

Violence and embodiment

By James R Mensch,
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Some years ago, a striking exhibition of photographs made its rounds through the galleries. I remember seeing it in Brno, in the Czech Republic. Its subject was the ravages of the civil war in Sierra Leon-in particular, the amputations inflicted on the people there. One particular photograph held my attention: a woman without hands holding her child. She was clearly a victim of physical violence. But what she suffered was something more than that. Regarding her, I asked myself: How could she look after her child? How could she perform all the tasks that a person with an intact body normally engages in without thinking? How must the world appear to her without hands to dress her child or herself, reach for things, grasp them, feed herself, her child, and so on? What sort of sense did it make to her, when its access had been so brutally limited? The physical violence she had endured left its mark on her not just in her bodily inability to function, but also on her inability to enact those senses that are dependent on our having a functioning body. It later struck me that violence is not just physically destructive, but also destructive of sense or meaning. The two are tied together through the role that the body plays in our making sense of the world, be this its physical, cultural, or social sense. Violence undermines this role.

Merleau-Ponty, the French philosopher, once wrote that "it is literally the same thing to perceive one single marble and to use two fingers as one single organ." Our perception of the marble is one with a set of bodily abilities: those of reaching over, picking up and bringing close the marble. We also turn our heads, focus our eyes and, if need be, roll the marble between our fingers to see its different colors and gauge its hardness and smoothness. The sense of the marble includes all these qualities. As such, it depends on these bodily abilities. The same holds for its cultural and social senses of objects. Such senses show themselves in our various projects, that is, in the ways we use objects to satisfy our needs. The water of a stream, for example, has the sense of water to drive my mill when I use it for this purpose. It can also appear as water to drink or to wash or cook with, depending on my particular needs. This determination is also a determination of the way we appear to ourselves. We become the person who has accomplished these projects. The sense of our embodiment as an "I can" is correlative to such projects.

In all this, the role of the embodied "I can" is crucial. Without it, we could not acquire and enact the practical senses we gain from others. We could not articulate them. Thus, everything from learning to eat at the table to learning how to write presupposes a functioning body. The same holds for our initial learning of our language. We acquired, for example, the

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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 behaviour, one which disclosed what knives and forks were for. Similarly, in appropriating the 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." 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. To the point that such projects are common, each of these correlated elements will also be common. The common meaning of an expression will point back to the common usage of an object as means for a given goal. Thus, for everyone who uses paper to start a fire, the meaning of the word "paper" will include the fact of its being combustible.

The role of the body in generating senses is, thus, one of enactment. Through a set of bodily activities, we enact senses by putting the objects to the uses that disclose their senses. We do so through our bodily "I can," which may be anything from "I can eat with a spoon" to "I can drive a car." Without this "I can," a person's words lose their lived sense. The loss of this "I can" is not, then, just the reduction of the body to a non-functioning object. It is also the loss of the person's ability to enact and, hence, disclose for herself the senses that make up the world she shares with his others. When a person is subject to the amputation of hand or foot, the mutilation extends to her pragmatic understanding of her world and her being in it. The same holds for the linguistic meanings that express this understanding. Within certain limits-namely those set by the bodily mutilation-she, thus, becomes languageless. Her mutilation is not just "unspeakable" in the sense of being dreadful. It is also such as to place her outside of the context of the common meanings she once shared with her others. Not being able to enact them, they remain "symbolic," that is, they possess a sense that she cannot personally experience. Here, the result of such violence is both an isolating and silencing of its victims. It removes them from a living participation in the context that would permit the articulation of their situation.

The relation of violence to our embodied understanding of the world does not just affect the isolated individual. It also affects families and communities. This is because our embodied "I can" usually requires others to operate. When collective action becomes impossible, so does the sense it generates. We see this in the effects of domestic violence on the patterns of behaviour that normally work to constitute a sense of the "home" as a place of belonging, mutual support and security. The violence that leads to the "dysfunctional family" impacts not just the ways its members relate to each other, but also their ability to generate the sense of the family as place of refuge. At the extreme, no one is "at home" in such families. The children, when they leave and attempt to start their own families must make a conscious effort not to repeat the behaviours that they learned growing up. At stake is not just avoiding the repetition of

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the abusive patterns and corresponding coping mechanisms that characterized their childhood. It is the very possibility of generating the sense of a loving family, that is, of establishing a place and a set of relationships that will allow them and their families to have the sense of being "at home."

The violence that is destructive of the sense we make with others need not involve any direct physical violence. The destruction of the necessary conditions for collective behaviour is sufficient. A striking example of such is provided by the disruption of aboriginal cultures by European colonists. Their transformation of the land through enclosures and the destruction of habitats deprived the natives of their original means of supporting themselves. This brought with it a disruption of the contexts of sense by which the natives interpreted their world and themselves within it. Thus, once the land was divided up and enclosed for farming, the aboriginal hunter-gatherer activity became impossible. With this, the surrounding worlds such activity disclosed were no longer available. The inhabitants could, consequently, no longer understand themselves within their context. The men, for example, could no longer see themselves as hunters or pastoralists given that all the suitable land was enclosed by the settlers. Their loss was a loss of their sense of embodiment as hunters or pastoralists. This was not just a loss of a social function along with the recognition and status that this involved. It was also a loss of a bodily "I can," one correlated to the specific projects that were no longer possible. It vanished along with the world such projects uncovered.

In my own country Canada, the forcible removal of native children to residential schools exacerbated this destruction of sense. These children were forbidden to speak their native language, thus preventing them from transmitting its special senses. The cumulative effect of this imposition of non-native cultural and religious outlooks was not necessarily their adoption. The inappropriateness of the latter-as belonging to a different social context and situation, one correlated to a different "I can"-usually ruled this out. The result was, rather, the collapse of their own interpretative, sense-making categories-including, most prominently, the ones by which they judged good and evil. At the extreme, native Canadians suffered a breakdown in their ability to make sense of and, hence, function in their new situations. With this came the phenomena of abuse. In the disorders of sexual, spousal, drug and alcohol abuse of some communities, it is possible to see the collapse of their embodiment as a social structure.

Such destruction is, of course, not yet the physical destruction of a people with all their embodied abilities to make sense of the world. The intimate relation of violence, embodiment, and sense making does, however, place it on a continuum with genocide. What is crucially important is not to wait until actual genocide occurs. This, however, involves being sensitive to the destruction of embodiment and of the embodied sense that characterizes violence. Seeing violence as destructive of our abilities to make sense of our world can provide us with a useful paradigm for recognizing violence in its physical, cultural and social forms. As destructive of the corresponding forms of embodiment, such forms all can be seen as aspects of the same phenomenon.

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