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Touch, tact and swerve: Three new concepts for the doctoral process, inspired by Jean-Luc Nancy's ontology

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Abstract
Doctoral study can be emotionally and psychologically challenging for students and supervisors. They can feel lost in the process, isolated and emotionally drained. It might be tempting for the supervisor to downplay such difficulties to protect the student. In this paper we argue that such challenges can be pedagogically developmental and ought to be acknowledged. This paper introduces three philosophical concepts: *touch, tact* and *swerve*. They are concerned with human intentionality in practical contexts and enable us to accomplish two things. Firstly, conceptualise the fluid, dynamic interplay of thoughts, emotions and psychological states in doctoral supervision; secondly, generate new tools for analysing the doctoral process. Our concepts are derived from Jean-Luc Nancy's philosophy, particularly his influential text *Corpus* (1992/2008). Nancy's work is contextualised by two of his key philosophical influences, Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Their ideas, especially *towardness* and *de-severence* (Heidegger) and *de-centred sense* (Merleau-Ponty) provide valuable context for the explanations of *touch, tact* and *swerve*. The authors conducted a piece of research into doctoral supervisors' experiences. The data illustrate the emotional and psychological challenges of being a supervisor and our concepts enable us to theorise their pedagogic potential, demonstrating 'real world' impact.

Keywords
Doctoral supervision, Phenomenology, pedagogy, Jean-Luc Nancy

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Introduction

Doctoral study can be emotionally and psychologically challenging for students and supervisors. They can feel lost in the process, isolated and emotionally drained (Turner, 2015; Winchester-Seeto et al., 2014). In this paper, we are particularly interested in the supervisor's past experiences as a student and how this affects their supervisory practice (Henderson, 2018; Lee and Williams, 1999). It might be tempting for the supervisor to disavow difficult memories, to downplay the riskiness of doctoral study to protect the student. However, we argue that such challenges can be pedagogically developmental for both supervisor and student, and ought to be acknowledged.

This paper introduces three philosophically informed concepts: *touch, tact* and *swerve.* This paper's key contribution to knowledge, these concepts are concerned with human intentionality in practical contexts and enable us to accomplish two things. Firstly, conceptualise the fluid, dynamic interplay of thoughts, emotions and psychological states in doctoral supervision. Secondly, generate new tools for analysing the doctoral process. We derived the concepts *touch, tact* and *swerve* from our reading of Jean-Luc Nancy's work, especially *Corpus* (1992 / 2008). Nancy's theory offers rich resources for conceptualising embodied agency in different disciplines (Derrida, 2005; Manning, 2007; McMahon 2012) but is often overlooked in education research studies.

The richness of Nancy's work lies in its treatment of human *agency*. Nancy's ontology imagines a dynamic, fluid interplay of externalised agentic contacts that are known only as they are encountered. This will require a lot more explanation as we move through the paper, but at this stage we can say that his work raises two significant questions about doctoral practice: What is the ontological status of the human agent and what avenues of intentional action are available to it? (In other words, what is irreducible about human experience and what are our capacities for setting and achieving goals). We suggest that these questions are *implicitly* being asked by supervisors and students in the process of a doctoral supervision. This suggestion came about from our theoretical understanding of supervisor and student *purposes*, supported by our reading of the data: both parties are seeking more effective 'contact' with the other to achieve their aims, and Nancy's dynamic ontology enables us to think in new ways about how that works and why it matters.

Much of the paper is devoted to explaining what Nancy's ontology can offer to educationalists. It allows us to theorise human agency as not being separate to situations but *always already involved*; moreover, humans may be *agentic* in ways that exceed their explicit intentions. These points also require more contextualisation as we move through the paper. To do this we will introduce two of Nancy's main influences, the earlier phenomenologists Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau – Ponty, both of whom wrote about human *agency* and *intentionality*. With the concept *towardness*, Heidegger imagined a human agent working purposively in its environment. In contrast, in Merleau-Ponty's work, human agency is decentred and dispersed across a depthless *sensory* network. Both of these writers influenced Nancy's thought, and our discussion of them will help to clarify our treatment of Nancy's position.

Our concerns in this paper overlap with current debates in posthumanist thought and related academic fields. A detailed treatment is beyond the scope of this paper, but we

identify some points of connection that readers may find useful to gain extra purchase on Nancy's ideas. Our understanding (via Nancy) of the human agent as being known not in itself but *in the contact it makes*, overlaps with a posthumanist conception of the individual (Braidotti, 2023). Both positions step back from identities understood as pure abstractions and are open to the idea of *decentred* human agency. In addition, our presentation of Nancy's *touch* and pedagogic *contact* bears comparison with Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) ideas about signs and signification. The sign is non-representational; it *enacts* or *brings about* what it is concerned with, rather than showing it. With our treatment of Nancy, words can create effects and bring about change in a similar sense. In their discussion of Deleuze, Jackson and Mazzei (2023) talk about thought as an *impersonal* force that brings about an *encounter*. Again, we see a connection with our reading of Nancy's thought in the context of doctoral supervision, and the impersonal agencies that can be present between student and supervisor, which we discuss in subsequent sections of the paper.

Phenomenological studies are underrepresented in current educational research with notable exceptions (e.g., Eddles-Hirsch, 2015; Farrell, 2020; Quay, 2016; Stolz, 2020). As we read Nancy alongside the earlier phenomenologists, we see his willingness to think human agency in all its rich, strange multiplicity. His work enables crucial insight about experience *as it is actually lived* (a key principle of phenomenological research – see Van Manen, 1990). Later in the paper, we will see this in our discussion of the research data, which shows that many factors other than academic forms of knowing affect the supervisor's pedagogic choices, including difficult memories, perceptions of 'riskiness' and empathising with the student's desire for certainty about how to succeed.

Our original research project explored doctoral supervisors' conceptualisations of their work supporting their students. We analyse two pieces of data, focussing particularly on one supervisor's troubling memories of being a student. Utilising our concepts *touch*, *tact* and *swerve*, we tease out the alternative ways of reflecting on the supervisory process, highlighting the importance of the supervisor's past experiences and empathy with their students' current struggles. Alternative forms of pedagogic thinking and practising are implied and we discuss their possible use and effectiveness. Together, the concepts and data analysis demonstrate the 'real-world' application of our approach.

For the sake of clarity in our explanation we selected the clearest examples of the argument, whereas with Nancy's recursive style of writing, the argument is continually reiterated in slightly different ways (a difficulty to which Nancy, 1993/1997: 56)). We address this challenge by paraphrasing where necessary, but our terminology is deployed as consistently as possible throughout the paper. With Heidegger, for the sake of clarification we condensed two different terms with very similar meaning (*towards-this* and *towards-which*) into a single term, *towardness*.

In the next section, we introduce Jean-Luc Nancy's ontology with detailed reference to *Corpus*. We then give *preliminary* definitions of the concepts *tact, swerve* and *touch*. In the subsequent section we examine the influence of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, identify key ideas and explain their connection to Nancy's thought before *returning* to Nancy's concepts to flesh out their definitions. We then introduce our research project,

bringing together our original concepts and our data analysis. In our discussion of the data, we tease out implications for future pedagogic practice and theorising.

Jean-Luc Nancy's ontology of *touch*

Our discussion of Nancy's ontology raises two questions: What is the status of the human agent and what avenues of intentional action are available to it? We suggested that these questions are *implicitly* being asked by supervisors and students in the process of supervision (both parties are seeking more effective 'contact' with the other to achieve their aims). Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty addressed these issues in very different ways, as we shall see in the next section. Focussing on these earlier phenomenologists enables us to clarify Nancy's thought, by establishing where his work mirrored theirs or departed from it.

We feel it is important to grapple with the difficulty of Nancy's thought for two reasons. Firstly, he does not present an argument or tight definitions. Instead, the ideas tend to roll into one another, creating different angles and emphases. It is important not to overlook such complexity but recognise a similar complexity in doctoral practice, in order to bring the two things closer together. Secondly, there is perhaps a risk of imagining 'touch' is to do with a common-sense notion of the physical 'body', but it is not. Nancy means ontological 'touch' and addressing his work directly helps to clarify that point as we shall see in the explanations that follow.

Next we explain the fundamentals of Nancy's ontology and develop a detailed interpretation using examples from Nancy's *Corpus*. We then provide some preliminary explanation about its relevance to doctoral practice.

In his influential work, *Corpus*, Nancy writes against the Western metaphysical tradition that sought to establish the ontological ground or 'presence' of things that guaranteed scientific knowledge (Derrida, 1978; James, 2006: 11-14). *Corpus* begins with an account of the Christian ritual of the eucharist, where ordinary bread is consecrated into the body of God. He says that the material thing, the piece of bread, can be touched but the ontological essence, the *absoluteness* cannot (Nancy, 1992/2008: 3). Our desire is to touch not just the appearance but the *absoluteness* of a thing, or as Nancy also calls it, *this*. In other words, an encounter with the particular allows an *approximation* of the absolute.

The authors are not qualified to comment on Nancy's exposition of Christian ritual, and we do not discuss it any further. The key point is that it is possible to achieve some kind of limited ontological 'touch', but not to draw out a thing's inner reality or ontological 'presence' (see Nancy, 1992/2008: 5). A thing is known by the *contact it makes* from moment to moment; the ontology of things is *relational.* A thing is also ontologically *external* and *separate*; it is *defined as itself in that moment of contact*. These key ideas will be gradually unpicked and explained with 'real-world' examples, as we move through the paper.

Two examples from Nancy's text give a flavour of his approach. When he writes about the body, he means the *ontological* not physical body. 'Body' is used almost interchangeably with 'words' and 'thoughts'; in each case he really means a thing's quality of *absoluteness* (see also Nancy, 1992/2008: 17, 33, 37, 51). In one example from *Corpus* he

talks about written words on a page as if they are bodies, i.e., things that touch. This is an instance of Nancy's aesthetic of *contact,* where the act of reading creates a *relation between things* that seems to be more important than meaning. He says,

> Bodies, for good or ill, are touching each other upon this page, or more precisely, the page itself is a touching (of my hand while it writes, and your hands while they hold the book). This touch is infinitely indirect, deferred – machines, vehicles, photocopies, eyes, still other hands are all interposed – but it continues as a slight, resistant, fine texture, the infinitesimal dust of a contact, everywhere interrupted and pursued. (Nancy, 1992/2008: 51)

As the reader reads the words, the meaning does not sit 'behind' the words like a reflection in a mirror. Instead, the sense travels *across* the words and is never complete. It is akin to the effect of 'dispersal' often associated with poststructuralism, albeit in a different philosophical context (Schroeder, 2005: 267). Moreover, the *contact* takes place equally between the hand and book, the other hands that touched it, and all they have touched or will touch. If one attempted to describe this process in conventional language, it would be hard to say *what* is coming into contact, *where* it is, or *whether* the contact is achieved.

In another example from *Corpus*, it is as if a thing – here referred to as a 'body' – is not known by its presence but by its semi-absence. Contacts always happen in the past, in the sense that they move away from us temporally as we try to perceive them.

> A departing body carries its spacing away, itself gets carried away as spacing, and somehow it sets itself aside, withdraws into itself – while leaving its very spacing 'behind' – as one says – *in its place,* with this place remaining its own, at once absolutely intact and absolutely abandoned. (Nancy, 1992/2008: 33)

A thing is not quite present to the perceiver, *or itself*. It does not quite occupy its own space ('carried away as spacing, and somehow it sets itself aside'), but is ontologically self-enclosed in the sense of being *defined as what it is* in that moment of uncertainty ('withdraws into itself…at once absolutely intact and absolutely abandoned').

Nancy's ontology – first reflections

Although they are obscure, we find these ideas exciting for two reasons. Firstly, we are seeking insight about doctoral supervisors' judgements in their sessions with students. Educators are not just technicians concerned with pre-determined aims, processes and outcomes (Arendt, 2018; Dunne, 1993); students affect us and we give of ourselves emotionally and psychologically 'in the moment'. The pedagogy of doctoral supervision is therefore complex. Many factors are in play in a supervision, including: words, voices, thoughts, memories and difficult emotions. Following Nancy, we can think of it as a *texture of contacts* between supervisor and student.

Secondly, we can think of these contacts as *ontologically separate* and *external*. This means that they sit outside the structure of human intentionality. In the introduction of this

paper, we said we are concerned with the emotional and psychological challenges of doctoral supervision. Researchers have found that *difficult emotions* and *psychological states* can arise between the student and supervisor, especially around role expectations (Guerin et al., 2015; Lee and Williams 1999). There can also be an unacknowledged hierarchical aspect to the relationship, a 'master-slave' dynamic through which supervisor and student dominate at different times (Grant, 2008). Doubtless, to a certain extent these difficulties are intrinsic to the process. At some point in the supervision the student must become fully autonomous in the discipline; they must supplant their supervisor and usurp the function of 'master' (see Grant, 2008: 23-24). We are not denying an important role for conscious intentions. The point here, however, is that we are theorising these difficult emotional and psychological exchanges as *having their own intentiona*li*ty*. In other words, to some extent they exceed both parties' capacity to define and achieve their goals. Perhaps doctoral supervision is not only about the making of new 'masters' but also acknowledging the messiness and multi-directionality of the research process. We will return to these ideas in later sections of this paper when we discuss our research project.

Touch, tact, swerve – preliminary definitions

Summing up the main ideas so far, we said Nancy's ontology raises two questions: What is the status of the human agent and what avenues of intentional action are available to it? Having taken a first look at Nancy's work, we can now offer preliminary answers.

- The human agent is never fully ontologically 'present'. It is known in its relatedness to other things, and through the *contact* it makes.
- The structure of human intentionality contains *external, separate* elements that may be unacknowledged or disavowed.

Next, we offer preliminary definitions of *touch, tact* and *swerv*e. They are designed to capture the emotional and psychological complexity of doctoral supervision and describe possible forms of pedagogic contact. They enable us to pull together everything said so far about Nancy and establish a systematic approach to Nancy's work for the rest of the paper. At this point, we do not explain how they can be applied. We do this later in the paper, interactively with the research data.

Touch means *ontological* touch. *Touch* is concerned with *contact.* Pedagogic spaces are like a weave of different contacts with *separate, external* agencies, some of which, like difficult emotions and memories, may be disavowed.

Tact is being respectful of the other and their ways of making sense, for example in their definition of personal goals, understanding of their role or their ways of speaking and knowing.

S*werve* means an ontological *swerve*. It is concerned with *relatedness*. Just as in the first example from *Corpus*, *ontological* contact is everywhere sought after, interrupted and resisted, so the *practical* sense of situation is spaced across its elements and never finalised. In a pedagogic context, words, bodies and thoughts *point away* from themselves – like a *swerve* – to other elements in a dynamic, relational context.

Having made these preliminary definitions, in the next section we outline key ideas from the phenomenological tradition, explain their interconnections and consider their influence upon Nancy's work. Like Nancy, both Heidegger's and Merleau-Ponty's work is concerned with *human agents* and *intentionality* and their writings enable us to clarify the explanation of Nancy.

After that, we will extend the definitions of *touch, tact* and *swerve.*

Nancy and phenomenology

Nancy is a significant figure within the phenomenological philosophical tradition comprising Edmund Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. Their influence upon Nancy's thinking about space, subjectivity and bodies has already been traced in some detail (James, 2006: 11-151). Phenomenology is about 'understanding phenomena, or "things," as they appear to, or are experienced by, ourselves or others' (adapted from Farrell, 2020: 2). Both Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty are concerned with this from different ontological standpoints – that is, beliefs about essential human experience. Stated schematically, Heidegger is preoccupied with *hermeneutics*. This is about the human's creation of meaning in its encounter with the concrete, practical world. In contrast, Merleau-Ponty's work is deeply concerned with human *embodiment* and the 'pre-reflective' dimension of human experience (Moran, 2000). For further information, the detailed connections between these writers have been explained in an accessible work by Moran (2000), while Stolz (2020) and Farrell (2020) explain key ideas from the thought of Husserl, and Husserl and Heidegger, respectively.

With reference to Heidegger's famous *Being and Time* (1927/1962), we will emphasise two key points about human practices. Firstly, prior to intentional thought, human beings are *already orientated* towards their practical environment. Secondly, space is *the everyday experience of space* filled with human sense-making, not an external region that 'contains' things. With Merleau-Ponty, the key point is about bodily perception. The 'classical' body has five senses (sight, touch, hearing, smell, taste) each corresponding with an aesthetic 'depth'. In contrast, with Merleau-Ponty the senses, and human identity itself, are depthless. These ideas influenced Nancy and help us to understand several of his key ideas, especially *relationality, contact* and *space.*

Heidegger's phenomenology and what it tells us

In the 1930s, Heidegger wrote against contemporary metaphysics which separated the elements of existence into two categories: 'external' objects of natural science, and 'internal' subjects (James, 2006). Heidegger argued that humans are actually in a state of 'throwness' (1927/1962: 174); immersed in the practical world of equipment (1927/1962: 99) and signs (1927/1962: 107). So, humans experience things *immediately in the world as they actually are*, not as an 'object' appears to a 'subject'.

The implication is that Dasein (the human agent) can know itself only in this prior practical orientation; its mode of being-in-the-world is *'towards-this'* (1927/1962: 105) and '*towards-which*' (our emphasis, 1927/1962: 116). For clarity, we are using the term

towardness. Accordingly, the *space* of Dasein is not an external domain that 'contains' things, but space as it is actually experienced, filled with human sense-making (James, 2006). Heidegger's word for this is *de-severence.*

What does Heidegger tell us about Nancy's work and educational practice?

Heidegger's *towardness* supplies crucial insight about Nancy's ontology of *contact:* things are known not in their essence but *immediately*, in the *contact they make.*

Moreover, Heidegger's *de-severence* helps us to interpret Nancy's treatment of *space and externality.* Heidegger's space is the everyday relational space. Nancy's space is also relational but on a different bodily scale. With Heidegger, the body is not ontologically differentiated. In *Being and Time* he wrote, 'This "bodily nature" hides a whole problematic of its own, though we shall not treat it here' (1927 /1962: 143). Nancy, on the other hand, wrote about the body at the 'micro'-scale, in terms of sense, spacing, touch, contact, etc., thereby opening up the 'micro' practical issues we are exploring in this paper. Here Nancy's thought deviates from Heidegger's but warrants closer comparison with Merleau-Ponty's later work.

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and what it tells us

In *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), Merleau-Ponty established the *finite, situated body* as a basis for phenomenological inquiry. In *The Visible and the Invisible* (1964) he radically extended his thesis (James, 2006: 121, 126). In the following passage he describes the act of seeing, but not as 'a human agent intentionally looking at something'. Neither the viewer, the thing viewed nor the gaze are ontologically 'centred'. They come into whatever relational existence they have *through the operation of seeing.* It says,

> not things first identical with themselves, which would then offer themselves to the seer, nor is there a seer who is first empty and who, afterward, would open himself to them…things we could not dream of seeing 'all naked' because the *gaze itself envelops them, clothes them with its own flesh.* (our emphasis, Merleau – Ponty, 1968: 131)

The human body is classically thought to possess five sensory 'surfaces' (sight, touch, hearing, smell, taste) each corresponding to an aesthetic 'depth'. But in this passage, human agents and their intentions are ontologically *depthless* and decentred ('the *gaze itself envelops them*'). For Merleau-Ponty, human agency is enacted at *the surface of the body* (1968: 141–142). 'Each touching with one sole hand has its own visible, its tactile, each is bound to every other vision, to every other touch' (1968: 142). Instead of a single consciousness, there are *clusters of consciousness* adhering to the hands, eyes, and so on (1968: 141). Ontologically, the human agent is like an interconnected network of sensory surfaces.

What does Merleau-Ponty tell us about Nancy's work and educational practice?

Merleau-Ponty's work helps us to understand Heidegger's *towardness* at a different *scale*. The senses do not merely convey information about the 'macro' human context; they are the site of practice. For example, in the educational context of a doctoral supervision with a student, the supervisor might create tonal effects with their voice that exceed their explicit, planned outcomes for the session. In this sense, the voice is not just a pedagogic tool; the supervision *is an effect of the voice*. Nancy's work mirrors this 'micro'- scale but with a different vocabulary of connection. Instead of ontological *fusion,* connection takes place in *touches* and *swerves.*

In another echo of Merleau-Ponty, Nancy's ontology also eliminates 'depth'. Nancy describes the making and breaking of contacts (like emotions striking one another in a conversation), without reference to the intentional 'centre' of a human agent.

In the next section, we extend our definitions of *touch, tact* and *swerve,* further teasing out the influence of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty on Nancy's work, and refining our pedagogic concepts.

Nancy's touch *revisited*

We can now return to our pedagogic concepts and extend our definitions. We said that *touch, tact* and *swerve* are designed to capture the emotional and psychological complexity of doctoral practice and enable different modalities of pedagogic contact to emerge.

Touch means *ontological* touch. *Touch* is concerned with *contact.* Pedagogic spaces are like a weave of different contacts with *separate, external* agencies, some of which, like difficult emotions and memories, may be disavowed.

We can now develop these points by adding that *touch* presupposes *towardness* (Heidegger). As human agents, we find ourselves immersed in practical reality. With Nancy, this equates to the idea that *we are always in a condition of active, contactful relation.* This means that educational contexts are not exclusively governed by human intentions. There are other relationalities to consider, like emotions and psychological states.

Moreover, as we saw with Heidegger, 'space' is not an external place for storing objects; it is concerned with the *meaning* of a thing. Nancy extends this logic to all contact, which is *defined as the thing it is* through the contact it makes. As he says at one point, '…touching is the limit and spacing of existence' (1992/2008: 37). At the moment of making contact, that contact is both 'touched' and *spaced*, defined as itself. In an educational context, this might be reflected in the ways in which individual students adapt and stretch the apparently 'fixed' definitions of academic terminology to articulate an original meaning. Theoretically, the student is defined as *someone reaching for meaning* through that contact: the student's attempt to make sense of the meaning is perhaps as significant as the 'fixed' meaning itself.

Nancy's tact *revisited*

Tact is being respectful of the other's separateness and ways of making sense, for example in their definition of personal goals, understanding of their role or their ways of speaking and knowing. Like *touch*, *tact* is concerned with *contact*. *Tact* is also a *practical* concept, in the sense of a human agent approaching a situation with conscious intentions.

Tact perhaps alludes to a tension in our theorisation of intentionality, based on Nancy's ideas: A human agent can approach a situation with a set of intentions, but in the event, these might be surpassed by unintended effects, like unforeseen emotional and psychological impacts. However, we suggest that the two states are consistent with one another; one can engage practically in a situation without knowing all the possible outcomes.

Adding to this, within student-supervisor relationships the psychological dynamic of separateness can be reversed, with each party *over-identifying* the other. This can create absences and prohibitions within their speech. For example, if the supervisor says less useful things to protect the student from feeling criticised and the student, mindful of the supervisor's status, does not say what they really think (Grant, 2008). This example recalls Nancy's idea that a contact is also a *spacing*; at the instant of contact *a thing is defined as itself*. In other words, in what passes between student and supervisor, there is need for a degree of *boundaried separateness* that enables each person to reflect openly about their difficulties with the role. For instance, (as we shall see in our discussion of the data) it might be useful for the supervisor to talk about their own past struggles as a student, thereby acknowledging the 'riskiness' of doctoral study rather than trying to protect the student from it, perhaps motivating the student to succeed in different ways.

Nancy's swerve *revisited*

We can now revisit our definition of *swerve.* The concept is concerned with practical intentionality – the setting and achieving of goals - and the deferral of ultimate meaning in human practices.

In the following quotation from *Corpus,* Nancy makes the now familiar point that things are ontologically depthless (as we also saw with Merleau-Ponty). A thing or body is not ontologically 'present' but it is *related*. He says,

> the body is *self* in departure, insofar as it parts – displaces itself right here from the *here.* The intimacy of the body *exposes* pure a-seity as the **swerve** and **departure** that it *is*'. (our bold text, 1992/2008: 33)

In this passage, we see that a 'body', or thing, is defined as what it is in dynamic relation to other things ('the body is *self* in departure'). Its movement is also its *to-wardness* (Heidegger) or *practical intentionality* defined as a continuous series of contacts, made and broken ('displaces itself right here from the here').

These rather abstract points tell us that a thing's body always *points away from itself* towards other contacts, other meanings, but meaning itself is never finalised. An example

from education practice is listening to someone speak, but paying more attention to body language. The physical gesture 'points away' from the verbal message, as the body of the listener 'listens' to the speaker's body (Goldin-Meadow, 2003). The listener may glean something other than the speaker intends, which reflects the inter-personal dynamic at the time, rather than the intended 'message'. In doctoral pedagogic practice, *swerve* is valuable for understanding how 'academic' meanings can be made slippery and in-complete as they 'point away from themselves' towards other factors in the situation, like emotions and psychological states that may be unexpected or unwelcome. As we discuss our data, we will consider how painful memories can still be pedagogically motivating and have a positive effect on the 'academic' performance.

Summary and research data

In the introduction, we said that doctoral study can create emotional pain and distress, especially where the supervisor is grappling with painful memories of being a student. We argued that reflecting on such distress can be pedagogically formative.

In the last few sections of this paper, we said that pedagogic space is dynamic and relational and we rephrased humanness and intentionality with the concepts, *swerve, tact* and *touch.* In this section we will examine some data from a small research project that investigated doctoral supervisors' attitudes towards supporting students' *writing*. Both excerpts come from one experienced supervisor, Shaun, in the context of a group discussion.

The authors and all the participants ($n = 5$) were involved in doctoral supervision at a university in the northwest of England. One of the authors had a co-ordinating role in the doctoral provision, and a particular interest in supporting students with the rigours of academic writing. Participation was voluntary. Ethical permission for the project was gained via the university ethics system. Prior discussions inside and beyond the university suggested that supervisor reasons for doing it in a particular way could be personal and complex, but insight from others was valuable. It was decided to conduct two exploratory group discussions where such an exchange could take place.

As we shall see, the data presented in this paper alludes to painful memories and emotions associated with the experience of supervision; it is therefore particularly pertinent to our concern with the lived experience of supervision and our 'multi-agentic' account of the doctoral process. We deploy our pedagogic concepts *tact, touch* and *swerve* in the discussion of the data, thereby fulfilling our purpose of demonstrating their value as analytical tools for understanding the doctoral process. Where Shaun is reflecting on personal struggles, often his words imply a possible pedagogic approach that we *infer from the context*. For example, in the first excerpt, he talks about the emotional challenges of being a student, and the supervisory challenge of introducing his students to new and potentially unsettling ways of thinking. We have *inferred a pedagogic connection* be-tween the two things; i.e., the supervisor helps the student with their studies by ac-knowledging, not disavowing, the emotional challenge. We provide worked examples of supervisor reflections that do not provide the reader with a pedagogic formula, but

highlight *pedagogic choices a supervisor could make*, in similar contexts of emotional and psychological challenge.

In this first excerpt, as Shaun describes the psychological challenge to his students, he revisits his own difficult memories of being a student. He talks about the lack of certainty in the process of acquiring doctoral knowledge, and how, in his own case as a student, this provoked a craving for feelings of safety and security.

> Moving people through their doctoral studies into that position is not moving them from A to B, it's moving them from a fixed position to something that involves a lot of movement and changes…and I'm thinking about again my own experience as a student, very influenced (by) cognitive psychology, my background was psychology, fixed kind of experiments, and moving to a world that was very disturbing for me, questioning everything…I went through this kind of…I was happy, I was struggling, and again I was managing to get a space where I feel safe but I knew it was not going to be safe…

It has been argued that the formation of a 'rational' academic identity necessitates the disavowal of difficult memories (Henderson, 2018). This passage indicates what those difficult memories might be like, and how they can affect the supervisor. Shaun's experience of doctoral study was emotionally hard ('…I was happy, I was struggling'), but it enabled him to reflect upon the limitations of the disciplinary knowledge he had previously acquired ('my background was psychology, fixed kind of experiments…'). It also enabled him to make a connection between *emotional* challenges and the formation of his *academic* identity ('…moving to a world that was very disturbing for me, questioning everything…'). Far from being irrelevant, in this excerpt he seems to be making conscious use of his past 'difficulties' to better orientate himself to the challenges, both emotional and academic, that his students will face.

Students can feel isolated and alone, even abandoned by their supervisors (Lee and Williams, 1999). Shaun seems to have felt that way as a student, and it enabled him to understand the craving for emotional and academic safety students may have ('…get a space where I feel safe…'), and the ways it can be prevented by the doctoral process ('I knew it was not going to be safe…'). Potentially, these insights will enable Shaun to make different pedagogic choices (a methodological *touch*) that recognise the existence of elements in the supervision other than academic forms of knowing. It allows Shaun to *reflect upon what the students are thinking and feeling*, and how it relates to the doctoral process - a pedagogically powerful thing to do.

In the next excerpt, Shaun talks about his frustrations with his own academic writing. He alludes to the emotional difficulty of removing a paragraph of writing, after it has been painstakingly written. Towards the end, he seems to be talking directly to his students about his struggles as a supervisor.

> I think the main idea is, transmitting to the student, 'okay, it's difficult for you…it's difficult for me as well, so don't think it's easy for me. We are operating at a very emotional level, it's something that is going to have a lot of implications about how you feel'…when I write something and I start to move things around and I need to remove a paragraph that I

wrote…it's painful!…it's mine, I need to use it. And even when someone came to me and said no, it doesn't have sense…so it's very emotional, the process of going into the feedback…we can't teach you how to do it, but we can be sympathetic…

In this paper, we talked about *tact* as a mode of contact that is *boundaried* and *respectful of differences.* At the beginning of the passage, it is as if Shaun is remembering an interaction with a student. It seems important to let the student know about his own struggles with the task of being supervisor ('don't think it's easy for me. We are operating at a very emotional level'). It could be a tactful way of establishing emotional *boundaries,* (which can be a problematic issue for supervisors and students alike ((Guerin et al., 2015; Turner, 2015)), while helping the student to understand the challenges of his role. There could also be significant pedagogic value in voicing his struggles with academic writing in the authentic, personal register he adopts here ('it's painful!...it's mine, I need to use it'). This draws the student's attention to the technical challenge and emotional investment needed to produce writing of a doctoral standard and could introduce a *tactful* way of talking to the student about their writing.

Shaun is focussing attention *away* from academic process ('we can't teach you how to do it…') *towards* the *identity formation* and *emotional connection* ('it's something that is going to have a lot of implications about how you feel…we can be sympathetic'). This can be thought of as a methodological *swerve* in that the academic demands *point away from themselves* towards the other active elements in the supervision (i.e., identities and emotions). But these elements do not rest; they continue to *swerve.* Shaun then alludes to the formation of *better academic judgement out of emotional resilience* ('even when someone came to me and said no, it doesn't have sense'). He is referring to his own struggles again, by acknowledging that emotional resilience is required to *sacrifice* writing as well as create it, and that better academic judgement can be attained in this way.

Conclusion

In this paper we included an *original, rigorous ontological explanation and justification* of three new concepts and demonstrated their use as reflective tools. We generated insight about the doctoral process relevant to both supervisors and students, and methodological insight useful to teacher-researchers working with philosophical concepts. Other practitioners might want to further develop our concepts in their own practice, for example by exploring how *supervisor memories and emotions* can be brought more effectively into the pedagogic repertoire. We gave an example of how this can be done with our research project. We provided data that showed a supervisor reflecting on difficult memories and emotions, then analysed it utilising our concepts, which allowed us to theorise different modalities of pedagogic connection.

We provided original insight about *phenomenologically informed research in education.* Reading *across* the phenomenological tradition, from Heidegger's agentic human to Merleau-Ponty's sensory fusion*,* we charted their influence upon Nancy's dense, recursive literary style. We identified potential in Nancy's work for educational researchers to utilise and showed how slippery concepts like *touch, tact* and *swerve* emerge

from within Nancy's relational ontology. By pointing out the ways in which humanness and intentionality are rephrased through the notions of *touch*, *tact* and *swerve*, we can help students and doctoral supervisors to reconsider what the doctoral process is really like.

We also illuminated classical phenomenological ideas, including Heidegger's *to-wardness* and *de-severence* in the educational research context. Thus, the paper makes a significant contribution to philosophical education scholarship that is concerned with the essential nature of practice, the ontological status of the agentic human and the nature of human intentionality.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

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