

Article

“Who's there? / Who goes there?” Point of View of the Feldenkrais Method® of Somatic Education

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PhD

Abstract

Referring to seminal texts and influential authors in the field of biology of cognition, the author discusses connections between mind and body, insisting on the critical role of the body in the acquisition of knowledge viewed as a biological phenomena. She reviews in that context the principles of the Feldenkrais method of somatic education whose goal is essentially to restore the integrity and unity of sensorial, affective and intellectual levels of the self. This approach designed to enhance body awareness and consolidate body image through sequences of movements and functional integration is said to be most beneficial to actors and artists in their search for creativity but it may benefit as well individuals who seek improvement of their health and personal growth.

Keywords

Feldenkrais Method, Somatic Education, body awareness, movement, body, mind, learning

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“Who’s there? / Who goes there?” Point of View of the Feldenkrais¹ Method[®] of Somatic Education^{*}

Odette Guimond

The famous introductory line from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, held for centuries to be a universal masterpiece, has caused much ink to flow. To how many commentaries and lectures has it not given rise even outside the realms of theatre and literature? Psychoanalysis has mined the constituent ambiguities of this work, as it has the masterpieces of Greek theatre. How can one not be fascinated both by the structure of the work and by the central role given to theatre, notably in the play-within-the-play, the presentation of *The Mousetrap* before the King? This is Hamlet’s ultimate strategy for observing on the face of the Spectator suspected of murder the revelation of his true identity; however, in so doing, Hamlet is himself forced to contemplate his own choices.

Translated by
Eileen McGurk

The French translation of the first line of Bernardo, one of the guards on the ramparts of Elsinore where the shade of the Ghost takes shape, conjures up either the phenomenon of being (“Qui est là” / “Who’s there?”) or of movement (“Qui va là” / “Who goes there?”). For my purposes, I prefer the second. It throws greater light on the fact that the question of identity is organically related to the awareness of the body moving in space.

Even if Gerald M. Edelman is convinced that artists can take no more than an amateur’s interest in the phenomenon of consciousness,² Antonio R. Damasio (2001), on the other hand, bases himself on various works,

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^{*} Translator’s note : This article is a translation of «Qui va là? Point de vue de la méthode Feldenkrais d’éducation somatique» in *PRISME, Psychiatrie, recherche et intervention en santé mentale de l’enfant*, no 37 (*Corps Culture Identité*), Montréal, Hôpital Sainte-Justine, 2002, pp. 98-106. ISBN: 2-922770-34-06; ISSN: 17-1-7599. The reference to the opening line of *Hamlet* in the second paragraph recalls the many occasions on which one Shakespearean character challenges another with either “Who’s there?” or “Who goes there?” Was Shakespeare’s choice a conscious pointer to Hamlet’s ambiguity concerning his identity?

including those of Shakespeare, to bring the public up to date on advances in the areas of neurology and psychiatry.³ The popular scientific works of Gerald M. Edelman such as *A Biological Theory of Consciousness* or *How Matter Becomes Imagination*, those of Antonio R. Damasio, *Descartes' Error* or *The Feeling of What Happens*, those of Israel Rosenfield such as *An Anatomy of Consciousness* support the reflections of Francisco J. Varela, biologist and specialist in cognitive sciences,⁴ and agree with the research of the founders and practitioners of various methods of somatic education⁵ over the last hundred years or more, especially the Feldenkrais Method®. This method has attracted the attention of Varela and other scientists for some time, even during the lifetime of Moshe Feldenkrais, doctor of physical science and judoka.⁶

The body, metaphor for the mind?

The mind, metaphor for the body?

An article like that of Carl Ginsberg on “The Somatic Self Revisited”⁷ proposes important paths not only in what pertains to the contribution of somatic education to the domain of consciousness, but also to the way that it envisages the question of identity. In fact, somatic education is interested in the learning of awareness of the body moving in space and in relation to its environment, including through this the context of learning, the culture of the individual. From now on, the question is no longer so much knowing who goes there as it is taking an interest in the process by which a living being knows, recognizes who he is and what his choices are to act more effectively and with minimum effort in a given situation, with maximum harmony and quality, sensitivity and awareness, indeed creativity.

For a long time, this question, associated to the cognitive process, was treated as if the “body” were not involved in the cognitive process, which was called “mental”, as if the head were not part of the body or the body devoid of a head. It must have required tremendous freedom of spirit, or perhaps more simply a quality of observation and scientific reflection free of philosophical or religious baggage, for medical research to reach the point of proposing in recent times that the brain be considered a bodily organ, and that that which had been referred to for centuries as the mind, in fact emerged from the functioning of the nervous system⁸ (Edelman and Tononi, 2000). Such has been the fundamental hypothesis of somatic education and especially of Moshe Feldenkrais since the 1940s, allowing escape from the duality of reductionist thinking that has been imposed since Descartes.

If the scientific dream that drives research on consciousness results, for example, in Edelman's production of sophisticated artefacts (“conscious” robots, that is, robots capable of learning and not only programmed from

without) whose function would be to objectively and quantitatively validate the functioning of a living organ like the brain, that of somatic educators emanates, above all, from their subjective experience and relies more on qualitative data. Themselves often confronted with a health problem or more generally with a question of survival, like artists, they call upon their creativity to learn to feel more and more from within themselves the functioning of their organism and their environment and to guide their students in a similar learning process. Just like artists, they have created and learned to master, in the course of long and demanding years of learning, extremely precise techniques, supported by objective knowledge, but based on a definition of consciousness as sensory and lived experience: in short, from the perspective of *qualia*, a stumbling block for present-day scientific research. For somatic education, the cognitive processes are the same as the autopoietic biological process as defined by Humberto Maturana and Francisco J. Varela in *Autopoiesis and Cognition, The Realization of the Living* in the 1970s.⁹ In this process, a living being constantly recreates its own functional identity, through the incessant movement of its parts and its structure. The brain and the rest of the body are but one, in fact, the brain nourished and affected by the movements, sensations and experiences of the entire nervous, skeletal, muscular and digestive system ... Maturana and Varela were the first biologists to clearly propose the hypothesis that knowledge was a biological phenomenon and open the debate on this topic in the scientific world.

How does the ground recognize you?

If a mirror exists that cannot lie and that reveals not appearance but identity itself, it is the relation to gravity. Didn't Moshe Feldenkrais say that the greatest discovery of Freud was his use of the couch? In somatic education, the quality of the contact with the ground and the capacity to subtly change this relationship at every stage of movement, that is, of life itself with every breath, are a means of revealing the person and, for Moshe Feldenkrais, the quality of the function of the nervous system. Imprints on the ground, so revealing for police or scientists interested in the past of living species, are at the heart of somatic education. But rather than discover only traces of a spent past, hidden or disclaimed, somatic education unlocks in this relationship to gravity the manifestation of the present moment, simultaneously revealing traces of a memory and the means by which a person manages, or doesn't manage, to transform his intentions into actions, to organize himself in space and time. Moreover, the ludic connection with the ground, the need to touch as first means of communication allow for starting up again the profound mechanisms of learning, survival and creation. Moshe Feldenkrais constantly invokes three principal themes: the inextricable unity of mind and body, the primordial importance of the relationship to gravity and the skeletal power that it incorporates, the body image (otherwise described as neuromuscular patterns) as reference to the

self that becomes clearer and therefore changes during lessons in somatic education.

He has written many books, including those with provocative titles, *Awareness Through Movement* (1972, 1977) or *The Elusive Obvious* (1981). In 1948, he had already published *Body and Mature Behaviour: A Study of Anxiety, Sex, Gravitation and Learning* (1981), a surprising synthesis for the time, even for those with a global view of the human being. The following year, in 1949, he wrote *The Potent Self*, proposing the learning of spontaneity as opposed to compulsion, which would not be published until 1985, a year after his death.

There are two ways developed by Moshe Feldenkrais to guide learning. Group lessons in Awareness Through Movement® are made up of movement sequences prepared to develop a better neuromuscular organization. Connected to specific functions, these movements are presented in an unaccustomed, non-linear way to stimulate creativity, to change habits and to find alternatives that are comfortable, based on an individual's own sensory reference points.

In individual lessons of Functional Integration® the student can be guided by the touch, as well as the verbal instruction, of the teacher who explores with him new options for movement. It is a touch that listens and accompanies, a touch suggesting neuromuscular patterns that were either forgotten or had never previously existed in the collection of movements of the student, a contact that helps to define vague areas in the person's perception of himself. What the teacher does is to hold a dialogue with the student through movement.

To sum up, the Feldenkrais Method® rests on an in-depth (and primarily experiential) understanding of several fundamental principles: organization of the body in movement in the gravitational field; self-regulated functioning of the nervous system; total integration of the person on the sensory, emotional and intellectual levels; the primacy of body image in the control of behaviour. The conditions created by our method are aimed at our learning capacities.

It is a strategic approach that is interested in the "how" rather than in the "why" of things. It uses reduction of effort and of speed; increase of keen sensitivity; a search for comfort and ease; an absence of models to imitate; the search for personal markers of quality; a graduated progression through the complex; an all-encompassing vision of the whole body and the whole person in movement. The principal strategies of the method are articulated around an approach that gives the student a sense of security, an approach as indirect as possible to sites of pain or trauma or to "problem" areas, with the perspective of addressing the whole person, the intelligence of the nervous

system, that which is healthy within the person, and not his biased perceptions.

How do you know who you are or where you're going?

The perspective of somatic education is both older and newer than is imagined; more important and more a bearer of organic solutions than is believed, confronted by issues that are too deep and shared by too many human beings to be simply individual, cultural or pathological. People are interested with good reason in the chemical make-up of human function and in what the study of brain lesions can teach us about the function and indeed the very nature of living phenomena. But my practice and teaching in the area of theatre and somatic education continue to teach me that, fundamentally, human beings cannot achieve total freedom and fully become creators without this constant recognition of their habits of movement in the gravitational field, of their behavioural preferences, of their own way of doing and perceiving. And this, not to run away from themselves and conform to some ideal model, both inaccessible and unreal, but to make peace with themselves and take ownership of who they are and what they do. The awareness of one's neuromuscular patterns is fundamental and fosters not only the improvement of what one loves to do but also brings to it creative variations that can even be qualified as profound behavioural changes.

In the theatre, we use words, many words. We even learn them "by heart". We "play" them. We try to remember that a human being wrote them and that they exist to return us to ourselves and to let us communicate with other human beings. Read a sentence that moves you, whether you do not know why it moves you or even if you feel that you do know why! Name three typical words, three qualifiers or images that the sentence makes you think of. Repeat the sentence out loud and listen to it resonate within you while discovering exactly where the images come from that you learn to differentiate one from the other. What do you do to clarify these images inside yourself? How do you know what you feel? These images will translate quickly through a pattern of movement whose reference points are known to you alone, that allow you to repeat them until they become second nature. Play at running the gamut among the three patterns of movement that will be integrated into a single form, something you could not have expected. It is both simple and fun! There you are, in contact with a new character that you may not even have recognized as an aspect of human nature within you... and of your identity.

Pick out a verb, two, three action verbs that are connected to the person with whom you wish to share this sentence that will create a relationship between you. Do your scales, run the gamut. Listen from inside yourself to how you react to the construction of movement of the other who responds to your

intention, to his relationship to you, to the reply that wells up and changes with the rhythm of the changes in your own movements. You have just created a dialogue, a fundamental relationship between two human beings. Now, what did you have to say that was so important? Was it in the words? You have just managed to clarify this relationship and perhaps to enrich it in an unexpected way, for how do you know what you know so well about yourself and your intentions? You have only to give a moment of attention to what you feel and to what you are doing in movement and to let yourself be guided by that within you that knows.

My own journey in somatic education, equal to what is dear to me in artistic experience, has taught me, like so many others, to burn masks rather than disappear behind that which is imposed. In a learning context, to quote the expression proposed by Antonio R. Damasio¹⁰ recently, it is to this freedom in the construction of differentiated characters, to this mobility in experiencing one's own identity that the awareness of sensory markers in the construction of a behaviour associated to "somatic markers" leads. This is what actors have been doing since the first intuitions of Stanislavski. But with the tools that somatic education offers, one can go much deeper in this type of research and with greater precision and pleasure. In theatre, that is something extremely precious. In everyday life, it is priceless.

ABSTRACT

Referring to the seminal texts and influential authors in the field of biology of cognition, the author discusses connections between mind and body, insisting on the critical role of the body in the acquisition of knowledge viewed as a biological phenomenon. She reviews in that context the principles of the Feldenkrais method of somatic education whose goal is essentially to restore the integrity and unity of sensorial, affective and intellectual levels of the self. This approach designed to enhance body awareness and consolidate body image through sequences of movements and functional integration is said to be most beneficial to actors and artists in their search for creativity but it may benefit as well individuals who seek improvement of their health and personal growth.

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NOTES

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- ² See the conclusion of the book by Gerald M. Edelman and Giulio Tononi, *How Matter Becomes Imagination*. There we read, for example, "But there is one fascinating point that, here and now, bears on the exhaustiveness of the scientific pursuit. It concerns whether *all* meaningful relations at the level of consciousness constitute objects for scientific study. Think, for example, of meaningful sentences in ordinary language or, even better, of poetic exchanges as they are enacted by sentient humans. Our conjecture is that they are, here and now, not fit objects for scientific study except in some trivial sense." p. 222.
- ³ See, for example, "Wordless storytelling is natural. The imagetic representation of sequences of brain events, which occurs in brains simpler than ours, is the stuff of which stories are made. A natural preverbal occurrence of storytelling may well be the reason why we ended up creating drama and eventually books (...) Be that as it may, the marvel is to think that the very first brains that constructed the story of consciousness were answering questions that no living being had yet posed: Who is making these images that have just been happening? Who owns these images? 'Who is there?' as in the stirring first line of *Hamlet*, a play that so powerfully epitomizes the bewilderment of humans regarding the origins of their condition. The answers had to come first, by which I mean that the organism had to construct first the kind of knowledge that looks like answers. The organism had to be able to produce that primordial knowledge, unsolicited, so that a process of knowing could be founded (...) Telling stories, in the sense of registering what happens in the form of brain maps, is probably a brain obsession and probably begins relatively early both in terms of evolution and in terms of the complexity of the neural structures required to create narratives. Telling stories precedes language, since it is, in fact, a condition for language (...)" in A.R. Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness*, pp.188-189.
- ⁴ See, for example, Francisco J. Varela, Evan Thompson and Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*.

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- ⁵ Among the founders of proven methods, Frederick Matthias Alexander, the late 19th–Century Australian actor realized to his horror that he would lose his voice on stage during performances and could find no specialist to help him to correct the problem. He was left to his own devices to undo his habits of behaviour rather than remain a victim of his own stress. At the same time as Moshe Feldenkrais was developing his fundamental ideas, a German doctor, Lily Ehrenfried, who had emigrated to France created the *Gymnastique Holistique*[®]: even if she could no longer practise medicine, she could at least search for ways to keep people from becoming sicker. Her aim was maintenance of health, prevention of illness and education. Taking her inspiration, like Lily Ehrenfried, from the works of Elsa Gindler (a 1920s pioneer), Gerda Alexander, a dancer in Denmark who had taught Jacques- Dalcroze rhythmic dance in her youth, created her *méthode d'Eutonie* centred on good muscle tone when at the age of 25 she contracted rheumatoid arthritis. More recently, Thérèse Bertherat, a kinesiotherapist in France of the Mézières school, created the *Antigymnastique* and taught the French-speaking public that *The Body has its Reasons*. In the USA, Bonnie Benbridge Cohen, who also began as a dancer and therapist, continues her research on *Body-Mind Centering*. This list is far from being exhaustive.
- ⁶ The Feldenkrais Method[®] carries the name of its author, a Russian-Jew born in 1904. Moshe Feldenkrais reached Palestine alone at the age of 14 and contributed to the building of his country. From 1928, he studied in Paris where he became at one and the same time Doctor of Physical Science and engineer. Among other things, he worked in the Joliot-Curie laboratory. An accomplished sportsman, he was very active in promoting the development of Judo in France and in England in the 1930s and 1940s. This long work of learning and teaching a martial art was a very important source of inspiration in the elaboration of his method and without doubt in his interest in the work of actors. The other determining factor was a serious knee injury that forced him to take an interest in his rehabilitation, in the connection between movement and the functioning of the nervous system and in the inextricable unity of the psyche and the soma. Actually, the prognosis for knee surgery at the time forced him to make a choice: either he would walk normally once again or he would find himself with still greater limitations. He decided to forego surgery and find his own way to walk as normally as possible again. The synthesis of his previous experiences, mixed with a great curiosity about biology, neuro-physiology, psychology and perinatal development, allowed him to take over his own rehabilitation. This personal discovery led him to elaborate his research and the method of work that resulted. He taught in Europe, in the United States, in Australia and in Israel where he died in 1984.
- ⁷ In the summary of the presentation of this article, we read, “Confusions as to how we use the concepts *self*, *personality*, *sub-personality*, and so on persist. Updating a previous contribution, the notion of identities, as distinct constructions and organizations of the somatic being, is introduced. In this way, it is possible to account for the observation that people exhibit, or experience within themselves, varying personalities in different contexts and, at the same time, acknowledge the underlying unity of being of the person.” (Ginsburg, 1996)
- ⁸ See, for example, Gerald M. Edelman and Giulio Tononi in *A Universe of Consciousness: How Matter Becomes Imagination*, “As living systems, we are also subject to evolutionary constraints not considered by the laws of physics. Consciousness, while special, arose as a result of evolutionary innovations in the morphology of brain and body. The mind arises from the body and its development; it is embodied and therefore part of nature.” p.215.
- ⁹ *Autopoiesis, The Organization of the Living* was originally published in Chile under the title *Maquinas y Seres Vivos*. Editor Univ. S.A., 1972. Published subsequently with Humberto R. Maturana, *Biology of Cognition* (1970) in a work that brought together the two essays: Maturana Humberto R., Varela Francisco J., *Autopoiesis and Cognition, The Realization of the Living*, D. Reidel Publishing Co.: Dodrecht, Holland and in *Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, 1980, vol.42.
- ¹⁰ Antonio R. Damasio posits the hypothesis of somatic markers in chapter 8 of *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain*. Damasio uncovered, among other things, the importance of the emotions in all decision making. We read, for example, “In short, *somatic markers are a special instance of feelings generated from secondary emotions*. Those emotions and feelings *have been connected, by learning, to predicted future outcomes of certain scenarios*. When a negative somatic marker is juxtaposed to a particular future outcome the combination functions as an alarm bell. When a positive somatic marker is juxtaposed instead, it becomes a beacon of incentive.” p.174.