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Edited by Virginia Slaughter and Celia A. Brownell

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Part I

The bodily self

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1 Primordial sense of embodied self-unity

Philippe Rochat

Primordial sense of embodied self-unity

Infancy research of the past forty years defies long-held ideas regarding the starting state of mental life. These ideas were justified by the fact that we do not have any explicit recollection of our own infancy. Infantile amnesia was symptomatic of an initial absence of experiential unity and self-awareness. Prior to language, children were regarded as some kind of larvae, eventually emerging from their blind chrysalides to find embodied selfhood, meta-cognition, and explicit self-identity in the light of symbolic functioning and conceptual representations. There is an abundance of evidence now showing that un-memorable infancy does not equate to mindless infants.

The long-held assumptions of mindless and self-less infants, devoid at birth of experiential unity (i.e. a unified embodied experience), can be explained by a lack of consideration of the variety of ways one can be aware, including levels of self-awareness that are more or less explicit and conceptual (Rochat, 2009). Infant studies call for a distinction between experiential and conceptual awareness: the awareness that accompanies being and acting in the world toward preferred goals, versus the awareness of a conceptualized and re-cognized world (a phenomenal consciousness that has, in addition, cognitive accessibility), following the recent discussion and distinction proposed by Ned Block (2007).

If in development experiential awareness precedes conceptual awareness, in the same way for example that independent sitting precedes bi-pedal locomotion, or that babbling precedes speaking, it does not mean that one is lacking coherence and unity, the other eventually endowed with it. It does not mean, either, that one kind of awareness calls for selfhood and the other does not.

The basic argument made here is that both conceptual (i.e. early body representation, the topic of this volume) and experiential awareness call for

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experiential unity and an ascription of selfhood, although at fundamentally different levels of mental functioning. Both conceptual and experiential awareness co-exist in development, particularly from the onset of language. From then on, our awareness tends to fluctuate from the experiential to the conceptual, in the same way that we sometimes sit and sometimes walk; sometimes babble and other times speak. In constantly transitioning through experiential and conceptual awareness, we do not each time lose or re-discover the sense of who we are, nor of what unifies our consciousness of the world.

Embodied sense of self and unity at birth

Empirical observations suggest that infants at birth start off showing all signs of experiential awareness. They feel and are selective in what they feel. They show unity in learning, in representing, and in orienting toward vital resources of their environment: faces, food, caretakers they depend on to survive (Rochat and Senders, 1991; Rochat, 2001 for a review of such evidence). They manifest from the outset some sense of their own body as a substantial and bounded entity among other substantial and bounded entities. They show an experiential awareness of the body that is organized, multimodal, situated, differentiated, and purposeful in the environment, what would correspond to an implicit body schema that is the foundation of later developing explicit body representations (Gallagher and Meltzoff, 1996).

The argument proposed here is that all these features justify the theoretical ascription of embodied unity and selfhood to children from the outset of human development. The questions are, what kind and what changes in development?

Following Kant's classic proposal, for an experience to become conscious *about* something requires embodied unity in the sense that it requires that sensations from the world, including the body itself, be synthesized into intuitions and percepts, these percepts eventually coordinated to grasp patterns and ultimately form concepts (Brook, 1994). Based on these criteria, evidence suggests that infants from birth would manifest unity in the Kantian sense, to the extent that they respond to more than discrete and isolated sensations, and more importantly, to the extent that they differentiate sensations originating *from within or outside the body*. Infants from birth need to be considered as perceivers and actors, not just instinctive reflex machines. They behave as differentiated and organized embodied entities among other entities, and are not born in a primordial state of un-differentiation with the environment.

Recent empirical evidence allows non-trivial conclusions regarding the origins of self-consciousness and what it might be like to be a newborn, calling for radical revisions of strong-held beliefs and premises from which highly influential theories were built. These beliefs include for example the notion that the starting state of development is an exercise of discrete, not yet coordinated

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hereditary “automatic” reflexes (Piaget, 1936), or Freud’s seminal idea that beyond survival instincts, behavior at birth is reduced to some sort of blind, circular, non-objectified and autistic quest toward bodily excitation and suppression (Freud, 1905).

These notions do not allow ascribing to newborns the power of being conscious *about* something that is differentiated from their own bodily experience, hence of their own body as a differentiated entity among other entities in the environment. But, as I will try to suggest, research shows that there is apparently much more than reflexes, a-dualism, blind auto-eroticism, and primary narcissism at the origins of conscious life.

Presumed mental weakness of the pre-verbal child

The fact that we do not have any explicit recollection of our own infancy makes the grasping of our origins in development difficult. Infantile amnesia prevents us from any direct reconstruction by way of introspection of what mental life might be at the origins and what our primeval experience is of being alive in the world. First coined by Freud, the phenomenon of infantile amnesia invites us to speculate that there might be a radically different mental organization at birth, or even *none* whatsoever. It leaves open the possibility of a different and incomparable experience to what we as adults experience of the world. Infantile experience would be yet un-repressed by conscious thoughts and without the awareness of others as “superego.”

The memory black hole of the first months in the world outside of the womb has naturally enticed philosophers to think of a primary mental incompetence, the incompetence of infants to create memories, even memories stored for later retrieval. This absence of conscious recollection of our life prior to the third birthday is universal. It is pervasive despite the claims of highly speculative therapies and other rather unscrupulous psychoanalysts reconstructing from patient hearsay what young infants might feel and what might be meaningful events for them.

If we consider infantile amnesia as the symptom of an original incompetence, infants’ inability to store and represent sensory information, it is also presumably the symptom of an original incapacity to synthesize sensory impressions into the concepts that give the mind its conscious unity. Children prior to 2–3 years would be incapable of giving sensory experience its unified “mindfulness.” Translated in Kantian terms, infantile amnesia would be symptomatic of mental blindness. Babies’ intuitions of the world and of their own body arising from sensory experience would be blind, not yet transcended into concepts and representations, not yet synthesized into bodies of knowledge that can be consciously retrieved.

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This is what the founders of modern psychology assumed. Wilhelm Wundt, who established the first experimental psychology laboratory in Leipzig in the late nineteenth century, considered that infants could not help in the scientific understanding and conceptualizing of the adult mind. He writes in his *Outline of Psychology* (1897): “The results of experiments which have been tried on very young children must be regarded as purely chance results, wholly untrustworthy on account of the great number of sources of error. For this reason, it is an error to hold, as is sometimes held, that the mental life of adults can never be fully understood except through the analysis of the child’s mind” (Eng. Trans. 1907, cited by Kessen 1965). Obviously, Piaget and his followers did not adhere to Wundt’s intuition. Nor did the great number of infancy researchers in recent years decrying William James’ (1890) idea that we are born into an initial state of “blooming, buzzing, confusion,” interpreted as standing for an initial state of disorder and experiential chaos in dire need of organization (see Rochat, 2001 for a review).

Progress in neuroscience might also have reinforced this intuition as we now have ample evidence that the brain of the young child develops continuously in marked ways during the first 2–3 years of life, particularly pre-frontal regions of the neo-cortex that are involved in the higher order synthesis of neural information as in advanced executive function, inhibition in problem-solving and intentional actions (e.g. Zelazo, 2004). Furthermore, and this is what delimits infancy from childhood, by the second year children become symbolic, increasingly proficient with language and begin to manifest an unambiguous conceptual sense of who they are (Bates, 1990). Their vocabulary becomes full of personal pronouns and adjectives like “I,” “me” and “mine.” All of these mental changes that occur by the second to third year of life correlate with what is typically reported as our earliest, reliable memories.

From this point on, the veil of amnesia appears to be lifted. Memories are stored to become potentially retrievable and communicable in narrative forms (Dennett, 1992; Nelson and Fivush, 2004). From then on only, it would therefore be legitimate to postulate that the child possesses a mind that is explicitly conceptual, showing unity in the Kantian sense. This unity also implies a conceptual sense of who the child is as an entity among other entities, a person among other persons in the world. From the time they speak, children identify (re-cognize) themselves in mirrors and show embarrassment. They start to show off, begin to lie if necessary and to engage in pretense. Arguably, the child’s experience rises to mindfulness proper. It is unified over time and space. Representations of representations are synthesized and organized into abstract concepts that can be mentally manipulated at will to generate new truths and true pre-visions about future states of the world.

In short, historically, there has been a natural inclination, albeit with good reason, for many thinkers of the mind to believe that there might be a lack of

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unity at birth. The lack of unity would persist until children develop the ability to synthesize representations of the world that are memorable and organized along the continuum of time and space. If a concept of self is an a-priori condition of unity in consciousness – as was suggested by Kant – it would be erroneous to speak of any notion of “self” prior to language, prior to the explicit ability to remember, conceptualize, and re-cognize the world symbolically, in particular within symbolic conventions. This, of course, would extend to any other non-symbolic animals that do not possess language, namely creatures that are not capable of representing representations, not capable of organizing thoughts around a-priori truths and within a continuous timeline that gives hindsight to the direct sensory experience of the world.

There are marked qualitative shifts in how and what the mind processes between birth and the onset of language, particularly when the child starts to remember an increasing number of past events in the explicit narrative formats of autobiographical memories (Nelson and Fivush, 2004). However, much research shows now that the phenomenon of infantile amnesia is not due to a lack of unity or sense of self, as alluded to by the founders of modern psychology. In fact, infantile amnesia is becoming increasingly a “misnomer” given the flow of empirical evidence that demonstrates long-term procedural memory in infants of only a few months, infants who presumably should be deep into our memory “black hole” period (e.g. Bauer, 1996; Meltzoff, 1995; Rovee-Collier and Hayne, 2000). In addition, numerous studies show that the timing of first explicit memories (typically between 2 and 4 years) can vary greatly among individuals depending on memory content, gender, family structure and culture (Nelson and Fivush, 2004).

It thus appears that children develop autobiographical memory progressively, incrementally and in parallel to language development. It does not emerge abruptly as if children were overcoming the obstacle of a generalized amnesia, hence a disorganized mind incapable of having organized representations of representation, not functioning rationally on the basis of a-priori concepts, only finding unity and selfhood by their third birthday.

Distinguishing the experiential from the conceptual

Newborns’ experience of the world is rich from the start. It is rich within the polarity of pleasure and pain, restfulness and agitation, approach and avoidance. Newborns cry and fuss when hungry or tired. They show irrepressible smiles with eyes rolling to the back of their head after a good feed. They “feel” something, expressing unmistakable pleasure and pains. These expressions have adaptive functions, forming crucial signals for caregivers on whom newborns rely to survive. But how much unity and embodied self-awareness can be

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ascribed to such emotional, obviously not yet objectified experience of being alive in the world?

To address this question, it is necessary to distinguish two basic forms of being in the world: the *experiential* and the *conceptual*. This is not a new approach, supported and proposed by recent research and theories in cognitive neuroscience, in the footsteps of William James proposing a distinction between the “I” or experiential self and the “me” or conceptual (objectified) self. Damasio (1999) emphasizes the fundamental difference between “core” consciousness and “extended” consciousness about the self and events that are construed over time and emerging with language. Similarly, Edelman and Tononi (2000) call for a distinction between primary and symbolic (language and narrative) driven consciousness. A large body of research in neuroscience supports the experiential diversity of being aware in the world, including blind-sight, hypnotic dissociation of pain and other highly relativist (as opposed to “real” or “core”) perceptual phenomena (see Gazzaniga *et al.*, 1998). There are different kinds of awareness, not all necessarily requiring re-cognition, language, or the capacity to represent representations as in meta-cognition. It is justified to talk about infra- or pre-linguistic awareness. There are indeed markedly different ways of being aware and conscious, as opposed to non-conscious or un-conscious (Rochat, 2009).

Newborns are not yet conceptually aware of being themselves alive in the world, obviously. However, they are *experientially* aware. Newborns, when not sleeping, are not merely in a wakeful state of confusion between what they feel and what causes them to feel. If they see a face or are struck by an object, they do not become this face or this object. Although not yet conceptualizing them as objects of reflection, they do not confound them with their own subjective feeling or sensory experience. This can be assumed to the extent that newborns’ feelings and behaviors cannot be simply reduced to automatic reflex responses, like the mechanical adjustments of a thermostat or any kind of automata.

Behavior at birth is more than a collection of automatic reflexes (Rochat, 2007). Rather than reflexes, it is more appropriate to talk about purposeful acts that are expression of innate action systems evolved to sustain infants’ survival in the state of prolonged immaturity (Bruner, 1972), what Montagu (1961) calls the human “extergestation.” These systems include orienting, feeding, and exploring, all organizing children’s actions around features and resources in the environment that are relevant for their survival (Reed, 1982; Rochat and Senders, 1991).

Behavior at birth is thus more than the expression of highly predictable stimulus–response loops controlled by endogenous, self-contained and automatically triggered mechanisms. It is more than breathing or blinking. In addition to reflexes, newborns also manifest bodily movements that are *oriented* toward particular functional goals. These action systems are by definition

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adapted to tap into available resources that exist *outside* the individual organism, in the surrounding environment: food, surfaces, objects, or people. Furthermore, contrary to reflexes, these movements are organized into systems that are *flexible*, capable of changing based on previous experiences and adjusting to novel circumstances (see Rochat, 2007 for further discussion of the non-rigid and triggered aspect of behavior at birth). Orientation and flexibility are two aspects that argue against the reduction of behavior at birth to simple reflex mechanisms.

Infants are born predisposed to act with purpose, oriented toward indispensable resources in the environment, be it food, comfort, or protection. These innate functional action systems are what unify the experiential awareness of newborns. It is also what justifies the ascription of selfhood from the outset of development. For the rest of this chapter, I will attempt to provide empirical support for these claims (see also Butterworth, 1992 target article and follow up comments for a similar argument based on different perceptual and cognitive evidence).

Criteria and evidence for basic experiential embodied unity at birth

As noted previously, following Kant's view of the mind, sensory inputs from the world need to be unified to become conscious experiences "about something." In other words, for the sense datum to become knowledge about the world, it needs to be synthesized within a temporal and spatial structure at three levels: (1) the transformation of sensory apprehension into intuitions or percepts; (2) the coordination of intuitions or percepts in reproductive imagination (what would correspond to mental simulation in today's neuroscientific jargon); and (3) the recognition of concepts in coordinated intuitions (conceptualization of a-priori categories). Kant proposes that the unity of our conscious experience rests on these three kinds of synthesis, an idea that still prevails in current cognitive sciences.

Within this framework, one can argue that newborns do engage in the synthesizing of sense data, certainly at the first level proposed by Kant, and probably also at the second level. The third level seems to be evident only a few months down the road, possibly before the first birthday. For example, Jean Mandler (1988, 1992) provides some empirical evidence that by 9–12 months, infants might already manifest object categorization that is based on ontological concepts such as animate versus inanimate, self-propelled or not. Although such rich interpretation is disputed by other researchers (see Rakison and Poulin-Dubois, 2001), Mandler proposes that already in the first year infants engage in perceptual analysis that includes the three kinds of synthesis that for Kant are the foundation of unity in consciousness. But, what about newborns, what about

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infants at birth? Do they show signs of unity in their experience? The most probable answer is yes.

If newborns were lacking unity, just bombarded by meaningless sensory stimulations, we would expect newborns' behavior to be fundamentally disoriented, just a collection of responses that would jerk them around in a disorganized manner. But ample evidence shows that this is not the case (Rochat, 2001). They learn and actively explore their environment, even showing evidence that prenatal experience and learning is transferred into postnatal life. For example, newborns a few hours old orient more toward the scent of their mother's amniotic fluid compared to the scent of the amniotic fluid of a female stranger. They also show active preference in hearing their mother's voice compared to another female voice (Marlier *et al.*, 1998a, 1998b; DeCasper and Fifer, 1980).

There is now substantial evidence demonstrating preference, active selection, learning (e.g. Marlier *et al.*, 1998), and even imitation in neonates (e.g. Meltzoff and Moore, 1977), all pointing to the fact that infants are born to a world they synthesize into meaningful features or affordances (Gibson, 1979). They are born endowed with the ability to detect these affordances and to synthesize them as invariant features of the environment (Rochat and Senders, 1991; Gibson, 1995). These invariants pertain equally to non-self objects and to the body. For example, a drop of sucrose on their tongue leads them to calm down and systematically bring hand to the mouth in the most direct trajectory for biting and sucking (Rochat *et al.*, 1988). The drop of sucrose engages the feeding or appetitive system of the infant that in turn mobilizes the whole body in orienting and rooting activities. These functionally purposeful activities come to rest only when something solid such as a finger or a nipple comes into contact with the face and eventually finds its way into the mouth for sucking (Blass *et al.*, 1989). Evidence of neonatal imitation of tongue protrusion, mouth opening, and finger movements (Meltzoff and Moore, 1977) is the expression of a body schema whereby the sight of active bodily regions in another person (the model) is mapped onto homologous regions of the own body. Another example of expressed body schema at birth is the systematic arm movements observed in neonates with their head turned to the side while lying supine in their crib and plunged in the dark with just a thin beam of light cutting across their visual field. In this condition, newborns are documented systematically bringing their ipsilateral hand and arm into the beam of light for active visual exploration (Van der Meer and Lee, 1995).

The behavioral orientation of newborns and their early propensity to detect invariant features in the environment (including the invariant features of their own body) all point to an experiential awareness at birth that is organized within a stable spatial and temporal structure. Newborns show quick learning, transfer, and use of prenatal experience into postnatal life. They memorize and recall procedural knowledge over time, orienting head and mouth significantly more