

Questioning the primacy of touch in Matthew Ratcliffe's "Touch and the Sense of Reality"

In the book *The Hand, an Organ of the Mind*, Matthew Ratcliffe discusses in chapter 6 "Touch and the Sense of Reality" the role of tactual perception in constituting a sense of reality and belonging to the same world. In this essay I summarize his approach regarding the role of touch for perception, and the sense of reality and belonging as necessary background. I will raise questions and discuss how he argues the claimed primacy of touch over all other senses.

The role of touch

Ratcliffe criticizes the dominant role vision is given in many philosophical discussions, which is mirrored in words such as *view of the world* and may lead to a tendency to generally think of perception as sight-like. While vision is often interpreted as giving an independent, uncorrupted, objective image of the world, the role of one's own body in touch cannot be so easily forgotten (cf. Merleau-Ponty in Ratcliffe 2013, 131). The emphasis on sight often fails to characterize the sense of reality and belonging to the same world, that is fundamental to all perception. Interestingly Ratcliffe argues that touch as the only sense takes part in constituting this sense of reality and belonging, while all others presuppose it.

Ratcliffe refers to an also existing different tradition that puts some emphasis on touch. As far back as Aristotle, who named touch "[...] a necessary condition for the being of an animal body" (Freeland in Ratcliffe 2013, 152), he finds statements in non phenomenological philosophy. In phenomenology he names Husserl who called touch "the only sense without one could not have an 'appearing body'" (Husserl in Ratcliffe 2013, 132), Merleau-Ponty who ascribed an important role to touch in "Phenomenology of Perception" (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 328) and Jonas who in his *The Nobility of Sight* described touch as the primary sense that constitutes a relationship with the world that vision presupposes (cf. Ratcliffe 2013,133).

Not wanting to here discuss the principal possibility of a distinction of senses, Ratcliffe builds on a diversity of uncontroversial tactual experiences and focusses on perceptions that lack differentiation between perceiver and perceived, since these do not seem adequately acknowledged by his predecessors.

Reality and belonging

Husserl claimed that we perceive an entity as "[...] naturally and simply there for us as an existing reality [...]" which includes a belief in the existence of the entity through "[...]a practical, bodily, felt sense of participation [...]" in the same shared world. (cf. Husserl in Ratcliffe 2013, 135).

Ratcliffe defines *sense of reality* as not only "[...] the taking of an entity or other to be real", but as "[...] the ability to discriminate between possibilities such as 'there,' 'not there,' 'possibly there,' 'perceived,' 'remembered,' 'imagined,' 'real,' and 'unreal.'" (Ratcliffe 2013, 136). He states that without the already given sense of being part of the world, we could not perceive things as residing in the same world, and attempts to further clarify the sense of reality by examining Husserl's and Merleau-Ponty's example of one's two hands touching taking in account cutaneous sensations inseparably experienced within the perception of bodily position and movement.

Differentiation in Touching one's Hands

While Husserl emphasized the *double sensation* where each hand is experienced as perceiver and perceived, Merleau-Ponty stresses a reversibility of roles in which the perceiving body cannot be perceived at the same time. Both philosophers find that to be important far beyond the experience of perceiving one's own body. "it is only insofar as we can be an object to ourselves, we can acquire a more general sense of being an entity among others, part of the world." (Ratcliffe 2013, 138).

Ratcliffe introduces very comprehensible and convincing experiments of passive and active touch in which this distinction between perceiver and perceived can not be completely made. For example in putting together one's palms and holding them still as in prayer, we experience one unified touch rather than two separate happenings. Also in touching objects like in grasping a cup with spread fingers from above, we experience "a unitary tactual perception of a cylindrical object" (Ratcliffe 2013, 141).

Background Touch

Ratcliffe finds *background touch* to be even more illuminating to the sense of commonality of perceiver and perceived, which is presupposed by the possibility of encountering anything as 'there' (cf. Ratcliffe 2013, 139). The upward pressure of the earth or any surface of support on the body is a constant background of stimulation (cf. Gibson in Ratcliffe 2013, 142), that is seldom

recognised. These experiences seem not even to be reducible to localized parts of our body like the skin of the feet but encompass the whole body. A diffusion, partial lack of differentiation can be experienced not only within the body but also between the body and an object like for example a "cloud-like couch" (Don Ihde in Ratcliffe 2013, 142). This constant being in contact with some medium forms the background on which localized tactual experiences can be made.

The Primacy of Touch

As Merleau-Ponty's example of touching empty space as part of a structure (cf. Merleau-Ponty 2012, 329) shows "the tactual perception of absence is not just an absence of tactual perception" (Ratcliffe 2013, 145). Taking this as an example for a tactual experience without physical contact seems wrong to me, since the absence of touch gets its meaning by the physical contact surrounding it. It may however clarify that tactual experiences cannot sensibly be divided into separated stimuli, but connect with the world in a foreground/background gestalt relation.

As in all perceptions, there is also more to touch than just perceiving the actual. As do other senses, also touch incorporates a sense of not-actualized possibilities, without which objects lose their "carnal presence and facticity" (Merleau-Ponty in Ratcliffe 2013, 147).

Ratcliffe states that tactual possibilities along with the tactual background connect us to things. "[...] without the possibility of potential touch, what we see would not appear as 'there'" (Ratcliffe 2013, 148), while in sight the sense of reality is presupposed.

He argues that although the dependence between vision and touch is mutual, and vision can as well influence the tactual experience, the comparison of loss of either vision or touch leads to a major difference: While a loss of sight even in the severe form in which the possibility of seeing is permanently removed an experiential world remains, a complete absence of touch is not imaginable. "Granted, one's existential predicament would be transformed by a loss of vision or hearing. But without touch, one could not have any kind of existential predicament." (Ratcliffe 2013, 149).

Ratcliffe claims that the sense of belonging to a world is inextricably connected with the possibility of touching. He concedes that there is no empirical evidence to support this claim, since there are no reported cases of total loss of tactual perception and furthermore potential touch.

The single term touch is used for a diversity of relations between the perceiver and the perceived. In seeing "the body is perceiver and not itself perceived in the act of perceiving" (Ratcliffe 2013,

150). In touch there is not only the basic difference of active and passive touch, but a variety of very distinct differences "[...] such as exploring, caressing, prodding, squeezing, stroking, being stroked, caressed, prodded, and so forth. These can be further differentiated: timid tactual exploration, involving a sense of vulnerability, is very different from eager, confident exploration" (Ratcliffe 2013, 150).

Touch much more than vision and the other senses differs in the kinds of connecting with our surroundings "[...] with respect to conspicuousness of one's body, the way it is felt, the extent to which something other than the body is perceived, and the character and extent of the relationship between one's body and what it touches" (Ratcliffe 2013, 150).

Ratcliffe claims that even with the complete absence of any other sense we can still encounter things as real, without the possibility of touch however no significant contact or interaction is possible and therefore the sense of reality and belonging to the world depends on tactual contact.

Questions

Ratcliffe describes differences between the senses in regard of their necessity for a sense of reality, meaning the ability to discriminate modalities such as *there* and *not there*, and builds on the strong argument that a loss of all senses but touch does not have to affect the profound sense of reality and belonging to the world,

We can only imagine how we encounter the world as babies, when hunger, pain, temperature, full gravity, air, light, odours all are new and any differentiation as inside/outside is yet to be made. We know from psychic diseases that differences in the sense of reality and belonging without explicit problems of the senses are possible.

Although it is hard to imagine bodily existence without even the possibility of touch, it still may be possible that the person itself cannot experience tactual sensations for example in the case of coma. Of course in such a case the person itself may not have a sense of reality and belonging to the world, but they would still be part of the world, their existence affect other people and their environment. It seems important to me to point out that the sense of reality and belonging is not the same as reality and belonging.

Can there be in a conscious person a sense of reality and belonging without the possibility of touch?

We would have to think of losing the sense of touch but not the capacity to interact. There are forms of interaction that don't involve touch like writing on a computer with my gaze. Does that involve possible touch, or even more: is this a form of touch?

Built on the security of a developed sense of reality and belonging people have always dealt with things that cannot be touched, like the shade of a tree without questioning their reality. Of course the shade is not a solid thing, but it can be felt on the skin and still not be touched. So the actual possibility of touch is not necessary to perceive something as present and there.

Can taking the sun *as there* be supported by the idea of possible touch?

When we encounter a formerly unknown situation involving something we do not know from experience, we have not seen or touched before? When I first saw a hologram of a trombone standing out in front of me from the frame nearly touching my belly, I could see something was wrong, before I tried to touch it, because it was not consistent.

A problem in Ratcliffe's argumentation could be that other senses, for which vision is taken as prominent example, are described in a form highly abstracted from bodily existence, while the sense of touch is used in a very broad way, not only for cutaneous contact, but for many different kinds of experiences and nearly synonymous for bodily existence itself, for example: "We are always in physical contact with some medium, whether it be air [...]" (Ratcliffe 2013, 143). Furthermore it is enriched by the term *possible touch*, which can be used to expand touchability to things that actually cannot be touched, such as one's heart or far away stars.

Modalities such as active or passive (cf. Merleau-Ponty 2012, 329), manners like exploring or caressing, attitudes like timid, eager, confident, and many others can be ascribed to sight as well, as long as we do not completely and artificially cut off vision from our bodily intention and response. And this might be the same with other senses like taste or smell.

Why should touch not presuppose reality? In I touch we experience contact with things we don't control as well as in the gaze. We develop an orientation in the world and our possibilities to interact in a unity of our body (cf. Merleau-Ponty 2012, 330).

Touch as well as sight may be described in an abstracted way, that presupposes a sense of reality and belonging, for example: to touch something I have to be able to differentiate between me and a

thing, otherwise I would not experience a difference and therefore no touch.

I am not suggesting to do that, the idea that our sense of reality is constituted by our senses seems very plausible to me. I am just not sure we should reduce that to the sense of touch. It may well be developed in a contact with the world that envelopes all senses and their interaction.

So the idea of a primacy of touch may arise from the abstraction of sight and on the argument that in vision and all other senses than touch the sense of reality is presupposed, which is not discussed or questioned in this chapter, but only referred to as statement of Jonas (Ratcliffe 2013, 133).

All this does not refute Ratcliffe's strong argument that touch other than sight cannot be separated from conscious bodily existence. Whether this justifies the proposition that touch, as the only sense, does not presuppose a sense of reality, seems to remain questionable. The sense of reality and belonging to the world may as well be a common achievement of our being in this world with all our senses and possibilities.

References

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