Intercorporeality and Social Distancing: Phenomenological Reflections

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As the coronavirus pandemic has made a swift advance across Europe, most of us have found ourselves engaging in the now very familiar practice of 'social distancing'. The central logic behind social distancing, and the related 'lockdown' initiatives, is to isolate human bodies, thereby breaking the chain of transmission of the Covid-19 virus. Under this logic, human bodies have become instantly homogenised, rendered biological entities that may, or may not, be carrying the virus. One's social position, gender, ethnicity, race or health status is not figured in these public health measures which effectively treat all bodies as equally dangerous (as potential "disease spreaders") and equally vulnerable (as potential "victims").

From a public health perspective, the lockdown has made inroads into curbing the spread of the virus and can be considered a successful intervention. From other perspectives, the lockdown has been catastrophic. In a UK context, increases in domestic abuse, poverty, hunger, unemployment, social isolation and social depravation mean that, for many, there will be long-lasting embodied, personal and social consequences as nations begin to emerge from their lockdowns and enter a phase many are calling the 'new normal'.

The future is uncertain for all of us, and no one can be sure of what this 'new normal' will look like. Nonetheless, one thing seems certain while social distancing is, and will continue to be, required: all bodies, regardless of their social position or status, have become dislodged from the usual taken-for-granted fabric of embodied social relations. In other words, encounters with others have been transformed. The sedimented bodily habits that govern face-to-face social life have morphed to accommodate the new social distancing rituals that now choreograph ordinary activities such as passing someone in the street, browsing

supermarket shelves, walking through a park or queuing at the post office. In addition, many of us, who are privileged enough to have the technology (and the need to use it), have also plunged into a new regime of virtual interactions, using basic video conferencing platforms such as Zoom, Skype, Jitsi or Houseparty, or simple video chats, via apps such as WhatsApp or Facetime, in order to socialize, have work meetings, attend lectures, participate in exercise classes, go to parties, go on dates and watch movies with friends. Basic telepresence, through videoconferencing, is the new medium for parliament, for funerals, for doctor's visits, for courtroom trials and children's classrooms. It is evident that these changes to our embodied interactions may continue indefinitely as some level of social distancing may still be required.

Intercorporeality

In these strange and unprecedented times, it is worth reflecting philosophically on some of the consequences of the public health measures introduced to tackle Covid-19. In particular, the philosophical discipline of phenomenology can help elucidate how some of the recent changes in daily life may impact on our lived experience. Specifically, I am interested in considering how social distancing measures have modified social aspects of what the phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty terms 'intercorporeality', and how this, in turn, may have consequences for our lived experience and overall well-being.

Intercorporeality, for Merleau-Ponty, signifies a complex layer of embodied responsivity, expressivity and communication which subtends intersubjectivity. What this means is that beneath our explicit individual subjectivity, and our relations to others through intersubjectivity and sociality—both of which involve communication and relations between self-aware subjects—we find intercorporeality. Merleau-Ponty figures intercorporeality as a primordial relation with others that underpins conscious life. Merleau-Ponty's account of

intercorporeality is both ontological *and* existential. He is concerned to understand how others, through their bodies, are part of the fabric of our *Being* (ontological). At the same time, he is interested in providing a rich description of the actual lived experiences of our necessarily social existence (existential). As such, intercorporeality forms a bedrock from which consciousness *and* self-other relations are possible. It signifies a "primordial" "kinship" between human bodies, to invoke some of Merleau-Ponty's terms. Starting in earliest infancy and continuing through adulthood until death, intercorporeality is continually constitutive of subjectivity and conscious life. Rosalyn Diprose reflects on intercorporeality in this way: "the self is produced, maintained, and transformed through the socially mediated intercorporeal 'transfer' of movements and gestures and body bits and pieces … Bodies, as they are lived, are socially constituted, built from an intertwining with others who are already social beings." Hence, intercorporeality can be understood as a tacit communication *between bodies* that involves an entanglement of self and other on an ontological level and also on an existential level when considering intersubjectivity and sociality.

In what follows I will use some insights from Merleau-Ponty and other thinkers in the phenomenological tradition, such as Frantz Fanon and Emmanuel Levinas, along with the 'accidental phenomenologist' Erving Goffman, to explore aspects of the lived and embodied experience of social distancing, considering two cases: face-to-face encounters and online interaction.

Face-to-Face Encounters and Social Distancing

In ordinary daily life, most of us come into contact with other bodies with regularity. Whether it is within our own household, on the street, in a classroom, in a shop or elsewhere, social life is infused with face-to-face intersubjective and intercorporeal encounters. Most of our

encounters happen unthinkingly: we walk past a stranger in the street, or we stop to chat to a friend in a shop, or we stand in a queue at the bank. In these situations we know, without any sort of reflection or deliberation, how to manage bodily encounters such that a basic social harmony is maintained. As Merleau-Ponty is at pains to emphasize, when we encounter other human bodies, we don't have to engage in any deliberation about their existence, their status as subjects, nor engage in any 'mind reading'. Instead our bodies instantaneously enter into intercorporeal communication with other bodies: the other's body speaks directly to my body, which responds directly. In this way, for Merleau-Ponty, the social world is part of the fabric of our bodies, not something we discover through reasoning or reflection.

The intercorporeal 'communication' between bodies is possible on the level of sociality because we have "shared vocabularies" of "body idioms", to draw from some terminology in the sociologist Erving Goffman's work. This means that our social lives are governed by conventionalised forms of non-verbal bodily behaviour which we all subscribe to without any conscious choice or reflection. With parallels to Bourdieu's notion of the "habitus" and Marcel Mauss's account of body techniques, Goffman points out that embodied social life is governed by "interaction rituals" that form an invisible backdrop to our agency, intentions and action. Of course, these 'idioms' and 'rituals' are learned tacitly through socialization. They are sedimented into our "body schemas" and involve certain "styles", to invoke Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body, becoming the invisible fabric of our intercorporeality, so thoroughly taken-for-granted that they are effectively rendered invisible.

While Goffman wasn't himself a phenomenologist, he has been described as an "accidental phenomenologist" because of his interest in providing rich descriptions of the taken-for-granted structures of lived experience—those aspects of experience which provide

the invisible scaffolding to our conscious life and agency, and which usually recede into the background remaining unnoticed and unthematized. To give one example from Goffman's work, he describes the achievement of the delicate balance of interest and disinterest that characterizes what he terms "civil inattention", where one acknowledges the presence of another person without given him or her undue attention. As Goffman notes, when describing "two persons passing in the street", the body automatically adjusts itself so that the encounter is for the most part harmonious, so that neither party feel uneasy or social discomfort:

> … civil inattention may take the special form of eyeing up the other up to approximately eight feet, during which time sides of the street are apportioned by gesture, and then casting the eyes down as the other passes—a kind of dimming of lights. In any case, we have here what is perhaps the slightest of interpersonal rituals, yet one that constantly regulates the social intercourse of persons in our society.

We have countless interaction rituals, within a body idiom, which govern the micro-structures of our movements and gestures in embodied encounters with others. There are, of course, modulations for cultural difference, familiarity, affect and context. Despite variations, the broader point is that intercorporeality, on the level of sociality, means that when our bodies come into proximity—for instance at the supermarket, in a queue, on the street, in a park— they tune into each other and communicate on this tacit level ensuring a certain 'flow', both physically and socially.

Overnight, the Covid-19 crisis has modified the parameters of face-to-face bodily communication. As all bodies have been rendered potential disease vectors and social distancing rules have come into place, our everyday encounters with others have been transformed as we adhere to the 2-metre rule. In short, we have had to learn a new body

idiom that speaks to needs of the crisis. As a result, the unthinking flow of interaction rituals has become disrupted as we have become self-conscious of our bodies' presence for others and, at the same time, highly conscious of the presence of others' bodies for ourselves.

In addition to these physical changes in how our bodies interact in face-to-face encounters, the affective inflection of our ordinary social interactions has been transformed. A wedge of suspicion has pierced almost every embodied encounter; we are now wary of *all* bodies because of the invisible illness that may be lurking within them. The increase in what many are calling "pandemic shaming" correlates with this bodily wariness. Shaming and blaming others for transgressing the new social distancing rules is one way to externalize this embodied atmosphere, or general mood, of fear and distrust.

The biologically reductionist demands of our new body idiom means that we give bodies a wide birth regardless of their status or situation. There is a heightened sense of the other's body as a biological entity, rather than a social subject. He or she could come too close, cough, sneeze or leave a trail of germs. We move among others as though magnets are pushing us apart. In public spaces there is no touching, little eye contact, mutual discomfort, a hushed and serious atmosphere. Bodily communication is now characterized by a stultifying self- and other-consciousness within a disconcerting atmosphere of suspicion. The question is, in time, what sort of social world and what sort of subject embedded within that world do these intercorporeal conditions create?

Face-to-face Social Distancing as Enacted Stigma
We don't have to look very far to get some clues as to the consequences of interaction rituals that are dominated by avoidance, fear and distrust. Of course, what is a new intercorporeal reality for many of us under the social restrictions imposed because of Covid-19, is, in fact, a

very familiar bodily existence for many others. Bodies which are marginalized, stigmatized or marked out as suspicious or dangerous routinely experience the wary avoidance of others. Frantz Fanon's phenomenologically inflected account of racism in 1950s France describes precisely this experience. He writes eloquently of his experience of being a black body in a "white world" under the legacy of colonial power relations. Rather than experiencing his body as social subject in the unthinking to-and-fro of embodied relations—the sorts of reciprocal and equal bodies that tacitly dominate Erving Goffman's analysis of social interactions— Fanon experiences his body primarily through a highly objectified inferiority. He writes:

> And then the occasion arose when I had to meet the white man's eyes. An unfamiliar weight burdened me … In the white world the man of colour encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema. Consciousness of the body is … a third person consciousness. The body is surrounded by an atmosphere of certain uncertainty… A slow composition of my *self* as a body in the middle of the spatial and temporal world … I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave-ships … completely dislocated, unable to be abroad with the other, the white man, who unmercifully imprisoned me, I took myself far off from my own presence … and made myself an object … I am being dissected under white eyes, the only real eyes. I am *fixed.* … Shame. Shame and self-contempt.

Fanon's prose reveals how the black man's body is objectified, stereotyped and judged negatively under the "white man's eyes", leading to a persistent negative evaluation of the self characterised by "shame and self-contempt". Instead of being a full social subject, he becomes reduced to a series of negative racial stereotypes. Under the racist social order dominated by a belief in white superiority, his black body is marked as contaminated, disgraced and an object to be avoided.

Fanon's evocative prose reveals that experiences of marginalization and stigmatization are communicated and experienced on a bodily level. This enacted stigma leads to experiences which have much in common with the face-to-face social distancing we are experiencing under Covid-19: a heightened self-consciousness of one's body; a suspicious wariness of others; reduced positive social contact; a heightened sense of one's own bodily vulnerability; avoidance and withdrawal. This sort of intercorporeal experience is at odds with the "felt, bodily openness" to another person that Matthew Ratcliffe argues characterises "rich interpersonal interactions" that involve "trust" and "mutual openness".

Alienated bodily communication may in itself be contributing to the general mood of wariness, fear and distrust that characterises aspects of social distancing. But more concerning is the clear evidence that experiences such as alienated intercorporeal communication have negative consequences in terms of well-being. As is well documented through the research regarding social determinants of health, experiences of racism and social marginalization, have concrete consequences for one's life chances. Research has revealed that psycho-social processes related to bodily experiences of stigma and marginalization are significant factors in determining health. In short, continued experiences of alienated intercorporeal communication, such as social marginalization, alienation, contempt, shame, objectification and experiencing the body as 'contaminated' can, *in themselves*, have negative consequences for one's health and well-being.

Online Interactions as Social Distancing

Of course, not all our socially distant interactions are taking place face-to-face, and many of us have been plunged into a world of online interactions, increasingly talking to family and friends through video chat, or using video conferencing platforms to conduct many personal

and professional activities, such as work meetings or, in the case of many students, to go to school or attend lectures. These online interactions avoid the potential affective pitfalls of the face-to-face realm outlined above. Bodies are not in proximity, but 'seen', 'heard' and generally 'experienced' only through a screen and auxiliary technologies. As a result, affective concerns regarding contamination, suspicion and bodily vulnerability are rendered moot. However, in terms of intercorporeality, online interactions pose a different set of experiential concerns that must be addressed (putting aside more obvious concerns about who has access to these technologies and the social privilege inherent to being able to work online), especially if some of the temporary measures in place (e.g., online learning and remote working) are being considered viable permanent options for the 'new normal' and beyond.

Online interactions via platforms such as Facetime, Zoom and Skype, among many others, operate through what is termed *telepresence*. Jonathan Steuer defines telepresence as "the experience of presence in an environment by means of a communication medium"; it is the mediated perception of a "temporally or spatially distant real environment" through the means of some sort of telecommunications technology. One of the main aims of telepresence technologies is to increasingly create the sense of 'presence,' or sense of 'being there,' in the environment (remote or virtual) with which the user is engaged. The idea is that even though I am talking to you through a technological medium, you as my interlocutor or audience have the sense that I am there in the room with you in some respect, and vice versa—we have a sense of proximity and contact despite the physical or geographical distance between us.

Naturally, telepresence is never the same as actual presence or face-to-face proximity, or at least technology has not yet developed to the extent that this sort of mediated delivery is as good as what we might call 'the real thing.' Of course, what is missing in telepresence is

embodied presence, or, the immediate proximity of the other's living, breathing and expressive physical body. As a result, the tacit communication between bodies that characterizes intercorporeality is drastically diminished: I don't experience an other's body directly, but instead I experience a moving image (of parts) of their body through a screen and hear their voice mediated through speakers or headphones. Technology and internet connections are presently such that images are routinely blurred or frozen during calls; voices are routinely garbled or muted; connections are sometimes lost entirely. As a result, the sort of presence—or intimacy, closeness, expression, emotion and contact—one can achieve through telepresence is significantly different from that of face-to-face interaction.

While technology may develop such that there are flawless correlations between visual, auditory, proprioceptive and other sensory feedback, inducing a potentially perfect sense of 'presence', even the most sophisticated technological interface cannot compensate for the lack of embodied proximity that comes from face-to-face contact with another. In short, significant features of intercorporeality cannot be fully reproduced through telepresence. Hubert Dreyfus, in his phenomenologically informed writing on technology and the internet, identifies a significant feature of face-to-face embodied presence which will never be replicated by telepresence: embodied risk.

Embodied risk is not just about threats of physical harm (for instance, the threat of physical violence, or in present times, the threat of infection or contamination) but also about the threat of existential or emotional harm. In other words, we can think about embodied risk in terms of one's social vulnerability. As Emmanuel Levinas has noted in his phenomenological ethics (which is grounded in a primordial intercorporeal experience), the face-to-face encounter is loaded with embodied risk, both physical and existential: the face of the other, Levinas writes, is "total nudity"; it is "defenceless". Encountering an other, Levinas argues

that we find that, "in his [sic] face … is the primordial expression, is the first word: 'you shall not commit murder'". The face-to-face encounter invokes the possibility of murder while also revealing its "purely ethical impossibility". In short, through proximity to the other an ethical relationship is constituted within which I am necessarily implicated. While in Levinas's account, this ethical injunction ultimately extends to *all others*, even those with whom I may not come into physical contact, he is at pains to ground the origin of ethics in the phenomenological experience of a face-to-face encounter.

Ultimately, we can read Levinas's work as exploring the ethical dimensions that are inherent in intercorporeal encounters with others, in some sense extending Merleau-Ponty's work into a meta-ethical domain. Being face-to-face with another person is a moment of radical openness and alterity, where the human attributes of ethics, subjectivity, vulnerability and responsibility, among others, arise. In a face-to-face encounter, the possibility of being affectively moved by the presence of another person is ignited—one may be recognized, validated, acknowledged or inspired, and concomitantly, one may be afraid of being alienated, objectified, scorned, harmed, rebuffed or misunderstood (as Fanon's testimony highlights). These experiences may be possible *to some extent* via telepresence, especially in 'encounters' with those who are already close to us. However, without physical proximity, embodied risk is drastically attenuated, if not completely eliminated, especially when considering 'encounters' with those we may never have met, or those we do not know well. This of course, will have consequences when considering, for example, the possibility that 'working from home' may become the norm indefinitely, or that universities may move all their lectures online and students can attain degrees entirely by remote learning.

It seems clear that we must consider higher education in universities as an experience that far exceeds the instrumental transmission and consumption of information. Likewise,

when considering 'working from home', it should be remembered that employment is not just the successful completion of tasks. Instead both education and work are times for personal development, moral growth, community formation, the broadening of horizons and contexts where ties of belonging, solidarity, understanding, ethics and kinship may form. These aspects of education and work come from embodied encounters with other human subjects, whether peers, colleagues or educators, encounters that carry a sense of embodied existential risk. As a result, a lack of social contact with colleagues, peers, educators, and of course others in multitude other contexts, will necessarily have personal, social and political consequences.

Conclusion

Intercorporeality is much more than saying we are 'social animals' and therefore 'need others'. As phenomenological investigations have revealed, being deprived of regular physical and face-to-face contact has personal, social, ethical and political consequences. Lisa Guenther's important work on the phenomenology of solitary confinement demonstrates clearly that being deprived of regular physical contact and social interaction can literally disintegrate and destroy the self. What this points to is that, at some fundamental level, our bodies need to see, touch and positively interact with other bodies. While the social distancing and lockdown measures that have been introduced are having success in slowing down the spread of the virus in the short term, it is worth thinking about the long-term consequences of these measures, especially as we enter the 'new normal'.