

WHAT DO WE DO AND WHAT IS IT FOR?

A description of the Feldenkrais Method through the notions of body image and body schema.

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Isabelle Ginot

There are frequent discussions within the Feldenkrais community about “how to talk about the Method”. This endless question seems even more difficult when the issue becomes how to discuss the Method with non-practitioners, for instance in interdisciplinary discussions where we lack a common vocabulary to share with other professionals or scholars. Moshe Feldenkrais, a former scientist, was known for his ongoing interest in the sciences while creating his Method, and most of his writings are supported by scientific arguments. Yet, his writings intended more to build a theoretical framework for his Method, than to describe his work. Could scientific vocabulary and concepts be used as a description of our work?

In this paper, I will consider a notion that is central to both Feldenkrais’ writings and practice, the notion of “self image”. I will also observe how this notion may be clarified by using a more contemporary framework of “body image and body schema”, offered by philosopher of science Shaun Gallagher. In doing so, I will not try to follow Moshe Feldenkrais’ effort to use science to *explain* what the work is, but rather, to offer a *description* of our work. In other words, parallel to the question Feldenkrais was trying to answer in his writings: *how does it work?* I’d like to ask another one : *what do we do and what is it for?*

Body image and body schema in Moshe Feldenkrais’ writings

In his writings, Feldenkrais uses a constellation of notions linked together: body image, body schema, self-image, awareness and habits. When writing about ‘self-image’ Feldenkrais refers to Paul Schilder’s *The Body Image and the Appearance of the Human Body*, first published in 1935 (Schilder 1950), and he recommended that students read this book during the Amherst training. Schilder’s book is seminal for it sets crucial representations for later research: body image (or self-image) is not static, but rather continuously evolving according to a perceptive flux of information. It is also dynamically composed of a variety of sources that Schilder sets as equally important: the functioning brain (and the crucial importance of proprioception, which was first promoted by Schilder, among others), the subconscious and the social (although in Schilder ‘social’ is approached as the interpersonal aspect of subconscious moves). As shown later, Gallagher has recently criticized not the content of Schilder’s book, which sets the foundation for later research on these notions, but his lack of rigor and precision in the vocabulary he is also setting up. Feldenkrais borrows much from Schilder (the notion of dynamic body image, or in more contemporary terms, its plasticity, is crucial to Feldenkrais, as is its multi-layered nature), including the lack of discrimination in vocabulary. Like Schilder, he uses both body image and body schema, without differentiating between the two, and perhaps even more often the term ‘self-image’¹ – a term that many contemporary Feldenkrais practitioners also favor. Moreover, in his effort to approach theory in a holistic way and demonstrate how different aspects of the self are in fact linked together, he presents the same concept, throughout his writings, with non-consistent descriptions or definitions.

A first version of Feldenkrais’ concept of ‘self-image’ is neuro-scientific: it is explained or described through another concept, the ‘homunculus’, or the theory of brain localization – very prominent at the time he was writing (1972: 13–14). In these fragments of his texts, ‘self-image’ might very well be confused with an image in the brain, and perhaps even an image of the brain. We can think of this first concept as the result of Feldenkrais’ own research to understand the experiential method he was developing.

A second version of the same concept might be said to be anthropological or sociological, although Feldenkrais himself does not use such terms. This appears in the many parts of his books where culture, society, education and family are the main causes of faulty development of the self: “Scholastic practice is responsible for parents’ beliefs, and understanding of learning. It seems that well-meaning parents interfere with organic learning to the point that many therapists trace the real start and development of most dysfunctions back to the parents. These findings are so general that one would think we would be better off if we never had parents at all.” (Feldenkrais 1981: 32)² Quite interestingly, this aspect appears at length in

his writings, while it is difficult to find evidence in the practice of any acknowledgement of cultural or social differences.

A third version appears to be mostly experiential and belonging to the subject's use of himself or herself: "A complete self-image would involve full awareness of all the joints in the skeletal structure as well as of the entire surface of the body – all the back, the sides, between the legs, and so on; this is an ideal condition and hence a rare one." (Feldenkrais 1972: 21) Quite interestingly, such a description of the ideal self-image appears marginally in his writings (as opposed to the first two, which occupy many pages and entire chapters), though it is the one that illustrates most clearly the aim of every Feldenkrais lesson. One can also observe that in this definition, 'self-image' is actually equal to 'full awareness', and appears both as an ideal and as the final goal of the practice.

New definitions: body image and body schema by Shaun Gallagher

While body image appears to be key to the Feldenkrais Method (as of many other somatic techniques), what Feldenkrais really means by it, and how the Method builds it, remains quite unclear, due to the definitional discrepancies within Feldenkrais' texts, and also between texts and practice. Yet those notions of body image and body schema have been the object of more recent researches in the field of neuro and cognitive sciences. I found the work of philosopher Shaun Gallagher relevant to the Feldenkrais method because, while integrating recent research in neuroscience and cognitive science, he gives the same value to the tradition of phenomenology, therefore, assimilating the "first person point of view" so necessary to our work. In *How the Body Shapes the Mind* (2005), he first remarks that the concepts of body schema and body image have a long history of confusion and inconsistency since Schilder's book (2005: 19). Alternately, he proposes to define quite strictly body image and body schema as two distinct sets of functions, so as to observe how they interact in the 'normal' subject.

In his model, "The body image consists of a complex set of intentional states – perceptions, mental representations, beliefs, and attitudes – in which the intentional object of such a state is one's own body. Thus the body image involves a reflective intentionality." In other words, body image encompasses all intentional actions, perceptions and ideas, that are both conscious and turned towards the body. Gallagher proposes three subdivisions of body image:

1. *Body percept*: "the subject's perceptual experience of his/her own body", or any conscious perception related to position, movement, touch, etc. In an ATM lesson, this covers any moment when students bring their attention to body parts, movement direction, effort quality, shifts in weight supports, etc.
2. *Body concept*: "the subject's conceptual understanding (including folk and/or scientific knowledge) of the body in general"; our lessons are full of "body concepts", from the elementary notions of skeletal anatomy that we may distill in order to clarify some direction, to more sophisticated information about biomechanics or movement learning and development.
3. *Body affect*: "the subject's *emotional* attitude towards his/her own body". (Gallagher 2005: 25, emphasis added). This doesn't concern emotions as experienced in one's body, but more specifically emotional states *about* one's own body (likes and dislikes, permissions and taboos, etc.). This last dimension of body image might be of interest in Feldenkrais because, as opposed to percepts and concepts, the way we approach it in our practice is less tangible, and I'll come back to this later.

Body image is therefore present mostly in the field of consciousness, and is particularly involved in new motor learning; as we know as Feldenkrais teachers, its three levels, percepts, concepts and affects are deeply interwoven and make the foundation for our lessons.

In contrast, body schema "involves a set of tacit performances – preconscious, sub personal processes that play a dynamic role in governing posture and movement. In most instances, movement and the maintenance of posture are accomplished by the *close to automatic* performances of a body schema, and for this very reason a normal adult subject, in order to move around the world, neither needs nor has a constant body percept." (Gallagher 2005: 26, emphasis added). Gallagher uses the term pre-noetic to encompass this sphere of the many processes that are non-conscious, but condition the quality of our consciousness. In Feldenkrais, we often use more vague terms of "non conscious", "habits", "automatism", etc. Gallagher insists that body schema is particularly difficult to describe since its operations are not accessible to consciousness. Just as body image, Gallagher offers three groups of processes that compose body schema (Gallagher 2005: 45–55):

1. Information about posture and movement (mostly produced by proprioception, visual and vestibular information).
2. Motor programs (learnt complex actions such as swallowing, reaching, grasping, writing, walking that have been automatized through learning and repetition, and remain accessible as long as they are activated by usual behavior), along with motor images (the capacity to evoke or imagine those actions)
3. Cross-modal communication of the senses.

Body image and body schema also include different functions of space. While body image is only concerned with one's own body, and therefore separates itself from space and surroundings, body schema may include non-body objects such as tools and prostheses, as well as elements of space that are inherent to movement (the kind of implicit knowledge that allows us, for instance, to walk through a door without having to consciously calculate how to adjust our trajectory). What they share is permanent readjusting and modulating, which is important since, in popular thinking, both body image and schema tend to be referred to as fixed things that one 'has'. Finally, body schema and body image are obviously intimately interacting; certain functions or actions integrated by body schema may migrate to body image (by way of 'awareness', for instance, as would most somatic practices), vice versa (by way of learning and integrating new motor schemas).

This summary of Gallagher's categories does not do justice to the complexity of his book. But how body image and body schema interact and cooperate in movement learning, how 'pre-noetic habits' and awareness dialogue to facilitate or add constraints to action, is precisely the field of work of the Feldenkrais Method, particularly in ATM classes.

Reading an ATM lesson through Gallagher's model

As we know, an ATM lesson is usually structured around a 'movement theme' (walking, shifting from lying to sitting, rolling, reaching, etc.), and its general aim is to 'improve' this global movement or coordination.

The practitioner leads the class through verbal instructions, avoiding demonstration, and students interpret these instructions according to their conceptual understanding (what is being said) and their movement experience (how they usually move).

We can split verbal instructions given by the practitioner into four categories that will either remain distinct or be woven together, depending on the practitioner's style and the moment in the lesson:

Position instructions (where to start from), e.g. 'please come to the front of your chair, with two feet flat on the floor'

Movement instructions (what to do), e.g. 'please turn your head to the right as if to look back', or 'please turn your head to the right while your right shoulder moves forward'. In their first presentation, these movement instructions might be mostly kinematic, that is, they name one or several body parts as well as a direction in space, and will not at first mention movement qualities, rhythms, etc. Suggestions of movement qualities, rhythm, amplitude, effort, etc., will be added while the same instruction is repeated and rephrased several times.

Perceptual indications (where to bring attention), e.g. 'when you turn to the right, is your weight remaining equally on your buttocks or does it move more to the right? Or to the left? If you bring your weight to the right, does it feel easier or heavier than if you bring it to the left?' These perceptual indications are mainly given in the form of a question and optional choices, and will stick to interrogative form, aiming at the minimal possible induction (they should never sound like 'this is the right thing to feel').

Conceptual information of various kinds (why we do this or feel this way): anatomy, physiology, biomechanics, how the Method is supposed to work, why we rest so much during a lesson, etc.

The popular experience of standing up after an ATM lesson is a very perceptible change in standing, and/or in walking and any daily movement; this change may be felt in the shorter or longer term. Part of it may be conscious and clear (my weight falls more to the middle of my feet now), and part of it feels much more obscure (I feel different). In Gallagher's terms, part of this change has occurred in the 'pre-noetic functions' (the anti-gravity activity or/and the motor schemas), that is, in the body schema, and in the awareness of this anti-gravity activity (my noticing that something changed), or body image. If the change persists it will become 'more habitual', says Feldenkrais, or 'integrated', which means that my weight is now always more to the middle of my feet than it used to be, but I no longer notice it. The new organization of my responses to gravity has become 'pre-noetic'; it has integrated in the body schema.

Hence, the structure of ATM instructions and their goals can be described as a weaving of actions upon body schema and body image as follows:

Body schema is mobilized in all instructions about position (Group 1) and movement (Group 2). The more raw they are ('please come to sit to the front of your chair' or 'please turn your head to the right'), the more they will be followed by the participants in their spontaneous movement style, that is, without consciousness and following their own habits.

Then instructions from Group 3 and 4 (perceptual and conceptual directions) bring awareness and new representations in the action engaged by instructions of position and movement, therefore acting upon body image to reach participants' body schema.

Yet the relationship between body schema and body image is acted upon not only by the spoken words, but also through the specificity of some of the movements instructed. This is what happens when a kinematic instruction has to evoke new representation to be performed, for instance in this kind of Feldenkrais classic: 'turn your head to the right while you move your eyes to the left'. Before they are able to perform such a non-usual coordination, most people will have to carry out various trial-and-error steps, to become aware of their motor automatic habit (here, moving head and eyes in the same direction), before succeeding in differentiating head and eyes. Another built-in device is the sequential composition of movements (what I call 'the syntax of the lesson'). Take this classic sequence in a chair-sitting position:

turn your head to the right

turn head and shoulders to the right

turn head to the right and shoulders to the left

turn head and shoulders to the right while moving your right sit-bone backward

turn head and shoulders to the right while moving your right sit-bone forward.

Through the exploration of this series, even without the usual verbal suggestions (guiding awareness through various body parts other than those named by the movement direction, and guiding attention to changes and variations in movement qualities), most people will navigate their own dialogue between pre-noetic habits and new awareness.

Body Affects

I hope this is enough to demonstrate how Gallagher's concepts of body image and body schema may appear as a new vocabulary for the usual description of Feldenkrais as changing unconscious habits through awareness of movement. But I believe it also raises a question: in the above description, the reader may have noticed that the described aspects of body image are mainly body percepts (indeed a very outstanding mark of our work) and body concepts. Gallagher's model forces us to question the place for "body affects" in our work. The notion of "affects" is not clearly defined by Gallagher, but one should remember that affects are different from emotions. Emotions are usually clearly categorized (joy, sadness, anger, etc.); they are expressed by the subject and often confused with their signifiers (the visible signs of the emotion). Affects are less easy to differentiate and categorized, they are easier to describe as a continuum between "positive affects" and "negative affects"; most importantly, they operate in terms of intensity and condition capacity to act (or the incapacity to act). They should be understood as dynamics and intensities that pre-condition our capacity to act.

In Feldenkrais ATM, the specificity is certainly to build this articulation within the structure of the lesson and by 'navigating' verbal instructions between the four levels of position, movement, perception and concepts. Most often described as parasympathetic reactions in Feldenkrais' writings (blushing, heart accelerations, sweating), body affects are considered as *effects* of dysfunctional education (Feldenkrais 1985: 7–13). They are therefore as much as possible separated from the structure of the ATM, and considered as an *indirect* target of the work. Practitioners and Feldenkrais users often argue that Feldenkrais (like most Somatic Practices) is actually *also* acting upon emotions or affects. I do agree that affects, as fully part of body image, are impacted by Feldenkrais practice. But I would like to argue two nuances: first (and this is an argument rarely mentioned within the community), the Feldenkrais Method approaches *directly* (or explicitly) only percepts and concepts, through the four types of instruction described above. This does not mean that there is no implication of body affects within Feldenkrais pedagogy (through the voice of the practitioner, his or her gaze on students, etc.), but the prominent insistence on body concepts and percepts tends to reduce the role of affects both in the experience and the

representations of students. The other nuance – and this is a much more frequently discussed topic among practitioners – is that in terms of impact or efficiency of the method, we do expect a balancing or regulating of body affects. But again this is an *indirect* target for the work. In other words, Feldenkrais has an ideal of the ‘perfect body image’, which explicitly relies on the development of acute perception, and implicitly expects the impact of affects on action to fade.

Conclusion

What I want to emphasize here is that this pair of concepts (body image and body schema), while omnipresent in Feldenkrais discourses, has not been sufficiently considered as a possible tool for a description of the practice, for two main reasons. First, Feldenkrais, following Schilder, is not using them as distinct categories. Second, Feldenkrais himself has not considered ‘description’, giving priority in his writings to general explanation. In contrast to Feldenkrais’ attempt at a ‘general explanatory theory’ of his method, I argue that today we urgently need a description of the work, and that Gallagher’s definition of ‘body image and body schema’ offers a possible tool for this description. Such a description does not attempt to be exhaustive, and may even appear simplistic compared to the general issues of the Feldenkrais Method. But such a reduction also generates transdisciplinary discussion and comparative studies, by observing how each Somatic method is presenting itself as a specific articulation of the link between body image and body schema, through a specific use of body image and body schema subcategories.

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Notes

¹ Such a variety of terms also varies according to translations, and thus deeper research on his conceptual uses would require an exhaustive reading of original texts. For instance, a chapter title in *Awareness Through Movement* (1972) appears as ‘The self-image’ in the English version, while the French is ‘Le schéma corporel’.

² This is a constant theme in Feldenkrais’ writings: entire chapters of his books are dedicated to it, and it also appears in most other chapters on other themes.