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The lived world of an autist: a phenomenological approach

Abstract:

The article is a phenomenological description of the lived world of an autist (J.) and a discussion of a prominent theory in autism research: the theory of mind. Is the autistic child actually "mindblind" as proposed by Baron-Cohen? I argue that J. has a difficulty in situating himself in the bodily expressive world of children and adults. Mainly three areas are discussed in the article: 1) J.'s relationship to other children, especially his way of playing. 2) J.'s communicative relationship to others. 3) J.'s fragmentary experience of time. Focus is on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological theory of the relation between body and world. In a concluding chapter I finally suggest that an educational practise has to be bodily expressive (playful and humorous) if you want to get into contact with the autistic child.

Key words:

Autism, theory of mind, phenomenology, body, meaning, life-world, play, experience of time, educational practise.

Some years ago I knew an autistic boy (J.) for a period of 4 years. He attended the pre-school, where I am working. Compared to other children in the pre-school his behaviour through all these years was enigmatic and rather difficult to understand. He did not move much around at the playground and he did not always answer me when I stood right beside him and called him by his name. Mostly he took no interest in playing with other children. Is it possible to describe and "grasp" this rather different world, which now and then seems to return to its starting point, when he is pushing a green toy tractor forward and backwards at

the playground? How can we understand J.'s behaviour, when he is building a tower of Lego bricks and shortly after knocks it down again? Is it possible to "get closer" to a world, which to me does not always seem meaningful?

The article is a phenomenological description of J.'s lived world. My point of departure will be Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological theory of the relation between body and world (Merleau-Ponty 1988, 1989 and 1995). I argue that J.'s autism mainly has to be understood as a disorder at the perceptual level. J. does not have access to the body's spontaneous way of inhabiting and understanding the world, and consequently it is difficult for him to understand the bodily gestures and expressions of other people. I will focus on three areas: 1) J.'s way of playing and his relationship to other children. 2) J.'s communicative relationship to the adults and the children in the pre-school. 3) J.'s experience of time, which seems to be fragmentary. Main emphasis, however, will lie on the first area.

At the age of 1 ½ J. started in the day nursery, a separate part of the pre-school. The pre-school teachers early noticed that J. differentiated from the other children. He seldom spoke to and contacted the adults and his eye contact was poor. Until the age of 3, J. took no special interest in his peers, and though his language development was normal, he obviously did not understand and respond to the children's bodily "play invitations", their gestures, their hops and jumps etc. For a long time he preferred to have a power saw made of plastic in his hand, but he did not play power saw with it. He walked around with it in his hand and used it as a kind of "home" and from his lips I seldom heard the spontaneous sound of a power saw. If he had a toy car in his hand, he did not play with it. He moved it to and fro at a toy carpet without making sounds of a driving car.

At the age of 3 years J. started in the part of the pre-school, where I am working. A special episode made me realize, that something was wrong. The following episode together with several others made it necessary to contact the parents and a psychologist in order to have a talk about J.

One day we (about 20 children and 3 adults) went for a walk in a neighbouring wood. I held J.'s hand, so that he was not lost in the wood and in his world. He did not

spontaneously follow the other children when they happily ran along the small roads in the wood. Having played for half an hour at a playground in the wood, it was time to return to the pre-school. As usual the children were counted, but one was missing: J. We called and called. Nobody was answering. We searched and searched. J. was gone and the search seemed to be futile. After 10 minutes had gone we were about to get into a panic, because we discovered a stream nearby covered by rush. Where was the boy? Suddenly one of the children shouted aloud: J. is here. He was nearby – in the hollow of an old tree. He was just standing there with a blank look. His facial expression showed no signs of being aware of the drama that had taken place around him. The adults were, of course, shocked when they went home with the children to the pre-school.

Since then J.'s behaviour had not become less enigmatic and difficult to understand. Shortly afterwards the parents were invited for a talk with a psychologist. After the talk a child psychiatrist tested him and the diagnosis was: autism. How is autism described and defined in the scientific literature?

Autism: from Kanner to Baron-Cohen

Autism was first described methodically in an article by the American psychiatrist Leo Kanner (Kanner 1943). A year later the Austrian physician Hans Asperger in a doctoral dissertation (Asperger 1944) referred to a group of children, who showed some of the same impairments as Kanner's children. Kanner's definition of autism lasted for a number of years, whereas Asperger's dissertation written in German did not make the same impact.

In his article Kanner referred to the following impairments. To a certain degree they also can be observed by J.: 1) The autistic child finds it difficult to get in social contact with other people, and he or she often shows more interest in objects than in persons. 2) Development of language is normally relatively late or sometimes the autistic child will never utter a word. J. is able to speak, but at the age of 3 years he simply does not want to talk to others. 3) Throughout most of the pre-school age his play behaviour is rather monotonous, full of repetitive movements and actions. At an early age (2-3 years) his "play behaviour" was restricted to repeated manipulation of simple objects, but when he was

around 5 years I observed a qualitative change in his play behaviour: J. played in a doll's corner and pretended to be a dog lying in his basket, while his playmate and best friend, a girl, was a mother. 4) The autistic child is against major changes in his daily life and so is J. 5) The physical appearance is normal. J. is a very handsome boy.

In 1978 Wing and Gould examined children less than 15 years with psychical problems and learning difficulties in the London suburb Camberwell. All children were examined particularly within these fields: 1) social interaction, 2) communication and 3) imagination. It appeared, that the group of autistic children had difficulties within all three areas, and that these dysfunctions formed a whole and always appeared together. Today the above spectrum is referred to as ”Wing's triad”. Wing and Gould concluded that ”all children with social impairments had repetitive stereotyped behaviour and almost all had absence or abnormalities of language and symbolic activities. Thus the study showed a marked tendency for these problems to occur together” (Wing & Gould 1978 p. 25). Wing's triad lead to a revision of Kanner's definition of autism. The autistic spectrum had to be broadened and now included five as many children.

In the last 10-15 years one single psychological theory has become widespread and popular within autism research. Several researchers (e.g. Leslie 1987, Frith 1989 and Baron-Cohen 1996) have put forward the hypothesis that autistic individuals lack a ”theory of mind”. They argue in this way: at the age of 4 years a child usually knows that other children may have thoughts, wishes and representations different from its own. Autistic children on the other hand have difficulty in understanding the mind of other people and they are consequently uninterested in social interaction. In Baron-Cohen's words: they are ”mindblind”. They do not understand that other people have their own thoughts and beliefs.

Happé summarises the theory in her book *Autism*: ”to have a theory of mind is to be able to attribute independent mental states to self and others in order to predict and explain behaviour” (Happé 1994 p. 38). And later in the book she writes: ”It seems that children with autism may have a specific and unique problem with understanding that people have mental states which can be different from the state of the real world and different from the autistic person's own mental state” (p. 40). In her book *Autism: Explaining the enigma*

(Frith 1989) Frith puts forward the hypothesis that the inability to read the mind of other people is the general cause of the triad of impairments.

To my mind this is a rationalistic approach that overlooks the lived world of the autist. In connection to my interpretation of J.'s behaviour I discuss whether the autistic child (J.) actually is "mindblind" as proposed by Baron-Cohen. I argue that J. more likely is to be characterized as a "bodyblind" child unable to read the other children's bodily "play invitations" and gestures. Autism is a disorder appearing mainly at the expressive, bodily level. Especially the "theory of mind" will be discussed in this article.

Autistic children differ, of course, from each other as do all other children. They have their own personality, and their total behaviour cannot be forced into a scheme. Yet, by patient observation I found certain recurrent patterns in J.'s behaviour. During his development from 3 to 6 years it was obvious to me that he became freer in his relationship to adults and children, and his play behaviour was less stereotyped. 20 hours a week a teacher aid came to help J.during his time in the pre-school. It was easier to get into eye contact with him, and when he was around 5 years he began, as I have already mentioned, to play house with one of his chosen playmates. And I also have to mention that he was fond of playing rough and tumble with boys one year younger than he was. For the most time he was acting as a keen spectator commentating what the other boys were doing. Now and then he left the scenery, ran over to me and told me very excited, that the other boys were teasing him. As a rule he did not always understand the meaning of the other boys' actions. Without doubt, J. over the years had become more open in his relationship both to adults and other children. It was certainly due to the well-structured daily life and the presence of the teacher aid that major changes in J.'s development could be seen during his four years in the pre-school. At the age of 6 years he left the pre-school to attend a special school for autistic children. A chapter in his life was over.

The exemplary description

If I want to describe and pin down the essential structures of J.'s behaviour, two features are specially outstanding: 1) compared to his peers, J.'s lived world is not characterized by *bodily spontaneity*. He does not at once participate in games and lively talk with children

and adults, and he generally avoids expressive activities as singing and painting planned by the adults. 2) It is difficult for J. to cope with a longer sequence of actions connecting past, present and future. Sometimes, I observe that he repeats his movements for a longer time and does not get on. Paradoxically, J.'s behaviour pattern is sometimes characterized by *circularity* (repetition), sometimes by *discontinuity* (fragmentary experience of time). It indicates that J.'s experience of time also differs from that of his peers.

In research literature it has not been common to describe and define autism as a bodily disorder, in spite of the fact that autistic children often behave in a peculiar way. The movements may be repetitive, now and then clumsy and cautious, and when I observe J.'s play behaviour he does not express himself in a bodily differentiated way. He does not spontaneously move into an ambiguous zone of free movements. He cannot instantaneously mobilize the bodily expression necessary when playing that he is a father, a dog, a cat etc. This "rigidity" and slowness at the bodily and expressive level is often explained as caused by a fundamental neuro-biological defect. Autism is, of course, caused by a so far unknown neuro-biological mechanism, but a biological explanation of autism does not tell anything about how an autistic child (J.) perceives the world. Merleau-Ponty expresses the problem in the methodological introduction to *Phénoménologie de la perception* : "La science n'a pas et n'aura jamais le même sens d'être que le monde perçu pour la simple raison qu'elle en est une détermination ou une explication". (Merleau-Ponty 1989 p. III).

After all, is it possible to describe J.'s lived world? A phenomenological description is not based on a definite and well-defined theory, but in an "uncovering" of J.'s presence in the world. Point of departure is J.'s lived world, his daily life in pre-school. J.'s world is partly also mine. I carefully follow him with my eyes and try to help him, when I can. I hold his hand and listen to him when he is bored and wronged. I am aware of where he is at the playground and what he is doing. The phenomenological description is an art of deciphering: "Die Beschreibung zwingt, genauer hinzusehen, als man es bisher getan hatte und schliesst den Gegenstand in einer ganz neuen Weise auf. Sie macht so das Altbekannte neu und interessant" (Bollnow 1975 p. 136). It will uncover the possible meaning in J.'s way of playing and handling toys. It furthermore asks the question whether there is always a meaningful connection in his actions, and it intends to describe his bodily interaction with adults and children. My aim is "to piece together" forms of possible meaning present in his

relationship to the world. I purposely write ”possible forms of meaning”, because J.’s lived world, sometimes seems to lack meaning.

J.’s bodily understanding of the world can be exposed by means of an ”exemplary description” (Lippitz 1987 p. 116). How is it performed? It is a common experience that examples may contribute to the understanding of a complicated theory. A light is dawning on the listener, when the teacher or lecturer refers to an illustrative example while explaining a rather complicated theory. The example illustrates a complicated theory. The concrete example in this context is secondary to a more or less abstract theory ”coming from above”. The theory has an already finished form and is just “looking for” suitable illustrative material.

The exemplary description proceeds differently. It ”comes from beneath”, from the lived and sensed world. It is a way of presenting the *general* in the *singular*. The description of J. becomes exemplary in the very moment when I reflect upon my own experiences and attempt to expose the essential structures of J.’s behaviour patterns. This does not mean that phenomenology operates with a contradiction between essence and appearance. J.’s lived world is not hidden somewhere in a dark background. It is here, right in front of my eyes, but has to be carefully described, because it can be veiled by theories of what might be the cause of autism. I think especially of biological and neuro-physiological explanations. Phenomenology is not in search for a possible biological cause of autism, but is looking for *structures of meaning* in J.’s behaviour.

The examples originate from and refer to an already lived world. Pre-school teachers working with autistic children will probably recognize the general structures of the examples and on the basis of that reason and perhaps agree with the author. The examples are related to a shared and meaningful context. It means that the ”validity” of the single example does not depend upon induction and generalization of many compared examples. The concrete examples of autistic behaviour (J.) transcend themselves and refer to a field of common meaning and experience. In the words of Lippitz: “Die exemplarische Deskription ist ein kommunikativ zu bewährender und intersubjektiv prüfbarer Deutungsakt, dessen Validierung in unseren konkreten Erfahrungen geschieht “ (Lippitz 1987 p. 117).

At first I will shortly introduce the term ”life-world” from Husserl’s work *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendentale Phänomenologie* (Husserl 1954).

In this late work from 1936 Husserl rehabilitates the unreflected and sensuous world of every day life and criticizes the common and widespread distinction between an objective reality existing ”out there” and a subjective reality characterized by the single person’s more or less arbitrary attitudes and notions. Contrary to this comprehension, Husserl emphasizes that the life-world is an unreflected basis of all our actions and doings. Even research with its abstract theories ultimately originates in the life-world. Husserl’s notion ”life-world” later on became important to Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological discussions of the lived body and its meaningful relationship to the world. Merleau-Ponty’s main work, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Merleau-Ponty 1989), could be read as an explicitation of Husserl’s *Krisis* book. These main works in the philosophy of the 20. century are very fruitful, if you want to understand the lived world of an autist (J.).

In the pre-school, children and adults are living in a common sensuous world. It is a kind of bodily co-existence. Most of the children are in steady movement and close contact with each other, and if I want to get closer to this world, I have to understand children from a bodily perspective. I have to be expressive in my way of communicating with children, and especially with J. If they fall and hurt themselves or if they are teased, they seek bodily comfort from the adults that hold around them. Children are seldom sitting still for a longer time, whether they are inside playing at a table or outside at the playground. Most of the children are interested in “exploring” the possibilities of their body, to confront themselves with the limit of their own abilities. The point of departure is not What *am* I, but What *can* I? And what can I *become*? They are living in an ambiguous and open world, playing with their own identity.

J., however, is not particularly interested in exploring his possible abilities. He slithers down the staircase and at the age of 3-4 years even if he is helped and encouraged by me he is afraid of going up the slide or sitting at a swing. As a whole he is cautious and does not move much around when outside at the playground. Slowness and cautiousness characterize J.’s actions. He has only limited access to the lived body or *body proper*.

The body proper

A child is understanding and communicating with the world through the body proper. The body proper (a central notion Merleau-Ponty borrowed from the philosopher Marcel) is ambiguous in its appearance, its way of existence. The body proper is both subject and object, active and passive. This way of ambiguous existence, which is neither subjective nor objective, is a necessary condition for feeling at home in an ambiguous world. Through the body proper the child opens itself towards the world and experiments with its identity.

In his posthumous book based on his lectures at College de France, *La Nature* (Merleau-Ponty 1995), Merleau-Ponty describes the body proper in these words: ”La conscience que j’ai de mon corps est une conscience glissante, le sentiment d’un pouvoir. J’ai conscience de mon corps comme d’une puissance indivise et systématique d’organiser certains déroulements d’apparence perceptiv. J’organise avec mon corps une compréhension du monde, et le rapport avec mon corps n’est pas celui d’un Je pur, qui aurait succesivement deux objects, mon corps et la chose, mais j’habite mon corps et par lui j’habite les choses” (p. 106-107).

J. does not inhabit his body as a whole and undivided spontaneous power that in a split second understands the gestures and actions of other children. By virtue of the lived relationship between body and world a child normally need not “mentalize” if it wants to understand the bodily expressions of other children or express its own intentions and ideas in words. The words do not exist in a mental space of representations. The thoughts take form by being formulated. Actually they are already on the lips. The body expresses itself when the words are formed. When I follow the other children in the pre-school they are in a steady and bodily dialogue with other children. The body inhabits the world. But J. does not feel so much at home in a bodily and expressive world that he spontaneously enters it.

We know that a glance of the adult sometimes hurts and affects the child deeply, or it may have an encouraging effect, and it feels at home in its body. At the age of 3-4 years, J.’s glance very seldom is met by mine. Even if he is standing right beside me and I am speaking to him, his glance will not come across mine. I would not describe him as a shy and reserved person, but he does not modulate his body in the direction of a glance. The glance of others only seems to have a

fragmentary meaning, and consequently his body is unable to transform itself to a glance in one single undivided act. If another child is hopping and jumping eagerly before J. to invite him into a game, as a rule he is unaffected and goes along to another activity, apparently because he is not mentally able to read the other childrens' intentions. I would rather interpret his behaviour in this way: J. does not see, sense and feel, that "to jump or leap" in this context means "come and join my game". In a play context he does not perceive the body as a power of meaningful expression and he is apt to reduce the ambiguous to the unambiguous. He behaves in accordance with behavioristic theory.

When the body proper opens itself towards the world it becomes a subject. Merleau-Ponty compares the spontaneous unity (synthesis) of the body proper to a work of art: "Ce n'est pas à l'objet physique que le corps peut être comparé, mais plutôt à l'æuvre d'art : Un roman, un poème, un tableau, un morceau de musique sont des individus, c'est-à-dire des êtres où l'on ne peut distinguer l'expression de l'exprimé, dont le sens n'est accesible que par un contact direct et aui rayonnent leur signification sans quitter leur place temporelle et spatiale. C'est en ce sens que notre corps est comparable à l'æuvre d'art "(1989 p. 176-177). As a rule the child normally "understands" what to do in certain situations, but J. does not always know.

J. sometimes has to "stop short" and form a general view of his body's position. It particularly happens when J. is asked to join simple pretend games (playing house, a cat or dog). At the age of around 5 years he now and then wants to participate in pretend games, but often he has to look for the movements and expressions necessary when playing you are another. His movements are not free enough to move into an ambiguos zone of imaginary actions. He does not sense that his body is able to transform itself to another. In reality, J.'s body must tune in on another frequency to play that he is another. He must play another melody.

J. must learn to modulate his body in a new way and manoeuvre in an ambiguous and unfinished field. At one and the same time, J. must both be himself and another, and it demands access to a *body scheme*. In scientific literature (Gallagher 1986 and Moss 1989) it is common to distinguish between "body image" and "body scheme". Body image is a person's more or less clear image of its own physical appearance and abilities. The body scheme is a person's implicit knowledge of its body, its actual and virtual position in a field of action. Originally scheme means "posture" in Greek and is related to the body's pre-

reflective presence in the world. The presence of the body scheme is a condition for acting in a competent and spontaneous way. It is a dynamic way of communicating with a meaningful world.

The body scheme is developed before the body image. A child's hand is a good example. Usually a child will develop an unreflected knowledge of its hand's potentials without reflecting upon how to move its hand. The hand immediately fits into objects around it. It attunes to them and "knows" by itself how to act and what to do in certain situations. The body is where it has something to do. Descartes' famous dictum "I think, therefore I am" must give place to Merleau-Ponty's "I can, therefore I am". The hand seizes, points, touches, waves etc. without the presence of representations.

Normally the body proper acts as a subject in order to inhabit the world. It is a centre of varied actions, but it also appears as an object if the other hand touches it. The body is able to do and learn something, to polarize itself towards the world. Thanks to the body scheme infants learn without knowing that they actually are learning. At the age of 3-4 years J., however, does not participate in planned activities as painting or putting together a jigsaw. If he cuts with a pair of scissors, one of the adults must direct his hand, and he obviously puts no energy into his movements. He does not focus on the activity and seems to be absent.

J.'s way of playing

J.'s way of playing is rather stereotyped until the end of 4 years. He is now willing and able to pretend that he is another. One day I observed a qualitative change. J. was about 5 years and was playing with a girl in a doll's corner. I stood right beside them and heard the girl ask him to be a dog lying in its basket chewing a bone. She handed him a train rail made of wood. He accepted her proposal, crouched in a small doll bed and began to chew the bone. To be a dog chewing a bone, J. has to leave his habitual and unambiguous world (the repetitive movements) and inhabit a virtual field. He has to abandon the habitual body and attune it to a new situation.

A child normally transforms itself very easily to someone else or objects become toys in its hands. It has a “non-literal” relation to its own body. J., on the other hand, is situated in a kind of bodily modulation that might be compared to *unmusicality*. As is well known some people have an ear for music, others do not. Some are good at dancing and quickly learn how to perform new dance steps; others try to reason out how to perform the complicated movements. They surely will fail the very moment they begin to reflect upon how to carry out the movements. J.’s body movements often “fails the rhytm” necessary to act in a virtual and free world. It is difficult for J. to grasp the virtual intentions and gestures of the other children, because he has never taken over them in his own body.

Play is an unreflected and spontaneous form of existence (puissance indivise). The playing body usually reads the world and acts in a proper and rhytmical way. As I have already mentioned, J. is unable to mobilize the spontaneity necessary to carry out virtual or imaginary movements and actions. How should I move my hands and feet in a proper manner, J. seems to “ask” himself when invited into a play by another child. How to make my mouth sound like a dog? How to chew the bone? How to find the door to the imaginary world of play?

How does it come about that J. gradually is able to pretend, of course, in a simple way that he is another and handle toys in the right manner? Has he developed a theory of mind (Leslie, Frith and Baron-Cohen)? Does he at last understand that his playmates may have intentions and representations different from his own? Or does the body proper play a prominent part in this context? I will take my starting point in the normal child’s way of playing in order to throw light on this question.

At an early age (1-1 ½) a child understands the body proper as an expression of meanings and intentions. It senses that the body proper can express the same meaningful movements and intentions, which it perceives in other bodies. In his lectures on child psychology at Sorbonne (Merleau-Ponty 1988) describes the interaction between body proper and the world in these words: “quand j’assiste au commencement des conduites d’autrui, mon corps devient moyen de les comprendre, mon corporéité devient puissance de compréhension de la corporéité d’autrui. Je ressaisis le sens final (le “Zwecksinn”) de la conduite d’autrui, parce que mon corps est capable des mêmes buts. Là intervient la notion de style: le style de mes gestes et gestes d’autrui, parce qu’il est le même fait, que ce qui est vrai pour moi l’est aussi

pour autrui. Le “style” n’est pas un concept, une idée: c’est “une manière” que j’apprends et puis imite, si je suis hort d’état de la *définir*” (1988 p. 39 - 40).

If we replace the word “I” with “the child”, it is possible to get an idea of how children normally understand each other while playing. An example from the pre-school may be useful:

Two children are playing doctor. One of the children suggests to the other: I was ill and had to stay in my bed. You was the doctor that visited me.

This is a common communication between playing children. How do the two children manage to carry out the typical virtual acts associated with being a patient and a doctor? A cognitive explanation of this play episode may take this form: by means of words the first child puts forward the idea or proposal that the other child is a doctor. The words generate mental representations of how to be a doctor. A doctor is doing and saying so and and so when examining the ill. In other words: the child (the doctor) must be able to develop a theory of mind, form an idea of how it is to be ill. The exchange of ideas and proposals will continue until the game ends. Leslie writes that the child has to develop metarepresentations in order to participate in a pretend play (Leslie 1987 and Poulsen 1994). In order to act as a doctor the child has to imagine how the other child imagines how it is to be and act as a patient. The actions of the doctor then generate representations by the other child of how it is to be ill.

Were this explanation correct, then all communication during play would pass away very slowly and mechanically. It would exactly be – autistic. The translation from word to idea and from idea to action would be complicated and children would find the game boring and soon stop it. A mutual understanding among playing children, however, does not take place by means of cognitive comprehension. The bodily act of understanding is in the front. The child at once grasps the style of the other child’s expressions and play actions and moves into a similar zone of meaningful actions.

Why does J. seldom take part in pretend play? He does not generally experience his own body as a means of understanding other people (children and adults). In the very moment

when their bodily behaviour becomes meaningful and comprehensible J. is able to move, act and express himself in the same way. J. is unable to situate himself in the already mentioned bodily modulation that is necessary when pretending you are another and speak in a special, often expressive manner. He has only limited experience of inhabiting a bodily and imaginary play field. At the age of 3-4 years this field does not exist for J. When he is around 5 years J. slowly opens the door to a space of imaginary and bodily expressive actions – a space of freedom.

The problem of other minds

Psychologists and philosophers traditionally have discussed and disagreed upon how we understand the intentions and expressions of other people. This classical philosophical problem ("the problem of other minds") also appears in the cognitive part of autism research. The argumentation usually takes this form: a child understands the thoughts, ideas, feelings and intentions by means of a *conclusion of analogy*. At the age of 3-4 years a child on a small scale is familiar with its own feelings and thoughts and the associated forms of behaviour. It is a kind of mental self-reflection. Consequently it will be able to understand that other people may have thoughts and ideas similar to or different from its own. If it observes a similar and recognizable behaviour by itself, it at once concludes that the same feelings and experiences must be present by the other.

The infant's understanding of bodily expressions shows something quite different. At the age of 15 months the infant spontaneously opens it mouth if the mother is simulating that she will bite its finger. The mother's teeth in reality speak to the experiencing body of the infant that understands the meaning of the biting movements. The social interaction is meaningful, because the teeth appear "as something to bite with". They have a "functional value". By means of the body scheme the infant immediately perceives the intentionality of the other body. The infant and the adult form part of a pre-reflexive pattern of communication that need not be translated from one field to another: "Entre ma conscience et mon corps tels que je le vis, entre ce corps phénoménal et celui d'autrui tels que je vois du dehors, il existe une relation interne qui fait apparaitre autrui comme l'achèvement du systéme" (Merleau-Ponty 1989 p. 405).

So far I have tried to show that J. have difficulties in sensing, feeling and expressing himself. He does not have access to a fully developed body scheme. That is the reason why his lived world is fragmentary and heterogeneous. Past, present and future are not always meaningfully connected. When J. has just finished an action he will not always continue it and combine it with a new and logical connected action. J.'s lived world has a caleidoscopic or mosaic character. From one moment to another it may change direction. The French word for direction is "sens". It also means meaning or sense. In short, J.'s lived world compared to others often seems to lack direction, meaning and sense. In *Phénoménologie de la Perception* Merleau-Ponty writes that human beings are born into a world of meaning: "parce que nous sommes au monde, nous sommes condamnés au sens". (p. 1989 XIV) The great question however is whether the autistic child generally experiences the world as meaningful and coherent - in time.

Time and meaning

Several researchers (e.g Wing 1996 og Frith 1989) stress that the autistic child is living in a fragmentary world. In her book *The Autistic Spectrum*, Wing proposes the hypothesis that the autistic child's experience is characterized by "disorder in time and space". As already mentioned, J. has a difficulty in coping with a longer, logically connected sequence of actions meaningfully related to each other. He stops his actions to make his world "small and manageable". In certain situations, J. is unable to cope with a sequence of longer and logically connected actions. When I ask J. about a concrete occurrence that he has been involved in at the playground, he now and then answers me by talking about something else. There is not always a logical connection between the question I ask and the answer I get. His experience of the world and himself sometimes seems to be characterized by discontinuity.

An afternoon J.'s mother came to pick him up. At that time he was 5 years and gradually took an interest in activites planned by the adults as putting together a jigsaw and putting small pearls at a smal sheet of plastic. He was just eagerly putting pearls on a sheet when his mother arrived. At once he insisted that she should wait until he had finished what he was doing. When the sheet finally was finished, he asked me to iron it in the kitchen, while he was dressing with his mother. It was J.'s own proposal. After a while he went down a

corridor in the pre-school and passed the kitchen without ever looking at me or mentioning the sheet with pearls. When they reached the door, J.'s mother asked him: What about your sheet with pearls J.? Didn't you forget it. Yes!

The sheet with pearls obviously did not exist any longer. It had disappeared into a "nothing". How are J.'s many repetitive movements to be understood? Is it a bodily way of stabilizing himself in an unstable and incoherent world? J., for instance, always wants to hear the same story over and over, and for a longer period he spends much of his time sitting on a green tractor at the playground. He gets sad if someone has taken his tractor and soon walks around as if situated in a space empty of possibilities. When we are out for a walk and come to a public playground he often runs to a preferred skipping animal. If another child has already captured it, he gets confused. What to do now? No alternatives seem to appear. If he has finally succeeded in capturing the skipping animal, he will be sitting there for quite a long time. At the same time the other children are running from one playground equipment to another. J. does not challenge himself as do his peers.

J. does not always experience a connection between a just finished act and an approaching one. Are there actually "gaps" in J.'s experience of his own and other's actions? Philosophers as Dilthey, Husserl and Heidegger have all stressed the internal connection between time and experience of meaning. Dilthey's notion "Erlebnis" (experience) is relevant in this context (Dilthey 1957). The notion originally is derived from "Erleben" and "Leben" (life). Experience in Dilthey's sense is man's direct and immediate contact to life and refers to a totality of meaning. It is a lived relationship preceding the separation of a subject and an object. The experienced time is threefold in its structure. It is determined by 1) what once or just happened, 2) what is happening and 3) what is about to happen (Dilthey p. 193). Experienced time is both disappearing and "kept back". Although the single moment is disappearing there is still a coherence in the life-world, because the past is "kept back": "So ist *die Gegenwart von Vergangenheiten erfüllt und trägt die Zukunft in sich.*" (Dilthey p. 232).

As I have mentioned several times in this article there is not always an internal coherence in J.'s experience of the world. Now I may better understand the dramatic incident in the wood, where the adults could not find him (mentioned at the beginning of the article). J. did not want to hide from the adults. Neither did he ignore their call. It just made no sense. The call of the adults did not refer to J.'s previous actions. In fact, they did not "exist" any

longer. J. had “stopped” his actions when standing in the hollow of an old tree, and the world had become unambiguous and predictable.

Pedagogical conclusion:

Nitschke, a German pediatrician, has put forward an interesting theory of how a child perceives and understands the gestures and movements of others people. His theory is also relevant in my understanding of how to communicate with an autistic child. He writes that a child understands the world through “motoric co-performance” (motorisches Mitvollziehen). In a lecture he defines this concept: ”Beim Kind ist es zunächst noch oft zu sehen, wenn es zum Beispiel im Anschauen ganz versunken das ihm sehr fremde und unbegreifliche Mienenspiel eines lebhaft erzählenden Erwachsenen mitmacht. Das Wesen des motorischen Mittvollziehens besteht demnach darin, dass die Bewegung eines anderen während ihrer Entwicklung und im Ablaufen unwillkürlich im Beschauer mitgemacht wird, noch ehe deutlich ist, oder zu sein braucht, wohin sie führt. Es liegt also der Nachahmung voraus… Die zunächst in immer erneuerten Versuchen mitvollzogenen Bewegungen können ind die eigene spontane Motorik des Kindes übernommen werden.” (Nitschke 1960 p. 12)

Most children normally “co-perform” every movement and expression, they perceive. In the very moment a movement or expression is co-performed, the meaning is incoporated and leads to an understanding of the other, Nitschke writes. The already co-performed movements and expressions do not disappear but are integrated into the child’s own way of moving and expressing itself. Autists, in this case J., quite obviously have a difficulty in adapting to new and complex situations with many shifting social signs which they often do not perceive or should we say perceive in a diminished manner (Klin, Jones, Schultz and Volkmar 2004). Therefore they are inclined to withdraw from a too complex social world and concentrate on a small world and follow rigid rules. The autist does not lack a theory of mind. He is not ”mind-blind”, as proposed by Baron-Cohen, but perceives the world in a different way.

J.´s lived world is diminished in the sense that he does not always perceive important social signs and expressions and instead is fascinated by objects (a power saw or tractor) and repetitive movements. Shared gestures and actions do not have the same meaning to J. as they have to his peers. Sometimes they seem to be devoid of meaning. A greeting gesture in play for instance can be dissociated from its social context and repeated several times in a mechanical fashion. Autistic individuals often choose a highly structured life routine and avoid any kind of novelty and unpredictability. After some time I learned that in order to get into contact with J. and "widen" his lived world, my way of communicating with him had to be bodily expressive, playful and humorous. When I laughed and exaggerated my movements and expressions J. was more apt to take them over in his own body. He observed me attentively and was willing to co-perform my movements and expressions, that is to play and interact with me.

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