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Haptic Skepticism: The Crisis of (Not) Touching

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The last three years spanned two global events that centered around the crisis of (not) touching: the #MeToo movement and the Covid-19 pandemic. These two very different crises exposed deep cultural assumptions concerning the right to touch. They equally revealed the difficulty of making ethical judgements in the ambiguous zones inherent to touch-relations.

The disruptive character of crisis is an opportunity for transformed practices that bring us into touch with others and the world. But such transformation depends on our response to crisis. In both the contexts of #MeToo and the current pandemic, the disruption of cultures of touch incites two kinds of responses. Some individuals feel that their rights are under attack and respond by clinging tighter to, what I call, “haptic dogmatism”: deep-seated attitudes and practices involving touch as well as the unwillingness to question touch when it is thrown into crisis. Others, perhaps for the first time, find themselves in a space of genuine uncertainty regarding how to navigate touch-relations. Whereas the dogmatic response to the crisis of touch closes the possibility for transformed relations, the skeptical practice of dwelling with the experience of uncertainty is where an ethics of touch begins.



John F. Marok, Pandemic Lovers, 2020, used with permission from the artist

I first developed the concept of “haptic skepticism” in 2017 as a research associate at the Universität Hamburg as part of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft project “**Jewish Scepticism.**” The study of haptic skepticism pursues two questions: What kinds of personal or shared haptic experiences throw us into crisis? What kinds of responses to the crisis of touch allow for transformation: the transformation of those who experience crisis, of those with whom we come into touch, and of touch itself as a mediator between self and others?

The traditional goal of research is to test theories in response to the questions we pose. But ethical practice that takes insight from skepticism aims to sustain

questioning. The ethical scope of haptic skepticism at first seems to question very intimate and personal experiences. Yet the crisis of touch reveals a direct connection between our personal experience, political landscapes, and ethical responsibility to our global existence. At this historical moment, the ethical imperative to continually question the rightness of one's touch—in each instance—has global consequences.

Philosophical skepticism not only questions the reliability of the sense of touch as a tool to test what we can know through touch or about touch. It equally investigates how haptic encounters—experiences of coming into touch with other people, things, and ourselves—can cause us to radically question what we believe to be true. Touch can shake our fundamental orientation in the world. Ancient skepticism describes the deeply personal crisis that can occur when our sensory experience brings us into conflict. The crisis of contradictory haptic experiences may result from conflicting sensations, conflicts between our sensations and cultural values, and conflicting cultures of touch within a single society.

Many experiences of touch can lead us into the crisis of being split between two equally compelling but contradictory positions. The Pyrrhonian skeptics called this crisis equipollence (*isostheneia*), often referring to the experience of undecidability between two epistemological or metaphysical propositions or appearances. However, equipollence may also be bodily: the experience of two contrary sensations that are equally powerful. Sextus Empiricus offers the example of pleasure and pain. Whereas Socrates argues that pain often follows pleasure as pleasure follows pain (*Phd 57a–61c*), Sextus points out that pleasure and pain may be experienced with equal intensity in the same moment in response to a single stimulus (*PH III 194–197*). The paradox of haptic sensation reveals itself in the capacity to feel pleasure in pain or pain in pleasure.

Another way that the experience of touch throws us into the crisis of equipollence is by bringing our sensations into conflict with our internalized cultural values regarding touch. When we take pleasure in experiences that defy cultural norms surrounding touch, we enter a risky zone. The consequence can be devastating when one's community exercises its power to shame through tactics ranging from gossip to excommunication. Yet the consequence may be immensely rewarding when touch yields sensations so profound that they cause our deepest commitments to quiver. These two experiences often coincide, throwing an individual's relationship to her own touching—to the way she comes into touch with the world—into the crisis of equipollence, splitting her sense of self in two.

Prohibitions against touching as well as imperatives to touch may seem to strengthen the unity of a community, protecting its members from the risks inherent to touch-

relations. The Hebrew scriptures, for example, offer clear instructions regarding who may (not) touch, what to (not) touch, when to (not) touch, and how to (not) touch. The law arguably leaves little room for deviation in practices of touching. Yet, the Hebrew scriptures also offer many examples of touch that transgress the law. Uzzah is struck dead when he impulsively reaches out to catch the forbidden Ark of the Covenant (2 Sam. 6:1-7). In contrast, the prophet Elisha is rewarded when he transgresses the prohibition against touching a corpse in order to resurrect a child (2 Kings 4:34). Risky touch with uncertain outcomes can have the consequence of life or death.

To touch according to custom or law expresses fidelity to one's community and even to one's God. However, acts of defiant touching may equally express radical faith. In the context of pandemic, some communities view the insistence of traditional social gatherings and touch-oriented rituals as such acts of radical fidelity. The [funeral of Rabbi Chaim Mertz](#), for example, attracted over 2,500 mourners in Brooklyn this April during mandated lockdown, inciting conflict between the Hasidic community and the state and, [as some reported](#), within the community. Similar religious and secular events occur all over the world, [calling into question](#) the imperative to preserve tradition against the imperative to create new forms of coming together even in isolation.

When overlapping guidelines and restrictions on touch come into conflict, ethical action becomes seemingly impossible. To paraphrase Hegel's analysis of tragedy ([LPR 353](#)), a touch that is right according to one ethical framework (reflecting one's religious or familial values) is found guilty according the logic of another (reflecting state regulation or scientific recommendations for global safety).

The crisis of touch not only highlights contradiction between cultures or within one society. It highlights the tension between our personal and political existence, which cannot be untangled. The Covid-19 pandemic is experienced as a personal crisis because its threat lurks in our everyday interactions: in every handshake and each time that I touch my own face. As a consequence, what is often framed today as [a conflict between religion and science over recommended practices of touch](#) have become simultaneously localized as a deeply personal issue and universalized as a conflict belonging to all. Local events that seem to disregard the expert advice of epidemiologists, as in the case of Rabbi Mertz's highly politicized funeral, incite international outrage directed both against scientific and government regulations and against those who appear to defy them. Personal crisis reveals itself as a world-political conflict, while political conflicts, which may appear to be unrelated to us, suddenly touch us directly.

The realization that our personal experiences of touch have universal impact adds to

the ethical weight of our individual choices without necessarily offering ethical clarity regarding the best practices of (not) coming into touch. Yet, when society and our ethical frameworks prove to be conflicted, we must face the crisis of making a choice in the space of ambiguity: to touch or not to touch? I am wholly convinced of my ethical obligation to stay at home; I am equally convinced of my responsibility to join mass protests against inequality and oppression. Is the equipollence of desire and conviction a barrier to navigating a lived ethics of touch?

The crisis highlighted by the study of haptic skepticism is not a Cartesian thought experiment. It is an event that knocks us off our feet, disorienting our grasp on the world. As Simone de Beauvoir argues in “*The Aesthetic Attitude*” chapter of *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, allowing ourselves to fully experience the shock of crisis is the condition for ethical responsiveness to the unique demands and horrors of our present moment (p. 83). Pyrrhonian skepticism ultimately seeks tranquility by relieving us from the responsibility of decision in the face of uncertainty. De Beauvoir, in contrast, locates the call for responsibility and risk in the skeptical crisis of undecidability. In the moment of crisis, we are split by two equally powerful realizations: the uncertainty of the situation in which we find ourselves and the urgent imperative to respond to this moment. The paralysis of uncertainty combined with a sense of urgency allows us to recognize our responsibility to the historical moment that constitutes our individual experience. Although we are free to respond as we please, every response or refusal to respond involves risk. Despite our good intentions, careful reasoning, or commitments to remaining neutral, we are nevertheless fully responsible for inevitable good and harm that results from our action and inaction.

One of the most successful consequences of #MeToo is that it *inspired panic* in some who have perhaps never seriously questioned their touch or the way they make their desires felt on the skin of others. The crisis of assault and harassment of course is not new. Yet the issue has recently pushed its way to the forefront of our social existence, making itself felt as a global crisis to be grappled with by all. The #MeToo movement played a crucial role in shifting the experience of crisis and the weight of responsibility from those in a vulnerable position to those with power.

When #MeToo erupted during my time as a junior researcher at a school for advanced studies in skepticism, a number of my colleagues pulled me aside to question whether it was possible that something they may have done or said (in some cases to me) might somehow threaten their reputations or careers. I suppose I was called on to ease their anxiety. I could only respond with the skeptical slogan, “Perhaps...” as I thought to myself, *Yes, please question your touch and the touch of your words and continue to perpetually question yourself forevermore*. The crisis of questioning, directed at the fear of one’s loss of incredible privilege, is not yet an

ethical stance. But it might be the first movement towards cultivating a genuine commitment to the wellbeing of others.

The transformative potential of crisis depends on our response to having our way of life called into question. There is ethical value in the skeptical slogan “perhaps,” which challenges us to dwell with the crisis of uncertainty regarding the rightness of our action. “Perhaps” holds open the space of a question, demanding ongoing self-reflection. Can we dwell with the discomfort and vulnerability of being held responsible for others? Can we resist the temptation of shutting down the question with new forms of dogmatism? As **de Beauvoir argues** through Kierkegaard, the skeptical moment of calling oneself into question—“Am I Abraham?”—is immediately put to rest by the dogmatic reply “I am not Abraham.” “[M]orality resides in the painfulness of an indefinite questioning” (p. 144).

Haptic dogmatism—embedded in unquestioned practice and belief—is a kind of one-directional touch based in mastery and domination. It is terrified of being touched back. It is also found in a response to crisis that resists transformation, preventing touch itself from taking on new forms and meaning. Haptic skepticism is the perpetual question of touch—of how we come into touch with others and with the world. Skepticism, in this sense, is located in disruptive experiences that challenge our practices and beliefs. It is also located in our willingness to be transformed by such challenges.

Haptic skepticism is the ongoing disruption of haptic dogmatism that expresses itself in today’s pandemics, stretching from police brutality against Black people, to violence against queer and trans individuals, to sexual harassment and assault of women, and to the pillaging of life on planet earth. It equally challenges a form of haptic dogmatism found in our unwillingness to adjust our habits, pleasures, and traditions in response to crisis. This lived dogmatism results in the senseless loss of lives during pandemic due to those who stubbornly cling to their privilege.

The activity of questioning our touch in response to the ambiguity of the present moment places us squarely within the difficult and delicate work of ethics. Ethical responsibility demands that we respond to crisis even without knowing how. Our inability to know the best course of action with certainty does not prevent us from having an ethical response to our social and political landscapes. Our uncertainty—and the moment of crisis that this uncertainty inspires—is where ethics begins.

*The Women in Philosophy series publishes posts on women in the history of philosophy, posts on issues of concern to women in the field of philosophy, and posts that put philosophy to work to address issues of concern to women in the wider world. If you are interested in writing for the series, please contact the Series Editor **Adriel M.***

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