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FINDING (AND LOSING) ONE'S WAY: AUTISM, SOCIAL IMPAIRMENTS, AND THE POLITICS OF SPACE[1]

abstract

I use critical phenomenological resources in Tetsurō Watsuji and Sarah Ahmed to explore the spatial origin of some social impairments in Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD). I argue that a critical phenomenological perspective puts pressure on the idea that social impairments in ASD are exclusively (or even primarily) neurocognitive deficits that can be addressed by focusing on cognitive factors internal to the autistic person – for example, training them to adopt a more neurotypical approach to social cognition. Instead, I argue that the structure and character of some neurotypical spaces may play a regulative role in shaping aspects of at least some of the social impairments autistic people exhibit when they inhabit these spaces. I also briefly consider some possible therapeutic applications of this critical phenomenological approach.

keywords

critical phenomenology; autism; Tetsurō Watsuji; Sarah Ahmed; space

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1. Introduction

Characterizations of intentionality, temporality, embodiment, subjectivity, and intersubjectivity by phenomenologists like Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty are routinely used to clarify experiential disturbances found in psychiatric conditions like schizophrenia, severe depression, and anorexia nervosa. However, more contemporary concepts and debates within *critical* phenomenology – which incorporate insights from feminist theorists, critical race theorists, queer theorists, decolonial, and indigenous scholars to challenge classical phenomenology's privileging of transcendental subjectivity over transcendental intersubjectivity (see Guenther, 2013; Salamon, 2018; Weiss, Salamon & Murphy, 2019) – appear much less frequently.[1] Even rarer are references to non-western phenomenologists like the Japanese thinker Tetsurō Watsuji.[2]

Here, I have two main objectives. First, I bring critical and non-western phenomenology into constructive dialogue. I explore possible ways to integrate Tetsurō Watsuji's phenomenology of *aidagara* ("betweenness") and Sarah Ahmed's phenomenology of "disorientation". Second, I apply this work to social impairments in autism. Social impairments in autism are often characterized as a kind of *epistemic* disorientation: a Theory of Mind deficit that impedes the individual's ability to attribute mental states to others, use these attributions to interpret and predict others' behavior, and grasp norm-governed rules regulating conduct in social spaces (Baron-Cohen, 1995). Drawing on Watsuji and Ahmed, I put pressure on this neuro-cognitive perspective. I argue that many social impairments arise from a more fundamental *bodily* disorientation: a felt sense of being bodily and affectively out-of-sync with neurotypical spaces not set up to accommodate non-neurotypical styles of being in the world. I consider some consequences of this relational approach for thinking about the nature of social impairments in autism and conclude with possible therapeutic applications.

2. Watsuji, "betweenness", and the dynamics of social space

I begin with an exposition of Watsuji's core notion of "betweenness" (*aidagara*). Watsuji was an extremely prolific writer. However, few of his books are translated into English. One of them

1 While these concepts and debates in critical phenomenology have yet to migrate to phenomenological psychopathology, there are nevertheless rich discussions in other related areas that make use of them – for example, critical phenomenological approaches to disability (Diedrich, 2001; Abrams, 2020; Valentine, 2020) and illness (Carel, 2016; Lajoie, 2019; Toombs, 1987).

2 Bin Kimura's work on schizophrenia is one exception, although most of his work is not translated into English. See Krueger, 2019, 2020.

is *Rinrigaku* ("Ethics") (1937/1996), arguably his most important book. It is here that Watsuji develops his phenomenology of *aidagara*, or "betweenness". For Watsuji, "betweenness" captures experiential and relational dynamics that generate basic forms of embodied selfhood (McCarthy, 2011). Most of what he writes about ethics, social ontology, and the self emerges from this notion (Shields, 2009).

Aidagara is a common Japanese term referring to relationships between people: being a sibling, citizen, teacher, taxi driver, or tax advisor. However, in choosing this term, Watsuji has a more nuanced phenomenological focus in mind. For him, *aidagara* is an ontological category of human being. It is, therefore, not reducible to the ontic relationships of everyday life (e.g., being a sibling, taxi driver, etc.) (Johnson, 2019, p. 84). While *aidagara* can include these ontic relationships – we cannot exist without taking up some of them – it instead captures a more fundamental sense in which the very *being* of the subject is bound up with the network of relationships and spaces it shares with others (Krueger, 2013; McCarthy, 2011).[3]

More precisely, "betweenness" for Watsuji captures the interrelation between *subjectivity*, *intersubjectivity*, and *space*. As embodied and situated subjects, human reality is organized by dimensions and intensities of spatiality. We are like other things in the world insofar as we take up space. We have physical bodies that can bump into things and sit on flat surfaces. However, we are not simply *in* space the way that tables, rocks, and trees are. We *live* it.

We inhabit space in a qualitative way. Consider, for example, the felt difference between a stranger pressing into our personal space in a crowded elevator versus a romantic partner or close friend; what it's like to walk into a party and suddenly realize you don't know anyone; or the ominous character our favorite park takes on when the sun goes down, the park empties, and night closes in.

For Watsuji, lived space "is not so much the essential quality of a physical body as it is the manner in which the subject operates" (Watsuji, 1996, pp. 170-171). The space of betweenness is tied to our *agency* ("the manner in which the subject operates"). Moreover, since the manner in which the subject operates is always shaped by practices and spaces it inherits from others, the space of betweenness is an *intersubjective* space. Watsuji's phenomenology of betweenness is, therefore, concerned with investigating the character and embodied dynamics of this spatiality and its constitutive relation with subjectivity and intersubjectivity. This focus leads Watsuji to assert that the spatiality of betweenness "is not the same as space in the world of nature"; rather, it is "the betweenness itself of subjective human beings" (ibid., pp. 156-157).

We will explore case studies of betweenness in more detail below. For now, we can note that for Watsuji, the spatiality of human betweenness takes many forms and degrees of intensity: from tactile and kinaesthetic intimacies of infant-caregiver interactions or sexual intercourse, to more expansive forms of betweenness within large groups (professional communities, political communities, or religious organizations). It can even include different ways technologies organize flows of information, communication, and transportation that enable possibilities for social connection. This emphasis on the qualitative character of space is what Watsuji has in mind when he says that betweenness is "the manner in which multiple subjects are related to one another. It is not a uniform extendedness, but a dialectical one, in which relations such as "far and near, wide and narrow" are mutually transformed into one another. In a word, it is the betweenness itself of subjective human beings" (Watsuji, 1996, p. 157).

The "dialectical" character of betweenness indicates that it is not something fixed or found pre-given in the world. Rather, it is a way of sharing spaces with others that is actively

3 Watsuji's formulation of "betweenness" is also deeply influenced by Buddhist characterizations of the empty nature of all things, including the self. See Johnson (2016) and McCarthy (2011).

constructed. By deliberately organizing spaces that comprise our shared world, we determine what we *do* with the space of betweenness, that is, how we connect with others in and through it.[4] We structure our spaces in ways that both support and limit possibilities for movement, action, connection, and expression. We do so by establishing relations such as "far and near, wide and narrow" *within* those spaces. For instance, think about differences in the forms of betweenness possible in a lecture hall, night shelter, sporting arena, mosque, online video chat, hospital, queer club, or military barracks – or, relatedly, the way these same spaces may be experienced by individuals from different cultural backgrounds, say, or a person with a chronic illness, multiple sclerosis, or visual impairments.

Crucially for what follows, spaces of betweenness in this way function as "forms of alignment" that bring bodies in line with others (Ahmed, 2006, p. 15). By directing bodies in some ways more than others, they determine what is both possible and, importantly, *permissible* when finding one's way in the world. For Watsuji, then, it is not enough to think of space as something we simply find ourselves in due to our physical embodiment. It is something we play an active role in co-creating and sustaining – and we do so *with others*.

For our purposes, the key take-away point is this: Watsuji's phenomenology of betweenness shows us that there is a sense in which our bodies (i.e., how we experience them, what we do with them) *take shape in the spaces around them*. These forms of betweenness open up possibilities for, and impose limitations on, the bodies that inhabit them. They do so by bringing bodies in line with one another. And this alignment, in turn, determines both what is possible and permissible for bodies as they find their way in the world. The shared spaces of betweenness in this way have normative dimensions. They are co-constructed. Accordingly, they take shape around the values, practices, and preferences of those who inhabit them. In light of these normative dimensions, some bodies feel more at home in – or are *allowed* to feel more at home in – our shared spaces than are others. This idea productively connects with Sarah Ahmed's phenomenology of "disorientation", which I turn to now.

3.Ahmed, disorientations, and losing one's way

As Watsuji's phenomenology of betweenness highlights, everyday life – whether at work, home, or play – involves negotiating shared spaces. We spend our days "finding our way", as Ahmed (2006) puts it, through different forms of betweenness. The deeply social character of everyday spaces is so close to us that it is easy to overlook. However, there are occasions when we become acutely aware of it – often when we lose access to it. In other words, we often become aware of the social character of space when, as we try to find our way, we become *disoriented*.

The disorientation I have in mind here involves more than just getting lost because one lacks the relevant information needed to find one's way. It involves a *felt sense* that one is no longer finding one's way. A central part of its phenomenal character involves not feeling at home in a particular space, or relatedly, feeling bodily out of sync with, or affectively unsettled within or impeded by, wherever one happens to be. I discuss a number of examples in more detail below. For now, we can simply note that this experience can arise from feeling that the people we share space with are somehow indifferent, unfriendly, or hostile to us; or, that the space itself is set up in ways that are not designed to accommodate or be responsive to our specific values, interests, and needs. The important point for what follows is that this felt loss of at-home-ness is an experiential cue that one is no longer finding one's way.[5]

4 Of course, what we do with the spaces we inhabit, that is, how we actively organize them to connect with (or exclude) others, involves, among other things, issues of power and privilege. More on this below.

5 A reviewer objects that this felt loss of at-home-ness is better described as an experience of radical *alienation*, an

Disorientations can develop in different ways and vary in their scope and intensity. This is because they are not unusual or rare experiences. Rather, they are common and deeply relatable (Harbin, 2016, p. xiv).[6] Most people at some point in their lives experience profound grief, a major injury or illness, a crisis of faith, divorce, or some other kind of experience that shifts how they understand themselves and the world more generally. These major life experiences can be deeply disorienting; as we go through them, we may not always have a clear sense of how to find our way. However, not all the disorientation experiences we have necessarily involve the pronounced *bodily-affective* and *spatial* disruptions I am here particularly concerned with.

For example, if I lose my religious faith, I may experience a feeling of disorientation as I gradually leave behind the familiarity of my former life and adjust to new ways of interpreting the world and my place in it. This is, at least in part, a kind of *epistemic* disorientation; it involves a significant shift in some of my core beliefs (e.g., about whether God exists; the authority of religious texts; the ultimate point of life, etc.). While this shift may impact my behavior (e.g., I no longer go to church each Sunday; deny myself certain things out of religious fidelity; or interpret specific events as part of God's plan, etc.), this kind of epistemic disorientation nevertheless need not involve the rich bodily-affective feeling that I am somehow now *out-of-sync with* or *not at home in* the spaces I inhabit and the people I interact with.

Of course, it *could* involve this feeling, or something close to it. I might be aware of this feeling if, say, I visit my former place of worship or socialize with religious friends. Many kinds of epistemic disorientations probably do involve some sort of bodily and affective component. Experiences are complex and minds are essentially embodied. However, there nevertheless seem to be occasions where epistemic and bodily-affective dimensions of disorientation experiences can come apart in interesting ways.[7] As I discuss in more detail below, certain kinds of bodies may experience the feeling of being profoundly bodily disoriented and impeded by the world without necessarily experiencing the co-occurrence of a similarly intense epistemic disorientation.

In sum, the point is simply to draw a rough distinction between the possibility of a kind of *epistemic* disorientation (which is interesting in its own right) and a phenomenologically richer *bodily-affective* disorientation with a distinctive spatial structure and character. This latter kind of disorientation – again, what I'm referring to as a *bodily* disorientation – is my focus here. Moreover, as I read it, this bodily focus aligns with Ahmed's rendering of "disorientation", which helpfully draws our attention to political dimensions of betweenness Watsuji doesn't

experience of being cut off from space in a way that makes us confront its anonymous and non-social character. Such experiences may indeed occur. But that's not what I mean by "disorientation". I also don't think it captures Ahmed's use of the term or the phenomenon I consider below. The experience of disorientation I'm interested in is *constitutively* social. It arises precisely because individuals recognize that they inhabit a shared (i.e., social) world that is nevertheless somehow bodily inaccessible to them in a way that is not the case for others. This felt loss of access to various social resources – resources that are, once more, available to others – is an essential part of its character. More on this in what follows. I'm grateful to the reviewer for raising this worry.

6 See Harbin (2016) for important work on the moral significance of disorientation experiences.

7 Liat Ben-Moshe (2018, p. 2) points to discussions in activist circles about the connection between knowledge of injustice and action. Activists note that individuals can experience a kind of epistemic disorientation – e.g., they can acquire world-changing knowledge about the racist, gendered, racial capitalist, and ableist "carceral logics" driving mass incarceration and the prison-industrial complex – that may profoundly shift how they think about notions of justice, fairness, and equality. However, this epistemic disorientation may not be accompanied by a significant bodily-affective disorientation or drive to political action. See also Calme (2020) for a similar discussion of epistemic disorientation, race, and "white fragility".

consider.[8] I turn to a more focused phenomenological consideration of Ahmed on the politics of bodily disorientations now.

3.1. Ahmed and the politics of bodily disorientations

By "bodily-affective", I am referring to the fundamental way we experience our body and its capacities for movement, expression, and action (i.e., our felt sense of agency). Phenomenologists often describe these experiences as a "pre-reflective" form of bodily self-awareness (Colombetti, 2014). This simply means that our body is implicitly present as we perceive and act on the world, dynamically shaping both what we experience and how we experience it. As we move through the world and do things, we don't explicitly attend to our body or plan each movement. We simply *live through* our bodies onto the world by responding to what the environment affords. As Ahmed (drawing on Merleau-Ponty) observes, "the body is habitual insofar as it 'trails behind' in the performing of action, insofar as it does not pose 'a problem' or an obstacle to the action, or is not 'stressed' by 'what' the action encounters... the habitual body does not get in the way of an action: it is *behind the action*" (Ahmed, 2007, p. 156). Our pre-reflective, bodily-affective experience in this way anchors us in the forms of betweenness we inhabit.[9]

As Ahmed repeatedly emphasizes, the character of our pre-reflective bodily experience is bound up with space. For example, if I am forced to work in a colleague's office for the day while mine is being repainted, I may experience a kind of bodily disorientation. The furniture, layout, height and hardness of the chair, the pictures and art, stains on the carpet, smells and sounds from the office next door are all somehow *different*. I experience them as unfamiliar; they are not the sorts of things I habitually encounter within the self-curated contours of my own workspace. Accordingly, for that day I may feel mildly disoriented (even if only in a low-level way), slightly irritated, and relatively unproductive. My body struggles to extend into and take shape within the contours of that space.

Of course, this is a very mild – and indeed, very privileged – experience of disorientation. Nevertheless, bodily disorientation can, in other contexts, be much more intense and have significant practical and political consequences. Critical phenomenologists draw our attention to powerful connections between bodily disorientation and the politics of social space – that is, the profound, and potentially devastating, consequences of ensuring that certain kinds of bodies (e.g., non-white bodies, queer bodies) are not allowed to comfortably find their way (e.g., Fanon, 1986; Ahmed, 2006, 2007; Yancy, 2016). Certain spaces are often configured to deliberately constrain these bodies and disturb them at a pre-reflective level.

Ahmed tells us that "[f]or bodies that are not extended by the skin of the social, bodily movement is not so easy" (Ahmed, 2007, p. 161). In support of this claim, she develops a phenomenology of "being stopped". Black activism, Ahmed notes, draws our attention to the many ways that policing involves a "differential economy of stopping". Some bodies – mainly non-white bodies – are stopped by the police more than others. They are impeded from freely

8 To be fair, Watsuji does have much to say about political ethics and agency. For example, he extends his critique of moral individualism to a sociopolitical and global level (Sevilla, 2017). Nevertheless, Ahmed focuses on themes like institutional exclusion, embodiment, gender, and race that go beyond Watsuji's analysis.

9 Phenomenologists observe that we also experience our bodies as objects, too. We think about our bodies, reflect on and take up emotional attitudes toward them, and become aware of different ways that others perceive, evaluate, and respond to our bodies as objects of *their* experience (Gallagher, 2005). Discussions of how certain kinds of bodies (e.g., queer bodies, non-white bodies, aging bodies, "crip" bodies, etc.) are objectified and "othered" via socio-political structures of the lifeworld are important parts of critical phenomenology. However, I here instead follow Ahmed, Fanon, and thinkers like Iris Marion Young (1980) to consider ways these socio-political structures reach down into and shape fundamental forms of bodily experience "from the inside", including our felt capacities for movement, action, and expression.

finding their way: e.g., being pulled over while driving, or harassed while trying to enter their home. But being stopped occurs in other (i.e., non-policing) contexts, too, such as when non-white bodies are bombarded with racist images or memes in online spaces, or passed over for a job despite having equivalent or better qualifications than a white candidate.

This stopping doesn't just place practical constraints on stopped bodies by depriving them of access to certain things and spaces (although it does). It also has significant phenomenological consequences: it induces a perpetual *bodily disorientation*, a disturbance of that stopped body at a pre-reflective level. This is because the persistent threat of being stopped isn't an abstract or ephemeral thing. It endures. It is materially encoded within different contexts of betweenness designed to unsettle and disorient certain bodies. A stark example is the proliferation of "Whites Only" and "Colored" signs once found above drinking fountains, waiting rooms, toilets, restaurants, and swimming pools across the American landscape well into the 20th century.[10]

This persistent materialized threat leaves its traces on stopped bodies (Ahmed, 2007, p. 158). These traces are present not only when stopped bodies inhabit acutely threatening spaces but also when they move on to other spaces, too. This is because, as Fanon observes, stopped bodies are perpetually "surrounded by an atmosphere of certain uncertainty" (Fanon, 1986, p. 83). Can I use this toilet? Why did that police car slow down as it drove by? Why are the diners at the next table staring at me? Why is this security guard following me as I shop? For both Fanon and Ahmed, no space is entirely free from the threat of being stopped. As Ahmed emphasizes, the threatening character of these spaces means that "[t]hose who get stopped are *moved in a different way*" as they find their way through the world (Ahmed, 2006, p. 162); they are never allowed to fully extend and take shape within everyday contexts of betweenness.

Ahmed says that her Muslim name similarly disrupts her bodily experience. It *slows her down* as she finds her way through the world. This is because her body is continually marked as "could be Muslim", which is immediately translated into "could be terrorist". As a result, "[h]aving been singled out in the line, at the borders, we become defensive; we assume a defensive posture, as we 'wait' for the line of racism, to take our rights of passage away" (ibid., p. 163). Ahmed's non-white body is brought into line with other non-white bodies also marked with "terrorist" names. In being singled out and made to wait, government authorities make clear that to be a non-white body in the west "is to be not extended by the spaces you inhabit" (ibid., p. 163). Rather, it is to be made to feel continually out-of-sync with – disoriented by and within – those spaces and the atmosphere of certain uncertainty that pervades them.

In this way, Ahmed's phenomenology of disorientation can enrich Watsuji's phenomenology of betweenness. Watsuji highlights the qualitative and co-constructed character of our shared spaces and their connection with our experience of embodiment and agency. However, Ahmed goes beyond Watsuji in drawing out the *politics* of betweenness by analyzing ways that certain bodies are made to feel disoriented by the structure and character of the different contexts of betweenness they inhabit. Equipped with this critical phenomenological framework, we can now turn to a consideration of betweenness, bodily disorientation, and social impairments in autism.

4. Autism, embodiment, and finding one's way

How does all this relate to autism? Simply put, *autistic bodies are often stopped bodies*. They are not allowed to fully extend into and take shape within the spaces they inhabit – forms

10 Despite popular assumptions to the contrary, these signs were not confined to the South – and some could still be found through the 1970s (Abel, 2010).

of betweenness organized primarily around the form of neurotypical bodies. As a result, autistic persons often experience a kind of pre-reflective bodily disorientation within these spaces which can, in turn, inform and intensify some of their social difficulties. This claim has significance for understanding the nature of social impairments in autism as well as potential intervention strategies.[11]

4.1 Social impairments and epistemic disorientations in autism

Autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) spans a range of impairments. These impairments are wide-ranging and vary from one individual to the next. However, they tend to cluster around a diagnostic triad of social, communicative, and imaginative difficulties (Frith, 2003). Autistic people tend to show a preference for order, predictability, and routine; they can become preoccupied with specific subjects, activities, and idiosyncratic habits. They also struggle to communicate with others, become attuned to their emotions and intentions, and flexibly adapt to changing social environments (Bader, 2020).

The still-dominant way of thinking about impaired social cognition and the autistic mind is the neuro-cognitive perspective (Chapman, 2019, p. 422). According to this perspective, autistic differences can be explained by neurocognitive differences found in all autistic individuals. These differences are said to cluster around a central trait: a diminished capacity for empathy, or *mentalizing*, when compared to neurotypicals (Baron-Cohen, 1995). Autistic persons struggle to find their way in the social world because they struggle to cognize the existence of other minds. This empathy deficit leads to difficulties interpreting and predicting others' behavior, and smoothly integrating with the shared practices that make up everyday life.

Note that for this neuro-cognitive perspective, social impairments in autism flow from a kind of epistemic disorientation. Again, autistic people struggle settling into neurotypical spaces because they lack the cognitive capacities and understanding of other minds (i.e., Theory of Mind) needed to become attuned to others' intentions and behavior. Neurocognitive therapeutic interventions were developed precisely to address this epistemic disorientation. These strategies – with names like "mind-reading" training, "picture-in-the-head teaching", and "thought-bubble training" – are tailored specifically to help individuals develop and refine their mentalizing capacities.

Before proceeding further, let me be clear: I am not suggesting that these programs are without value. Many autistic people find them helpful. Moreover, it may be that some kind of epistemic disorientation is an important part of many autistic persons' struggles to feel anchored in neurotypical spaces. I am instead arguing that we should adopt a more holistic and multidimensional approach to social impairments in autism. This is because adopting an exclusively neurocognitive perspective downplays, or even overlooks altogether, the way *embodied*, *interactive*, *relational*, and *developmental* processes are partly constitutive of autistic styles of thinking, expressing, and sharing emotions and experiences (Bizzari, 2018; De Jaegher, 2013; Schilbach, 2016; Krueger & Maiese, 2018; Roberts, Glackin & Krueger, 2019). Looking at the role bodily (and not just epistemic) disorientations play in ASD social impairments can help make the importance of some of these processes clearer.

A useful way to think about a more holistic alternative is to see ASD as a form of life (Chapman, 2019). Forms of life are, as I use the idea here, forms of betweenness. To see ASD as a form of life is to pay particular attention to unique styles of embodiment that are distinctive of ASD (Krueger, 2021). There is now growing sensitivity to the ways autistic persons use their

11 I here follow the terminological preferences of neurodiversity proponents who, by endorsing identity-first language ("autistic persons") instead of person-first language ("individuals with autism"), deliberately stress the connection between cognitive styles and selfhood (Pellicano and Stears, 2011).

bodies to find their way – that is, move through the world, express emotions, and respond to the people, things, and spaces around them (Doan & Fenton, 2013). These embodied (or sensorimotor) approaches to ASD move away from an excessive focus on neurocognitive traits and explanations. Instead, they refocus on distinctive ways autistic persons pre-reflectively experience and live through their bodies as they use their bodily agency to organize sensory information and negotiate shared spaces (Donnellan, Hill & Leary, 2012). However, as Watsuji and Ahmed remind us, bodies don't merely inhabit space. They *create* it. Moreover, the spaces they create are often embedded within encompassing spaces that *other* bodies have created. A critical phenomenological approach therefore brings to light the ways co-created spaces within ASD forms of life – spaces that are not necessarily set up by people with ASD – can disorient such bodies but also, potentially, disclose possibilities for more inclusiveness, connection, and understanding.

4.2 Bodily disorientations in autism and losing one's way

Neurocognitive perspectives say little about bodily experience in ASD. However, looking at the role of the body is crucial for understanding how autistic people find their way. From an external neurotypical perspective, ASD styles of embodiment may initially seem unusual or strange. The timing and flow of their movements can appear odd or contextually inappropriate. For example, people with ASD may have an unusual gait or posture, and exhibit movements, tics, and habits (e.g., rocking, hand-flapping, spinning, exaggerated gestures, etc.) that are off-putting for neurotypicals. They may repeatedly shrug, squint, pout or rock back and forth; repeatedly touch a particular object; turn away when someone tries to engage with them; maintain an unusual or inert posture; appear "stuck" in indecisive movements for an uncomfortably long period of time; have trouble imitating actions; or require explicit prompts to perform an action.

Distinct styles of embodiment in ASD aren't simply apparent from a third-person, external vantage point, however. First-person reports suggest that people with autism pre-reflectively experience their body *from the inside* in ways that depart from neurotypical experience, too. The character of these anomalous bodily experiences contributes to their distinctive behavior, which in turn leads to difficulties fitting into the world of neurotypicals.

For example, reports indicate that people with autism often experience difficulties controlling, executing, and combining movements – from fine motor control, grip planning, and anticipatory movements, to more complex action-sequences like gesturing, reaching for a book, dancing, or negotiating a crowded hallway (Eigsti, 2013). Sometimes this feeling results not just from objective, measurable coordination difficulties but also from a *felt* sense of diminished agency and bodily control. This feeling seems connected to the sense that one's body has a mind of its own, particularly when stressed or overstimulated: "I had an automatic urge to touch my body – rub my thighs or my stomach and chest" (Robledo, Donnellan & Strandt-Conroy, 2012, p. 6). At other times, however, individuals with ASD report diminished proprioceptive and kinaesthetic awareness of limb position and spatial orientation (Blanche *et al.*, 2012). Difficulty locating one's body in space can lead to challenges when it comes to smoothly interacting with the environment. In order to cope, some individuals seek sustained deep pressure or joint compression to regain a felt sense of bodily integrity (Leary & Donnellan, 2012, p. 60). Strategies include lying on the floor under a mattress or sofa cushions, jumping on the floor or bed, wearing multiple layers of clothing, banging fists on hard surfaces, or sitting in a plush recliner, bathtub, or swimming pool in order to have the experience of being touched all over.

For our purposes, the important point is this: these anomalous bodily experiences lead some people with ASD to feel as though their styles of embodiment do not smoothly integrate with neurotypical spaces and the patterns of interaction comprising these spaces. Some of the

causal factors responsible for these anomalous bodily experiences likely reside within the neurophysiology of the individual. However, a significant portion of these factors appear to be *social*: individuals have the experience of being "stopped" by structures and norm-governed character of neurotypical spaces. Accordingly, this sense of being stopped informs and intensifies aspects of their pre-reflective bodily disorientation within these spaces.

To see how so, we can let people with ASD describe their own experiences of being stopped, and the bodily disorientations that ensues.[12] For example, one individual says that, "I was sitting on the floor and when I got up after looking at a couple of books, my friend said I got up like an animal does" – and further, that although she is aware that her bodily style differs from those of neurotypicals, she remains unsure of *how* it differs, exactly (Robledo, Donnellan & Strandt-Conroy, 2012, p. 6). Another person says that she will easily "lose the rhythm" required to perform sequences of action requiring two or more movements, and that "[e]verything has to be thought out" in advance (ibid., p. 6), which gives her movements an excessively stiff and unnatural quality. This felt disconnection both from her own body, along with a sense that she is rhythmically out-of-sync with the neurotypical spaces she inhabits – and judged negatively because of this – leads to frustration and a deepened sense of bodily disorientation: "I have been endlessly criticized about how different I looked, criticized about all kinds of tiny differences in my behavior...No one ever tried to really understand what it was like to be me..." (ibid., p. 6). For people with ASD, moving through neurotypical spaces is often characterized by an atmosphere of certain uncertainty: a perpetual anticipation that one is about to be negatively impacted or judged for not settling into the bodily dynamics of these spaces in a comfortably familiar (i.e., neurotypical) way.

These reports – and many more like them (see Leary & Donnellan, 2012) – suggest that autistic bodies struggle to extend themselves into spaces organized around the form, and *norms*, of neurotypical spaces. Forms of engagement, expression, and sharing acceptable within ASD forms of life are often actively discouraged and negatively evaluated within neurotypical spaces. This felt resistance limits bodily possibilities for people with ASD when they inhabit these spaces and contributes to the feeling of being bodily stopped. This resistance might be acutely felt when negotiating the material structure of different neurotypical spaces such as a noisy, brightly lit lecture hall, restaurant, or retail space that negatively impacts an individual's auditory and visual hypersensitivity. But it can also be felt within the interpersonal spaces of everyday social interactions, too.

A striking example of how ASD styles of embodiment shape contexts of betweenness is found by looking at delayed responses in conversation. Donnellan and colleagues found that twelve young adolescents with minimal verbal skills, all of whom were labelled developmentally disabled or autistic, could offer competent conversational responses – but only, on average, after fourteen seconds of silence (Leary & Donnellan, 2012, p. 57). Most neurotypicals would find this slower-paced rhythm awkward. It would alter the character of that social space in an unfamiliar way (i.e., for neurotypicals), and they would probably either quickly change the subject or leave the conversation altogether.

Consider another example: when someone is asked a question like "Do I look good in this shirt?".[13] An autistic person might see this question as fact-seeking and give an honest and direct answer ("No, you do not."). However, sensitive attunement to the broader context in which it is asked might reveal that the asker is instead seeking affirmation ("Sure, you look

12 Chapman (2019) observes that first-person reports of autistic people are often left out of philosophical and psychological discussions of autism (p. 426).

13 This example is taken from Chapman (2019, p. 430).

great!"), or at least honest but gentle critical feedback ("Hmm, not bad, but perhaps we can find a more flattering color."). So, a direct and honest answer from an autistic person might be met with confusion, a hurt reaction, and lead to conflict – all of which they may find puzzling and disorienting and discourage them from future engagements.

Importantly, this lack of attunement cuts both ways. As McGeer notes, people with ASD may be "blind to our minds, but so too are we blind to theirs" (Mcgeer, 2009, p. 524; see also Krueger & Maiese, 2018). Seeing how so helps to further highlight the spatial origin of some social impairments in ASD. For example, in autistic spaces, it is relatively normal – and acceptable – for autistics to avoid eye contact when speaking to someone. Within neurotypical spaces, however, people who do this are often wrongly judged to be deceptive or dishonest. Similarly, neurotypicals may find rhythmic patterns of "self-stimulation" (or "self-stims") – hand-flapping, finger-snapping, tapping objects, repetitive vocalizations, or rocking back and forth, etc. – socially off-putting, and view them as meaningless behavior. Indeed, treatment programs (often developed with little input from autistic people) have traditionally tried to suppress or eliminate them (Azrin, Kaplan & Foxx, 1973). Yet, for many autistic people, self-stims are effective ways to manage incoming sensory information. They may use them to refocus and self-regulate when information threatens to be overwhelming (hypersensitivity), or when they require heightened arousal in order to access further information (hyposensitivity). In short, for many autistic people, self-stims are *embodied strategies for finding one's way*. While people with ASD may be actively discouraged from bodily extending themselves via these strategies within neurotypical spaces, they nevertheless have the freedom to do so within autistic spaces where their meaning and salience is recognized. Observations such as these help to explain why the Internet has played such an important role in providing spaces for autistic people to develop online forms of life governed by distinctively autistic norms, vocabularies, and styles of expression (Hacking, 2009).[14]

The takeaway lesson from examples like these, I suggest, is that many so-called social impairments in ASD are *context sensitive*. They do not arise when people with ASD inhabit autistic spaces – again, spaces where these bodily practices are viewed as acceptable practices for finding one's way. As one autistic person tells us: "If I socialize with other Aspergians of pretty much my own functionality, then all of the so-called social impairments simply don't exist...we share the same operating systems, so there are no impairments" (Cornish, 2008, 158). Reports like these are supported by studies indicating that high-functioning autistic people – despite anxiety and difficulties interacting with non-autistic people – find their interactions with other autistic persons efficient and pleasurable (Schilbach, 2016; see also Komeda *et al.*, 2015). Again, the latter are governed by ASD-friendly norms, expectations, and interactive possibilities that allow them to bodily extend into those spaces in a way they cannot when they inhabit many neurotypical spaces.

5. Final thoughts

I have drawn upon critical phenomenological resources in Tetsurō Watsuji and Sarah Ahmed to explore the bodily and spatial origin of some social impairments in ASD. This critical phenomenological perspective puts pressure on the idea that social impairments in ASD are exclusively (or even primarily) neurocognitive deficits that can be addressed by focusing on cognitive factors internal to the autistic person – for example, training them to adopt a more neurotypical approach to social cognition. An important takeaway is that the structure and

14 See Osler (forthcoming) for a phenomenological discussion of how the lived body can enter online spaces and be empathically available to others within those spaces.

character of some neurotypical spaces may play a regulative role in shaping aspects of at least some of the social impairments and disorientation experiences autistic people have when they inhabit these spaces.

Adopting a relational approach to ASD has potential therapeutic significance. Again, such an approach highlights the way orthodox neurocognitive approaches (1) overlook the role embodied, interactive, and spatial features play in shaping characteristic impairments; and (2) presuppose that social difficulties in ASD consist of a failure to conform to normative expectations of neurotypical people, without acknowledging or offering resources to address the two-way nature of these impairments. Relational intervention strategies should be tailored to address these shortcomings.

To better connect with autistic people, neurotypicals should move beyond attempts to "fix" the heads of single individuals and instead consider ways of adjusting and recalibrating material and normative features of the social world. These strategies can include constructing more inclusive ASD-friendly spaces that consider how things like colors, lights, textures, sounds, and smells may negatively impact ASD styles of embodiment and sensory processing, and potentially impede their ability to find their way. It may involve social skills training not just for autistic persons but also neurotypicals – for example, sensitizing the latter to characteristic ASD patterns of interaction (e.g., delayed conversational response) in order to become more flexible and responsive to such differences. Finally, it may also involve exploring alternative forms of therapeutic interventions, such as music therapy – a form of therapy that, for several reasons, seems particularly well-suited to positively impacting various forms of communicative, social-emotional, and motor development in children and adults with ASD (Srinivasan & Bhat, 2013; see also Krueger & Maiese, 2018, pp. 29-32). Critical phenomenological resources from philosophers like Watsuji and Ahmed provide important conceptual resources for thinking through some of these spatial possibilities.

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