

## Understanding understanding!

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### Abstract

The word *understanding* indicates a bodily connection to being upright. The prefix here *under* does not have the common meaning of *beneath* but derives from the old English meaning *between* or *among*. The old English word *understandan* could be transcribed as *standing in the midst of* and shows enactive relationality: how we are and how we bring ourselves in relation to our environment creates our understanding and forms our experiences and conceptions of the world. It is an active, sensory-motor-process borrowed in the act of understanding that carries action-potentialities. From the encounters of many individual action-potentialities rises a cultural and political potentiality in which we form our social reality. This potentiality makes it necessary for us to be able to practice conscious,

responsible decision-making. The range and the freedom of choices demand to take responsibility for actions and their consequences, which means that where we have the choice we have to make a choice.



In social spaces we are making our choices always in collective structures which involve us and others. Within these collective structures our choices show impact in many directions. To build conducive conditions for individual and collective unfolding, the social space requires a compassionate, appreciative way of understanding which leads beyond the cognitive aspect of understanding. Compassion creates a wider space which not only depends on cognitive understanding. The awareness for the always already shared space allows to develop self-care into community-care.

### **Keywords**

Embodied understanding, Kinaesthetic orientation, Sensory-based question-action-observation-processes, Political potentiality

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### The framing

This article is a compositional and experience-informed exploration within language which allows an exploration of a new understanding of understanding while relating the ideas and practices of the Feldenkrais Method® (Feldenkrais 2010) with improvisation theory (Dell 2002), philosophy (Ahrendt 1968), artistic philosophy (Cage 1961) and biological philosophy (Maturana and Varela 1987; and Varela 1990). The text is based on a transcription of a lecture-performance<sup>1</sup> and the article 'Verstehen verstehen' (Munker 2016) which both investigated embodied and inter-bodily understanding from the perspective of the Feldenkrais Method and improvisation.

This lecture-performance unfolded a field for experiential, cognitive and poetic understanding of understanding. Blending the spoken essay on understanding with movement, improvisation/instant composition-strategies and quotes of Hannah Ahrendt, John Cage, Christopher Dell, Moshe Feldenkrais, Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela suggested possibilities how somatic practices can support multi-layered and actively applied ways of understanding.

With a participatory approach the lecture-performance encouraged the audience to:

- Feel **free to move** and to change perspective in any moment according to own **needs and interests**.
- **Move** particularly when one does **not understand**.
- **Play** with a specific-movement-practice called *multi-circular circles*: Imagining the over 200 bones hanging in, swimming in and expanding the elastic material, and trying to circle these over 200 bones simultaneously in multi directions.
- **Interact** with provided papers and rearrange the pattern according to their own understanding and sense-making: Highlighted terms and quotes printed on papers were put out on the ground in the order of their appearance creating a huge spatial pattern.

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<sup>1</sup> Lecture-performance *Understanding understanding*, September 2017 at Symposium *BODILY UNDOING – Somatic Activism and Performance Cultures as Practices of Critique* at Bath Spa University

The audience was invited to constantly interact with these papers.



## The lecture-performance

It started with an excerpt from the Lecture on nothing by John Cage (1961: 123):

*[...]*

|                          |                                |                              |                               |
|--------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| <i>More and more</i>     |                                | <i>I have the feeling</i>    | <i>that we are getting</i>    |
| <i>nowhere.</i>          | <i>Slowly</i>                  | <i>,</i>                     | <i>as the talk goes on</i>    |
| <i>,</i>                 | <i>we are getting</i>          | <i>nowhere</i>               | <i>and that is a pleasure</i> |
| <i>.</i>                 | <i>It is not irritating</i>    | <i>to be where one is</i>    | <i>.</i> <i>It is</i>         |
| <i>only irritating</i>   | <i>to think one would like</i> | <i>to be somewhere else.</i> | <i>[...]</i>                  |
|                          | <i>More and more</i>           | <i>we have the feeling</i>   |                               |
| <i>that I am getting</i> | <i>nowhere</i>                 | <i>.</i>                     |                               |
|                          | <i>Slowly</i>                  | <i>,</i>                     | <i>as the talk goes on</i>    |
| <i>,</i>                 | <i>slowly</i>                  | <i>,</i>                     | <i>we have the feeling</i>    |
|                          | <i>we are getting</i>          | <i>nowhere.</i>              | <i>That is a pleasure</i>     |
|                          | <i>which will continue</i>     | <i>.</i>                     | <i>If we are irritated</i>    |
| <i>,</i>                 | <i>it is not a pleasure</i>    | <i>.</i>                     | <i>Nothing is not a</i>       |

*pleasure if one is irritated, but suddenly*  
*, it is a pleasure , and then, more and more*  
*it is not irritating (and then more and more*  
*and slowly ). Originally*  
*, we were nowhere ; and now, again*  
*we are having the pleasure*  
*of being slowly nowhere. [...]*

The contact with the ground and/or with something constitutes our felt relationship within the **environment** and takes place within **space** and **gravity**. This is the space in which we exist, function, learn and generate an **image** of ourselves and of the world. And it is the space in which we consider something possible or impossible. In this sense it is simultaneously as much a **physical** as an **imaginary space**, in which **internal** and **external** **separate**, and **unite**.

From the perspective of the **Feldenkrais Method** and of contemporary approaches of **philosophy, biology and neuro- and cognitive science** the **body** cannot be understood separately from the whole **person** within his or her **environment**. Moshe Feldenkrais assumed an **inseparability** and mutual **interdependency** of **body, self, self-image, environment and awareness** as an entire system. The human ability to develop consciousness, to differentiate sensitivity and to organize conscious actions through sensory feedback is understood as the basis for learning, understanding and knowledge.



Moshe Feldenkrais named **space, time, gravity, culture** and **society** as relevant within the **environment**, though he recognized **gravity** as a **universal condition** on earth of particular importance. In the body he named **the skeleton, the muscles and the nervous system** as particularly relevant for learning and self-organization. Exposed to gravity our **nervous system** differentiates between our **own body** and the **environment**.

[...] a living nervous system introduces order into the random, constantly changing stimuli arriving through the senses and impinging on the system. Moreover, the living organism itself is moving incessantly, and the nervous system has to bring order to the mobile, changing world as well as to its own mobility, to make some sense from that whirling turmoil. [...] the most efficient means for achieving this [...] is movement. Movement of the living organism is essential for the formation of stationary events in the changing, moving environment and the constantly moving organism itself. (Feldenkrais 2010: 60)

While we go through life we **linger** here or we **accelerate** there. Thereby we **deepen** one thing and we **omit** something else. In consequence this creates a **conditionality**:

The freedom to learn is a great liability. [...] The ability to learn is synonymous with free choice and free will. But once learned the choice is made [...] and the tabula rasa is no more. Herein lie the liabilities as well as the restriction. (Feldenkrais 2010: 49)



In this process our basic capacity to **understand** unfolds, our **self-conception** and our **conception of the world** and by that our full **intelligence**.

**The basic idea is that our cognitive capacities are intrinsically tied to our life story; like a path which doesn't exist as such but only originates through the process of walking. (Varela 1990: 110)**

Within the **process** of continuously **practicing, testing** and **sensing** in the search for **deeper understanding** and for the development of **skillfulness** we need **orientation** to **navigate** within that process. **Simultaneously** orientation as a differentiation is a **result** from the same **process**. This is why orientation is a crucial support and challenge in the development of **self-care** and **self-responsibility**.

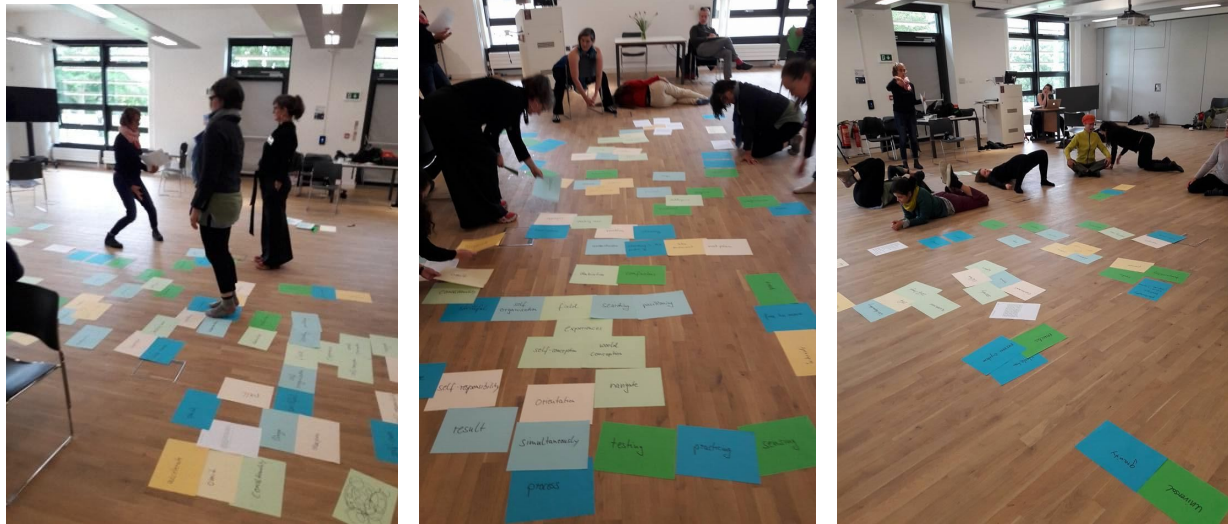
**[...] to become conscious of our body's spatial orientation is to come to know ourselves in depth and in clarity. In this way, we take charge again of our personal evolution [...]** (Feldenkrais 2010: 25)



Our **movements** create impulses which stimulate **sensory** areas of our nervous system. Within this whirl of multi-sensory stimuli, co-created by self-movement, **preferences** and **patterns** can emerge. Changes in the **spatial position** and in the **push** and **pull** of **gravity**, which we sense in the **kinaesthetic integration** of **proprioception**, **equilibrium** and **touch**, are complemented through what we hear, see, smell and taste to build our synaesthetic wholeness-experience of the moment. These physical aspects inform us about where and how we are oriented in space. The **physical orientation** then is the basis for an **orientation** as a whole **person** including the **cognitive, emotional** and **cultural** aspects of our being:

**The term 'orientation' is used here in its widest sense, including the distinction between 'I' and 'not I' in the social field, with all its ramifications. (Feldenkrais 2010: 33)**

As **orientation** is **means** for and **consequence** of our **self-organization** we can ask what kind of **acting** needs to underlie this **interconnectedness** to allow **development**? In the **Feldenkrais Method** it is an **active, sensory questioning** of what we do which is used as methodology for action organization. Leading questions in this are: **What** do I do? What do I sense? **How** do I do and how do I sense? And **what...if...?** How...if...? These questions conduct towards more detailed **differentiation** and allow us to recognize connections and **relations**.



Assuming that our actions are motivated by **conscious** and **unconscious intentions** we could use this sensory questioning to recognize hidden and maybe even contradictory intentions. With this **awareness** we can use the **observations** of what we **actually do and sense** to **filter** out the ways of action which enable us to experience greater **adequateness**, conduciveness, and pleasure to satisfy our intentions. We can distinguish if we are acting inappropriately without matching our intentions or even if we would have to change our intentions because even these intentions appear to be inappropriate. With the practice of such **sensory-based question-action-observation-processes** we train our brains and bodies to **act** in **complex** space-relation-configurations. As part of complex organization Feldenkrais (2010: 17) described **reversibility**: With the ability to reverse a movement we develop the **freedom of choice** between **doing** or **not doing** which opens a new range of possibilities.

Our **body** houses our **senses** which inform the system simultaneously about itself and about the world. The way in which we **use** our body and our senses creates our **reality**, 'our' **world** and how we make sense from all of that. Our **understanding** of the world and of ourselves is thereby based in our **self-usage**. This interrelatedness yield not just our complete **epistemic ability** but also our **(organizational) blindness**:



Since we are learner and judge at the same time, our judgement depends on, and is limited to, our learning achievements. Obviously, to improve, we individuals have to better our judgement. But judgement is the result of learning already completed. To break this vicious circle, we must use the basic quality of the [...] part of our brain, which is able to sense and to abstract and often even to express in words what is happening in our bodies. (Feldenkrais 2010: 71-72)

To take **responsibility** for this blindness, Feldenkrais suggests to constantly create a **sensory actualization** (cited in Pippin 2013: 104) within our being. This actuality then forms a continuous source of variations which again and again have to be related to already made experiences. Thereby we constantly develop our personal **criteria** and systems of **order and orientation**. Simultaneously we can use this process of actualization in our sensing, acting and **evaluating** to verify these systems concerning their functionality. We are actualizing in this not just our physical body-movement strategies but our whole **value systems** on a general level for all our encounters within society when we are challenged to **synchronize** and **adapt** with others.

**Body** in this context is **not relevant** as a purely physical body but it is **relevant** how we **use** ourselves as bodily, intelligent and self-aware beings as a whole. And our **movements** become **relevant** for how we **relate with** ourselves and how we open ourselves for a complex understanding of ourselves, of the world and of others.

If movement forms the basis for **successful** behavior the question is if all movement is appropriate, or which **criteria** might be more or less **conductive**.

Movements can **stabilize** or **destabilize** a situation. These two options find their resonance in the two basic human motivations of **structure preservation** and **curiosity**. Both impulses are equally important necessities for life and development which means that we need to develop acting and evaluation strategies which allows us to relate to both qualities.

In the **oscillation** between the fundamental impulses **of preservation and curiosity or change** we sometimes **exaggerate** one or other option so that an **inhibiting stagnation or fluctuation** might be the consequence which would, in a long-term perspective, **undermine development**.

**A conducive field** needs enough **trust, stimulation, comparison**, but also **leisure, stability** and **openness**: a variety of **rhythms, directions, intensities, surprises** and **unforeseen** to develop the ability to act in complexity.

Understanding therefore needs **tolerance** for **change**, for **decay** as well as for **stillness** or **sameness**. It needs tolerance for **not-knowing** or for the **unknown** and for **failure**, as we never can get full **certainty** as to which way of acting might be finally conducive. It remains as a practicing and testing process even if we achieved some understanding and skillfulness.

Finally, within this field for understanding, movement can just become meaningful with and through **awareness** and **perception** of our own action.



Understanding obviously emerges in in-between-spaces; in creative leeway. To support understanding we need to create a space for creative leeway. In this sense understanding is a **creative act**: Learning how to create and to handle this field is part of the process of sense-making. While the **Feldenkrais Method** provides strategies to use the human **potential** on a **movement-awareness**-related level, **improvisation** and instant **composition** can provide strategies for **navigation** in **space, time and relationship** in broader ways. Possibilities offered by improvisation strategies are for example:

- Playful change in the relations in space and with others,
- creative **conversion**,
- **process-oriented** acting in opposition to solution-oriented action,
- **variation** of **rhythms, durations, positioning, perspectives** and **pathways**,
- **augmentation, miniaturization, compression, expansion...**
- inclusion of **chance** as conductive parameter,
- acceptance of **irritation**,
- perception of **space** and **interspaces**,
- consciously **listening**,
- active and flexible shifting of the own **focus**,
- creation of **unconventional combinations**,

- perception of **center** and **periphery**
- and **staying connected** even in irritation, not-knowing or not-understanding

**Improvisation exists within a non-linear causality-network. Within its apparent disorder it subtly undermines prevalent behavioural pattern and creates complex, open systems.** (Dell 2002: 17-18)

These open systems can become malleable when the **questioning-analyzing-perception-process** from Feldenkrais practice finds into **cooperation** with above described **improvisation strategies**. Acting based on that emerges from sensory connectedness without being lost. And understanding based on this acting becomes a **creative process**.

**We can say of improvisation that it incessantly operates within the mode of decision-making, in the mode of permanent crisis. ... Judging is the coordination point within our permanent process of decision-making. It allows us to identify the tendency of a situation and to use it, as much out of ourselves as from being part of the group. That means that in the process of improvisational judging the subject is not alienated to position itself independently outside of process or the community, but decides inside the intersubjective space.** (Dell 2002: 175-176)

From what I have said until now suggests that a sense-making **field** for **understanding** is necessarily also a **communicative field** – **intrapersonal** within one person and **interpersonal** between two or more people. Communication is a necessary **corrective** within the field of possibilities – not just in improvisation but generally in life:

**The communicative aspect prevents the playing participants to lapse into just external and superficial aspects of reality or in pure inner self-reflection. The undetermined openness of the system 'improvisation' creates and demands an alertness, a presence concerning past, now and future. [...] non-verbal communication-systems open new coordinates for the orientation in space.** (Dell 2002: 21-22)

In **communicative systems**, **subjectivity** is a **resource** as long as it stays **inter-subjectively** related. Experience and understanding of **individuals** then become a **source** for enrichment of the **social** interactions and is necessary information for the **collective**.

**Change** is a reality in individual and collective understanding. The state of improvisation integrates this reality and uses **fluidity** and **flux** instead of **absoluteness**. Relating to fluidity and flux enables collectives to identify **temporary agreements** in **common understanding**, and to reconfirm or actualize this when necessary. This state of improvisation finds resonance in the state of mind as well as in the body-state and can be described as **constructive fluctuation**. It is the same state as the **unconscious reflex activity** in our standing

deconstructing and reorganizing our balance, which keeps our ability alive to position ourselves newly in any moment.



The aware practice and coordination of

- **sensory actualization**,
- the **active creation** of **field for understanding**,
- **fluidity** in patterning,
- the ability to **reverse or pause** in any moment,
- and the development of **tolerance**,

is my **interpretation** of **bodily undoing** which opens a complexity of **action-perception-potentialities**.

When many individuals get together with many individual **action-perception-potentialities**, a **cultural** and even **political potentiality** emerges that holds a strong social relevance from which we **negotiate** and **form** our **social reality**. This potentiality challenges us, as Hannah Arendt emphasizes, to take conscious responsibility for decisions, which 'way of action' to choose in the world and how the world should look like:

**Culture and politics, then, belong together because it is not knowledge or truth which is at stake, but rather judgment and decision, the judicious exchange of opinion about the sphere of public life and the common world, and the decision what manner of action is to be taken in it, as well as to how it is to look henceforth, what kind of things are to appear in it. (Arendt 1968: 223)**

Within the open space of **freedom of choices** we are meeting our **responsibility** for the **consequences** of our actions. Where we have the choice we really have to make a choice.



In **social spaces** where we are inseparably connected, we always make our choices within a bigger structure which includes ourselves and others. In these collective structures our choices always show **effects** into **multi-directions** which go **beyond** our understanding. In collectives therefore we need to also develop **sympathy** to create supportive conditions to unfold for both, the individual and the community. (The German word *Verständnis/sympathy* has the same root as the word *verstehen/understanding*, but *Verständnis* includes the aspect of empathy.) Sympathy creates a wider **co-sensing and co-feeling** space that is not necessarily depending on understanding or that is even **transcending understanding**.

**Biology shows us that we can expand our cognitive sphere. This happens ... through the encounter with a stranger on an equal level, or, even more immediately, through the experience of interpersonal congruence, which allows us to 'see' the other and to open a space for being next to us for him or her. This we call 'love', or, if we prefer a less strong expression, the acceptance of the other next to us within our daily life. (Maturana and Varela 1987: 265-266)**

The **awareness** for the already **shared space** allows the possibility to expand the **self-care** towards **community-care**:

**A society of men and women with greater awareness of themselves will, I believe, be one that will work for the human dignity of its members rather than primarily for the abstract, collective notion of human society. (Feldenkrais 2010: 68)**





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## Biography

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Trained as physiotherapist, studies and practice of contemporary dance, (contact-) improvisation and instant composition. Long-term experience in several somatic practices, professionally trained in Feldenkrais Method and Somatic Yoga. Artistic works and research with the focus on the connection between somatic and choreographic practices as well as on walking and environmental relatedness. Regular national (*inter alia* Free University Berlin, University of Arts Berlin, Inter-University Centre for Dance Berlin, HafenCity University Hamburg) and international teaching, lecturing and contributions for congresses, publications, co-direction of *Take Us for a Walk-Symposium* (2014) and *BODY IQ Festival* (2015-2017).

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Indoor photos during lecture-performance *Understanding understanding* at Symposium *BODILY UNDOING – Somatic Activism and Performance Cultures as Practices of Critique* at Bath Spa University, September 2017. Credits: Thomas Kampe

Outdoor photos during environmental somatics workshop led by K. Munker in Berlin, April 2019. Credits: Katja Munker

Editor's note: In order to preserve some of the author's preferred formatting, we note that some of the text is not presented in standard Harvard format.