

The body of the other: intercorporeality and the phenomenology of agoraphobia

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Abstract How is our experience of the world affected by our experience of others? Such is the question I will be exploring in this paper. I will do so via the agoraphobic condition. In agoraphobia, we are rewarded with an enriched glimpse into the intersubjective formation of the world, and in particular to our embodied experience of that social space. I will be making two key claims. First, intersubjectivity is essentially an issue of intercorporeality, a point I shall explore with recourse to Merleau-Ponty's account of the prepersonal body. The implication of this claim is that evading or withdrawing from the other remains structurally impossible so long as we remain bodily subjects. Second, the necessary relation with others defines our thematic and affective experience of the world. Far from a formal connection with others, the corporeal basis of intersubjectivity means that our lived experience of the world is mediated via our bodily relations with others. In this way, intercorporeality reveals the body as being dynamically receptive to social interactions with others. Each of these claims is demonstrated via a phenomenological analysis of the agoraphobe's interaction with others. From this analysis, I conclude that our experience of the world is affected by our experience of others precisely because we are in a bodily relation with others. Such a relation is not causally linked, as though first there were a body, then a world, and then a subject that provided a thematic and affective context to that experience. Instead, body, other, and world are each intertwined in a single unity and cannot be considered apart.

Keywords Phenomenology · Other · Merleau-Ponty · Embodiment · Intersubjectivity · Anxiety · World

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Another person, for us, is a spirit which haunts a body and we seem to see a whole host of possibilities contained within this body when it appears before us; the body is the very presence of these possibilities.

Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*.¹

1 Introduction

Agoraphobia is commonly thought of as anxiety concerning space. Even if that anxiety is not reduced to such obvious motifs as one of de Chirico's piazzas—surely, the archetypal agoraphobic space—then spatiality nevertheless remains at the foreground of most research on the condition.² All of this is, indeed, for a good reason. Spatiality is the principle manifestations of the agoraphobe's anxiety. From dizzying squares to seemingly endless hallways, spatiality is of particular concern for the agoraphobe. Moreover, as its etymology suggests, *agora*-phobia refers to the place of political assembly.

This emphasis on spatiality is supported by the historical development of agoraphobia. Throughout its rich history, the agoraphobic condition has moved from such terms as “la peur des espaces,” “horreur de vide,” *platzschwindel* [square dizziness], and finally, agoraphobia.³ Marked in each case by an intense anxiety brought on by being in particular places, especially those in which the urge to flee would prove difficult, the condition has moved from a simple fear of public places to the more complex anxiety surrounding places that are in some broad sense unfamiliar.

Yet tellingly, the etymological and historical development of the condition also refers to the assembly gathered in that space, thus accenting the intersubjective quality of agoraphobia. In this paper, I will argue that far from an incidental aspect of the agoraphobe's experience of the world, *intersubjectivity is in fact at the heart of agoraphobia*. In particular, what is peculiar to the agoraphobic experience of others is a conflict between the personal experience of the body and the impersonal relationship the body has to others, a claim I will develop at length.

To demonstrate this thesis, I will make a critical claim: *Intersubjectivity is essentially an issue of intercorporeality*. This claim can be taken in the context of the “problem of other minds.” Instead of accessing knowledge of other minds through analogical reasoning or abstract theorizations, our relations with others is already established in the primacy of the prepersonal body, a point I shall defend with recourse to Merleau-Ponty. This primacy is as much an active force in infancy as it is in adulthood. What this means is that despite the idiosyncrasies and neuroses of human experience, evading or withdrawing from the other remains structurally impossible so long as we remain bodily subjects.

A phenomenological study of agoraphobia will, I suggest, demonstrate this claim. The phenomenologically inspired literature dealing with agoraphobia is

¹ Merleau-Ponty (2008, p. 83).

² Cf. Marks (1987); Trotter (2004).

³ Cf. Knapp (1988).

sparse but developing.⁴ That there is a burgeoning interest in the phenomenology of agoraphobia is a testament to its value for understanding a series of issues not limited to the agoraphobic condition.

For the present purposes, my usage of agoraphobia privileges the role of the body as being central to the phobic anxiety. For the majority of agoraphobic people, the body is the principal means to assess how “safe” they feel in the world. The reason being that agoraphobic people tend to interpret their bodily response to the environment through a filter of apocalyptic doom. The formula invariably adheres to the following structure: “If I don’t get out of here immediately, then X will happen,” where “X” might include heart attack, fainting, or vomiting. Because of this catastrophic bodily interpretation, constant supervision of the body’s sensations as well as “superstitious avoidance behaviour” accompanies all environmental experience, with an unflinching vigilance directed toward any unfamiliar or uncomfortable sensations.⁵ Once detected, those bodily sensations urge the agoraphobe to flee the scene immediately, in the process reinforcing the sense that particular places are marked by the potential of danger.⁶

2 Method of investigation

My methodology is threefold. First, I will present an illustration of an agoraphobic’s experience of being on a bus journey. Methodologically, this illustration is sourced from first-person experience of my own experience as a former sufferer of the condition. This illustration does not aim to speak on behalf of all agoraphobic people, nor does it profess to be a typical experience (though fellow agoraphobes may indeed find aspects of their own experience mirrored in my own). What this illustration aims to do is describe the specificity and singularity of what it is to experience the body for an agoraphobic person in detail. As with any phenomenological inquiry involving one’s own experience, to move beyond mere introspection and thus to make a *philosophical* contribution, rigorous hermeneutical interpretation is required. A subject who has experienced an anxiety condition is no different from, say, a subject who has experienced elation. Both moods require a mixture of critical inquiry along with a sensitive, careful description of the phenomena at stake.

Second, so that the particular phenomenal features of the agoraphobe’s experience of others can be defined in context, I will outline the structure of an

⁴ Cf. Davidson (2003); Jacobson (2004); Trigg (2012).

⁵ Chambless and Goldstein (1982, p. 3).

⁶ A necessary disclaimer. Agoraphobia is a complex topic, involving a broad range of themes that no single article can do justice to. While the focus of my paper concerns the intersubjective and corporeal aspects of agoraphobia, it would be disingenuous to not point out that these same features imply the co-existence of other topics, not least home and the issue of spatiality. Both home and spatiality are touched upon in this paper, but only as means to understand the role of the body. Even within the scope of intersubjectivity, only one aspect of bodily relations has been focused on: the look of the other as invoking anxiety. Much remains to be said for other intersubjective relations within the agoraphobic worldview, above all the role of companions and trusted others. A separate treatment of all these topics is necessary (cf. Trigg (2013)).

“everyday” experience of how spatiality is determined by our relation with others. To achieve this end, I will turn to Merleau-Ponty’s account of intersubjectivity. What Merleau-Ponty will help us achieve is the grounds for a spatially oriented account of intersubjective relations. For Merleau-Ponty, far from an additional component of lived experience, the coexistence of the other person is implicated from the outset. This prereflective bodily reciprocity between ourselves and others, originally experienced in childhood, retains a presence in our ability to recognise ourselves in others. Because of this dialogical structure, it becomes possible to partially “place” ourselves in the experiential perspective of the other’s bodily experience. What is central to this gesture is that the structure of intersubjectivity relies less on the phenomenal appearance of the other’s body and more on the “anonymous existence of which my body is the ever-renewed trace henceforth inhabit[ing] both bodies simultaneously.”⁷

The third stage of the paper will draw together the opening illustration with the phenomenological background by focusing explicitly on how the look of the other affects the agoraphobic subject’s experience of their bodily sensations. Here, my usage of “look” calls upon Merleau-Ponty account of the visual and non-visual gaze. Employing this idea, I will argue that the agoraphobe’s anxious experience of others is rooted in the failure to construct an empathic relation with the other, despite the fact that on a prepersonal level, communication is an *a priori* of intersubjectivity. This tension between the personal experience of the agoraphobe and the prepersonal orientation toward intersubjective communication sets in place a disturbed relation to the body of the other, which I will explore in its manifold manifestations.

3 Case study: the bus journey

As promised, we begin with our case study, which is sourced from my own experience. For the sake of clarity, I will employ a first-person narrative for the phenomenological description and then proceed to third-person for the hermeneutic interpretation. The description aims to offer as clear an account of a vivid experience as is possible. It is important to note that the writing of the experience takes place retroactively rather than in the present. What is being described, therefore, is as much mediated by memory as it is the sensations themselves that are at stake.

It is two o’clock on a grey Tuesday afternoon and I am standing at a bus stop.⁸ Even though I am not keeping track of time, I have been waiting for what feels like a long time. My anxiety is generalised but not acute. I perch myself on a bench and scan the immediate field of perception, giving special attention to places to retreat to, should the anxiety escalate. Although I’m unable to visually see my home, its

⁷ Merleau-Ponty (2006).

⁸ Although the details are contingent, for readers with an interest in the topographical context of this illustration, the route taken is from the Pont de Sully to Saint-Germain-des-Prés, Paris while aboard the number 86 bus. The temporal context is February 2011.

presence is felt as reassuring warmth. Still waiting for the arrival of the bus, I am beginning to grow impatient. Standing up to gain better view of incoming traffic, I experience a surge of dizziness pulse through my head. The dizziness is only abated when the bus approaches. I exhale slowly. When it arrives, I am relieved that the bus is comparatively free of passengers. Those passengers that have boarded the bus are either gazing out the window or otherwise buried in newspapers. I take a seat by the window, focus on the outside world, and continue to breathe slowly.

The electric doors close and the bus resumes its journey. At the next stop, a flux of passengers enters the bus. Despite my best effort to will them away, one of the passengers sits next to me. He is a middle aged man carrying a suitcase. He takes his seat and begins reading a newspaper. Experiencing the person as trapping me in the seat, I am aware of an increase in tension and feel a surge of hostility directed toward the passenger.

Now, a transformation is beginning to take place in my experience of the world. Every heterogeneous marker that I pass—a square, a monument, a notable building—becomes further evidence of my distance from home. Indeed, I am aware that I measure space less in geometrical terms, and more in respect of how anxious my body has become.

When the bus passes over a bridge, I feel the ground beneath swell with vertiginous force. As though floating in midair, I grip the man next to me tightly with the aim of rooting myself in place. He looks back at me and I grimace. Before having the chance to mutter an apology, my body has begun another series of involuntary reactions and spasms. I grip the collar of my shirt so tight that three of the buttons proceed to pop off in a comical fashion, landing somewhere on the floor of the bus. As the bus turns a sharp corner, I automatically fix my hand on the window, feeling my inner organs judder violently with every turn in the bus's course.

Beyond the bridge, the bus is now in dense crowds and traffic infested roads. It stops in the midst of congestion. The large windows open onto an endless stream of anonymous human beings. At times, I cannot even be sure that these material entities are indeed human, such is the intense aura of unfamiliarity permeating the enclosure of the bus. The trembling I experienced when crossing the bridge is now accompanied by intense pangs of hunger and thirst. Sensing that I might imminently slip into unconsciousness, I wade through my bag in a frenzied state looking for a bottle of water.

The respite afforded by the water is only momentary. As the bus surfaces from the traffic, it journeys through a series of alleyways. The high walls, enclosed darkness, and lack of view give me the impression of being swallowed at sea by mounting waves and thunderous clouds. All that prevents me from succumbing to an urge to flee is the thought of being abandoned in an unfamiliar part of the city. That I am able to maintain the course is only because I am now clutching my phone, braced to establish contact with the world of familiarity.

Frantically, I make use of my phone. There, I mutter the words through trembling teeth, "On the bus...can't breathe...feel like I'm going to die..." The voice on the other end of the call, although located in a different country, is familiar and calming. As I hear the voice, I become aware of the incongruity of the situation, as though the reassuring tone of their voice were mutually incompatible with the alienness of the

bus journey. But the two realms are now joined in the space of the bus. Hearing the trusted person remind me to breathe slowly, I absorb the calmness of their tone into my body, as though I had previously forgotten to breathe slowly. Slowly I begin to resume a non-anxious mode of being. Only instead of returning to a pre-anxious body, the post-anxious body I have now become is drained of energy, depleted of spirit, and in the midst of an intense migraine. Looking around the interior of the bus, the wariness I previously felt gives way to a numb exhaustion. I sink into the chair in a state of deflated gloom.

4 Agoraphobia as an intersubjective condition

How can we begin to make sense of this experience? Thematically, the following observations can be made. First, the orientation during the journey hinges at all times on the reference of a fixed point: *home*. Generally speaking, the idea of “home” is inherently ambiguous for the agoraphobe, ranging from a particular building or room, to a general neighbourhood that assumes the appearance of being familiar. Various anecdotal reports testify to this ambiguity. Thus in some cases, the centrality of the physical home, with its borders and boundaries, marks a threshold from agoraphobic embodiment to non-agoraphobic embodiment, as Stewart Sadovsky writes:

Other clients are perfectly comfortable in their own homes despite the fact that they are alone and helpless should they have an ‘attack.’ The cozy familiarity of their home exudes a physiognomic air of safety and shelter. This permits them to cast off their constant concern about ‘attacks.’⁹

In other cases, the locality of the physical home extends to a broader region, and might contain a multiplicity of different homely places. Kirsten Jacobson writes: “It is only when the agoraphobic is in his safe places or somewhere from which there is a reliable avenue to what he considers a home base that he feels comfortable and capable of carrying out his daily activities and interests.”¹⁰ In each case, as the agoraphobe becomes distant from this fixed point in space—home—so his anxiety escalates. Home, therefore, is something located objectively in the world rather than carried with him.

Second, this relation between anxiety and the home colours the subsequent experience of self and other while journeying on the bus. What follows is a series of intersubjective moments, each of which is shaded by the increased distance of home.

The first intersubjective moment is manifest as the experience of being trapped by the other. To be trapped in this way is not only a spatial prohibition, but also a threat to the tightly wound personal space the agoraphobe has cultivated in the space of the bus. As a threat, the other assumes the appearance of being a danger to general well-being, and thus something the agoraphobic body recoils at.

⁹ Stewart (1997, p. 33).

¹⁰ Jacobson (2004, p. 34).

The second intersubjective moment almost immediately reverses this hostile space when I instinctually grip the forearm of the same person in a heightened flurry of anxiety, as though searching for parental comfort. This transition between hostility and vulnerability is played out in the body shifting from a recoiled state to a dependent state.

The third movement in this arc of intersubjective exchanges focuses on the anonymity of the crowds, as the bus stops in a dense crowd. If the first two movements give a precise definition to the other, then here we are confronted with a resistance to ascribing any form of presence. Together with an adjoining sense of unfamiliarity, what remains is a total alienation from the visual materialisation of other people's bodies. Indeed, the window of the bus in this respect serves to establish a sort of televisual distance, whereby other people beyond the bus are in some sense less real than the immediacy of the bus itself.

The final moment in this narrative involves the presence of the agoraphobe's trusted other. Central to this stage is the fact that the precarious calm opened up in the presence of the trusted other is not limited to the experience of bodily sensations, as though those sensations were autonomous entities interfering with the world. Rather, the presence of the other restores the world to a place of calm, in which the body has its place.

5 Intersubjectivity and intercorporeality

Our case study presents us with a rich multiplicity of different modes of intersubjectivity. From hostility to intimacy, the role others play in the lifeworld of the agoraphobe is complex and ambiguous. But this ambiguity is not limited to instances of pathological embodiment, but instead is incorporated into our everyday experience of the world. In this section, I will begin charting the development of the other within the horizon of subjective experience. The importance of conducting this investigation is that it will provide a foundation for how less nominally everyday instances of intersubjectivity are structured.

For Merleau-Ponty, far from an additional component of lived experience, the coexistence of the other person is implicated from the outset. This is clear enough in his paper, "The Child's Relations With Others."¹¹ Ordinarily, so he argues, we begin our lives as children who are able to recognise the gestures of others in a pre-reflective way. As he goes on to say, when a baby is born, the baby will smile if smiled at by another. Or the baby will open its mouth if another person pretends to bite it.¹² In such a case, the baby "perceives its intentions in its body, and my body with its own, and thereby my intentions in its own body."¹³ Likewise, when hearing the cries of another baby, another baby will also cry. This "phenomenon of the contagion," as M.C. Dillon puts it testifies to the synchronicity between different babies, with each baby sharing in the same discomfort.¹⁴ Lacking the advantage of

¹¹ Merleau-Ponty (1964a).

¹² Merleau-Ponty (2006, p. 410).

¹³ Merleau-Ponty (2006, p. 410).

¹⁴ Dillon (1997, p. 121).

perspective, the crying babies attest to a “pre-communication, in which there is not one individual over against another but rather an anonymous collectivity, an undifferentiated group life.”¹⁵

Thus, whereas traditional accounts of subjectivity tend to begin with the solipsistic subject entrenched in what Husserl would term a “sphere of ownness,”¹⁶ Merleau-Ponty begins from the view of the infant’s consciousness as lacking a distinction of different perspectives. It is not, then, a problem of establishing the existence of other minds, but instead of learning to “distinguish his experience of himself from his experience of others.”¹⁷ All of this takes place on a prepersonal and pre-reflective way. The baby does not orchestrate these gestures, but experiences the body of the other baby as being incorporated into his own self, as Merleau-Ponty says: “What is true of his own body, for the child, is also true of the other’s body. The child himself feels that he is in the other’s body.”¹⁸ Lacking an awareness of bodily boundaries, the baby finds himself spread through the presence of other bodies.

As we grow older, this lack of independence is replaced with a self-conscious distance between ourselves and others. The body becomes an object, at once separating and distinguishing self and other. Yet despite the independence that maturity confers upon us, our bodies remain prepersonally bound with other bodies. This pre-reflective bodily reciprocity between ourselves and others, originally experienced in childhood, retains a presence in our ability to recognise ourselves in others. Merleau-Ponty again: “It is the simple fact that I live in the facial expressions of the other, as I feel him living in mine. It is a manifestation of what we have called, in other terms, the system ‘me-and-other.’”¹⁹ Because of this dialogical structure, it becomes possible to partially “place” ourselves in the experiential perspective of the other’s bodily experience. When we witness someone in shock, then we do so not as detached observers, but as bodily subjects who share in that shock. We feel the other person’s shock through our own bodies, as though their bodily experiences were reverberating through us. This we are able to do because the body has a potentiality that enables us to project ourselves beyond the limits of our flesh.

It is important to note here that what Merleau-Ponty has in mind when he is talking about other bodies, is not simply the phenomenal appearance of the body as mine. What enables me to recognise the existence of another person through their body is not the idiosyncratic characteristics of a particular body, or otherwise, a style of bodily language. In fact, “the other person is never quite a personal being,” given that what structures bodily existence is an anonymous, prepersonal being.²⁰ As he writes: “In so far as I have sensory functions, a visual, auditory and tactile field, I am already in communication with others taken as similar psycho-physical

¹⁵ Merleau-Ponty (1964a, p. 119).

¹⁶ Husserl (1977).

¹⁷ Dillon (1997, p.121).

¹⁸ Merleau-Ponty (1964a, p. 134).

¹⁹ Merleau-Ponty (1964a, p. 154).

²⁰ Merleau-Ponty (2006, p. 411).

subjects.”²¹ Because world and body belong together, other bodies, and not only my own, also belong to the world. Here, the reference to “my” body is not me the personal subject, but instead the anonymous and prepersonal subject that inheres in all bodies. Merleau-Ponty writes:

Henceforth, as the parts of my body together comprise a system, so my body and the other’s are one whole, two sides of the one and the same phenomenon, and the anonymous existence of which my body is the ever-renewed trace henceforth inhabits both bodies simultaneously.²²

This is a key passage. In it, Merleau-Ponty deprives the egocentric subject of an ontological centrality, replacing it with it an anonymity that belongs to all bodies. In turn, this privileging of the prepersonal body means that self and other can partake of the same world, cohere in the same space, and reveal the possibility of a shared understanding of bodily experience. That I have a human body necessarily puts me in contact with other things of this world that also have human bodies. As bodily subjects we belong to the same ontological and thus corporeal order. To this end, the experience and behaviour of the other person can, in potential, also be my own experience and behaviour, given that our bodies dovetail into the same ontological plane of existence. The “miraculous prolongation” of the body cements my subjectivity with that of the other, cojoining each of us in a “single fabric” of being.²³

What we see in Merleau-Ponty is that intersubjectivity is really an issue of *intercorporeality*. That I am in a world of others is not thanks to a mental subjectivity conferring agency upon other people. Rather, “he and I,” so Merleau-Ponty writes in the essay “The Philosopher and His Shadow,” “are like organs of one single intercorporeality.”²⁴ This union of flesh places each of us in an “interworld,” whereupon having a body means necessarily being open to the experiences of others.²⁵

6 The body of the agoraphobe

This detour into Merleau-Ponty has been necessary in order to show us that relations with others is fundamentally bodily in structure and involves a level of prepersonal existence that is resistant to the contingences of personal life. In a word, we are *always already* in touch with others long before others are visually in our frame of perception. The body’s intentional relation with others is not only structural but thematic, too. In the complexity of their look, movement, and language, people’s bodies *affect* us.

²¹ Merleau-Ponty (2006, p. 411).

²² Merleau-Ponty (2006, p. 412).

²³ Merleau-Ponty (2006, p. 413).

²⁴ Merleau-Ponty (1964b, p. 168).

²⁵ Merleau-Ponty (2006, p. 415).

People's bodies affect us not only in terms of being able to physically interact with us, but also in the sense of bearing influence upon the experience of our own bodies. This we can already see in an especially visceral way in our example of being on a bus. There, the very presence the other's body instigates a transformation not only in the agoraphobe's experience of their own bodily sensations, but also of the spatiality the agoraphobe shares with others. How can we understand this double transformation of space and sensation?

We have to begin with the specificity of the agoraphobe's body. In common with all anxiety disorders, the body of the agoraphobe is conditioned by a highly sensitised mode of being. What does it mean to be highly sensitised? It means, above all, establishing a heightened level of self awareness. The body of the agoraphobe is sensitised insofar as it has become transformed to a mode of vigilance. This role of this hyper vigilance is to safeguard against the invasion of unfamiliar bodily sensations, which, for the agoraphobe, would signal collapse of some kind. In this way, the highly sensitised becomes a function of anticipation, where anticipation is equivalent to control.

Reports of tightened chests, pounding migraines, panting breath, and tunnel vision all reinforce the sense that agoraphobia is primarily a bodily experience. That the body of the agoraphobe is receptive to such intense sensations means that their body is already attuned to the world through the primacy of the body's senses. Time and again, the impression we have of the agoraphobe's bodily experience is a constant vigilance over any unfamiliar or undesirable sensations, as though those sensations could be arbitrarily activated from any source. In order to domesticate these sensations, the agoraphobe strives to retain absolute control over his body, and thus of his surroundings. Though a highly regulated and ritualised life, the agoraphobe's self-control presents itself as an attempt to insulate his body from the contingencies of the world. Indeed, much of the cognitively orientated treatment of agoraphobia reinforces this concern by teaching the patient to control their sensations, as though those sensations were an inconvenient appendage attached to an otherwise functional subject. Thus, once that control is lost through overwhelming sensations, then the agoraphobe invariably succumbs to an urge to flee or hide from his immediate surroundings.

The emphasis on the phobic reaction coming from any source (and, just as importantly, at any *time*) positions the locus of control out of the agoraphobe's body and into the body of other things. While those other things might include any environmental factor such as a shift in temperature, a particular configuration of space, or a certain type of lighting, where the issue of control is concerned, then the body that concerns the agoraphobe the most is the body of the other person. Unlike the lighting and temperature—both factors that can influence our bodily sensations—establishing control over the thoughts and perceptions of another person's body is not possible. Precisely for this reason is the alterity of the other's look the focal point of anxiety—to phrase it in Levinasian terms, the look of the other resists all comprehension and thus in the agoraphobe's interpretation, presents itself as a threat to identity.²⁶

²⁶ Levinas (1999).

Here, we must confront a critical question: *why* should the look of the other cause the agoraphobe to lose partial control of their bodily sensations, and in turn feel their sense of self fragment? What exactly endangers the security of the agoraphobe in the face of the other? By asking this question, we must tackle the issue of the body as objectified by the look of the other.

7 Agoraphobia and the look

Let us return to the bus journey. Let us recall that when the bus becomes populated with passengers, then a transformation takes place in the agoraphobic body. The agoraphobic person's body tenses up before moving into an anxious state when he feels entrapped by another person. More than an issue of just being unable to escape, the presence of the other person's body amplifies the agoraphobic person's bodily anxiety through reinforcing the material reality to the agoraphobe's anxiety. The other person is not a mass of materiality, and that alone. Their body is an active field of force that draws other bodies into its sphere of being. If a suitcase was placed where the fellow passenger was sitting, then instead of feeling trapped, the agoraphobe would feel enclosed and protected by the barrier established. Where a human body is concerned, protection is replaced with penetration. Without even directing his visual gaze toward the agoraphobe, the other person's body penetrates the already porous boundary of the agoraphobic person's flesh. The presence of the other's look attests to the reality of the agoraphobe's sensations, and thus heightens those sensations.

If there was any doubt that the agoraphobic person was anxious, then in the look of the other person, all doubt has been erased. The other person confers a distinct material reality upon the agoraphobe's anxiety. It is for this reason, that hostility is the natural response to the other passenger. In the prereflective interpretation of the agoraphobe, the arrival of the other is causally linked to the development of anxious sensations and is thus at least partly assigned responsibility for these sensations. In a word, for the agoraphobe, the arrival of the passenger is regarded as something external that triggers anxiety, as though anxiety was floating freely in the air. Objectively speaking, of course, the trigger is activated in the body of the anxious subject rather than in the world.

It is important to note here that the reference to the "look" of the other does not mean that intersubjectivity is reducible to the visual gaze.²⁷ Following Merleau-Ponty, we understand the subjectivity of the other person as being expressed in and through the totality of their body.²⁸ What this means is that the other is other for me, not simply through the meeting of flesh on flesh, but instead through the dynamism of his behaviour. The other does not depart from the world of things and become

²⁷ For the sake of brevity, I have not included the obvious reference to Sartre in this account of the look and vision. A separate treatment concerning this relation between anxiety and Sartre's account of intersubjectivity is in preparation .

²⁸ Merleau-Ponty (2006).

other through facing me as an autonomous entity. He encircles and surrounds me, precisely because we are both bodily consciousness joined in our intercorporeality.

At no point, therefore, can we withdraw or resist the other's being. We may experience it as strange or alarming, but it is through that response that our bond with the other is reinforced. At all times, we are in a relationship of being-with the other, even if the other is physically absent.

From a Merleau-Pontean view, how can we account for the agoraphobic experience of the other, given that what we seem to be faced with in the agoraphobic worldview is a complete rupture of intercorporeality? Phrased another way, how can we retain Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on bodily intersubjectivity as occupying a transcendental relation to appearances while at the same time account for the lived experience of estrangement from that relation to appearances?

We are confronted, then, with an ambiguity in our dealings with the philosopher. On the one hand, he grounds intersubjectivity in the prepersonal body. This has the advantage of dissolving the problem of "other minds" and providing us with a more coherent and empathic account of intersubjectivity. On the other hand, other people can be experienced as detached objects, with whom we have no empathic relation. At the centre of this ambiguity is the question of whether or not Merleau-Ponty's account of intersubjectivity allows for pathological instances of embodiment.

In fact, it is precisely because Merleau-Ponty grounds his account of intersubjectivity in the primacy of intercorporeality that the experience of anxiety and alienation *can* be accounted for. Let me explain this.

According to Merleau-Ponty, when I am confronted with a stranger's look, the objectification I experience is "unbearable only because it takes the place of possible communication."²⁹ Communication is the transcendental condition of intersubjective relations, and to this end, is ontologically prior to alienation. In distinction to other models of subjectivity, Merleau-Ponty does not argue that we are thrown into the world, and thereupon forced to confront a state of being ill-at-home in the world. For him, that I have a "natural body and a natural world" means that a series of "patterns of behaviour with which my own interweave" is mapped out in advance.³⁰

In addition, it is worth reminding ourselves at this point that for Merleau-Ponty, the fact that "I have sensory functions, a visual, auditory and tactile field" puts me in contact with "with others taken as similar psycho-physical subjects."³¹ On this psycho-physical level, we necessarily enter into a relation with others. And yet, such a relation is strictly prepersonal and anonymous. At no point, does the relation foreground the personal "I." Thus, for Merleau-Ponty, impersonality is at the "heart of subjectivity and eliminating the individuality of perspectives."³² While this non-thematic structure resists direct expression, it nevertheless implicates the specificity of the lived body. It is "my" personal body that enters into this prepersonal relation with other bodies, and as such, involves the implementation of the personal subject.

²⁹ Merleau-Ponty (2006, p. 42).

³⁰ Merleau-Ponty (2006, p. 416).

³¹ Merleau-Ponty (2006, p. 411).

³² Merleau-Ponty (2006, p. 414).

8 The body's boundaries

Let us return to the heart of the matter. We have seen in Merleau-Ponty that the corporeal basis of intersubjectivity involves a tension between the personal and prepersonal aspects of the body. How does this relate to our agoraphobic case study? It is my contention that *the relation between the anonymous structure of intersubjectivity and the irreducibly personal experience of intersubjectivity is what comes apart for the agoraphobe*. If the “psycho-physical” body necessarily puts us in a relation with others, then for the agoraphobe this level of bodily subjectivity is problematic insofar as the natural body is beyond personal intervention.

At all times, the body expresses a receptivity to other bodies. The body, we can say, is a porous agent in the world, necessarily conjoined with other bodies, all of which seep into the intercorporeal space of the personal subject. Quite apart from the idiosyncrasies of the subject's psychological characteristics, being a subject means being exposed to and in touch with the bodies of others.

For the agoraphobe, the porousness of the natural body is a problem for at least two reasons. First, the very fact that the body's boundaries resist closure positions corporeality outside of the agoraphobe's control. Confronted with anxiety, it is as though the body has betrayed him by allowing itself to be affected by the encroachment of the other's body. As it does this, the agoraphobe loses control of the boundaries of his intercorporeal space and thus experiences the other as a threat to security.

Second, because his relation to the body is one of control (and dominance), in the experience of anxiety and panic, the agoraphobe's body ceases to be identifiable with the personal subject and instead assumes an objectified quality. This is no longer a body that the agoraphobe can recognise as being “mine,” as the worldview of the agoraphobe fails to negotiate with gradients of ambiguity (and relies on regularity and ritual). The failure to incorporate ambiguity leads to a bifurcation of the body. *Either* the body is controllable and thus retains a sense of ownership, *or*, the body is beyond control and accordingly divested of a sense of ownership. When confronted with the latter option, the body of the agoraphobe presents itself as having an objectified relation not only to the surrounding world but also to the agoraphobic subject.

In both modes of bodily comportment, the structure of the natural body not only retains but also asserts its ontological primacy. The agoraphobe's experience of being out-of-joint in the public sphere is predicated on the fact that the expression of communication has been ruptured *precisely because its possibility remains intact*, as Merleau-Ponty has it. Far from destroying or denying the other, the agoraphobe's anxiety only accents the lived relation to the other. That the agoraphobe undergoes a transformation in the presence of another body is evidence of his tightly wound relation to that body. The body assumes a special and privileged significance for him. Only now, the significance has assumed a negative quality, in which the possibility of communication has become obtruded by a body maladjusted to the intersubjective realm.

For the reasons outlined above—porousness of the natural body together with the loss of control—the case study of agoraphobia demonstrates the ambiguities and (productive) tensions in Merleau-Ponty’s account of intersubjectivity. In non-pathological embodiment, the anonymity of the body’s relations with others is that which enables us to communicate with other people, and is thus taken-for-granted. In pathological instances of bodily existence, where intersubjectivity is a threat rather than source of reassurance of subjectivity, the body’s relations with others is invariably a flashpoint. This is especially clear in the case of the agoraphobe, where bodily existence is subject to a series of rituals and regulations, all of which strive to domesticate the body’s relation with the world of others.

To summarise, then, we have seen that the agoraphobe’s ownership over his sensations is exasperated by the presence of others in close contact. As we saw, the sensations he is undergoing are at the control of others around him. Not only does the other person intensify the presence of anxiety, but he also strips the agoraphobe of their agency by reducing him to a thing—a material mass of raw nerves with no integrated subject to control them. All along, of course, the other person is unaware of the role he is playing in shaping the agoraphobe’s experience, and indeed, likely unaware of the agoraphobe. But for the agoraphobe, a complex and yet silent dialogue is occurring with the other person.

9 A psychoanalytical contribution?

As to the question of *why* the agoraphobic person is unable to withstand the look of the other, the question leads us perhaps beyond phenomenology and more into the realm of psychoanalysis. Yet we need not venture too far into this terrain to be able to profit directly from the insights developed there. Of particular interest, is the work of Donald Winnicott in helping us to understand just how the other person assumes the presence of a threat.

We note that in the face of the other, the felt experience of the agoraphobe’s anxiety is heightened. Thereafter, his body is experienced as being porous and out of control. To the detriment of the agoraphobic person, his body pulls him into the bodily world of the other. As we have seen, this is problematic insofar as the agoraphobe’s relation to his own body is one of alienation and bewilderment. Put simply, the agoraphobe has no idea *why* what is happening is in fact happening.

One way to look at this mystery is to consider the notion of an absence of connection between the agoraphobe and the other. That he feels stripped of his bodily control, reduced to a porous state, is in large because the agoraphobe has failed to cultivate a relation with the other. It is at this juncture that Winnicott can be of help with his idea of a “transitional object.”³³

For Winnicott, the notion of a transitional object is predicated on an intermediate reality. Between the reality of subjective experience and an objective world outside of that reality, an intermediate space opens up. Winnicott cites the infant’s caressing of external objects—cloth, wool, string, teddy bear, etc.—as emblematic of a

³³ Winnicott (2005).

“defence against anxiety, especially anxiety of a depressive type.”³⁴ The transitional object and phenomena coincide, each aspect dependent on the other, and each emerging with greater intensity in times of insecurity.

In normal development, the baby would outgrow the transitional object through destroying it, thereby relegating it to a state of “limbo,” and thus depriving it of meaning. Having survived and testified to the destruction of the object, the infant proceeds to an ontologically secure place in the world, now able to experience his own autonomy without the need to possess or be possessed by the things and people around him.

Winnicott’s ideas have a particular appeal to an understanding of agoraphobia. If we are to understand agoraphobia as having a special relationship with the inability to cultivate a relationship with the other, then from a Winnicottian perspective, this inability centres on the agoraphobe’s failure to transcend the transitional quality of the home as a locus of control. Psychoanalytically, there is, of course, a relation between the home and mother’s breast, insofar as both constitute a first point of contact with the world and the source of primordial nourishment. From a phenomenological perspective, “home” is not a geometric site in the world, nor is it a construct of the subject’s internal landscape. Instead, it is a relational mode of being-in-the-world: it is the bridge enabling one to set foot in the world.

Read from a psychoanalytical perspective, the “disorder” in agoraphobia is a failure to negotiate or create the transitional space between self and other. Consider this in the context of the relation between the breast and the home as a site of familiarity. When the baby cries, the breast appears in the world, giving the impression that the baby’s will creates the breast to materialize. In turn, the mother submits herself to the needs of the baby. Once other objects are introduced into this dyadic relationship, the baby slowly begins to recognise objects as being “not me.” In time, the mother herself is distanced from the needs of the baby, and with the mother’s guidance, the baby enters the transitional space between subjective and objective realities. If all goes to plan, then the frustrations met in this phase are adapted to and the baby begins to find a place in the world.

In the case of agoraphobia, the anxiety experienced has its roots in the subject’s inability to will a state of familiarity instantly. After all, what is less resistant to the act of establishing familiarity than the alterity of the other? For the agoraphobe, the experience of anxiety is primarily an experience of this radical alterity: the world becomes hostile by dint of its unfamiliarity, and the one thing the agoraphobe lacks, is the ability to establish familiarity outside of his circumscribed sense of “home.” Panic ensues as the sensations the agoraphobe undergoes are interpreted as a threat to his already vulnerable sense of self. In turn, the reliance on transitional objects within the transitional space becomes a pathology. Only now, those objects are not teddy bears and pieces of cloth—though they may well be—but instead particular modes of bodily comportment and navigation.

Lacking a sense of security in the world, the experience of intermediate space for the agoraphobe is thus not interpreted as a “potential space” of creation and growth, but as a space divested of all familiar attributes and so opposed to the integrity of the

³⁴ Winnicott (2005, p. 5).

I. Indeed, in the failure to navigate the terrain of the intermediate space successfully, what the agoraphobe experiences is the reality of internal experience (self) confront the external world (other), without anything to link them.

This glance into psychoanalysis reminds us that the agoraphobia condition is informed by a history that is far from immediately present to the subject. If phenomenological is able to thematize the specificity of the body's experience of others, then it may fall to psychoanalysis to elicit the historicity giving rise to that intersubjective experience.

10 Conclusion

In this paper, I have pursued the question of how our experience of our bodily self is affected by our experience of others. In order to respond to this question, I have sought to show that intersubjectivity is fundamentally intercorporeal in structure. This we have seen in Merleau-Ponty's account of intersubjectivity. For him, communication with others is provided by the structure of bodily subjectivity, which *necessarily* puts us in touch with others. This onus on the necessary communication with others is stipulated on the structure of the prepersonal body, which is co-constituted with the body of the other and thus never entirely free of the other.

In turn, we investigated the intercorporeal basis of intersubjectivity in the example of agoraphobia. What the case of agoraphobia shows us is that our relations with others serves to define and shape our experience of the self. This is evident in that other people can provoke a transformation in bodily experience, such that when confronted with the look of the other, modes of bodily comportment and sensations alter accordingly. In the phobic subject, the material reality of anxious sensations is determined by the density, proximity, and behaviour of other people. This materialization of sensation attests to the entwinement of the experience of one's own body with the presence of the other's body, with each aspect together forming a union.

Our experience of ourselves is affected by our experience of others precisely because we are in a bodily relation with others. Such a relation is not causally linked, as though first there were a body, then the other person, and then a subject that provided a thematic and affective context to that experience. Instead, body, other, and self are each intertwined in a single unity and cannot be considered apart. This is especially clear in conditions such as agoraphobia, because the body in question is highly attuned to the presence of other bodies, and thus to the world of those bodies. To this end, agoraphobia does not present us with a world that is alien to "everyday" embodiment, but instead shows us a world enriched with a series of themes and issues that are already of concern to non-agoraphobic subjects.

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