, who often displays unusual fascination with things and a rigid insistence on sameness in the physical environment.

Since then, this distinction between a world of objects and a world of persons has been maintained in autism research, notably in the current diagnostic criteria, which delineate two aspects of autism: (1) deficits in the reciprocal, communicative, and relational aspects of social interaction, and (2) 'non-social' differences, e.g. unusual preoccupation with objects, desire for routine and sameness, and sensory abnormalities (American Psychiatric Association 2013; World Health Organization 2018). Thus, from the birth of autism as a psychiatric category, autistic individuals have been described as obsessively engaged in the world of objects and detached from the world of subjects.

In this paper, I will question the widely upheld distinction between a world of objects and a world of persons. I will argue that in autism, phenomena described as of a social nature and phenomena described as of a non-social nature are not really separate at all, but closely interrelated. More precisely, I will suggest the notion of material intercorporeality as a way of describing how autistic modes of social engagement are related to particular modes of material engagement. On this basis, I will argue that autism can be construed as a case in support of expanding the boundaries of the social encounter to include the realm of the material world. Thus, the case of autism invites us to reconsider the more general distinction between what could be termed the intersubjective and the material domain.

What motivates this analysis is Maurice Merleau-Ponty's notion of *style* with which he describes the rhythm between the phenomenality of perceptual objects and a certain mode of bodily expression and engagement. We can say that the concept of style relays the perceptual and motor intertwinement between materiality and subjectivity. As I will argue, the notion of style allows for an understanding of the meaningful entanglement between the social and non-social aspects of autism, and importantly, it explicates the inextricable, yet implicit, relation between things and people. In support of these arguments, I will present brief extracts from interviews and observations conducted as part of my ongoing research on social interaction between young high-functioning autistic people in the context of social training and networking groups.

Materiality and social interaction in autism

Autistic individuals are often described as inflexible, rigid, and highly reliant on structure. As Asperger noted in 1944, "certain things always had to be in the same place, and certain events always had to happen in the same manner [...]" (1944/1992, 60). When I began my one year of fieldwork in the autism groups mentioned above, I was struck with how firmly the social activities were structured and managed by the autism center hosting the groups, and the vigor with which this structure was upheld and repeated from week to week. I was amazed with how little social activity seemed to go on in between and around scheduled

activities such as conversation groups, creative activities, cooking, or board games. In fact, most of my initial observations were primarily about silence, tension, and social awkwardness.

The guitar

Line and Helene are sitting on one of the red sofas, bodies turned toward each other. Helene is holding an acoustic guitar and tunes are emanating from the space between them. Both sets of eyes are turned toward the guitar in Helene's lap as Line is teaching her to play a simple melody. Helene is holding the guitar and Line is leaning towards her. They are shifting between looking intently at the guitar and smiling to each other, their gaze touching briefly before returning to the guitar. Line is showing Helene what tunes to play by leading her fingers from string to string along the neck of the guitar. Helene is following. Line instructs a little at the time: first a tune, then a word or two, then a tune, and another word.

Etymologically deriving from the Greek *autos*, meaning 'self', autism is believed to be characterized by self-absorption and withdrawal to inner life. Historically deriving from the notion of schizophrenic autism coined by Eugen Bleuler (1911/1950), autism was born as a disconnection from the outside world. Usually, both Line and Helene seem to embody these characteristics. Line is most often absorbed by scrolling on her smartphone or playing her guitar, and Helene favors sitting in the periphery of the common space and always retreats to a faraway room when dinner calls for gathering of the group.

Although not driven by words but rather by movements, the two quiet and self-enclosed girls communicate. Helene's movements follow Line's, which, in response, adjust to align with hers. Their bodies attune to each other as they fine-tune the melody that reverberates from between them. As Merleau-Ponty described it, "[...] my body and his are coupled, resulting in a sort of action which pairs them." (Merleau-Ponty 1964d, 118).

We can say that an intercorporeal dialogue ensues between them. But on a closer note, we can qualify this interaction further. Even though I initially said that Helene's movements were following Line's as she demonstrates which strings to touch with which fingers, it is enticing to say instead that both of their movements are being led by the guitar. The guitar is what intertwines their movements and couples their bodies so that they are no longer separate, but embraced in a collective happening of playing the guitar.

The board game

One of the small café tables in the periphery of the common room is occupied by Hanna and Mads. Between them sits a board game filled with black and white circular pieces. They both lean over the table, looking intently at the board between them and taking turns in moving the pieces around. The only sound from the table is the soft clacking of the little black and white plastic pieces as they are being set down, moved, turned, or tossed aside. Neither Hanna nor Mads speak a word. 10 minutes, perhaps more, pass by as their arms successively move across the table, briefly pausing over different positions on the board, hovering hesitantly, diving down to make a move and finally withdrawing again to make room for the other person's arm already waiting at the opposite side of the table.

Perhaps, one might object, it is too obvious a claim that a board game leads the movements of its players. However, I think this obviousness is only apparent. The board game spells out and explicates what is at play in most, if not all social encounters.

My point is that objects draw our movements to them, unites them and facilitates their mutual participation. Thus, social interaction is something that takes place *out there*, between interacting bodies. When Merleau-Ponty describes intercorporeality as the formation of a system in which [...] the other's body and my own are a single whole, two sides of a single phenomenon [...]" (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 370); and

further, when he describes this intercorporeal system as one in which “[e]verything happens as if the other person’s intention inhabited my body, or as if my intentions inhabited his body.” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 191), we can add that this reversibility is achieved in and through communication with things.

In the following, I will suggest that the character of social interaction evident in the two examples above is not the behavioral expression of inner autistic social impairments. Rather, what the examples show is a difference in *style* of social engagement and interaction characteristic of autism.

Merleau-Ponty and the notion of style

The predominant context in which the concept of style is treated by Merleau-Ponty is the context of art and painting. Linda Singer (1981, 154) and Meirav Almog (2018, 15) argue that the context of art serves Merleau-Ponty’s purposes as a paradigm case of style from which he traces features that concern perception and expression. Styles of painting, being simultaneously forms of perception and expression, communicate what Singer (1981, 155) describes as a happening of meaning; or the way in which perceptual experience allows for the upsurge of significance. We can perhaps say that painting describes vision itself (Merleau-Ponty 1964b), and thus, a style of painting is “an extension of the body’s basic capacities to intentionally intertwine with the world.” (Singer 1981, 157).

In the case of perception and expression, we can say that style allows perceptual objects to present themselves as what they are.

This piece of wood is neither an assemblage of colors and tactile givens, nor even their total Gestalt; rather, something like a woody essence emanates from it, these “sensible givens” modulate a certain theme or illustrate a certain style that wood is, and that establishes an horizon of sense around this piece of wood and around the perception I have of it. (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 476)

Thus, style is what calls forth a primordial sense in perceptual experience, a meaning of the object that transcends its particular qualities and allows the wood to present itself as wood. As Almog notes, this style “is sensitive to carnal existence in the world.” (Almog 2018, 3). This sensitivity can be described through the way style allows the body to engage with the world in particular ways. The thing’s phenomenality is the thing expressing itself in a particular style, drawing the body to it in particular ways by affording particular modes of sensorimotor, material, practical, and social engagement.

At the same time, what constitutes the style of the thing, or the ‘woody-ness’ of the wood, is the body’s particular manner of engagement with the world,

[...] for it is not a purely mechanical movement of our body which is tied to certain muscles and destined to accomplish certain materially defined movements, but a general motor power of formulation capable of the transpositions which constitute the constancy of style. (Merleau-Ponty 1964c, 65)

What Merleau-Ponty calls the body’s *motor power* is a formulation or a mode of expression that stylizes the world in particular ways. Thus, style describes the relation between the thing’s appearing as what it is in perceptual experience, and the body’s mode of directing itself toward the world. In light of these considerations, we may ask, what is the relation in autism between the way the world presents itself in perceptual experience and the bodily styles of engagement that this world affords?

A style of autism

In recent years, it has been recognized that the world is experienced differently in autism. Although differences in sensory processing and experience are estimated to occur in 90% of autistic individuals (Robertson and Baron-Cohen 2017), these problems have only recently been recognized as integral to the autism spectrum (American Psychiatric Association 2013; World Health Organization 2018). One example is

provided by Johanne, a 26 year old woman with Asperger's Disorder. She describes her auditory experience of being at a family gathering in the following way,

It is like a constant blanket of sound that just keeps coming at you until you are totally disoriented. [...] You can't really get away, and it's like a sea, that just... It's just everywhere, and you can't get away.

This experience of the world as intrusive, overwhelming, demanding attention with almost violent intensity consistently permeates my informants' descriptions of social situations. At once, the world plunges forward, almost swallowing you up, and at the same time becomes strikingly unavailable and out of reach. When I ask how they handle these banal yet overwhelmingly stressful situations, some describe behavior that curiously embodies the self-enclosure and detachment that have been associated with autism since the 1940's.

According to Johanne,

I can get so distant and almost isolated from what happens around me because I just shut down. [...] I withdraw more into myself, stopping any interactions with others... or just shut down. Then I notice the sounds less, but I also notice less of what is going on around me.

In Johanne's case, the oppressiveness of sensory experience forces a sort of detachment, a turning away from the sensible world by withdrawing into one's own world. Another way of managing sensory stress, which is particularly interesting for my purposes in this paper, is described by Line, a 17 year old woman with Asperger's Disorder.

I try to focus on *something* different. It can be looking out the window, or looking down at a... the glass of water in front of me. [...] I don't know... Maybe it makes sense somehow, so I can calm down a little by focusing on some object and say 'okay, now it is *this* thing, which is important.'

In other words, Line willfully absorbs herself in a particular aspect of the sensory world. The glass of water standing in front of her at the dinner table comes to act as a sensory anchor maintaining her presence in a situation that relentlessly pushes her away. What is it that Line's glass of water does? And to what extent does it make sense to talk about objects doing anything at all? What I have just described is how the world, for autistic individuals, presents itself in a certain way, or with a certain style, and how this style affords a particular material and sensorial handling of the world. What, then, can we say now about social interaction in autism based on this analysis?

We can say that the board game and the guitar carry out the same work of centering and grounding perception and movement as Line's glass of water, of providing a basic sense of embodied presence in a hypersensory world. Although in the latter case, the water glass seems to divert Line's attention away from the social activity around her, there is still a sense in which it allows her to remain seated at the table and being minimally present in a way that conforms to the social norms of a dinner party. Thus, although the glass of water was a way to *tune out of* social interaction, and the board game and guitar were ways of *tuning in to* social interaction, the objects in each case serve as ways of regulating sensory experience and attuning to an overwhelming and chaotic social world. We can say that the guitar and the board game are not really objects *of* an interaction, but rather, they intertwine the interactants' movements, fuels their coupling, and stylizes the interactional process.

In addition, objects do not only have a material and sensory dimension, but also a normative one. There are established modes of engagement with guitars and board games, or ways of handling these objects in accordance with their respective techniques of playing. These normative practices are inextricable parts of the sense, or the style of the object and provide a framework within which to perceive, understand, and reciprocate the embodied and social gestures of the other person.

Thus, we can say that objects are both sensory and normative, and through these features, they provide particular kinds of action spaces that affords particular styles of interaction. We could even say that the objects should themselves be understood as part of the interactional process as constitutive elements that allow individuals to be realized as interactants in the first place.

Toward a material intercorporeality

What can we say about the relation between social interaction and materiality in light of this analysis? Thomas Fuchs and Hanne De Jaegher (2009, 465) describe social interaction from a phenomenological perspective as mutual incorporation, that is “a process in which the lived bodies of both participants extend and form a common intercorporeality.” According to Fuchs and De Jaegher, social interaction builds on a process of reversibility in which two bodies become the extension of each other. Thus, this account of social interaction ultimately relies on two bodies’ reciprocal and immediate directedness toward one another.

Here, autism provides an interesting challenge to the emphasis on face-to-face interaction pervading such phenomenological approaches to social interaction. Autistic interaction is a style *not* primarily driven by the direct embodied presence of the Other. Rather, the social encounter is mediated through engagement with the world of things. As we have seen, it was the guitar that intertwined the movements of Helene and Line, and it was the board game that facilitated the mutual coupling between Mads and Hanna. In these cases, it is not the body of the Other that is the ground of our mutual incorporation, as described by Fuchs and De Jaegher. In fact, it is the object that grounds our intercorporeal blending, it is the things of the world that facilitate and scaffold intersubjectivity.

Thus, social interaction proceeds and is realized through what we described as engagement with the world of things. On this basis, we can suggest the notion of *material* intercorporeality as a particular style, genre, or mode of social engagement particularly characteristic of autistic interaction, but generally fueling all social interactions to a greater or lesser extent. Recently, much attention has been granted to the way our cognitive processes are supported, realized, and even constituted by the physical world (Clark and Chalmers 1998; Malafouris 2013; Krueger and Maiese 2018). What Lambros Malafouris (2018) terms material engagement describes the process of thinking, feeling and acting *through* things, or ‘thinging’. The case and style of autism speaks persuasively to this point. In this case, social interaction and understanding is realized through engagement with things.

As a contrastive case (McGeer 2001; Krueger 2012; Gallagher 2005), autism draws attention to the entwinement of perception and bodily activity and demonstrates how shared perceptual and expressive styles informs the *how* of the systems that bodies form with each other. Importantly, autism also reminds us of the particularity and heterogeneity of modes of existence implied in Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of pathology. When Merleau-Ponty speaks of illness as “a complete form of existence” (2012, 110), it means that autism is in itself a meaningful style of being. Indeed, one could argue that autism as *pathology* only emerges in the clash between autistic and non-autistic ways modes of experience – what Damian Milton has described as the ‘double empathy problem’ (Milton 2012). Ultimately, approaching autism in this way allows for an understanding of pathology as a *difference* in style rather than a bad style in need of correction.

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