
Affects, Images and Childlike Perception: Self-Other Difference in Merleau-Ponty's Sorbonne Lectures

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I. Introduction: The critique of indistinction and its opposition

Since Shaun Gallagher collaborated with empirical psychologist Andrew Meltzoff on their 1996 article on Merleau-Ponty and recent development studies, it has become commonplace in Anglophone scholarship on Merleau-Ponty to question or even dismiss his claim in the Sorbonne lectures that the sense of self is developmentally acquired. Gallagher and Meltzoff argue that Meltzoff and Moore's studies on neonate imitation show newborn infants doing something that Merleau-Ponty is committed to claiming infants cannot do, namely, imitating the facial gestures of others directly after birth.¹ Imitation, they write, indicates that "the newborn infant is capable of a rudimentary differentiation between self and non-self," including not only "a primitive body schema," but also a "primitive body image" that must be innate in the sense that it is present before birth (Gallagher and Meltzoff 223).² "The youngest infant in the study," they write, "was just 42 minutes old at the time of the test. It is difficult to conceive of any stronger evidence for nativism than this" (221).³

However, in recent years Meltzoff and colleagues' work has inspired interesting and compelling opposition from Merleau-Ponty scholars. The most comprehensive rebuttal is Welsh's tightly argued and impressively researched 2006 article, "Do Neonates Display Innate

Self-awareness? Why Neonatal Imitation Fails to Provide Sufficient Grounds for Innate Self- and Other- Awareness.” It raises both empirical questions about the data from the original studies, as well as phenomenological questions about how we should interpret that data. Welsh marshals evidence against key tenets of the studies by Meltzoff and colleagues, first challenging whether the studies show imitation at all; and if they do, objecting to the claim that these results indicate the presence of “primitive” versions of phenomenological structures present in the goal-oriented imitative behaviors displayed in older children and adults. She argues that we must consider the possibility that neonate imitation is a phenomenologically unique mimetic behavior which requires a unique description and explanation, in particular one that does not depend on invoking the phenomenology of body image and the sort of self-other distinction implied in it.

As Welsh notes, insofar as Meltzoff and Moore’s studies successfully establish neonatal imitation, the claim that they demonstrate a neonatal *body schema* is relatively uncontroversial. The claim that they establish the presence of a *body image* is much more contested (Welsh 225).⁴ The inference to *nativism* has also drawn criticism. Lymer’s 2011 article, “Merleau-Ponty and the Affective Maternal-Foetal Relation,” challenges Meltzoff and colleagues’ equation of behaviors present at birth with behaviors that are “innate,” correcting for the neglect of the maternal body, pregnant experience, and *in utero* development in the accounts offered both by Merleau-Ponty and by Meltzoff and colleagues. She offers an account in which a maternal body schema inculcates fetal kinesthetic rhythms during gestation by means of an “affective bodily incorporation” of the fetus into the mother’s movements—for example, rocking to calm fetal distress (129).

Another familiar claim from imitation studies that has drawn compelling opposition is the assertion that the sort of body schema necessary for imitation is incompatible with self-other

indistinction. Taking a position that is especially interesting for its refusal to insist on the mutual exclusivity of self-other distinction and indistinction, Maclaren's 2008 article, "Embodied Perceptions of Others as a Condition of Selfhood?" criticizes work in phenomenology and recent developmental psychology that rejects notions of infant self-other indistinction and insists on distinct selfhood as an organizing feature of infant phenomenology.⁵ Maclaren explains that while it is uncontroversial among her interlocutors to concede that infants do not distinguish between their own and others' *minds*, the theorists she mentions share an interest in positing a specifically *perceptual* sense of distinct self in infants (66). While Maclaren does not directly engage with the work on imitation by Meltzoff and colleagues, their work clearly falls within this research program. Maclaren applauds the premium her interlocutors place on a notion of embodied, perceptual subjectivity, but objects that they have imported the Cartesian assumptions they hoped to abandon when they insist that the phenomenology of the embodied subject always involves a sense of self-possession or "mineness" and distinctness from others (67).

Maclaren offers her own argument in support of Merleau-Ponty's claim that the individuation of lived experience is not given from the start, but must develop. Analyzing a different set of empirical studies on infants' perceptual engagements, she concludes that especially but not exclusively for very young children, other people's sensory-motor orientations are directly perceivable, and the feelings and movements that make up those orientations are infectious. In a word, there exists a curious indistinction of the aspects of experience that traditional views regard as private, exclusive to myself or an other: "other people's intentionality orients us" (80). The attitudes and expressions of others can overtake me, so that to perceive them is to participate in them. This sort of indistinction, Maclaren argues, precedes and conditions the infant's perceptual sense of her own distinctness, but is not incompatible with it.

Indeed, it is participating in an other's orientation toward the infant that enables her to develop an orientation toward her self as such.

This critical work suggests a need for entertaining phenomenologies of infant and neonate behavior that share credit for the infant's movement with the influence of others—that is, that situate it within self-other indistinction. Meltzoff and colleagues may have too hastily dismissed the possibility that neonate imitation could be a co-authored behavior, a behavior that is produced by an intercorporeity. Because they observed repeated imitations that involved closer approximations, they concluded that imitation is a goal-oriented activity: that the infant is correcting its expression to more closely match the adult's.⁶ That implies a movement organized by a qualitative distinction between inside and outside, self and other, interoception and exteroception. They controlled for the possibility that the corrections they observed were responses to encouraging feedback from the adult.⁷ But this does nothing to control for the influence of the maternal body schema that Lymer describes. Nor does it control for the influence that interests Maclaren: the influence the very perception of the adult's expression exerts on the infant's own perception and movement.

Evidently, the debate about imitation would be well served by reopening the case for indistinction. But what precisely is meant by indistinction in Merleau-Ponty's sense of the term? Ironically enough, his account of indistinction in the Sorbonne lectures primarily features a description of imitation in infants (though not neonates): imitation is offered as a privileged example of something infants could not accomplish without a certain indistinction from others. Thus, in this paper I offer a reading of what Merleau-Ponty says about imitation. However, I will not produce a competing interpretation of Meltzoff and Moore's data. My own goal is to re-examine on its own terms what Merleau-Ponty meant by self-other "indistinction." Whether

confusing or convenient, much of what he said about that in the lecture in question can be found in a description of infant imitation. And this is no coincidence: it turns out that mimesis is a key dynamic of indistinction as he understands it.

What I discover is that it is crucial to understand both distinction and indistinction in terms of their *affective* significance. In the critical literature I have discussed above, affect is a theme as persistent as it is difficult to pin down: for Lymer, affect is the medium of the maternal body schema's influence over the material it incorporates. For Maclaren, sympathy is the means through which one person's attitudes and orientations can overtake and inhabit those of another. Welsh discusses alternative accounts of imitation that position it in one case as "affect-mirroring" and in another as affect "regulation" (228-230). The role of affect in this discussion clearly deserves more attention.

My contention is that what Merleau-Ponty calls self-other indistinction is a virtual or imaginary participation in others' embodied orientations including the felt and motor aspects of their experience, a participation that he defines as an affective phenomenon. Further, I contend that Merleau-Ponty's account of the advent of the body proper—the aspect of the body image that constitutes a perceptual sense of the body as a distinct and private space—theorizes that as an affective innovation. Rather than being a fact of which we at first are ignorant and gradually grow to recognize, distinction from others in the sense that is important to Merleau-Ponty is a situation that must be cultivated and maintained through the negotiation of affective distance and proximity. Again, affect plays a key role: it is in our adult affective attachments to others that we negotiate and cultivate self-other boundaries and intimacies. The affective dimension of adult relationships is a life-long project of working out the relation of distinction and indistinction.

One crucial conclusion we should draw from this for the debate about imitation and the child's sense of self and others is that insofar as self-other distinction and indistinction have been understood as mutually exclusive phenomenologies, we may be entertaining an over-simple notion of both. While given new impetus by Gallagher and Meltzoff's critique, the question of how to make sense of Merleau-Ponty's position on distinction and indistinction in this text has always been an issue in Anglophone scholarship on this lecture. Dillon's early article on the text notes that Merleau-Ponty is maintaining the coexistence of distinction and indistinction, but objects that that must be a mistake (89-90). I propose that understanding indistinction and distinction in terms of the affective forces that sustain them explains how it is possible for them to coexist.

II. Merleau-Ponty on the child's perception: Imitation as sympathy

Arguing against the classical account of the psyche, Merleau-Ponty invokes the problem of invisible imitation:

At a very early age children are sensitive to facial expressions, e.g., the smile. How could that be possible if, beginning with the visual perception of another's smile, he [sic] had to compare that visual perception of the smile with the movement that he himself makes...? This complicated process would seem to be incompatible with the relative precociousness of the perception of others. (PP 115, see also CPP 247)

Merleau-Ponty concludes that we cannot solve the puzzle if we suppose an original difference in kind between interoception and exteroception. The key feature of Merleau-Ponty's account of child perception is the indistinction or mixture of interoception and exteroception, such that the advent of adult proprioception is primarily characterized by a reorganization of the perceptual field that qualitatively distinguishes inner and outer zones.⁸ The child's perceptual field is not yet organized around a qualitative distinction between private and public parts of perception—those

that take place outside of bodies, and those that take place privately, inside bodies. The indistinction of self and other is for Merleau-Ponty a corollary of this indistinction of interoception and exteroception.

We can see why Merleau-Ponty thinks that this view of the phenomenology of child perception prevents the more intractable puzzle of invisible imitation from arising only if we understand that indistinction for him is not merely ignorance of distinction. For the child, perception really is a less private and intensely participatory experience. When the adult smiles at her, the child experiences not “an other person” (PP 116) in the adult sense of that expression, but rather a *conduct*, which is literally “transferred” (117) from the adult to the child through “sympathy” (120, 145-146). The child’s vision of the adult’s smile functions, Merleau-Ponty says, as a kind of “sympathy” that “grasp[s] directly in the other” (PP 115) the motor and affective *feeling* of the adult’s smile. Through this *sympathy*, the adult’s seen smile “speaks directly” to the child’s *felt* or interoceptive body (PP 117). The very perception of the other’s gesture is a perception, not only of its exteroceptive qualities, but of its “inward formulation”: “this perception is of such a nature,” he writes, “as to arouse in me the preparation of a motor activity related to it” (PP 146).

Sympathy is thus indistinction operating as an affective force that lends movement its infectious or contagious potency, allowing the infant to participate in what she sees, to *see* things in terms of how they *feel*. It is precisely because the body schema functions as a sympathetic indistinction of interoception and exteroception that no side-by-side, self-other comparison between the visual and motor smile is necessary. Sympathy inducts the child into the behavior she witnesses. For Merleau-Ponty, the claim that imitation requires a body schema is tantamount to the claim that imitation requires sympathetic indistinction.

There is some confusion in the literature about this passage and the surrounding text, in which Merleau-Ponty discusses the problem of invisible imitation. When Gallagher and Meltzoff argue that Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the phenomenology of imitation requires a body schema, the quote they use to establish his understanding of imitation—that in order to imitate, “it would be necessary for me to translate my visual image of the other's smile into a motor language” (PP 116)—is not Merleau-Ponty's own position, but one he describes in the course of attributing it to his classical interlocutors.⁹ He argues against this classical view in which the phenomenology of “translation” is not consistent with the precociousness of imitation. A body schema is needed to explain infant imitation, Merleau-Ponty argues, insofar as a body schema conducts a motor equivalency between perception and movement, including what will later be distinguished as interoception and exteroception, self and other, such that no effort of translation is initially necessary. Relying not on translation or comparison but on the affective force of sympathy, the body schema equates the seen smile with a felt one, so that the adult's smile offers the child not only a sight but also a feeling.¹⁰

Crucially, Merleau-Ponty claims that without sympathetic indistinction we cannot account not only for the precociousness of imitation, but also for the later experience of others as such. As adults whose perception has become organized according to a qualitative distinction between private and public spaces, between the interoceptive aspects of a perception that I feel “in here” and the exteroceptive aspects that I see “out there,” we think of the adult's smile as a spectacle whose felt aspects are private, and we create not only the puzzle of invisible imitation, but also the classical problem of the experience of others. Merleau-Ponty's solution is to say that the division between inside and outside that generates this problem is not as inflexible as the classical prejudices of psychology would have us believe. Without doubt, social life often

involves struggling to translate others' more complex and inscrutable conducts. But this cannot be the *earliest* experience of others. For in order to inspire such efforts on our part, others' appearances and movements must first distinguish themselves from mere spectacle by making themselves *felt as conducts*.

The earliest experience of others must not be an experience of the other *as other*, on the outside of an inside-outside divide. It must rather be the experience of a conduct that makes itself *felt* directly, through sympathy rather than translation or comparison. The earliest experience of the other must be a kind of induction into her attitudes and behaviors, such that I participate in the feelings her gestures radiate. Sympathy shows itself in gestures of imitation, a "[m]imesis" which, Merleau-Ponty writes, "is the ensnaring of me by the other, the invasion of me by the other; it is the attitude whereby I assume the gestures, the conducts, the favorite words, the ways of doing things of those whom I confront" (PP 145).

This aspect of Merleau-Ponty's work is what Maclaren invokes when she argues for a self-other indistinction in which "other people's intentionality orients us" (80). If Merleau-Ponty is right in his anti-Cartesian claim that the embodied status of intentionality means it is not hermetically private but rather tends to be directly perceivable, then when we say (for example) that we see someone looking at something, that need not be a euphemism for having *inferred* that they are looking. Rather, we can actually *see* them seeing. When "we pass someone on the sidewalk apprehensively gazing upwards, we tend to feel quite unreflectively moved to look upwards too" (79), Maclaren writes. This behavior, she argues, is not simply a matter of turning our attention. The other person's apprehensive upwards orientation "actually solicits in us the same apprehensive way of intending. It calls upon us to *participate virtually* in the other's intentionality" (79). Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's notion of indistinction as sympathy, Maclaren

argues that the infant's perception of an other inducts the infant into a determinate attitude or orientation—the one incarnated already by that other person. “When perceiving another,” Maclaren writes, “the other's intentionality sweeps us up and turns us away from the person herself, and towards that which she intends” (79).

Maclaren is drawing on Merleau-Ponty's implication that the imitating infant is not the author of the smile on her face. Instead, the *feeling* of a smile—in both the motor and affective sense of the word—is directly mobilized in the infant's body by her perceptual exposure to the smile she sees on the adult's face such that she participates in it (PP 115). Borrowing Scheler's phrase, Merleau-Ponty calls sympathy a “pre-communication” (PP 119, 146), mimesis rather than dialogue. This is the meaning of Merleau-Ponty's position (following Wallon) that there is a “‘postural impregnation’ of my own body by the conducts I witness” (PP 118, 145). Instead of striving to match the adult's expression, in the unguarded intimacy of the infant's sympathetic indistinction, the perception of the adult's smile possesses her with its felt qualities and summons its reflection in her features. In “mimesis,” Merleau-Ponty writes, “our perceptions arouse in us a reorganization of motor conduct, without our already having learned the gestures in question” (PP 145).

“[G]enuine communication” and the adult perception of others, Merleau-Ponty argues, would not be possible without this “transfer” of conduct found in pre-communicative sympathy (PP 118). Insofar as we become able to see others as such, to communicate dialogically and “smile back” when they smile, this is not only because we learn to see bodies as interiorities, private lives distinct and external to each other, but also because our adult vision of others still functions as sympathy. Just as Merleau-Ponty distinguishes “genuine communication” from “pre-communication,” he distinguishes “a genuine sympathy” that is “at least *relatively* distinct”

from the initial, childlike sympathy (PP 120). As adults, what we see others doing still functions to mobilize *feelings*—again in both the motor and affective sense—in our own bodies. But it works according to an “adult sympathy” that “occurs between ‘other’ and ‘other’; it does not abolish the differences between myself and the other.” Quite the contrary: “on the basis of this initial community ... there occurs a segregation, a distinction of individuals” (PP 119). And yet this segregation also does not abolish the indistinction between myself and the other, for it is “a process which, moreover ... is never completely finished.” Thus, even in the adult perception of others, there is still transfer: “conduct which I am able only to see,” Merleau-Ponty writes, “I live somehow from a distance” (PP 118).

Take note of that language of *distance*: Merleau-Ponty will describe the feeling of alterity, the learned and perpetually negotiated distinction between self and others, in terms of a “lived distance,” distinguishing it from the one-time discovery of a given and pre-determined boundary (PP 154). Not only does Merleau-Ponty think that child perception begins with an indistinction of self and other, he thinks adult experience continues to be a potentially disorienting mixture of distinction and indistinction, a “distance” that is “lived”; not fixed and discovered once and for all but negotiated. The “dizzying proximity of others” that characterizes child perception is “pushe[d] ... farther away rather than suppress[ed] ... altogether” (PP 154). We push others farther away (or draw them closer), we become people that are more or less intimate with and sensitive to particular people or contexts or issues, and in that sense the self-other distinction is quite real; but not as a brute or fixed fact, and not in a manner that is inconsistent with the persistence of indistinction.¹¹

In his influential study of the body image, Schilder notes that manifestations of both motion and emotion have a tendency to provoke similar reactions in others (244, 245). He

accounts for most forms of this mimetic behaviour by theorizing a contagious potential he calls sympathy that constitutes the expressive force of motions and emotions (243-245).¹² If we understand Merleau-Ponty's notion of sympathy through Schilder's, then it is no accident that imitation is chosen to exemplify it, since sympathy as Schilder theorizes it is a fundamentally mimetic force.¹³

The type of mimetic behavior Schilder associates especially with the behavior of children, crowds and animal groups he calls a "sympathetic induction of emotion and feeling ... [or] of an affective state" (244). As in Merleau-Ponty's lecture, Schilder also uses the example of the infectious smile: "the sight of a smiling face," he writes, "provokes a smile" through a kind of induction of the feeling, even when the child is "at an age at which they cannot be credited with understanding ... the significance of the expression that provokes their reactions" (244). He notes that adults also have "sympathetic reactions" of this sort: "[a] merry face makes us feel brighter" (244). Laughter and crying are notoriously infectious in this same manner: we may laugh or cry along with others even when we have no idea what the fuss is about.

Though he distinguishes them as different varieties of imitation, Schilder compares this sympathetic induction of emotions to motor mimesis, in which the sight of someone's movement prepares a motor version of the gesture in "one's own body, which, like all motor representation, tends to realize itself immediately in movements" (244). Thus for Schilder, both motions and emotions are fundamentally promiscuous, incontinent, infectious. They *solicit* induction, repetition, analogic amplification. Indeed, contemporary studies support the suggestion of a close relationship between emotional contagion and motor mimicry (Hatfield et al. 97).

Both Schilder and Merleau-Ponty claim that the body schema in its initial form is an intercorporeal system rather than something that is privately owned. Schilder theorizes that,

rather than relying on them already being in place, imitating emotional expressions of others conditions the cultivation of the perceiver's body schema and body image, as well as her perception of others as such. "[T]he postural model of the body is dependent on what we see and experience in others," he writes (248).¹⁴ Schilder even claims that "[o]ur own emotions and those of other persons and their expressions are never isolated" (246), and that the imitation of another person's movements relies on "the partial community of the body-image" (247). Thus, for Schilder, sympathetic mimesis is a crucial means through which the child develops proprioceptive structures—structures which are themselves intercorporeal achievements. Similarly, when Merleau-Ponty returns to a discussion of mimesis later in the lecture emphasizing that it operates through sympathy, he says that sympathy relies on a body schema or "postural function" that is not private, not owned by the child's body personally, but is rather an intercorporeal system "unit[ing] my body, the other's body, and the other himself [sic]" (145).

In order to understand these claims, we must distinguish between two stages and functions of the body schema: one which is intercorporeal, and one which is proprioceptive. At first the body schema serves as a system of equivalencies between perception and movement. It is only after the assumption of the body image, when the body schema must adapt to incorporate the body proper, that it develops to include a felt sense of qualitative distinction between interoception and exteroception. And it is only in this adapted variation that the body schema functions as proprioception narrowly construed. So for instance, I can coordinate the movements of my legs with themselves or in response to my environment without having a sense of my legs as my *own*.

When he introduces the concept of the body schema in this lecture, Merleau-Ponty asserts that "my body ... is first and foremost a *system* whose different interoceptive and exteroceptive

aspects express each other reciprocally” (117). But he distinguishes between a “fragmentary” (PP 123, CPP 249) and a “total body schema” (CPP 249).¹⁵ It is only insofar as the body schema incorporates into perception and movement a qualitative inside-outside distinction that it functions as proprioception in the narrow sense of the term, indicating in the perceptual field a feeling of oneness, a distinction of one’s own body as an inner, closed, or insular zone bordered by a perceptual frontier. To have a body schema that reciprocally expresses interoception as exteroception and vice versa is not necessarily to have a body schema that distinguishes them as such.

Merleau-Ponty’s reference to a period before the body schema is “total” posits a time before the body schema has incorporated interoception as a totality, a closed and insular interior domain separated from the domain of exteroception and given the special and exclusive status of “mine.” The earliest form of the body schema that Merleau-Ponty posits, and that he attributes to the imitating infant, is a body schema that conducts the reversibility of perception and movement, which will only later be qualitatively distinguished as interoception and exteroception (when it will continue to function as a conductor between them such that they “reciprocally express” or stand in for each other). It does not yet distinguish them into private and public zones. As I will argue in the concluding section, that will require an affective investment in a body image.

Understanding this early form of the body schema is the key to understanding Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of child perception as sympathetic indistinction. It is because exteroceptions actually function as interoceptions and vice versa, rather than merely being confused with each other, that the child “live[s] in the facial expressions of the other” (PP 146). Child perception is characterized by a “ubiquity” (PP 129, 139) or “*identity at a distance*” (PP

139), a coexistence of interoceptions in multiple places on the perceptual field at once. Interoception for her has not yet fixated on what she will later feel to be its privileged location: her *own* body, *le corps propre*.

III. Interoception, exteroception, and imagination as adult sympathy

So what becomes of that first function of the body schema in adult perception? In “Eye and Mind,” Merleau-Ponty recounts an experience of the mirror image borrowed from Schilder. “[S]moking a pipe before a mirror,” he writes, “I feel the sleek, burning surface of the wood not only where my fingers are but also in those ghostlike fingers, those merely visible fingers inside the mirror” (168)¹⁶ As Schilder tells the tale:

I sit about ten feet away from a mirror holding a pipe ... I press my fingers tightly against the pipe ... [and w]hen I look intently at the picture of my hand in the mirror I now feel clearly that ... sensation of pressure... not only in my actual hand but also in the hand in the mirror ... [T]he body is also present in my picture in the mirror. (223-224)¹⁷

As bizarre as this doubling of one’s felt sense of place sounds, it is readily repeatable. For instance, executing complex motor tasks using a mirror—like shaving or applying make-up—requires coordination between two sets of motor feelings: one that takes place in my actual fingers, and another that takes up residence in the phantom fingers in the mirror.

Schilder’s mirror experience betrays a weakness in the hold the body proper’s felt insularity exerts over the organization of our adult perceptions. It allows us a glimpse into what perception was like prior to the advent of the body proper, but it also reveals an undercurrent of adult perception in which the childlike felt sense of place is still at large, possessed of a mobility that is the adult form of “*ubiquity*” (PP 139).¹⁸ The mirror image is crucial in this Sorbonne lecture, not only because of the mirror stage, but also because the mirror image, Merleau-Ponty

writes in that lecture, “even for the adult ... is mysteriously inhabited by me” (PP 132). For Merleau-Ponty the mirror stage, like the reduction, cannot be completed. The mirror’s ability to mobilize the child’s interoceptions so that they cathect on a privileged location as *her own* depends on its ability to solicit the child’s sympathy, offering her “a ‘phantom’ life in the mirror” (PP 134). It is this function of the mirror Merleau-Ponty is emphasizing when he writes that just as the child “feels that he [sic] is in the other’s body ... he feels himself to be in his visual image” (PP 134).

Both Merleau-Ponty and Schilder claim that we can witness this ubiquity in adult life, not only in perceiving ourselves in the mirror, but also in perceiving others and the world around us. Merleau-Ponty’s late essay “Eye and Mind” is dedicated to arguing that depth perception is only possible on the basis of this ubiquity.¹⁹ The things I merely *see*, Merleau-Ponty writes, are also *felt*: they “have an internal equivalent in me; they arouse in me a carnal formula of their presence” (“Eye and Mind” 164). This “carnal formula” conditions the emergence of perceptual depth. It enables perceived objects to appear in terms of their hidden sides. It supplies the force of the feeling Merleau-Ponty calls the perceptual faith: the feeling that perception has placed me in the presence of the real.

Thus the development of the body schema into a means of proprioception in the adult sense does not extinguish the first function of the body schema—indeed, it depends upon it. To perceive my surroundings in terms of possible movements I could undertake in them is precisely for the space I see to become populated with vaguely felt phantom movements; to “have a feel” for a space I merely see. But as an adult, the virtual or imaginary presence of the body in potential movements and orientations is qualitatively distinguished from the perceptual presence of the body in its actual movements and orientations. Insofar as the reciprocal expression

between interoception and exteroception the body schema performs in adult perception functions as proprioception, the interocepted feeling of my surroundings in terms of potential positions and movements is sharply distinguished from my sense of my *actual* position and movements. If it becomes conspicuous, their reversibility in experiences like the one I describe—an implicit sense of the surrounding space that consists of phantom movements that I could perform in it—will feel like a haunting of space, an imagination distinguished from perception proper. Thus part of what it means to claim that child perception involves an indistinction of interoception and exteroception is that for the child, the distinction between imagination and perception has not yet been made. This is indeed also a claim that Merleau-Ponty makes in the Sorbonne lectures (CPP 176-182): not only that childlike perception involves “a partial absence of the distinctiveness between the real and the imaginary” (CPP 182), but also that even in adult perception, “this distinction cannot be maintained absolutely” (CPP 181).

The interoceptive sense of things that are nonetheless experienced as outside, attributed to child perception and found again in adult experiences such as Schilder’s mirror experience, is that “imaginary texture of the real” Merleau-Ponty speaks of in his famous final essay (“Eye and Mind” 165). When Merleau-Ponty writes there that “the word ‘image’ is in bad repute,” he means that we fail to understand imagination if we see it only through adult eyes: as mere illusion, an inner copy of the world projected back onto it by the self, paling before veridical exteroception, veridical contact with the outside (164). “[W]e have thoughtlessly believed,” he writes, “that a design was a tracing, a copy, a second thing, and that the mental image was such a design, belonging among our private bric-a-brac” (164). Instead, in that text and in that later period of his work, the term “image” achieves the sense of a perception animate with interoceptive textures. Imagination trades in the affective tissue of perception; it is the means in

adult life through which what we merely see *moves us*, the means through which it has affective force, a felt purchase on our own moving bodies. But that sense of the term is already being prepared in the Sorbonne lectures, where Merleau-Ponty writes that “[t]he image is not an enfeebled perception” (CPP 176); that “what is called *imagination* is an emotional conduct” (PP 98), that “imagination ... [is] an *affective* and *motor* phenomenon” (CPP 178). Imagination, in other words, is the adult form of sympathy: that “genuine sympathy” that hesitates to affirm itself as perception, distances itself from perception in order to make space for difference and dialogue.

The adult mode of this childhood indistinction of exteroception and interoception is an experience of their reversibility, where exteroceptions function as interoceptions and vice versa. That reversibility, Merleau-Ponty argues in “Eye and Mind,” is the mode of perception that the painter taps into when she paints: by “lending his [sic] body to the world” (162), the artist “liberates the phantoms captive in it” (167). The painter’s gaze is an exteroception that functions as an interoception; and that, by painting what she sees, lets that interoception function in its turn as an exteroception, a way to see the canvas. Though the advent of the body proper represses it, to see is not merely to *be in here* and *look out there*; it is also to haunt the whole sphere of perception. In the experience of looking, I can find in what I merely *see* qualities that I otherwise treat as inward qualities, as things that must be *felt* from within. Though the advent of the body proper identifies the felt sense of place, the interoceptive body, as *inner*, even in adult experience the feeling body, the interoceptive body, is not contained within the boundaries that have captivated it. And this is why “even for the adult the image is never a simple reflection of the model; it is, rather, its ‘quasi-presence’” (PP 133), animated with interoceptive feelings, that mobilize its affective force and let it appear as a kind of physiognomy.

IV. Conclusion: The affective assumption of the image

Crucial to understanding Merleau-Ponty's position about child perception as indistinction is that *the indistinction he speaks of is not only a spatial indistinction, but an affective one*. It is not just a failure to make a spatial distinction. It is rather an affective intimacy: an unguarded tendency to induct affects. This is why Merleau-Ponty insists that childhood indistinction is not "egocentri[sm]" (PP 119). The child is not simply attributing to others feelings that really belong to her. Indeed, she has no feelings that are properly her *own*. Thus, to incorporate the self-other distinction into perception is not only to begin experiencing *spaces* as yours vs. mine, it is also to begin experiencing *feelings* as yours vs. mine.

Merleau-Ponty's account of child perception follows Henri Wallon's very closely until the pivotal mirror stage, when he rejects Wallon's description in favor of a more Lacanian one that privileges its "affective significance" (PP 137). In this stage, the child is supposed to learn to see the mirror image in the adult manner, withdrawing her interoceptive participation in it so that the image no longer enjoys its own spatiality, but instead serves to indicate her own body as the privileged headquarters of all her perceptions. Wallon, Merleau-Ponty reports, treats this as an intellectual development: as the child learns how the mirror works, she comes to understand it as a reflection. But he objects that this approach fails to appreciate "the affective significance of the phenomenon."

One part of what Merleau-Ponty means by this is that an *affective force* must be mobilized in order for the child to invest her embodied perspective in a body image. In order to feel the image as her *own*, it is not enough that the child learns the facts about reflective surfaces. What occurs in the mirror stage, Merleau-Ponty writes, "is the acquisition not only of a new content but of a new function as well: the narcissistic function" (PP 136).²⁰ She must become

“capt[ivated]” by the image, devoted to it (PP 137). This requires cathexis: *attachment* in the affective sense of the word. Her interoceptive, feeling body must be “confiscat[ed]” by this visible one, so that her interoceptions now feel shaped by the surfaces of the image. The visible image of her body in the mirror and her interoceptivity migrate into one another, so that her visible body becomes a *body image*: an imaginary exteroception present whether or not she is looking in the mirror. Furthermore, this imaginary exteroception is *intercepted*, and indeed captivates her interoceptive body, so that for the first time the child is “distance[d]” from the desires and feelings immediately available in her present perceptual situation, and becomes “orient[ed] ... toward what he [sic] sees or imagines himself to be.” (So again in the pivotal case of the body image, we see imagination cast as that adult form of sympathy, the one that includes distance.) The development at issue here, the transformation wrought in the child’s perception, is not primarily an intellectual acquisition, but an affective investment.

But the emphasis on the “affective significance” of the transformation is an emphasis, not only on the role of affect as means and medium of the development, but also on the affective results of this development. The transformation changes the way the child feels feelings. It introduces “a sort of wall between me and the other: a partition” (PP 120). But this “wall” or “partition” is not only a partition in the child’s experience of spaces. It also reorganizes her experience of affects. “There is no longer,” Merleau-Ponty writes, “that dizzying proximity of others” (PP 154). Instead a “‘lived distance’ divides us,” allowing room to perceive others’ feelings without them encroaching on the intimate space of my *own* feelings.

But just as the mirror is a lasting reservoir for the experience of ubiquity it helped to suppress, it is in “the realm of feelings” that the childlike indistinction and mixture of self and other persists most tenaciously (PP 155). Love, for instance, forges between people “an

undivided situation” akin to that of childhood, joining me to an other such that I “suffer from her suffering” (PP 154). Affective forces carve into relief the imaginary geography of perception that allows me to say “this is mine, this is yours.” And just so, affective forces can forge intercorporeal situations in which these boundaries are once again fully at stake, situations in which “[o]ne can no longer say ‘This is mine, this is yours’” (PP 154) If affective forces intervened to institute a felt sense of privacy in one’s body, then whether for better or for worse, they retain a power to renegotiate it.

Thus on Merleau-Ponty’s account of the phenomenology of child perception, not only is the self-other distinction an affective development rather than an innate possession, it is also not a terminal accomplishment. In our valid concern with the politics of difference, we might choose to protect self-other boundaries at an ontological level, or by positing them as fixed phenomenological structures. Merleau-Ponty’s notion of “indistinction” offers us an opportunity to reflect on the possibility that in fact our boundaries have to be negotiated and protected at an interpersonal and intercorporeal level. It is possible, he suggests, to really undo my boundaries in a relationship; for better or worse, to re-introduce that “dizzying proximity” with an other, and genuinely lose my bearings on what is my own. Not only our spatial boundaries but also our affective ones are vulnerable and negotiable. Adult sociality and difference is an imaginary geography whose contours surface in the circulating currents of affective forces. The assumption of the body image institutes a phenomenological structure for addressing a question of distinction which is never finally answered.

If Merleau-Ponty is right that distinction and indistinction coexist, this opens an intriguing set of questions about how to understand intercorporeal difference and the experience of alterity. In my view, by the end of Merleau-Ponty’s lecture some tension has accrued between

the model of alterity as a “wall” or “partition,” and the model that casts it as a “lived distance.” If it is true that our relations with others as such will always involve a certain amount of sympathy, and that there is fundamental structural instability in the experience of self-other difference as a “wall,” that feeling of absolute integrity our sense of privacy can sometimes presume; then it follows that the wall, the border or partition, is not the right model for all of our experience of intercorporeal difference. There must be an operation of differentiation in childhood and in intimate adult relationships that is not finally or fully describable as the parsing of territories, the assertion “this is mine, this is yours.” There must be a more intimate dynamic of difference that accommodates the micropolitics of the negotiations that transpire when the question of boundary has been relaxed, a differentiation that gives rise to—perhaps consists of—the many variations and mixtures of affective intensity and valence through which the intimacy of a relationship is incarnated; a differentiation that is not a matter of drawing borders, but rather persists and even thrives in even the most intimate, shared space.

Notes

¹ See Gallagher and Meltzoff (212). See also Meltzoff and Moore (“Imitation of facial and manual gestures,” “Newborn infants,” “Imitation in newborn,” *Infant Development*). The Merleau-Ponty text in question is referenced in two versions, both translations of transcripts compiled from student notes. The version published in *The Primacy of Perception* will hereafter be cited as PP; the version published in *Child Psychology and Pedagogy: The Sorbonne Lectures 1949-1952* will hereafter be cited as CPP.

² What is significant about this dual claim is that while the body schema is a system of motor capability—that is, a system of motor equivalencies between perception and movement (thus, between movements that are seen and movements that are undergone or felt, or between a moving body and the motor possibilities afforded to it by its situation)—the body image includes the perceptual experience of one’s body as *one’s own*. That is, body image experience is proprioceptive awareness in the narrowest sense: a body image is always of a body proper. Merleau-Ponty’s lecture posits a body schema from the time that he thinks external perception begins—thus, he already thinks that as long as there exists external and internal perception to be

coordinated, that coordination is underway. However, he says that this body schema is “fragmentary” and only gradually becomes “total” (CPP 247-249, PP 115-123), meaning that it does not at first involve the integrated consciousness of one’s body as one’s own that is part of the development of body image. Welsh points out that the attribution of a body image to the neonate is a considerably more controversial claim (225).

³ Gallagher’s 2005 book, *How the Body Shapes the Mind*, especially the third chapter “The Earliest Senses of Self and Others,” repeats the criticism of Merleau-Ponty made in the co-authored 1996 article, bringing it to an even wider audience of scholars in Phenomenological Philosophy and Cognitive Science.

⁴ See also endnote 2. To elaborate on the part of Meltzoff and colleagues’ critique of Merleau-Ponty that has been received with little controversy: following the empirical studies of his day, Merleau-Ponty reports that in the neonatal phase, infant neurophysiology is not equal to the task of correlating interoception and exteroception, perceptions of internal states and of external things (see PP 121-123, also CPP 248-249). Since correlating interoception and exteroception is the work of the body schema, for Merleau-Ponty there was an initial neonatal phase prior to body schematic functioning. This is the basis for Meltzoff and Moore’s largely uncontroversial claim that, as his text stands, Merleau-Ponty cannot account for imitation in the youngest infants. Insofar as Meltzoff and Moore’s empirical studies demonstrate that in fact, even infants under an hour old are able to imitate adult facial gestures, then this aspect of the correction they offer is an open-shut case (see Meltzoff and Moore “Imitation of facial and manual gestures,” “Newborn infants,” “Imitation in newborn infants”; though again note that there exist challenges to this result: see Welsh 227-231). Anything rightly called imitation would certainly require a coordination of exteroception and interoception, vision and motility. In fact, without a functioning body schema, a newborn infant would only be able to *see* an adult’s face in the weakest sense of the verb (see PP 122, see also CPP 249). Insofar as what Meltzoff and Moore observed in neonates is in fact imitation properly so called, infants’ exteroceptive capabilities and the coordination of these with their interoceptive capabilities must be capable of mimetic behavior, and they must in fact have a body schema. However, according to my reading of the Sorbonne lectures, so far this correction is of small consequence for Merleau-Ponty. In fact, the claim that there is an initial neonatal phase in which interoception and exteroception are not yet correlated can be excised from his account as a friendly amendment. For this correction fits well with his account of child perception as characterized primarily by an *indistinction* of interoception and exteroception, such that the advent of adult proprioception constitutes a reorganization of perception that distinguishes interoception and exteroception, with the distinction of self and other as corollaries. Indeed, as I read him it was awkward for Merleau-Ponty to maintain along with his contemporaries that the initial neonatal phase involves the absence of exteroception and the non-integration of interoception and exteroception—in other words, the absence of any body schema to speak of. If we must posit interoception and exteroception as co-present from birth in order to account for neonate imitation, then so much the better for Merleau-Ponty’s account of child perception as characterized by their indistinct co-presence. The much stronger and more contentious claim that Meltzoff and colleagues make is that neonate imitation involves, not only a body schema, but also a body image. A body image includes a body proper: a sense of one’s body as the bordered and private space of a self.

⁵ Maclaren positions her paper as a critical response to Zahavi's work, as well as that of three developmental psychologists (see Maclaren 64).

⁶ See for example Gallagher and Meltzoff (222-223).

⁷ See for example Meltzoff and Moore, *Infant Development* (172).

⁸ See PP (133-134), see also CPP (253). Note that the two English translations of Merleau-Ponty's lecture differ on their spelling of "interoception" and "exteroception." I use Welsh's spelling from the 2010 translation. When citing Cobb's translation, I preserve his spelling (the second vowel does not appear).

⁹ See PP (116), quoted in Gallagher and Meltzoff (220-221), and again in Gallagher (69).

¹⁰ I do not have space to explore it here, but I think there is an interesting resonance between this claim about sympathy and the body schema and Lymer's suggestion that affect is the medium of the maternal body schema's incorporating influence.

¹¹ For an opposing interpretation, see Dillon, the early important piece of anglophone scholarship on this lecture that I mentioned earlier. Dillon argues that Merleau-Ponty must have been wrong to posit the breakdown of syncretic sociability well after the advent of specular experience, since syncretic sociability is characterized by indistinction while specular experience is characterized by distinction, and thus they must be mutually exclusive.

¹² The outlier is a more voluntary, conscious type of imitation.

¹³ I have suggested comparing them on the basis of the parallels between their concepts; also, as I explain in the next section, references to Schilder on related topics continue to appear in Merleau-Ponty's later work. Yet since they wrote during roughly the same period, we might also take an interest in the puzzle of how the directions of influence actually ran at the time. Since *The Image and Appearance of the Human Body* was published in 1950, the year Merleau-Ponty gave his lecture on the child's relations with others, it would no doubt be anachronistic to cite that work as the precedent for Merleau-Ponty's discussion of sympathy in the lecture I am discussing here. He must have been familiar with it by the time he wrote "Eye and Mind," since he there recounts an anecdote of Schilder's that appears in the 1950 book. However, he may have encountered key concepts and claims of Schilder's—and perhaps the anecdote as well—much earlier through the work Schilder published in German. While *Image* was Schilder's first major work to be written in English and the one circulated most widely as well as most remembered in subsequent decades, we must not forget that Schilder had been publishing on related topics in German for decades. It is known Merleau-Ponty was already familiar with that work at the time he taught at the Sorbonne, since he cites it in *The Phenomenology of Perception*. Schilder is also said to have influenced Lhermitte, whose *L'Image de notre corps* Merleau-Ponty cites on relevant topics in the Sorbonne lecture under discussion. But no doubt the most direct influence on Merleau-Ponty's notion of sympathy and mimesis (second to Wallon himself) was Max Scheler. See Scheler's discussion of mimetic behavior, sympathy, and "fellow-feeling" in the

early chapters of *The Nature of Sympathy*. As I have already mentioned in noting the distinction between communication and “pre-communication,” Merleau-Ponty cites Scheler in the relevant section of the lecture.

¹⁴ The full quote runs: “Emotions are in themselves connected with expressions and are in themselves connected with the emotions of others. We perceive ... their expressions which are expressions of emotions, and emotions are emotions of personalities. These are primary data. They are not secondary to the building up of our own postural model of the body, and I have shown in detail how much the postural model of the body is dependent on what we see and experience in others” (247-48).

¹⁵ See PP 115-123, especially 123: “The consciousness of one’s own body is thus fragmentary at first and gradually becomes integrated.” See also CPP 247-249: “No total body schema yet exists,” and “[c]onsciousness of one’s own body is first of all fragmentary” (249).

¹⁶ The full quote continues: “The mirror’s ghost lies outside my body, and by the same token my own body’s ‘invisibility’ can invest the other bodies I see. Hence my body can assume segments derived from the body of another, just as my substance passes into them: man [sic] is a mirror for man” (“Eye and Mind” 168, see also *Schilder* 223-224, 278).

¹⁷ The full quote runs: “I sit about ten feet away from a mirror holding a pipe or a pencil in my hand and look into the mirror. I press my fingers tightly against the pipe and have a clear-cut feeling of pressure in my fingers. When I look intently at the picture of my hand in the mirror I now feel clearly that the sensation of pressure is not only in my fingers in my own hand, but also in the hand which is twenty feet distant in the mirror. Even when I hold the pipe in such a way that only the pipe is seen and not my hand, I can still feel, though with some difficulty, the pressure on the pipe in the mirror. This feeling is therefore not only in my actual hand but also in the hand in the mirror... the body is also present in my picture in the mirror. Not only is it the optic picture but it also carries with it tactile sensation. My postural model of the body is in a picture outside myself. But is not every other person like a picture of myself?” (*Schilder* 223-224).

¹⁸ See also the description of this mirror experience in the Sorbonne lecture: “the body is at once present in the mirror and present at the point where I feel it tactually” (PP 139-140). See also CPP 251.

¹⁹ The term “ubiquity” reappears in “Eye and Mind” (170).

²⁰ See also CPP 254.

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