

## — Prologue —

“For more clearly (but not differently) in my experience of others than in my experience of speech or the perceived world, I inevitably grasp my body as a spontaneity which teaches me what I could not know in any other way except through it” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a, p.93).

**L**ike my previous Taos Publications book (Shotter, 2008), this is a book for practitioners, for people who, like crafts-persons or sports-people, must continually shape or fashion their conduct in terms of the immediate allowances or opportunities for action afforded them by their circumstances, *whilst at the same time*, aiming at an overall goal of ‘bettering’ those circumstances and their performances within them in some way. What is distinctive about it is that the material in it, instead of being concerned with models or theories, with ways of thinking, is concerned with practices, with *ways of acting* and with the role of bodily events and happenings within our conduct of them.

As a consequence, the overall approach taken in this collection of essays is not wholly social constructionist, hence its title. They are ‘on the edge’ of it in the sense of not being closely related to those versions of social constructionism that are associated with Postmodernism, Post-structuralism, or Deconstructionism (see Gergen, 1999, pp.24-29, for an account), which in their turn, have been influenced by Saussure’s (1911) ‘structuralist’ account of language as a *self-contained system*. These approaches, which are often characterized as exhibiting a “linguistic turn” (Rorty, 1967) or an “interpretative turn” (Rabinow & Sullivan, 1987), ignore or preclude the spontaneous, expressive-responsiveness of our living bodies which, as we shall see, provides the ‘background glue’ holding us together in all our relationships, both to the other people as well as to all the other events occurring in our surroundings.

Our living, bodily embedding in this previously unnoticed background, and the ways in which events in it both ‘call out’ expressive-responses from us whilst utterly ‘disallowing’ or ‘repulsing’ others, exerts much more of an influence on our actions than ‘linguistic’ versions of social constructionism allow. It suggests what some have come to call an *ontological* version of social constructionism (Corcoran, 2009), to do with our coming to acquire certain “ontological skills” (Shotter, 1984) at *being* this, that, or some other kind of person as a result of coming to embody certain sensitivities and sensibilities in a certain sphere of practical activity or activities. Being a good organizer, a good listener, a careful reader, a good speaker, etc., are all to do more with our learning how to *be* in the world (ontology) than with our gaining knowledge of it

(epistemology)<sup>1</sup>. The overall approach, to the extent that it is to do with our self-authoring, *can be seen as* relevant to what in recent times has come to be called “the narrative approach” (White and Epston, 1990; Josselson et al, 2003) to psychological inquiry; but is especially close to Tom Andersen’s (1992, 1996) explicitly *embodied*, responsive orientation to psychotherapeutic events. For these are approaches which, as I hope to make clear in these essays, are much closer to our ordinary ways of inquiring into the affairs that matter to us in our everyday lives together, than those that we often still try to implement in copying the theory-driven practices of inquiry exemplified in the experimental methods of the physical sciences.

Indeed, in many spheres of life now, it is assumed that the *only* proper way to proceed is by the application of rationally agreed protocols or principles, etc., in guiding the practice in question. Thus, instead of being taught practical skills, within the context of their execution, practitioners are taught *ideal, generalized* models or theories in a classroom, in accord with the idea that to act skillfully is ‘to put a theory into practice’. But, as Gadamer (1975) remarks, this is “an awful deformation of what practice really is” (p.312). The upshot of this is to turn our practical reasoning – which requires both our ‘in touchness’ with the uniqueness of the situation we face, as well as our own imaginative and judgmental skills – into a technical matter, into the application of pre-given recipes or protocols. It also means that the growth of practical wisdom can no longer be promoted by informal personal contact and dialogue amongst practitioners within the context of their practices; instead, plans and strategies are discussed and argued over in committee rooms and seminar rooms prior to their (often inappropriate and ineffective) application in practice.

The shift, then, that I explore in this book, from inquiries and practices modeled on the experimental methods of the physical sciences to those of a more everyday form of inquiry, is a shift of massive proportions – and nothing is gained by minimizing it. In brief, rather than solving problems or proving general theories true, researchers (practitioner-inquirers) explore the particular possibilities available for next steps in their own current, unique, circumstances; rather than finding the one right answer for all time, they must open up multiple possibilities for multiple goals; rather than making measurements and determining quantities from a far, researchers (practitioner-inquirers) attempt to come to a ‘sense’ of the unique ‘inner nature’ of the other or otherness before them, by ‘inventing’ many different ways of dynamically relating themselves to ‘it’ – thus to allow, as Steiner (1989) puts it, “the ‘otherness’ which enters into us [makes] us other” (p.188).

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1. Let me issue a reminder here, that to make a distinction is also to make a relationship: it is only too easy to think that a focus on one side of a distinction amounts to a rejection of the other; whereas the other is always still there as a background to our foregrounding of the other.

Overall, then, this collection of essays, as the title indicates, is about a special kind of thinking that can occur when we allow the ‘otherness’ of the other to enter us and make us other – it is a kind of thinking that I have come to call ‘*witness*’ (*dialogical*)-thinking, to contrast it with the ‘*aboutness*’ (*monological*)-thinking that we have become very used to in our academic and intellectual lives in the West. As a style of thought, it was first suggested to me by a remark of Merleau-Ponty (1964b) about the way we look in relation to a painting, to a work of art: “I would be at great pains to say *where* is the painting I am looking at. For I do not look at it as I look at a thing; I do not fix its place. My gaze wanders in it as in the halos of Being. It is more accurate to say that I see according to it, or with it, than that I *see it*” (p.164) – if the painting truly ‘moves’ or ‘touches’ us, it makes us other than we were. In other words, on some occasions at least, we look at something in accord, not with our own requirements (as in Foucault’s “gaze”), but ‘its’ requirements, as our two eyes spontaneously search for a joint focus and fixation as we survey it in all its details, an ‘it’ as a consequence comes to enter us as ‘an other’. And, as Merleau-Ponty (1964a) puts it, in such a circumstance there can be a *reversal* in the ordinary relationship that I have to objects; if I adopt a desultory (aimless), exploratory attitude towards the scene before me, then “the scene invites me to become its adequate viewer, [and] it is as if a different mind than my own suddenly came to dwell in my body... I am snapped up by a second myself outside me: I perceive an other” (p.94)<sup>2</sup>.

It is this shift, then, away from ways of acting (looking, listening, thinking, doing, etc.) we ourselves direct towards ways of acting in which we allow the detailed features of our surroundings to ‘catch’ our attention, so to speak, that is crucial, for it is a shift away from relating to our surroundings in terms already familiar to us to allowing our surroundings themselves to ‘teach’ or to ‘instruct’ us in ways of relating to them.

We can call those ways of thinking, when we think in familiar terms, aboutness-thinking. For they work in terms of pictures and perspectives, in terms of frameworks and positions, repetitions and regularities, bodies of systematically connected knowledge, etc. of a kind already well-known to us. Witness-thinking is quite different, in that it is continually concerned with the unique, once-occurrent events of Being (to use a phrase of Bakhtin’s, 1993), events that just happen to one in the situation within which one is currently engaged. Such events, because they are of an ongoing kind, because they are continuously unfolding in time, because they can never be “finalized” (Bakhtin, 1986), i.e., brought to a final closure, do not give rise

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2. It is perhaps appropriate at this stage to apologize for the number of repeated quotes, other repeated turns of phrase, and general level of redundancy exhibited in this book. But the essays it contains were all written to be read as complete pieces in themselves, and I have thought it best to retain their overall wholeness.

at all to anything that can be accurately pictured or easily named; but they can and do give rise to shaped and vectored *feelings*<sup>3</sup> – feelings that can be immediately sensed as giving us, as practitioners, the guidance we need in the practical struggles we face every day in coping with the unique individuals or unique circumstances we meet in our practices.

I have only just recently become aware of witness-thinking as a distinct style in people’s “inner movements of thought” – although, as I shall recount below, in an implicit way, it has been ‘known’ to me for some time. Such a kind of thinking becomes available to us, I think, only as a result of our spontaneous responsiveness, as living-growing-embodied beings, to temporally unfolding events occurring around us, for, as living-growing beings, we cannot *not be* bodily responsive to these events in this direct and immediate, unthinking fashion.

For the moment, I will mention four important features of the living movements (more will be mentioned in the chapters below) in which such spontaneous responsiveness is manifested: 1) in their very occurrence, they ‘place’ us, bodily, *in one or another style or kind of relationship* to such events; 2) the bodily movements we exhibit in response to such events are *expressive* in some way to the others around us; 3) they are expressive of both *what* the relevant events ‘are’, and, in what way they *matter to us*, i.e., in being expressive in this way, they ‘point beyond’ themselves; and 4) they are what we might call *identity preserving* movements, in that the concomitant changes occasioned in us by their occurrence do not lead – as they might in a machine – to our ‘wearing out’ or to our physical degradation. In fact, just the opposite, they in fact lead to our becoming more able to ‘fit’ ourselves to our surroundings. Indeed, we could call all living activities *telic* activities in that they all aim, so to speak, at becoming in their activity more fully themselves.

As is perhaps now readily apparent, almost everything of interest in the study of such spontaneously responsive living activities, is apparent out in the *relations* occurring between such activities and their *surroundings*. Hence, perhaps surprisingly and unexpectedly, we end up being interested in the uncanny amazingsness of our living bodies, rather than in mysterious minds hidden inside people’s heads – the deep enigmas of our lives together lie in what is in fact *visible* before us, not in what is invisible and in what is hidden from us.

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3. By a *shaped and vectored* feeling, I mean a feeling that works not only as a ‘shaped standard’ against which to measure the success of one’s attempts to give it adequate linguistic expression, but which also provides a sense of ‘where’ one should next go, i.e., it is a feeling that ‘points beyond’ itself. In other words, we have a sense of how we *stand* and how things are *going* for us, of how we are *placed* or *positioned* and the *point* of our actions. We gain from such a feeling, not only an *evaluation* of how we stand, but also an *action guiding anticipation* as to where next we might move. It is, of course, in terms of such action guiding anticipations (as *second nature*) that we drive our cars, and continually monitor our ‘positioning’ on multi-lane highways.

As a foretaste of the strangeness of what, on the one hand, we must deal with here, but, on the other, its everyday familiarity, let me mention an example from Vygotsky's (1978) account of the importance of *play* and *playfulness* in our development as we "grow into the intellectual life of those around" (p.88) us: As he notes, for a child in play, "any stick can be a horse but, for example, a postcard cannot be a horse" (p.98), for while a child sitting astride a stick can respond bodily to a stick 'as if' it were a horse, *moving with it* as his or her 'imaginary horse' requires, a postcard would afford no such sitting-astride movements.

With Vygotsky's example in mind, if sticks can mean horses because they can be responded to some extent *like* horses, while postcards can't, how might we view Wittgenstein's (1953) claim that, "the meaning of a word is its use in the language" (no.43)? Perhaps we need to be prepared for people to put their words, at least sometimes, to quite strange uses – uses which we will be able to understand, *if* we can find a similar such responsive understanding of such uses within our selves.

Although this kind of playful involvement "is not the predominant feature of childhood," Vygotsky (1978) argues, "it is a leading feature... [For] in play, action is subordinated to meaning, but in real life, of course, action dominates meaning" (p.101). In other words, play provides a special realm within real life in which the child's spontaneous, impulsive reactions are suspended, and the child seems *free* (in one sense) to determine his or her own actions – that is, in the sense that in play, the child is free from any coercion by others. "But in another sense this is an illusory freedom," notes Vygotsky (1978), "for his [or her] actions are in fact subordinated to the meanings of things, and he [or she] acts accordingly" (p.103). This, as we shall see, is a comment with very far reaching consequences – in play, the child can develop and express her or his witness-thinking and witness-acting, while in *real life* aboutness-thinking and acting, i.e., operating in terms already shared by others, must prevail.

As will be apparent in the chapters of this book to follow, this kind of emphasis on people living out their responsive-expressive bodily activities in relation both to the things, *and* to the other people around them, is the book's central theme. Indeed, such topics as 'agency', 'responsibility', 'willfulness', 'play', 'spontaneity', 'creativity', and 'living change' have occupied my attention in my work since its inception. Some may see it as the old freedom determinism issue; but if so, they will find it set out here in terms quite different from the "either-or" way it was originally posed: As I see it, as living-growing beings, we can only be self-determining to a very limited, but very crucial extent. Indeed, the degree to which, and the importance of the fact that, we as individuals can be *accounted* responsible for at least some of our own actions, was the concern that marked the original point of departure for the work exhibited here (see Shotter, 1974).

I did not, however, come to this focus, or my focus on "joint action" and other such topics straightaway – even though I have been exploring the nature

of our living involvements in activities we perform along with others, for quite some long time now<sup>4</sup>. At first, my revolt was simply against a mechanical *cause and effect* psychology, against behaviorist psychology (again, see Shotter, 1974), which led, with a colleague, to a turn towards the study of “action” (see Gauld and Shotter, 1977) – to things people do deliberately and self-consciously for a *reason* – which lead on to a focus on meanings and interpretations. So for a while, the sharp distinction between what people themselves *do* and what merely *happens* to them was central for me.

However, it soon began to dawn on me that there was a third realm of activity in between these other two. And for a short while, I thought of it as “the penumbra in the middle,” because it was a region in which both just happening events *and* deliberately done actions were inextricably intermingled. For, on the one hand, things only came to pass in this sphere if participants exerted their *will*, so to speak, and deliberately paid attention in certain ways to these events, making use of their intelligence and judgment in so doing. But on the other hand, what actually happened, i.e., the outcomes of such activity seem to be beyond the control of any of the single individuals involved. But, without the intelligent, responsive engagement of each nothing happened; but even with it, people were unable to be fully knowledgeable, i.e., fully articulate, about what they were doing.

Indeed, in a non-Freudian sense of the term, people seemed to be unconscious of the details of the social inter-activity giving rise to such outcomes – they didn’t know ‘what led to what’. As I was later to discover, Foucault put the issue very nicely in saying: “People know what they do; they frequently know why they do what they do; but what they don’t know is what what they do does” (pers comm., quoted in Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982, p.187).

In such inter-activity as this, what happens to people, spontaneously, over and above their wanting and doing is, in fact, more important than their wanting and doing, for it determines the possibilities available to them at any one moment for what, realistically, they can hope to achieve in their consciously executed acts. We can call it “the background.”

Around 1979-1980 I came to call this kind of inter-activity “joint action” (Shotter, 1980), but later, under the influence of Bakhtin’s (1981, 1984, 1986) writing, I started to call it the *dialogical*, and even more recently, under Merleau-Ponty’s (1968) influence, *chiasmic* activity, for involved in it is not just the dynamic intertwining of two or more voices, but the dynamic inter-relating of an indefinite number of stands of relationally responsive activity, and I have been mediating on the nature of this third realm of activity – and the kind of knowing and understanding we can develop to help us to conduct our lives within it in a less confused, more

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4. For something like the last 25 years (see Shotter, 1980).

well oriented fashion – in one way or another ever since.

It is very tempting to call what is produced in such dialogical or chiasmic exchanges, a complex ‘mixture’ of not wholly reconcilable influences – for, as Bakhtin (1981) remarks, at work at the same time in all dialogically structured activities are both inward, ‘centripetal’ tendencies towards order and unity, as well as outward, ‘centrifugal’ ones towards diversity and heterogeneity.

However, although we may have no trouble discriminating and identifying the strands, the tendencies at work in two or more *voices*, to call their intertwining a ‘mixture’ is a fundamental mistake. It is a ‘product’ word, suggesting a simple physical amalgam, the arithmetical sum of two or more forms. Whereas, in fact, when two or more living activities ‘rub up against’ one another, so to speak, a *completely new tendency* is created in the resulting dynamics, a new form of life emerges with its own *telos*, with its own special shape and direction of development. It is thus quite impossible to definitively and finally characterize the nature of dialogically-structured, chiasmic, joint activity: it has neither a fully orderly nor a fully disorderly structure, a neither completely stable nor an easily changed organization, a neither fully subjective nor fully objective character. More than just a static kind of complexity, dialogically-structured activity has a dynamic, continually changing, oscillating, pulsating character, such that its structure at any one moment is very different from its structure at another. Indeed, it would not be going too far to say that its very lack of specificity, its lack of any pre-determined order, and thus *its openness to being specified or determined yet further only by those practically involved in it*, is its central defining characteristic. No wonder that Wittgenstein (1980a) said about his own way of philosophizing, that when you are doing it, “you have to descend into primeval chaos and feel at home there” (p.65).

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For a reason that was not, at the time, well understood to me<sup>5</sup>, in my attempt to forge an alternative to what I saw as demeaning and simplistic psychological theories, I felt drawn to reading the original writings of many ‘landmark’ psychologists and philosophers<sup>6</sup>. Although now ignored by those

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5. Although I now think of myself as blessed for spontaneously taking up this way of conducting my explorations – for as I will make clear at the end of this Preface, while we might find fault with their *theories* and *opinions*, with the supposed *content* of their utterances, others can exert powerful and crucial influences on us in their *saying* of their words.

6. One reason for this was that on a couple of occasions when I turned to an original text to check a quotation in a textbook, I found either the original text misquoted, or, so flagrantly ‘selected’ (‘cherry picked’, as the Americans say) that the original text had almost the opposite meaning from that claimed in the psychology textbook – textbook writers ‘interpreted’ classics according to their own aims. Much like the rest of us, they seemed to find it difficult to allow the original writers expression in their *own voices*.

on the ‘scientific edge’ of the discipline, such people, surely, must have had something impressive to say (I thought) for them to have been so ‘disturbing’ to the mainstream of their day. In doing this reading ‘off the beaten track’, so to speak, I spontaneously discovered – although I think I can now describe why this is so (see below) – that it was tremendously productive to carry on an ‘inner conversation’, so to speak, with a certain collection of writers who also – it seemed to me – had ‘worried at’ these same *interactive* issues. Vygotsky was the first, Vico and Wittgenstein came along a little later, along with Cassirer, G.H. Mead, Dreyfus, Dewey, Garfinkel, Goffman, Merleau-Ponty, Bohm, Bernstein, Charles Taylor, along with a number of conversational partners in the flesh, particularly Rom Harré and Ken Gergen. It was their voices, their *words in the speaking of them*, that was important to me, not the *patterns in their already spoken words*. It was, as I came to call it under Bakhtin’s (1986) influence, my relationally-responsive understanding of their words, their utterances – rather than a representational-referential understanding of them – that I found helpful. For they worked to create within me, different kinds of understanding shaped by different ‘attitudes’, ‘stances’, or ‘ways of seeing’.

For, the difficulty we face in our failure to understand our own involvements in constructing our own social worlds or realities *is* of the ‘fish being the last to discover water’ variety. In other words, we don’t quite know how to ‘orient’ ourselves towards our surroundings, our circumstances, towards our own everyday social interactions, in our inquiries into them. Thus, if we want to know our ‘way about’ within them better thus to ‘go on’ within in a more self-aware manner, as Wittgenstein (1980a) notes, “what has to be overcome is a difficulty having to do with the will, rather than with the intellect” (p.17) – a difficulty, as we shall see, more to do with how we might get ourselves ready to participate in the meetings of importance to us than with thinking about what *plans* to make.

I will discuss this issue more in the Introduction section below, but suffice it here to say that, again as Wittgenstein (1980a) remarks, the kind of work involved in coming to know one’s way about in a new circumstance, rather than learning new facts or pieces of information, “is really more a working on oneself... On one’s way of seeing things. (And what one expects of them)” (p.16).

This why I think the essays included in this book are especially apposite to those special students who are also themselves practitioners (therapists, social workers, managers of ‘people processes’). For the *ways* of thinking explored in them are, I think, of use to those of us who must, so to speak, think ‘on the hoof’, ‘from within the ongoing midst’ of complexity, or while ‘in motion’. They are especially apposite because these modes of thought – as I will make clear in these essays – work not in terms of static images or pictures, in terms of fixed shapes or forms that can be ‘seen’ to correspond to, or to be ‘like’, states of affairs out in the world, but in terms of another

kind of ‘likeness’ altogether. They work in terms of *felt* dynamic ‘likenesses’ that arise for us within sequences of unfolding ‘movements’, within the unfolding ‘interplays’ that occur when, in some sense, we *resonate with*, or move *in accordance with* the temporal contours another’s expressive ‘movements’ – as when, say, we are ‘taken up by’ a dance or piece of music.

In the past, we have been used to working with spatial images, with pictures, with representations, with finished shapes and forms that can be depicted out in the world in objective terms and talked about. This concern with movement-forms or time-forms, takes us into a different realm altogether, the realm of subtle bodily feelings that can exert, as they unfold in time, a distinctive and intricate *guiding* or *directive function* in our actions, and especially in the words we *use* as we voice our utterances in our speech. Indeed, it is precisely the function of such directive and guiding feelings that Wittgenstein (1953) explores in what he calls his “grammatical” investigations (no.90) – his explorations of the way in which all the small details at work in this, that, or some other quite particular situation can work to determine precisely what it is appropriate for us to say within it. Or, to put the issue differently, he is concerned with investigating those situations in which, to repeat Merleau-Ponty’s (1964b) way of putting it above, we look at, or listen to something *according to*, or *with* a certain way or manner of looking or listening that we have learned in our previous encounters with similar such circumstances.

This, then, is the topic of this book, and I will turn first, in the Introduction, to the strange, chiasmic nature of “the background” within we live our lives together. About it, Wittgenstein (1980a) remarked: “Perhaps what is inexpressible (what I find mysterious and am not able to express) is the background against which whatever I could express has its meaning” (p.16), and also: “When you are philosophizing you have to descend into primeval chaos and feel at home there” (1980a, p.65), so we need to be ready for some rather, perhaps, unexpected claims as to its strange nature.