

Freedom and the Feldenkrais Method

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Background

I am in the fourth year of my training (the Victoria Training led by Jeff Haller). I am doing this in my 59th year, having spent most of my adult life so far in an academic and highly intellectualized mode of being. I am also someone who has personally struggled to be free to live life in my own way rather than continue to live the way of being of my parents. I have been politically oriented to questions concerning self determination: how does the individual acquire the capacity for self determination, how do her fellows facilitate or hinder her in relation to the possibilities of self determination, and what is it that the institutional order of our society might do if it were to facilitate and encourage individuals in taking up the possibilities of self determination? I am writing a book, *The Politics of Individuality*, that explores these questions. I should add before I go on that my formal academic training is in social and political theory. When I call on the resources of my intellectual background, I am often thinking across seventeenth century civil philosophy (e.g. the civil philosophy of Locke, Hobbes, and Spinoza), Hegel's investigation of subjective experience in relation to what he calls ethical life, the post-metaphysical philosophy of Heidegger and Arendt, and post-Freudian psychoanalytic theory (especially the work of Winnicott and those he has influenced). The frame of reference I bring to this diverse body of thought is an enquiry into the nature of freedom and its relationship to subjective experience. For example, I ask questions like: what kind of being in the world for the human subject makes freedom meaningful? (My answer to this question is that this being in the world has to be that of individuality which is not a given but an achieved possibility that can occur only under certain conditions.) How does the human subject need to develop *and* be facilitated in this development if s/he is to take up the opportunity of freedom? What is freedom as a set of practices? What kind of institutional order is needed in order to provide worldly support for individual practices of freedom?

It is not just inevitable but desirable I think that I attempt to integrate my ways of being, in this case my long established practice as a political and social theorist with my much newer practice as a student of the Feldenkrais method of self education. However, while what I offer here can be understood in this way – as satisfying my individual need for an integrated way of being – I think there is a case to be made for all of us thinking about the relationship of the Feldenkrais method to freedom. The core proposition of this brief essay is that Moshe Feldenkrais is best understood as a practical philosopher of freedom.

Considering Moshe Feldenkrais as a practical philosopher of freedom

I consider Moshe Feldenkrais to be a practical philosopher of freedom. His intention is to open up a process whereby people are invited to explore their individual possibilities of being in the world in such a way as to enable them to live more freely. Freedom denotes a highly developed quality of functioning on the part of the individual in how she works with her ever-changing environment: she is able to move easily, fluently; she is able to open up options for how she may move; and she is able to develop awareness of herself as an individual who acts/moves so that she learns how to fit her action to her intention. Feldenkrais does not consider movement to be the only modality of action. Action includes also feeling, sensing, and thinking. However, it is through movement that the individual human being engages in a vital as well as dynamic relationship to its environment. It is by means of self movement that the human being positions herself in the world: as Maxine Sheets-Johnstone (xxi) proposes, it is through such self positioning that the human being acquires a sense of “I” that provides the “foundation of our conceptual life, that is, the foundation of an ever-growing store of corporeal concepts, concepts such as ‘inside’, ‘heavy’, ‘light’, ‘open’, ‘close’, concepts having to do with consequential relationships, and so on.” In developing a method of facilitating Awareness Through Movement (ATM), Moshe Feldenkrais’s intention in the first instance is to invite the individual to be aware of herself as a center of animation (Sheets-Johnstone’s phrase xv), and on the basis of this self-valuing, to learn to trust as well as to explore her experience of engagement with her environment. It is thus that I receive these two statements of his: “It is important to understand that if a man wishes to improve his self-image, he must first of all learn to value himself as an individual, even if his faults as a member of society appear to him to outweigh his qualities” (Feldenkrais 1990: 19). And: “I use the movements only to improve the process of self organization” (June 5 1980).

In this conception, the human being is an individual subject who is free to develop or improve his or her ability, “that is, to expand the boundaries of the possible” (1990: 57). In what follows, I want to explore this conception of freedom and to do so, at least to some extent, in dialogue with the idea of freedom offered by Hannah Arendt. It is not arbitrary to link Moshe Feldenkrais (1904-1964) to Hannah Arendt (1906-1975). Both of these extraordinary twentieth century thinkers were born around the same time in the part of Europe associated with large Jewish communities (Feldenkrais in Russia; Arendt in Germany). They must have shared the legacies of Eastern European Jewish intellectual culture as these played out in the time before World War I, a time still shaped by hope for revolutionary change of the kind that would make European society more democratic and egalitarian. This was the time of revolutionary social movements including the Jewish Bund. Arendt (1970: 35) dates the end of this time with the murder of Rosa Luxemburg, a Polish Jew, in 1919 by “members of the ultra-nationalist and officially illegal Freikorps”, an act of complicity between the Social Democratic government of the Weimar Republic and an historically new kind of ultra nationalist populism (Arendt 1970: 35).

Beyond this shared legacy, I do not know enough at this point to point to specific currents of thought or figures of influence they may have shared. But one thing is clear: they shared the climate of thought that opened up with the critique of the Western metaphysical dualism of subject and object, a critique associated especially with Heidegger’s attempt to offer an account of philosophy outside the framework of metaphysics (see Bambach 1995; Dreyfus 2006), and more broadly with the development of systems theory. I identify this climate of thought with the following ideas: (1) it is not meaningful to think in terms of human nature because this presupposes a separation of the human subject from its world (the subject-object dualism): in reality the human being is positioned in a dynamic relationship to its

environment;¹ (2) thus individuality does not denote some set of essential attributes of the singular human subject but refers to the dynamic patterning of the way of being that *is* the individual in relation to her environment;² (3) there are instinctual bases for human conduct in relation to its environment but these are less important than the open horizon of possibility for human being-in-the-world that comes about because of the human capacity to think about reality and to develop self-awareness; (4) human being in the world is dynamically structured by individual agency in relation to an environment that is shared with other individuals so that the specific temporal-spatial positioning of the individual is articulated in relation to a wider shared temporal-spatial positioning (what Heidegger calls facticity or historicity); (5) thus human awareness is contextually framed by the historicity of lived experience, both individual and inter-individual; (6) it is in how we as individuals take up (or fail to take up) the open horizon of future possibility that we shape our relationship both to our present and to our past;³ and finally, (7) intentionality is the type of agency that is involved in directing one's movement towards something, a type of agency that is kinetic in nature thus entailing a "movement of meaning".⁴

The idea of freedom that Feldenkrais shares with Arendt belongs to this climate of thought. Here I can be only suggestive regarding this proposition, but let me offer it in two ways. Firstly, both Feldenkrais and Arendt refuse to accept an account of freedom in terms of will; indeed both argue that will-power (the will-to-power) not only interferes with, but profoundly undermines, the individual's capacity for free action. Instead of the will, Feldenkrais and Arendt conceive freedom as the opening of new and, thus, unknown in the sense of unpredictable possibilities for the articulation of individual agency. For this to occur, the individual cannot be subject to force, in this case the internal force of the will. Secondly, Feldenkrais and Arendt take for granted that individual conduct is deeply shaped by its environment and that the most significant aspect of the individual's environment in this respect is her parents in the first instance, and the normative force of society in the second (mediated as this is usually by means of the first of these two forces).⁵ Yet for neither

¹ Consider here this statement of Moshe Feldenkrais: "Man's life is a continuous process, and the improvement is needed in the quality of the process, not in his properties or disposition" (1990: 33).

² "A man tends to regard his self-image as something bestowed upon him by nature, although it is, in fact, the result of his own experience. His appearance, voice, way of thinking, environment, his relationship to space and time – to choose at random – are all taken for granted as realities born with him, whereas every important element in the individual's relationship to other people and to society in general is the result of extensive training" (Feldenkrais 1990: 20).

³ Bambach (1995: 220) presents Heidegger's phenomenological conception of temporality as one that is centered in subjective experience and that must therefore be opposed to an implicitly theological conception of "narrative, developmental time" as a sequence of stages: "Because historical science was organized around the theme of narrative, developmental time, it tended to conceal the genuine meaning of temporality as a unity of what Heidegger termed three temporal ecstasies: the phenomenon of the future as a 'coming-toward' [*Zukunft*], the past as a 'having been' [*Gewesenheit*] and the present as a 'waiting-toward' [*Gegenwart*]."

⁴ Bambach's (1995: 231) discussion of Heidegger's notion of intentionality is to me highly resonant with Feldenkrais work: " 'Every lived experience', Heidegger argued, 'directs itself toward something'; that is, it is not an *intra mentem* coordination of the physical and the psychical but a kinetic, dynamic center, a movement of meaning (*Sinn*) which breaks with the Cartesian, objectless subject who first must proceed outward toward the object."

⁵ Feldenkrais (August 4 1980) declares: "None of us want to do what our parents did – none of us!" I am not certain Arendt would have identified with this statement partly because she was brought up by a mother who pride-fully identified as Jewish which produced, of course, a sense of being outside "society". In her portrayal of Rosa Luxemburg's Polish-Jewish background – Arendt's mother was a great admirer of Rosa Luxemburg – Arendt speaks of a distinctive milieu which "has now completely disappeared". It is hard not to think she is also thinking of her mother's milieu: "Its nucleus consisted of assimilated Jews from middle-class families whose cultural background was German..., whose political formation was Russian, and whose moral standards in both private and public life were uniquely their own. These Jews, an extremely small minority in the East, an even smaller percentage of assimilated Jewry in the West, stood outside all social ranks, Jewish or non-Jewish, hence

Feldenkrais nor Arendt does it occur that individual freedom resides in a flight from the presence of other subjects. Rather, they are interested in how the relationship of the individual to other individuals can be practically approached and thought of so that it invites and facilitates their freedom. Let me take these in turn.

Freedom is not will-power

How many times does someone who goes to ATM classes hear the teacher's encouragement to find a way of doing the lesson without engaging in effort? If one listens to ATM classes on tape taught by Moshe Feldenkrais himself, he often says something like this: if you use effort, it is because you do not think you can do the movement. In encouraging the learner to engage in the lesson without effort, the teacher is engaging in a complex mode of facilitation of individual learning, one that is oriented to bringing the learner in relationship to possibilities of movement that lie beyond her habitual patterns of movement in the world. The habitual patterns are all too likely to have been shaped by will-power, by the individual feeling compelled to make herself act in ways that society (as mediated by her parents) think she ought to do. When the individual shapes her conduct in terms of norms, she uses her will to impose on herself, she loses connection with what it is that she has "naturally" the ability to do (sense, feel, think, and move). "Natural" is a tricky term to use here. For Feldenkrais, it refers to a cultural-social-evolutionary heritage of being human that is expressed in a repertoire of ability – how this group uses language, moves, makes artifacts, etc. – that is passed on from one generation to another. This does not mean that this repertoire of ability does not change or develop over time, or that it is in any way "simple" (Feldenkrais 1990: 25). In using the term "natural" for this kind of acquired ability, Feldenkrais is distinguishing it from ability, as it is either mediated by individual engagement in self-education, or by the professionalization of ability (here I am working with Feldenkrais's (1990: 40-49) conception of what he calls "strata of development"). When an activity is professionalized, the process itself is subject to method, systematization, and reflective specification. The paradox of such professionalization is that, while it may improve how we do things, it can also displace the individual's confidence in her own capacity to learn how to be a human being in the world: "We may observe how natural practices have gradually given away to acquired methods, to 'professional' methods, and that society in general refuses to allow the individual the right to employ the natural method, forcing him instead to learn the accepted way before it will permit him to work" (Feldenkrais 1990: 27). Here Feldenkrais, I think, is suggesting how scientism – the conception of science as the only true kind of knowledge – leads to the displacement of experience as the basis of learning and development.⁶

In Feldenkrais work, the individual is invited to discover her own experience of movement and to use this experience as the touchstone for how she receives informed guidance from the teacher about how she might find direct skeletal connection with the ground for support. If a lesson is taught well, it invites the individual to put to one side habitual patterns of using her will to command herself and to open up an inner space where she can explore and listen to what may be for her entirely new possibilities for action. If it is our individual ability we are exploring, improving and developing, it is recognizable only in the absence of force. It is in

had no conventional prejudices whatsoever, and had developed, in this truly splendid isolation, their own code of honor" (Arendt 1970: 40-41). She goes on to say of this code of honor: "The hidden equalizer of those who always treated one another as equals – and hardly anybody else – as the essentially simple experience of a childhood world in which mutual respect and unconditional trust, a universal humanity and a genuine, almost naïve contempt for social and ethnic distinctions were taken for granted" (Arendt 1970: 41).

⁶ "Scientism means science's belief in itself: that is, the conviction that we can no longer understand science as one form of possible knowledge, but rather identify knowledge with science", Habermas cited by Bambach (1995: 27).

how we sense and become aware of ourselves moving that, as individuals, we develop a capacity for having an experience that is our own; that is, it expresses our unique being in the world, and it is neither confused with nor displaced by how others seem to want us to be in the world. When we free ourselves to become open to, and thus, in a very real sense, free ourselves to “have” our own subjective experience, we learn to discriminate our experience as distinct from what it is we may feel we “ought” to feel, sense, or do. On this basis, we can learn to trust our experience and to use it as a touchstone for what feels functional for us as an individual.

Moshe Feldenkrais’s (1977: 57) own way of putting these points is as follows:

These lessons are designed to improve ability, that is, to expand the boundaries of the possible: to turn the impossible into the possible, the difficult into the easy, and the easy into the pleasant. For only those activities that are easy and pleasant will become part of a man’s habitual life and will serve him at all times. Actions that are hard to carry out, for which man must force himself to overcome his inner opposition, will never become part of his normal daily life; as he gets older he will lose his ability to carry them out at all.

Feldenkrais, always a respecter of reality, did not think we could get rid of our attachment to will; in fact, he valued enormously the human subject’s use of will to engage in self-improvement. He (August 4 1980) offered the paradoxical insight that the more intelligent an individual, the more likely she is to be aware of her inferiority in relation to others (what it is they can do that she cannot);⁷ it is usually these individuals who are neurotically driven by a sense of inferiority who engage in the most remarkable and creative processes of self-improvement. In *Awareness Through Movement*, there are two passages where Feldenkrais distinguishes between use of will for self education and use of will for self compulsion:

... we are speaking of the training of will power and self-control, but not for the purpose of gaining control over ourselves or over other people (Feldenkrais 1977: 51).

... we should differentiate clearly between improvement of ability and sheer effort for its own sake. We shall do better to direct our will power to improving our ability so that in the end our actions will be carried out easily and with understanding (Feldenkrais 1977: 57).

Let me turn now to Arendt. Like Feldenkrais, Arendt sees each human being as unique; thus the birth of each new human is the beginning of something new. Arendt conceived freedom as the principle of beginning. It is the interruption of automatic process and of habitual patterns of life. The human subject is free because s/he is a beginning, and thus is capable of the faculty of beginning (Arendt 1977: 167). Whether the human subject is willing to risk exploration and thus articulation of her individuality or uniqueness is another matter. Arendt emphasizes the fragility of this aspect of human being in the world. She argues for it to flourish – for the individual to feel valued as an individual—a distinct kind of space has to open up for the articulations and explorations of individuality. She sees this space as “the political”, and she is acutely aware of how corruption and domination may shut down this space as she is also aware of how a societal insistence on conformity to norms may displace

⁷ My notes on what he said in this talk at this juncture read: It (a sense of inferiority) is an experience which is absolutely justified – if one looks at it, one *is* really inferior in this or that (so the most intelligent people have the strongest sense of inferiority) – someone will always be better at something than you are.

the space of the political entirely. Moreover, even when the space of the political offers as the worldly space within which freedom can appear, individuals can still refuse to risk the disclosure of themselves in their action (Arendt 1958: 180).

Arendt is aware of how her conception of freedom as both beginning and the articulation of individuality contravenes the established Western (and as she sees it Christian) account of freedom in terms of the will. She offers an account of how the I-will paralyzes the I-can very similar to the one we find embedded in the Feldenkrais method: “Historically, men first discovered the will when they experienced its impotence and not its power, when they said with [Saint] Paul: ‘For to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not’ ” (Arendt 1977: 161). She emphasizes how the impotence of the will readily encourages tyranny both over self and over others: “Tyranny at any rate, the only form of government which arises directly out of the I-will, owes its greedy cruelty to an egotism utterly absent from the utopian tyrannies of reason with which the philosophers wished to coerce men and which they conceived on the model of the I-think” (Arendt 1977: 163).

If Feldenkrais can be said to put more emphasis on how a freedom of action enables the individual to have a sense of options for how they live, where he and Arendt converge is on an account of freedom as the disclosure of possibilities of being that were not known prior to this point. Such disclosure is structured as an intersection between what is personally real for the individual and the reality that the individual shares with other individuals. It is for this reason that the disclosure of possibility in the individual’s engagement in freedom to act is *both* idiosyncratic *and* illuminative of human possibility.

The inter-individual space of freedom

Both Arendt and Feldenkrais think that if individuals are to practice freedom – and the emphasis should be on practicing freedom – they have to develop a capacity to think that does not lead them to seek to transcend their conditions of being but, instead, leads them to concretely engage with these conditions – testing the limits, expanding the boundaries of the possible, engaging with new beginnings, making new meaning. Thinking of this kind is a worldly activity and it is for this reason it can be practiced only in relation to and in the presence of other individuals. To put this point directly: an individual can engage in the kind of thinking that creates an open horizon for her being in the world only if she explores the world that she shares with other individuals in such a way that each individual’s unique way of practicing freedom discloses possibilities not just to herself but to her fellows. For this to occur, these other individuals have to be present in several capacities: as those who invite the individual to disclose their possibilities of being; as those who facilitate such disclosure; as those who witness such disclosure; and who communicate their witness to the individual in such a way as to facilitate the individual knowing the truth of her being as it is disclosed.

Both Arendt and Feldenkrais have difficulty reconciling the inter-individual space they see as the essential condition of freedom with “society”. However, in developing their respective conceptions of an inter-individual space, they can be seen to offer the conception of a distinctive sociality that is shared between free subjects. Free subjects are human beings who enjoy the status of being invited to stand forth and present to each other as individuals, that is, as unique beings who have their own distinct way of being in the world. Arendt uses Socrates to help her conceive this uniqueness: the individual’s being in the world follows from each individual having his “own opening to the world” (Arendt 2005: 15).

Arendt is entirely explicit about the necessity for this inter-individual space if freedom is to be possible at all. In a passage that reveals clearly her insistent association of freedom with the

“plural” condition of humankind, she rejects conceptions of freedom that celebrate an “inner freedom” as though the individual could be self-sufficient, and in this self-sufficiency, could discover such a thing:

Hence, in spite of the great influence the concept of an inner, nonpolitical freedom has exerted...it seems safe to say that man would know nothing of inner freedom if he had not first experienced a condition of being free as a worldly tangible reality. We first become aware of freedom or its opposite in our intercourse with others, not in the intercourse with ourselves (Arendt 1977: 148).

“Plurality” is Arendt’s term for the inter-individual sociality that if articulated as a worldly reality makes the freedom of individuals possible: “Human plurality is the paradoxical plurality of unique beings” (Arendt 1958: 176). Like Feldenkrais, Arendt accepts that all organic life manifests “variations and distinctions” (Arendt 1958: 176), but unlike other living species, it is only the human species that has evolved in such a way that it expresses this distinction thus enabling it to become apparent as a worldly reality. For Arendt uniqueness is disclosed in speech and action:

Speech and action reveal this unique distinctness. Through them, men distinguish themselves instead of being merely distinct; they are the modes in which human beings appear to each other, not indeed as physical objects, but *qua* men. This appearance, as distinguished from mere [she means automatic] bodily existence, rests on initiative, but it is an initiative from which no human being can refrain and still be human (Arendt 1958: 176).

She goes on to make the most interesting suggestion: “Action and speech are so closely related because the primordial and specifically human act must at the same time contain the answer to the question asked of every newcomer: ‘Who are you?’ “ (Arendt 1958: 178). This is surely a fascinating provocation to the Feldenkrais practitioner who in Functional Integration lessons uses hands to explore through touch the question of her student as she presents today: who are you, and what possibilities of being are you ready to explore today?

As far as I am aware, there is little explicit exploration in the Feldenkrais world of practice of the distinctive sociality that makes freedom in the Feldenkrais sense possible. Yet it is clear from the practice of the method that something like an Arendtian conception of the distinctive sociality of plurality or inter-individuality is at work. This is evident in the one-on-one “functional integration” lessons where the practitioner engages in a Socratic form of midwifery (what Socrates called *maieutic*): the facilitation of the disclosure of the truth of the being of the other. I make this connection because Socrates is, for Arendt, a key historical figure who illuminated the nature of freedom:

To Socrates, as to his fellow citizens, *doxa* was the formulation in speech of what *dokei moi*, that is, “of what appears to me.” ... The assumption was that the world opens up differently to every man according to his position in I; and that the “sameness” of the world, its commonness (*koinon*, as the Greeks would say, “common to all”) or “objectivity” (as we would say from the subjective viewpoint of modern philosophy), resides in the fact that the same world opens up to everyone and that despite all differences between men and their positions in the world—and consequently their *doxai* (opinions)—“both you and I are human” (Arendt 2005: 18).

The individual cannot articulate her opinion without being facilitated in this process by other individuals; she cannot know what it is that she has said or disclosed by way of truth except in the hearing of and listening to it by these others. Moreover, Socrates saw an even more active role for such facilitation: he saw himself as practicing the art of midwifery or maieutic (and see Fiumara 1990, chapter 10) – “he wanted to help others give birth to what they themselves thought..., to find the truth in their *doxa*” (Arendt 2005: 19).

If Functional Integration can be thought of as the art of midwifery in relation to the disclosure of the individual’s possibilities for improvement of her ability, Awareness Through Movement lessons can be thought of in the same way. Here the practitioner uses her voice and attention to guide individuals in the exploration of their possibilities of movement. It is relatively easy, I think, to recognize this maieutic feature of Feldenkrais practice, less easy to see that the other enabling condition of this practice resides in the availability of a space for such disclosure. Here I am not referring to the chronic difficulties practitioners have in finding physical space for lessons – although this is surely a connected issue -- but to the intangible political space that has to be on offer. Arendt offered her account of freedom after she had both experienced and written about twentieth century totalitarianism (both Nazism and Stalinism). It is obvious that Feldenkrais lessons would not make sense in a concentration camp as they would not in any situation of oppression, domination, or severe deprivation. My reasoning here is as follows: in any situation that is structured so as to put the individual onto alert because she is at risk of threats to her survival, she has to put all her attention into reacting in the interests of her survival to such threats.⁸ She cannot use her attention for purposes of self awareness.

Moshe Feldenkrais was deeply aware of this point of course: human beings cannot explore their possibilities for self improvement if they are reduced to the conditions of bare survival. Both Feldenkrais and Arendt were aware that human evolution has reached a point of reckoning: either we develop our ability to think or we risk using our advanced technological mastery of the means of survival to destroy both our selves and our world. It is to Arendt and her work, however, we must look for an articulation of the point that freedom and politics, understood as a secure opening of a public space in which freedom can appear, are two sides of the same coin (Arendt 1977: 149).

⁸ Winnicott made a similar point in relation to the baby: The baby whose environment of care is unreliable and inadequate has difficulty in stabilizing a sense of its own distinct being in the world because it has to interrupt its sense of being in reacting to, and attempting to fend off, these external threats to its being. Here are Winnicott’s own words on the matter: “...it is when things do not go well that the infant becomes aware, not of the failure of maternal care, but of the results, whatever they may be, of that failure; that is to say, the infant becomes aware of reacting to some impingement. As a result of success in maternal care there is built up in the infant a continuity of being which is the basis of ego-strength; whereas the result of each failure in maternal care is that the continuity of being is interrupted by reactions to the consequences of that failure, with resultant ego-weakening. Such interruptions constitute annihilation...” (Winnicott 1990:52).

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