

Review / Hypothesis and Theory / History

Between psychology and philosophy: A review of *Thinking and Doing* by Moshe Feldenkrais

Hillel D Braude

MD, PhD, Feldenkrais Practitioner®

Director of Research, Mifne Center, Rosh Pinna, Israel

Correspondence: hdbraude@gmail.com

Copyright ©: The copyright for this paper remains with the author(s).

Please cite: (First published in the) *Feldenkrais Research Journal*, volume 5; 2016.

Service marks: The terms Feldenkrais®, Feldenkrais Method®, Awareness Through Movement®, ATM®, Functional Integration®, and FI® are service marked terms of the International *Feldenkrais*® Federation (IFF) and Feldenkrais professional guilds and associations in many countries. In keeping with academic conventions, they will not be service marked in the entire text as may be required in nonacademic use, but only for the first and most prominent use of the terms. In recognition that these phrases are formal terms referring to specific practices within the Method, and to the Method as a whole, capitalization of all the words in each term has been retained.



Between psychology and philosophy: A review of *Thinking and Doing* by Moshe Feldenkrais

Hillel D Braude

MD, PhD, Feldenkrais Practitioner®

Director of Research, Mifne Center, Rosh Pinna, Israel

Introduction

With the passage of time since his death, the relation between the man, Dr. Moshe Feldenkrais (1904-1984), and the Feldenkrais Method® comes more and more into relief. Likewise, there is increasing interest among the Feldenkrais® community in Feldenkrais' personal biography, filled with the drama of a creative life lived in the shadow of two world wars, the destruction of European Jewry, and the founding of the state of Israel. Two important books were published in 2015 that testify to the sculptural effects of time on Feldenkrais' legacy, i.e., the much anticipated biography of Feldenkrais by Mark Reese, *Moshe Feldenkrais: A Life in Movement*, published posthumously, and the subject of this present review, *Thinking and Doing*. The latter is a reprint of the introduction to *Autosuggestion*, Feldenkrais' Hebrew translation of Harry Brooks' (1922) best-selling study of Emile Coué, which Feldenkrais published in Tel Aviv in 1929 as a young man of twenty-five. Emile Coué (1857-1926) was a French psychologist who popularized a method of self-improvement via self-hypnosis or autosuggestion.

Feldenkrais' translation of *Autosuggestion* testifies to his early interest in experiencing and mastering techniques of self-transformation. Reading *Thinking and Doing* today is thoroughly informed by the retrospective knowledge of Feldenkrais' later development of his own Method for self-improvement and healing. Its primary interest today lies in providing insight into the personal and conceptual foundations of the Feldenkrais Method.

My methodology in this review is to provide philosophical reflection on aspects of *Thinking and Doing* that speak to the association between Moshe Feldenkrais and the Method that he spent a lifetime developing. This reflective method is particularly appropriate, since as with few other disciplines, Feldenkrais the person, and the development of his Method exploring the physical basis of human conscious experience, are so intertwined. Tracing the conscious and unconscious influences on Feldenkrais' development is akin to determining the "phenomenological clues" (*Leitfaden*), which point back to various modes of consciousness (Zaner 1981:173). Reviewing *Thinking and Doing* with hindsight knowledge of the Feldenkrais Method is a bit like the detective who starts off with the clear knowledge of the villain, but who still needs to retrace the actual course of events leading to the fatal murder. (See, in this

Volume of the *Feldenkrais Research Journal*, Sondra Fraleigh's application of the detective storyboard to examine her own unique approach to teaching EastWest Somatics influenced by the Feldenkrais Method.) In what follows I provide a philosophical reflection on some clues regarding the Feldenkrais Method in relation to the publication of *Thinking and Doing*.

Feldenkrais only mentioned Coué a few times in his later publications, including two of his books, *Body and Mature Behavior* (1947), and *Awareness Through Movement* (1972). In *Body and Mature Behavior*, Feldenkrais notes that:

Coué relied expressly on the unconscious to bring about all the desired improvements. He devised several means whereby he could bypass the conscious control and plant his ideas "directly" in the unconscious. He used the period before sleep when we are half conscious; whispering into the ear of the sleeping; rapid repetition – and so forth, with the idea of reaching the unconscious and avoiding the conscious critical faculty which does not believe in this or the other idea of "I can," and rejects them (1949:3).

In *Thinking and Doing* Feldenkrais observes further that for Coué the unconscious has an "executive power" in determining conscious action. For Feldenkrais, this ability to consciously direct the unconscious for personal transformation completely inverts Freud's conception of the 'mechanism of psychic life' (2015:4). It is clear that this central therapeutic insight from Coué already resonated deeply with Feldenkrais in the 1920s, and was foundational for his development of the Feldenkrais Method. Feldenkrais, as a highly original thinker, was not content simply to convey or even interpret Coué's ideas regarding autosuggestion, but needed to explore and translate these ideas concretely in the realm of physical action. As Mark Reese has observed, "When Feldenkrais teaches his most important ideas, he can be counted upon to communicate their foundations through the most concrete forms of somatic experiences" (Foreword, Feldenkrais 1985:xvii). Feldenkrais created an original educational and therapeutic system through applying Coué's insight to the field of human movement.

The Feldenkrais Method is characterized by providing an embodied method of working with the emergent phenomenon of consciousness, or awareness (Ginsburg 2010). Already apparent in *Thinking and Doing*, Feldenkrais' original insight – awareness of movement provides a bridge between conscious cognition and the unconscious, is key to understanding the therapeutic and transformational force behind the Feldenkrais Method. By 1929, Feldenkrais' interest in Coué and his developing expertise in martial arts provided the conceptual and physical foundations for his future somatic explorations and development of the Feldenkrais Method. The contemporary republication of *Thinking and Doing* is particularly important, because it indicates that the development of the Feldenkrais Method from its earliest origins was motivated by the ambition to provide a therapeutic approach towards healing the unconscious mind through conscious control of movement and posture.

Thinking and Doing

Thinking and Doing is a short monograph. Feldenkrais' two chapters, 'The Unconscious as Executor' and 'Last in Deed, First in Thought,' are only 23 pages long. Published together with *Thinking and Doing* is a contemporary introduction by Reuven Ofir contextualizing the initial publication of *Autosuggestion*, a contemporary foreword by Moti Nativ, a republication of the original foreword to *Autosuggestion* by Professor Hugo Bergman (1930), and the preface by Professors Hans Kreitler and Shulamit Kreitler (1977:109-129). The photograph on the cover, taken in the studio Plastica on Allenby Street in Tel Aviv (from Moti Nativ's private collection), depicts a young Moshe Feldenkrais at the height of his youthful prowess gazing wistfully into the future. The book cover, probably characteristic of the photographic portraiture of the epoch, conveys the sense of the young Feldenkrais gazing forward, projecting his thoughts and actions into the future, while we, the presently informed reader, are peering backwards in time and into the mind of Feldenkrais himself.

Feldenkrais dedicated his translation of *Autosuggestion* to 'the immigrants.' These are, of course, Feldenkrais' fellow immigrants in pre-state Israel, British Mandate Palestine. Predominantly from Eastern Europe, these formerly downtrodden *lumpenproletariat*, intellectuals, Talmudic scholars, and former Hasidim, the devotional group from which Feldenkrais himself derived, took upon themselves the task of rebuilding the Jewish homeland. Feldenkrais' dedication is more than homage to his social group and context, but a clue to the task of personal and social renewal and transformation, to which he obviously hoped and expected *Autosuggestion* would contribute.

The Zionist enterprise necessitated a conscious process of renewal at the individual and social level. Firstly, this meant a physical renewal through manual labor and self-defense. In his foreword, Moti Nativ narrates the ironic story from a book by Yehuda Erez called *The Third Aliya*, where Feldenkrais instructs his former teacher Avigdor Grinshpan, obviously also from Eastern Europe, to ignore the suffering arising from arduous physical labor. The physically powerful Feldenkrais tells Grinshpan that, 'The work makes life sweet,' unlike the perpetual study of Torah, which, 'drains your strength' (Feldenkrais 2015: vii). This story is telling about Feldenkrais' attempt to move away, or else to transform his spiritual roots, through physical activity, which was central to the Zionist project but became especially pronounced and nuanced in Feldenkrais' somatic explorations.

From Coué, and even perhaps from his own Hassidic roots (Kaetz 2007), Feldenkrais recognized that personal transformation additionally requires change at the level of the individual and social unconscious mind, hence his great interest in translating Coué into the revitalized modern Hebrew language. To some extent, Feldenkrais' concern with physical labor, martial arts, and movement, parallels Edmund Husserl's call for philosophy to return to the "things themselves" in the method of phenomenology (Husserl 2001:168). Like phenomenology,

this return to the state of things as they are includes an emphasis on unconscious material, or in phenomenological terms, pre-reflective experience.

Key insights

There are a number of key insights Feldenkrais makes in *Thinking and Doing* regarding the unconscious that are worth emphasizing in this review in relation to the later development of the Feldenkrais Method.

First, as already emphasized, is the importance of the unconscious for the ability for personal transformation. Feldenkrais writes in this regard that, 'It is imperative to demonstrate that the unconscious mind has a significant role to play in the actions of the conscious mind' (2015:2). This insight explicitly informs the ability for self-transformation through Awareness Through Movement® (ATM®) lessons, but equally informs the one-on-one dyadic interaction that occurs via Functional Integration® (FI®). Thus, 'the unconscious mind is a veritable storehouse of memories and knowledge that can become available to us only through diligent observation, study, experience, and much effort' (2015:2).

Secondly, is the evolutionary nature of the unconscious mind. Feldenkrais writes that, 'Moreover our unconscious mind is the repository not only of our own personal memories and experiences, but also those of our fathers and forefathers over many generations of experience and repetition' (2015:3). *Thinking and Doing* is replete with Rabbinical and Biblical quotations and examples. This reflects the archetypal influences on Feldenkrais, who in his childhood received a Hasidic upbringing, as well as perhaps his desire to speak in the language of his intended audience who would also, to a greater or lesser extent, be familiar with these examples. Today, we might better speak of these inherited character traits in terms of genetic and epigenetic inheritance, and inherent neuroplasticity of the brain. It also refers to the natural intelligence of the evolutionary unconscious mind that seeks improvement through the inhibition or mastery of habitual responses.

Thirdly is the creative potential of the unconscious mind. Feldenkrais notes that the unconscious mind 'uses its treasured experience to reform, to reconfigure and create new varieties that are beyond the ability of most people using their mental faculties on a conscious level' (2015:4). This harnessing of the creative potential of the unconscious is perhaps what Feldenkrais meant by the term potency. The term potency was of obvious significance to Feldenkrais. As Moti Nativ points out, in the first edition copy of *Autosuggestion* that he gave to his future parents' in-law, Feldenkrais inscribed the words, 'You have witnessed me in my distress, and this here is the beginning of my potency' (Feldenkrais 2015:x).

Feldenkrais' later study of the domain of sexuality in relation to personal transformation is entitled *The Potent Self* (1985). Potency, or its deficit impotence, refers explicitly to sexual prowess. The Oxford Dictionary primarily refers to potency as 'the power of something to affect the mind or body.' For Feldenkrais, sexual mastery was indicative of the ability for personal

control more generally, the integration of the conscious and unconscious mind in the height of physical arousal, and intersubjective interaction. In *The Potent Self* Feldenkrais defines potent activity as the:

sort of behavior we encounter in well-matured persons... we gradually take responsibility for our own actions... In those planes of life in which our maturity is least developed, we continue acting compulsively; we do (or we do not do) things knowing perfectly well that we want the exact opposite. Under these circumstances, impotence appears (1985:8).

Feldenkrais' inscription points out that his integration of Coué's understanding of the unconscious with the study of physical movement was the key to his own sense of potency, and provided a powerful practical method for social uplift. Here was the embodied means of transforming an individual's biological and historical legacy for personal transformation in the present moment, to face the uncertain future with positivity and optimism.

As emphasized, Feldenkrais' main innovation in transmitting the ideas of Coué through his translation and explanatory chapters is in its embodied or somatic concretization. This becomes clear in reference to the three summary points of self-autosuggestion that Feldenkrais provides:

- (a) *They are always thoughts, the contents of which are actions that have been completed.*
- (b) *The thought is always singular.* The thought or image being at that moment actualized is the only one being accepted or rejected by the unconscious.
- (c) *In all of these the element of will is absent as it relates to an urge or craving.* (2015:8)

It is likely that Feldenkrais considered these aspects of autosuggestion characteristic of thoughts more generally. However, analyzing the relation between autosuggestion and thought more generally is too complicated a task for this present review. Feldenkrais is clear that he believes self-autosuggestive thoughts cannot arise without the prior experience of muscular action, voluntary and involuntary. This implies that autosuggestion, straddling the boundary between conscious and unconscious thought, is essentially an embodied phenomenon, emerging from physical components, such as the skeleton and the nervous system, and the main task of moving against gravity.

Feldenkrais' essential insight that self-autosuggestive thoughts arise on the basis of embodied movement – both our current bodily organization and our personal history of bodily movement, explains his emphasis on embodied movement as the means of self-improvement. This also explains the second essential characteristic of autosuggestions, i.e., the singularity of thought. Since auto-suggestive thought is always a result of muscular activity, only individual thoughts can be accessed by the unconscious mind at a particular moment in time. The third characteristic, i.e., the absence of importance of the will, also underlies a key methodological

component of the Feldenkrais Method: to perform movements or actions with the least amount of effort.

As emphasized in this review, it is Feldenkrais' ability to translate Coué's ideas into physical movements that transforms his introductory chapters into more than a simple introduction of the ideas of Emile Coué, but already sets the foundations for Feldenkrais' development of his own Method for therapy and self-improvement. As with the French phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty, for Feldenkrais, the body provides the access point for mediation between the subjective self and the world.

Between psychology and philosophy

In the final section of this review I wish to reflect on the significance of the contributions to *Thinking and Doing* by the academic friends of Feldenkrais: Hugo Bergman, and Hans and Shulamit Kreitler. As mentioned, together with Feldenkrais' two chapters, the 1930 foreword by Professor Hugo Bergman, and the 1977 preface by Professors Hans and Shulamit Kreitler are republished in *Thinking and Doing*. Including support from these established academics was undoubtedly intended to provide intellectual legitimacy for Feldenkrais' translation and critical introduction of *Autosuggestion*. Yet, in the spirit of following phenomenological clues, I submit that these personal contributions reveal a crucial dimension about Feldenkrais' thinking in developing the Feldenkrais Method.

As detailed in the foreword to *Thinking and Doing*, Moti Nativ narrates that Bergman was an important intellectual presence for Feldenkrais, with whom he maintained lengthy personal correspondence. Samuel Hugo Bergman (1883-1975) was one of the most prominent Jewish philosophers of the 20th century, and an active member of the Zionist Labor Movement. Before emigrating from Prague to British Mandate Palestine in 1920, Bergman studied philosophy, mathematics and the natural sciences at the German Karl Ferdinand University. He studied philosophy with Anton Marty, who was one of the principal exponents of the philosophy of the phenomenological school of Brentano. Bergman's rich philosophical career has been differentiated into an early stage focusing on philosophy and science, and a later stage focusing on philosophy and religion (See, Bar-On, 1986).

Bergman was appointed the first director of the Jewish National and University Library, and from 1928 he lectured in Modern Philosophy in the Philosophy Department at Hebrew University. In 1935 he became a professor in the Department and was also elected the First Rector of the Hebrew University. Bergman was an acclaimed teacher who inspired his students 'with his spiritual eminence, clarity of thought and enormous range of knowledge' in philosophy, religion, and the experimental sciences (Bar-On 1986:1). It is, perhaps, no surprise that Feldenkrais would have found an affinity with Bergman, who was an older peer in the Zionist Labor Movement, a charismatic intellectual personality, and who shared a mutual interest in the philosophy of consciousness, experimental physics, and the mind-body relation. In his foreword, Bergman provides an intellectual background and summary to the work of Coué. He relates

Coué's great principle, 'Imagination has higher priority and preference over willpower,' to the philosophy of Bergson who argued that imagination and instinct are deeper manifestations of the mind than willpower and intelligence (Feldenkrais 2015:xix).

In their preface, Hans Kreitler, who was at the time head of the Faculty of Psychology at Tel Aviv University, and Shulamit Kreitler, who is still presently an emeritus Professor in the same Faculty of Psychology, point out that Coué and thereby Feldenkrais were pioneers in proposing that directed cognition can be therapeutic, as demonstrated by later experimental science into attention and expectancy. As mentioned in the foreword to *Thinking and Doing* by Moti Nativ, Feldenkrais became acquainted with Professor Hans Kreitler in the 1960s, and was a frequent guest in the Kreitlers' home. Between 1965-1966, Feldenkrais taught in the Faculty of Psychology at Tel Aviv University chaired by Hans Kreitler.

The Kreitler's insight contextualizing *Autosuggestion* is also of central importance for their own theory of cognitive orientation developed around the same time. Cognitive orientation is a psychological approach used to describe the cognitive determinants of behavior. A main tenet of cognitive orientation is that cognitive contents, such as meanings, beliefs and values, guide human behaviour. Moreover, 'the processes involved in the guidance of behaviour, its elicitation, and performance are neither conscious nor voluntary' (Kreitler and Kreitler 1991:4). Without knowing whether Feldenkrais' intellectual influence played an important role in the development of cognitive orientation, the parallels between cognitive orientation and the Feldenkrais Method are clear. Shulamit Kreitler has applied the insights from cognitive orientation to develop a model of wellness that studies the relation between psychological processes and physiological phenomena manifesting in the context of disease, especially cancer. Unsurprisingly, as mentioned by Moti Nativ, she has applied principles of the Feldenkrais Method in this practical work.

The support of Hugo Bergman and Hans and Shulamit Kreitler for Feldenkrais' manuscript points towards the ambition of Feldenkrais, already heralded in *Thinking and Doing*, to develop a therapeutic methodology, at least of equal therapeutic merit to Freudian psychoanalysis, through awareness of the body and movement. Beginning with his integration of the martial arts and Coué's insights about the unconscious, it can, perhaps, be said that the Feldenkrais Method presents a somatic modality that explores and concretizes conceptual insights from cognitive psychology and philosophy through physical action and intention. In this way, it can be said that the Feldenkrais Method stands between psychology and philosophy as an independent somatic educational and therapeutic method.

The conceptual relation between cognitive orientation and the Feldenkrais Method is clear. Less obvious is the relation between Feldenkrais' thinking and the philosophy of Bergman. I wish to suggest that the influence of Bergman on the development of Feldenkrais' work was not merely personal, but also conceptual. Moti Nativ narrates that Feldenkrais kept in constant contact with Bergman and continued to share his life events with him. An autodidact and polymath like Feldenkrais must have been impressed by Bergman's intellectual acuity, and expressed interest

in the intellectual life of his friend and teacher. Others have pointed out the similarities between the Feldenkrais Method and concepts of kinesthesia and perception in the phenomenology of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty (See for example, Braude 2015: 124-134; Fraleigh 2015: 3-23). If there is a philosophical basis to Feldenkrais' thinking, it is likely to have been directly influenced by the phenomenological philosophy of Brentano as transmitted by Bergman.

A key aspect of Bergman's philosophical approach inherited from Brentano was the systematic investigation of inner and outer perception. Inner perception has the personal subject's own intentional activity as its object; whereas outer perception is constituted by the external object of our sensations. Undoubtedly, Feldenkrais did not consider his work to be philosophical, eschewing philosophical abstraction for embodied experience and the simplest verbal description. Yet the emphasis on the awareness of movement as the key to self-transformation reveals the philosophical association, if not the basis of the Feldenkrais Method in phenomenological concepts of intentionality and inner perception. The foreword by Professor Bergman and the preface by Hans and Shulamit Kreidler testify to the intellectual independence of the Feldenkrais Method as a form of human praxis, standing alongside psychology and phenomenological philosophy. However, further historical and intellectual work is required to develop this insight further.

Conclusion

Thinking and Doing reflects the rich intellectual and historical milieu in which Feldenkrais came to maturity and that planted the seeds for his lifework in developing the Feldenkrais Method. It alludes also to the personal and societal struggles and conflicts associated with the Zionist Labor Movement in which Feldenkrais came to maturity. It is, perhaps, ironical that the core idea of "less effort" from Coué found its place in the midst of this personal and social engagement. Yet it was Feldenkrais' genius to develop a means of self-transformation by paying attention to the functional malleability of embodied perception. He embarked on this process by interpreting the core psychological ideas from Coué and gave them a new life in terms of movement and intentionality. His personal associations with Hugo Bergman and Hans and Shulamit Kreidler point to an intellectual influence and legacy of the Feldenkrais Method that deserves to be explored further.

References

- Bar-On, A. Z. (ed.) (1986) *On Shmuel Hugo-Bergman's Philosophy*. Amsterdam: Rodopi
- Braude, H. D. (2015) 'Radical Somatics'. In *Moving Consciously: Somatic Transformations through Dance, Yoga, and Touch* ed. by Fraleigh, S. Indiana University Press, 124-134
- Brooks, H. (1922) *The Practice of Autosuggestion by the Method of Emile Coué*. New York: Dodd, Mead & Company

- Feldenkrais, M. (1949) *Body and Mature Behavior: A Study of Anxiety, Sex, Gravitation, & Learning*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul
- Feldenkrais, M. (1972) *Awareness Through Movement*. San Francisco: Harper Collins
- Feldenkrais, M. (1985) *The Potent Self: A Study of Spontaneity and Compulsion*. Berkeley: Somatic Resources & Frog Ltd.
- Feldenkrais, M. (2015) *Thinking and Doing*. Longmont, Colorado: Genesis II Publishing
- Fraleigh, S. (2015) 'Why Consciousness Matters'. In *Moving Consciously: Somatic Transformations through Dance, Yoga, and Touch* ed. by Fraleigh, S. Indiana University Press, 3-23
- Fraleigh, S. (2016) 'Teaching Through Movement: A Detective Story'. *Feldenkrais Research Journal* 5 [this volume]
- Husserl, E. (2001) [1900/1901] *Logical Investigations*. Volume 1. Findlay JN (transl). Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge
- Ginsburg, C. (2010) *The Intelligence of Moving Bodies: A Somatic View of Life and Its Consequences*. Santa Fe: AWAREing Press
- Kaetz, D. (2007) *Making Connections: Hasidic Roots and Resonance in the Teachings of Moshe Feldenkrais*. Metchosin: River Centre Publishing
- Kreitler, S. and Kreitler, H. (1991) 'Cognitive Orientation and Physical Disease or Health'. *European Journal of Personality* 5, 109-129
- Reese, M. (2015) *Moshe Feldenkrais: A Life in Movement*. San Rafael: Reese Kress Somatics Press
- Zaner, R. (1981) *The Context of Self: A Phenomenological Inquiry Using Medicine as a Clue*. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press