The Intertwining of Generations: Merleau-Ponty's Chiasm as a Paradigm for Understanding Intergenerational Relations

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In 2008, a remarkable, but disturbing film won the Cannes Film Festival's French Language prize. Using actual students as actors, Laurent Cantet's "Entre les Murs" depicted the constant tug of war between them and their French teacher. Demanding respect, but often showing none, the teenagers made the simplest teaching task a difficult and drawn-out enterprise. The final dialogue of the film is the most disturbing. Let me quote a few lines in translation. A shy student, Henriette, is the last to leave the classroom at the end of the year. She approaches the teacher and says:

> Sir?
> FRANÇOIS : Yes? What is it?
> HENRIETTE : I didn't learn anything.
> FRANÇOIS : What? Why are you saying that? That doesn't mean anything.
> ……
> HENRIETTE : But I don't understand.
> FRANÇOIS : What do you mean?
> HENRIETTE : I don't understand what we do.
> FRANÇOIS : In French?
> HENRIETTE : In everything

She honestly does not know what is going on in the classroom. The school is an alien environment. Its purpose escapes her. This is all the more remarkable given the efforts of the teacher to reach his students. Why couldn't she understand what is supposed to happen at school?

Let me frame this in terms of the relations between different generations. The school is the way we bring children to the adult world. In imparting its skills, its history and culture, teachers show them how to become part of it. But as the film makes clear, teenagers can insist on their own world. Limiting their relations to their peers, they can regard the adult world as alien territory – as something to be fended off and, if necessary, attacked. The intergenerational problem is not limited to children and adults. It also concerns relations to the aged. Like school children, the aged are often confined to distinct institutional settings. Their world, too, can come to be regarded – this time by the adults – as an alien territory with its own rules and strictures, as something whose boundaries one should not cross.

I am going to argue that this breakdown of relations between generations bears witness to a failure of a particular type of empathy – that which links different generations. Empathy, according to its Greek roots, means feeling or undergoing something in another.[1] Normally this is thought of as in another person. I shall extend this to the intergenerational empathy that allows us to understand things in and through another generation's world. To grasp its process, I will employ Merleau-Ponty's account of the Chiasm or intertwining. This is the relation where I have to say that I am in a world and this world is in me. Let me begin with this relation.

1. The Intertwining of Self and World

As Merleau-Ponty observes, our ordinary perceptual faith is that what we see is really out there in a world that includes both ourselves and the

[1] The word comes from the Greek *pathein*, "to suffer or undergo," and *en*, signifying "in."

objects that we see. We also, however, believe that our perception "is formed this side of the body" (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 8). It comes to presence in our heads. Thus, each of us has to assert, "I am in the world and the world is in me." This, according to Merleau-Ponty, is our natural perceptual faith. In his words, "The 'natural' man holds on to both ends of the chain" (Ibid. 8). He lives the paradox, undisturbed by it. He thinks both that he grasps things as they are in themselves and that their apprehension is within him. There are several ways to understand this chiasmatic relation. The first and most obvious is in terms of our senses. In our bodily being, we provide the venues for the world's appearing. Using the word tapisser, to cover, drape, line or wallpaper, Merleau-Ponty asserts, "our flesh lines and even envelops all the visible and tangible things" (Ibid. 123). Thus, we "line" the world with visual qualities through our eyes, with tactile qualities through our sensitive skin, and so on. Doing so, our embodied being provides measures "for being, dimensions to which we can refer it" (Ibid. 103). In other words, through our flesh, we can refer to the sensible aspects of being. We can measure it along the axes or dimensions of its tastes, sounds, smells, roughness and smoothness (Ibid.). The world that is inwardly present through our embodiment is, however, the very world that our embodiment thrusts us into. This means, Merleau-Ponty writes, "my eyes which see, my hands which touch, can also be seen and touched … they see and touch the visible, the tangible from within" the visible and tangible world (Ibid. 123). Similarly the flesh that "lines and even envelops" the things of this world is "nevertheless surrounded" by them (Ibid.). It is within the world it reveals.

The nature of the world's being "within" us is not limited to our bodily senses' being the "places" of its disclosure. Such senses do not function apart from our other bodily abilities. To perceive something involves being able to turn your head, focus your eyes, move foreword to get a better look, grasp it, feel its weight, and so forth. In all this, the bodily "I can" functions as part of our perception. As Merleau-Ponty writes, "it is literally the same thing to perceive one single marble, and to use two fingers as one single organ" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 205). Our perception of the marble is one with a set of bodily acts, those of reaching

over, picking up and bringing close the marble. It is by rolling it between our fingers that we perceive its different colors and determine its hardness and smoothness. Such activities are part of the ways in which we "line" the world. They form part of the "place" of the disclosure of the world. As part of our bodily "I can," this "place" is both within us and within the world.

The same point holds when we expand this "I can" to include our projects. The disclosure of the world's senses is not simply a matter of beholding or manipulating objects. It arises from the practical projects such abilities make possible. Thus, as we employ various objects for our projects, we get the sense of what they are for. Their pragmatic meanings are given by their purposes. A hammer, for example, is understood when we use it to drive in a nail; a glass reveals its sense when we use it to drink from. Engaging in such projects, we are both in the world and disclosive of it. Here, the place of such disclosure is our purposeful activity. It is both in the objective world and what subjectively "lines" the world by providing us with a new set of dimensions for its appearing.

The same intertwining characterizes the pragmatic senses that we disclose. On one level, these senses are within me. They are what I have in mind when I employ various objects for particular purposes. On another level, they are external to me. When I use a hammer to drive in a nail, the pragmatic senses I assign to the hammer and nail are apparent to others. The body-project that is guided by these senses thrusts into the public realm what I have in mind. They become senses inherent in a project that is there for others to observe. This example should not be taken as indicating that such senses are initially private, their public presence being dependant on what we have in mind as we engage in our projects. We were not born with the subjective understanding that guides these projects. We acquired it, by and large, from our others as they engaged in such projects. It was from observing them that we saw what they had in mind, thereby acquiring the senses of the objects they used. The question of what was first here, private subjective understanding or public presence, admits of no definite answer. The public presence internalizes itself within the subjective understanding. Such understanding, however,

concerns how we use the objects of the world. As such, it is within the world. It has a public presence. Given this, the senses composing our subjective understanding have to be grasped in terms of its intertwining with the public world. In other words, to grasp these senses in themselves is to grasp them in the intertwining of the private becoming public and the public becoming private. Only as such are they seen as what they inherently are: the senses of the world that are both disclosed by and internally guide our various projects.

2. The Intertwining of Empathy

I could continue with more examples, but the pattern is already clear. It is that human beings have a relation to the world such that the result is neither simply public nor private, but rather exists in the intertwining of the two spheres.[2] Since the world that we are in includes other human beings, this fact necessarily affects our relations to them. Not only do they internalize a world, but we in our empathetic relations with them also internalize their worlds. The reality that results is social. As before, it exists in the intertwining of the public and the private. As such, it is not reducible to either. The intertwining constitutes it as a distinct level of reality.

The best way to see this is through a series of examples. As I said, empathy is defined as a feeling (a suffering or undergoing) of the world in and through another person. At its most basic level, empathy is bodily. Another person hurts his hand and we reach for our own. We see someone cut himself and we wince. In each case, we take on the other's embodiment. We incarnate ourselves in the other person. Doing so, we internalize the world that comes to presence through his wounded flesh. This world is, strictly speaking, neither ours nor his. It is not his since we are imaginatively assuming his flesh. It is not ours since, although we feel the cut, our flesh is not actually wounded. Our private bodily integrity remains intact. What comes to presence through this intertwining is a separate inter-personal reality. Our immediate, pre-reflexive empathy

[2] For additional instances of this, see Mensch (2009).

can, of course, undergo development. The body is not just its flesh. As animate, it expresses our "I can," that is, our ability to engage in projects through our functioning bodies. Such projects range from those we learned in childhood, such as learning to walk, to dress and feed ourselves, to collective actions. In the movements of the members of a string quartet as they watch and gesture to each other, moving in tempo with the music, the performers exhibit a sense of collective embodiment that is founded on but distinct from that which is present when they play alone. Such embodiment is another, higher level interpersonal reality.

Taking on the other's embodiment in the sense of the "I can" involves imaginatively placing ourselves in their action. A batsman swings his bat, a basketball player strains to place the ball in the hoop and we imaginatively feel ourselves experiencing these exertions. This empathetic ability to experience through the other is crucial to learning. We learned to tie our shoes by imitating those who first showed us how. Doing so, we observed the process from their perspective. Imaginatively, we were there with them as they knelt down, grasped the laces, and moved and knotted them with their fingers. The same imaginative processes are present when the field of empathy widens to the collective "I can" of a group. Our ability to be part of an ensemble relies on our imaginative ability to assume multiple perspectives. Whether the object of our empathy is an individual or a collective, the reality that is constituted is social. At its basis is an "I can" that is neither private nor public. This is the "I can" that each of us bodily enacts, thus making the senses that internally guide it publicly available to others. It is also the "I can" we learn from the public practices of others, practices that make such senses publicly available. Thus, the very "I can" that lines the world providing a place for the world's subjective disclosure – its inner presence in each of us – is, as a bodily ability, something occurring within the world. As such, it is available to the empathy that allows us to learn from others. The resulting intertwining of the internal and the external, the private and the public, is what gives rise to the reality of social life.

The most important element of this social life is, of course, our ability to speak to one another. It, too, results from the intertwining of the

public and the private. This cannot be otherwise given that the basic senses of the words we use are the senses disclosed through our body-projects. We acquired, for example, the meaning of such words as "knife" and "fork" when we learned to eat at the table. They were not taught to us in isolation, but rather as part of a pattern of bodily behavior, one that disclosed what knives and forks were for. Similarly, in appropriating the body projects of others we learned, for example, that paper can be used as a surface to draw and write on or as material to start a fire or to make a paper airplane, and so on. Each new use enriched our sense of what is meant by the word, "paper."[3] Behind this is, in fact, a multiple correlation: The components of a word's meaning are correlated to the ways in which the object it designates can appear, which are correlated to its instrumental character, that is, to the purposes we can put this particular object to. Such purposes themselves are correlated to our specific projects, which depend upon our bodily "I can." This "I can" enacts the pragmatic senses of our basic words. It does so by putting objects to the uses that disclose these senses. Such enactment can be anything from "I can eat with a spoon" to "I can drive a car." Engaging in such activities, we disclose the senses of objects such as spoons and cars. Such senses, as well as the language that expresses them, are neither internal nor external. Internally, they do guide our bodily projects; externally, they are what such projects exhibit as the pragmatic senses of the world. The same holds for the language that expresses them. It is both within us, capable of sustaining an interior monologue regarding such senses, and without, being the way that we exhibit though speaking and writing what is within us. Those who hear us can understand us because the world that they are in exhibits the pragmatic senses our words express. It exhibits them because

[3] Heidegger makes this point by observing that as we gain more and more skill in making our way in the world, we "understand" it in the sense of knowing the purposes of its elements. He defines "interpretation" as the "considering ... of something as something" that articulates this practical understanding. In other words, "interpretation" makes explicit the purposes of the objects we encounter; it expresses "what one does" with them. Such interpretations form the core of a language. They constitute the significance of its descriptive expressions. See Heidegger (1985, 261).

its reality is social, having been constituted by the empathy that allows us to learn from one another.

3. Intergenerational Empathy

The empathy that functions between the generations repeats this general pattern. What is distinct, however, is that the worlds we enter into and allow to come to presence in ourselves are those of different stages of life. As such, they involve both memory and anticipation. Suppose, for example, I enter a kindergarten. Physically, I am in this world; perceptually, it is in me. I can also act as an adult and disclose the pragmatic senses that these acts involve. I am then in it as an adult "I can." My projects provide a place for its pragmatic disclosure as an adult world. This, however, does not disclose it as the world of the kindergarten's children. For this, I must recall the "I can" of the corresponding stage of my childhood. I have to remember what it was like to build a tower of blocks, pretend to be a fireman, regard adults that are at least twice my size. The empathetic identification between my remembered "I can" and the child's actual "I can" allows me to be in his world, that is, to grasp the pragmatic senses that pertain to it. Playing with the child, I can participate in his projects. I can also internalize and linguistically express the senses that these projects disclose to us when I speak to him. What about the child's empathetic relation to the adult world? How does he enter into it? He does so not as a remembered, but as an anticipated "I can." Thus, the child plays at being a fireman, a doctor, etc. Doing so, he enters the adult world through imitation and imagination. The empathetic identification here is between his prospective "I can" and the actual "I can" of the adult world. In a certain sense, the failure of the school in "Entre les murs" is a failure of this anticipatory imagination. Henrietta cannot imagine herself in the adult world she is supposedly being prepared for. She does not "understand what we do" there. None of its senses are imaginatively available to her. When, however, the empathy that permits the intertwining of the generations works, each side, either retrospectively or pro-

spectively, recognizes the goals of the other's projects. Each understands the meanings that their realization entails and, thus, each has access to the language expressing them.

The empathy that links the generations has a dual aspect. When I was helping raise my children, I often remembered being kissed by my mother as I kissed my child. I experienced being the recipient of my action through the mediation of my memories. The result was an intertwining that linked me not just to my child, but also to my parent. Kissing the child, I am in his world as receiving the kiss and my mother is in mine as giving me the kiss.[4] The intertwining here links three generations. It is based on the fact that in acting, we are, in our memories, also acted on. The intertwining that places us in active relation to someone (in this case the child) occurs along with a second intertwining where we remember ourselves as the recipient of such action. The pattern here is perfectly general since we learned our actions though empathetic imitation. To return to my earlier example, to learn to tie my shoes, I had to enter into my parent's world – i.e., regard my shoes from the perspective of the parent showing me how to do this. The same holds for learning how to kiss with affection, indeed, for all the acts we learned from others. They all involve an empathetic identification. The result is that when I teach my child how to tie his shoes, my remembrance of being in my parent's world intertwines with the current action that places me in the child's world. Teaching, I remember being taught. The same pattern holds for all the actions by which we pass on our culture with its pragmatic senses. It involves not just parents, but also the teachers, relatives and elder siblings from whom we learned the disclosive actions typical of our culture. Passing them on involves a double empathy, a double intertwining that knits us to the generational chain. Through it, we become part of the chain of generationally successive "I cans."

Thus far, I have been speaking of the adult's relation to the child. What about our relations to our aged parents? As we might expect, it is the mirror image of the adult-child relation. As an adult, I share the

[4] In parallel with this, my child is also in me as the object of my affection in my perceptual world, just as I was in my parent's as the child being kissed in her perceptual world.

child's world retrospectively through my memories. The child shares mine prospectively, that is, through acts of anticipatory imagination. In my relation to the aged, this relation is reversed. It is the aged who now share my world retrospectively, while I share theirs prospectively. Doing so, I anticipate having their "I can." Once again, we can speak of the break-down of intergenerational relations in terms of a failure of this prospective imagination. Just as Henriette cannot imagine herself in the adult world, I myself may be unwilling to imaginatively place myself in the world of the aged. To do so would be to take on an "I can" that is more limited than my own. It would mean abandoning many of my longer term goals. For a child, to anticipate an adult's "I can" is empowering. But for the adult, this projecting of himself forward can be disempowering. Imaginatively, it involves not just the increasing "I cannot" of the aged, but also a palpable proximity to the ultimate "I cannot" of death. The case is different when, in teaching my child, I remember my parent teaching me. The parent I recall is my present age. It is my parent as an adult in the full vigor of an adult "I can." The empathetic identification with the aged, by contrast, involves the "I cannot": my prospective "I cannot" and the actual "I cannot" of the older person. The fear of such an "I cannot" can prevent me from imagining placing myself in the old person's world and, hence, prevent this identification.

4. The "I cannot" and the Human

The failure to imaginatively grasp the "I cannot" is a major cause of the difficulties of intergenerational relations. We begin our lives with the helplessness of infants. We end with the increasing incapacities of aging and illnesses that ultimately result in our deaths. But our commercial culture necessarily focuses on those with the income and opportunity to consume. Thus, it presents us to ourselves as adults in the full vigor of our lives. Its preference, in fact, is for young adults since they have a lifetime of purchasing before them. To the point that this becomes our image of the human, we identify it with the "I can" of the full vigor of life. Doing

so, we conceal from ourselves the humanity of children and the aged insofar as it involves the "I cannot." We cover over the actual "I cannot" of the child with the prospective "I can" of the adult. We grasp him as a potential adult, rather than as an actual child. Thus, the teacher in "Entre le murs" responds to Henriette's confession of her incapacities with the words, "What? Why are you saying that? That doesn't mean anything." A similar failure of empathy occurs when we view the aged through the lens of the "I can" of the adult. As such, he appears, with his elapsed "I can," as an elapsed adult. This concealment of the "I cannot" of the child and the adult brings with it a corresponding concealment of their respective worlds. The world of a small child includes, for example, the "I cannot reach the shelf" since it is too high for me. It includes the "I cannot write" since I cannot hold the pencil with any coordination. The diminished bodily and mental capacity of the aged involves a corresponding set of "I cannots." Since the disclosure of a world involves both the "I can" and the "I cannot," to enter their worlds, we have to grasp both. Without an empathetic identification that includes such "I cannots," the practical and symbolic meanings of the child's and the adult's worlds are not fully accessible to us.

The result of this deficit in our empathy is a deficit in our humanity. Such humanity follows the same pattern as all the other examples of intertwining. It itself is the result of the intertwining. To the point that the intertwining is impoverished, so is our humanity. This impoverishment comes when we do not grasp the multiple stages of our embodiment: stages stretching from infancy to extreme old age with their various "I cans" and "I cannots." As including both, a human lifetime includes both activity and passivity, both the ability to care for others and the need to be cared for by others. The intertwining that results in our humanity links us to the generational chain of those who precede and those who follow us. It involves our being in one another as both active and passive, as both caring for and being cared for by others. To be human, in other words, involves a double horizon, both prospective and retrospective, both anticipatory and memorial. The intertwining of these elements gives us our humanity as part of the generational chain.

Since, in fact, we constantly age, we have a changing relation to this chain, one beginning with the prospective horizon overshadowing the retrospective and ending with the reverse of this when we are old. The empathy that makes us part of this chain must start with where we are, that is, with the balance of the "I can" and the "I cannot" that marks our position. The intertwining of our present state of life with the "I can" and the "I cannot" of those younger and older than ourselves fills out our humanity. Such humanity involves all the various relations between the "I can" and the "I cannot" that characterize the stages of life. As that which progresses through them, our humanity is a "motion of existence" that begins with the original "I cannot" and proceeds through all the stages of the "I can" that lead to the ultimate "I cannot" of death. To refuse the empathy that links us to the "I cannot" undermines this humanity. It makes us blind to the very motion of existence that we are.

To combat this, we need to practice the acts of empathetic imagination that link us to the generational chain. As a society, we need to foster these through a set of institutional practices aimed at placing each generation, at least for a time, in the others' worlds. In an earlier age, the mixing of generations happened automatically through the collective tasks of the farm and the workshop. Many places now employ "service learning" and internships as a replacement for this. Whatever method we choose, our efforts in this regard need to be broadened to include all the generations. At stake is nothing less than the role that our schools and other institutions play in shaping our humanity.

Literature

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