



Touching matters: Embodiments of intimacy



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ABSTRACT

Touch is, I propose, a foundational, “intercorporeal” form of intimacy. Such intercorporeal intimacy precedes developmentally and undergirds permanently the “intersubjective” intimacy that is possible between adult subjects. For, it is in the affective intimacy of touching and being touched that we first realize (i.e., make real, actualize) both a coexistence or participation with other bodies, and an organization and differentiation of ourselves as embodied beings. Section 1 lays out phenomena of interpersonal (and interanimal) relations that require thinking touch as much more than either the exploration of a physical surface by an embodied subject or a conventional form of communication: I note the powerful existential effects of being or not being touched. In Section 2, I recall philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s account of embodiment, focusing on features that provide resources for understanding touch. I argue that touching must be understood as potentially transformative of the toucher, that “being touched” can equally be transformative, and that touching and being touched are inherently intertwined. This intertwining and transformative power is what makes touch an intercorporeal form of intimacy and accounts for its ability to inaugurate and enliven, at the affective level, our sense of self as differentiated from and in relation to others.

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We are, in some sense of the word, constantly touching and being touched. My feet on the floor, my hands on the keyboard, my back against the chair, the breeze on my cheek, this soft old cotton shirt against my skin... For the most part, these contacts are self-effacing, effecting the background upon which my daily projects take place. I am caught up in the ideas I am trying to articulate, and in the wandering memories or worries that weave themselves in and out of my attempt to write this paper; I do not typically notice the hardness of the chair or the coldness of the breeze until I have sat here too long and the thoughts I’ve been struggling with no longer hold their own against the growing discomforts. Even when I am purposefully touching something, exploring its texture, the

touching itself is effaced by the wondrous softness or sliminess of the thing touched.

It is perhaps because it is both ubiquitous and often self-effacing that touch has not *traditionally* received the kind of philosophical attention that it surely deserves.¹ For it is indeed deserving: imagine what it would be to live without a sense of touch. A lack of sight or hearing is hard enough for a sighted or hearing person to conceive; but often enough we do try to imagine it, and sometimes we can effect a temporary shutting down of all sight or hearing. A lack of touch, however, seems almost unimaginable. Could there still be a world for me? Could there still be a me? Is there perhaps something fundamental about touch, something transcendental, such that it is a condition of possibility of experience itself?

In our understanding of interpersonal relations, too, touch typically is given no substantial role. In sex, perhaps, we think that touch is important. But otherwise, our emphasis tends to be on the ways in which two people can come to share a world of objects, values, and ideas, or, conversely, on the ways in which we can miss each other and fail to share our worlds. We remain concerned, in other words, with the meeting or non-meeting of minds. From this perspective, interpersonal touching, like a hand on a back, a hug or a kiss, can seem merely communicative conventions invented within the context of a project of “spiritual” closeness. And yet, if we take seriously philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s claims that we are embodied beings and that our experience of the world,

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¹ Starting in the 20th century, touch has become a more central topic of philosophical discussion. Sartre has a significant discussion of the caress (Sartre, 1953); touch figures prominently in Merleau-Ponty’s work (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012, and especially 1964/1968; Merleau-Ponty’s texts are cited with the French edition listed first and the English translation second.); and in *Le Toucher*, Jean-Luc Nancy, Derrida (1998) figures Nancy’s philosophical thought on the model of touch. Irigaray and Levinas also explore the relevance of touch, and in cognitive studies, an interest in Molyneux’s problem makes the relation between touch and other senses central. Nonetheless, there are interesting mentions and theories of touch throughout the history of philosophy and western thought. Mark Paterson weaves together many of these threads in his *Senses of Touch* (Paterson, 2007).

others, ourselves is founded in and informed by our embodiment, we might find reason to think that touch plays a much more powerful and foundational role in our relations with others and our very having of a world.²

In this paper, through a consideration of the development of touch, I propose that touch plays a fundamental role in inaugurating a sense of oneself and one's differentiation from others and things. Prior to the birth of a self-proper, and underlying all higher forms of intersubjective interaction, there is, I propose, an *intercorporeal* form of intimacy – an intimacy that resides in our bodily touching engagements with each other. This primordial intimacy, both bodily and affective, is characterized by an affective transgression and differentiation and, in its healthiest form, such intercorporeal intimacy enables selfhood and makes possible the development of true *intersubjectivity* – a relation between two subjects who recognize each other's alterity. In other words, the intimacy of touch gives place to a subject, enables a subject to establish herself in her own place, both separate from and in communication with others, and thus makes possible a place of mutual engagement between two subjects. Though this intercorporeal intimacy may also be enacted in the exchange of gazes and in vocal interaction, I suggest that it is most paradigmatically realized in touch. Touch, I claim, is a foundational form of affective interpersonal intimacy, and it is no mere coincidence that we speak of an intimate gesture as “touching” or say that we have been deeply “touched” by another's life.

I begin, in the first section of the paper, by laying out phenomena of interpersonal (and interanimal) relations that call on us to think touch as much more than either the exploration of a physical surface by an embodied subject or a conventional form of communication: I focus in particular on the powerful existential and affective effects of being or not being touched. In the second section of the paper, I recall features of philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty's account of embodiment that give us resources for understanding touching. In Section 2.1, I propose that touching must be understood as potentially transformative of the toucher. Section 2.2, argues, by way of a meditation on the well-known example of two hands touching, for the potentially transformative nature of *being touched*. This allows me, in the final section, to sum up the intercorporeal, affective form of intimacy I believe characterizes touch, and to return, finally, to the phenomena of interpersonal (and interanimal) relations that called to be thought.

1. Phenomena of interpersonal (and interanimal) life that demand a rethinking of the nature of touch

Let me begin by noting the felt imperative, which we experience as humans, to touch others and to be touched by them in a bodily way. Reunited with a loved one we feel compelled to hug, hold or kiss her, and to be hugged, held or kissed. A newborn infant quiets when she is picked up, held close, and rocked. A toddler clammers repeatedly over her parents' resting bodies not apparently to get to the other side, but to feel her own body in contact with theirs. And lovers cannot help themselves from weaving their bodies together in various forms of intertwinement and embrace. We find here a momentum, a human need, it would seem, to go beyond the substantial spiritual intimacy that can be achieved in good conversation or shared projects and to make a bodily form of contact, to literally touch each other. What, we might ask, is

accomplished in such touch? Why is the spiritual intimacy of a meeting of minds and even of worlds insufficient?

Clues to guide our inquiry might be found in the ways in which touch seems to be associated with human well-being. Several recent studies in healthcare note how the elderly, the ill and the disabled suffer from a deprivation of touch and derive benefits both psychological and physiological from touching and being touched (Fanslow, 1990; McCorkle and Hollenbach, 1990; Barlow and Cullen, 2002). This touching may be *interpersonal*, but touching interactions between people and companion *animals* are also very therapeutic. Indeed, this kind of touch therapy is so sought after that MIT has been developing a “therapeutic robotic companion for relational affective touch” called the Huggable. Simulating another person or companion animal, this robot is “sensitive” to different kinds of affective touch and “seeks out” being held, tickled, and stroked.³

Though one might suppose that the significance of touch lies in the sense of emotional connection that it brings and thus in a merely affective or mental meaning, many studies suggest that touch also has an impact on us in profoundly bodily ways. We have seen, in Simms's (2013) contribution to this Special Issue, that institutionalized infants who are fed and kept warm, but deprived of human interactions often suffer from social, linguistic, cognitive and sensory processing deficits – suggesting that lack of touch might have an effect on cognitive, linguistic and sensory functioning. But consider, furthermore, the high mortality rate, susceptibility to disease, and severe retardation in growth observed by René Spitz (1945a,b) in institutionalized children deprived of motherly care. Instances of “non-organic failure to thrive” in such infants (and others who are not institutionalized but suffer equally from neglect and touch-deprivation) suggest that touch might have directly *physiological* consequences.⁴ Many studies support this hypothesis. To begin with animal studies, studies on primates and rats suggest that maternal separation can suppress certain endocrine and physiological systems and in the long term lead to shortfalls in developmental weight gain and behavior; these patterns can be reversed, however, by maternal contact and tactile stimulation, or what Kuhn and Schanberg call a “nurturing touch.”⁵ The claim is that this touch is the key mediator for proper weight gain and behavioral development.⁶ In the field of infant studies, Tiffany Field and colleagues have considered infants born prematurely who have traditionally been touch-deprived

³ See Stiehl et al. (2006). Ultimately, the implications of the present essay are that the Huggable makes possible only a very deficient and derivative mode of touching.

⁴ “Non-organic failure to thrive” names a condition in which (1) infants show a lack of weight gain and growth, and often appear especially thin and wrinkled instead of plumping out as infants typically do, and (2) there does not seem to be any organic explanation for this failure to thrive (i.e., the infant does not have a physical disorder that prevents nutritional intake). Many “psychosocial” factors can be involved in non-organic failure to thrive (poverty and problems of access to food, lack of feeding skills in the caregivers, outright neglect, or disturbed family or infant–caregiver relations) but my particular interest is in the possible role that touch plays, within the infant–caregiver relation, and thus with instances in which the children are clearly touch-deprived. For a summary of “failure to thrive” see Bauchner (2007).

⁵ See Hofer (1975), Schanberg et al. (1984), Levine and Stanton (1990), and Kuhn and Schanberg (1998). These researchers typically agree that the mother's behavior and sensory presence acts as “hidden regulators” of the infants' physiological systems.

⁶ Many of these studies take their impetus in part from Harlow's (1958) and Harlow's and Zimmerman's (1959) famous studies of rhesus monkeys reared by surrogate “mothers” (wire figures) that provided either milk in a bottle, or a cloth covering to which the infants could cling. Harlow demonstrated that the infants formed important attachments to the surrogates that offered “contact comfort” in the form of a cloth, but not to the surrogates offering nourishment. Monkeys who could turn to “contact comfort” also showed less emotionality to feared objects. Caulfield (2000) provides a review of several studies of the role of touch in animal and infant flourishing.

² See Ratcliffe's (2008) *Feelings of Being*, chapter 3, for a discussion of the structure of tactile experience, its similarity to the structure of existential feelings, and the ways in which existential feelings incorporate tactile feelings.

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