



## THE CLEVER BODY

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### 3 | SPONTANEITY

THE FORMING BODY | In a broad sense, spontaneity denotes the basic dynamism or motor intentionality dwelling in our body and announcing itself in the execution of movements. Whenever we stand up and walk or run – when we do anything – we rely on the body's indeterminate energy, on its "natural spontaneity."<sup>1</sup> Strictly speaking, movements performed in absence of constraint, on our own initiative, but without voluntary decision, we may call spontaneous. And in as much as we carry out habitual actions with no conscious co-ordination of the various motor segments, they also may be considered spontaneous. For

example, we do this when, without thinking, we ride our bicycle, effortlessly flexing our arms or legs, rotating our wrists and neck, and shifting our weight. Without thinking does not mean without focus: while moving spontaneously, we may be very aware of the characteristics of the road, such as surface, width, level of steepness, or sharpness of curves. What is lacking is reflective control and analysis of the movement. If, instead of "thinking aside" and relying on our body's ability to organize the motor segments into a coherent whole, we try to analyze the movement structure, we risk becoming stiff, awkward, or strained, and, as a result, committing mistakes.

Our movements unfold as a continuous and self-renewing dialogue between our body and the surrounding world. The latter is a complex and dynamic reality; it presents a great number of objects with ceaselessly changing aspects and meanings. The source of this diversity resides, in part, in the qualities and characteristic features of our actions and feelings. Objects look different when we are agitated or calm, when we move or are at rest, when we stand up or lie down. In addition to their meanings, they exhibit a wealth of material characteristics. We are able to perceive and deal with such abundance through a wide range of flexible and variable movements. There is a correlation, as Arnold Gehlen aptly remarked, between the "enormous potential diversity" and "wealth of possible combinations" of human movements and the great number of everyday situations in which we find ourselves and interact with things.<sup>2</sup> Driving a car, for instance, calls for an ongoing motor adjustment to the requirements and challenges of the actual circumstances. It is impossible to steer a vehicle with rigid, stereotyped movements. When we sail a small boat, our body responds adroitly to changing external conditions: we modify the form of our movement and our body position according to

the strength and direction of the wind or the height of the waves. Rock climbers know that failing to allow their body to make the appropriate motor adjustments could lead to serious accidents. Even seemingly very simple habitual actions, such as driving a nail with a hammer, closing a door, or raising a glass, call for a series of hardly noticeable adaptations to the characteristics of the object and to a concrete setting.

Whether we adjust the sail of the boat to rough wind conditions or hit a ball with a golf club, immediately we feel the success or failure of our motor performance. As we accomplish these acts, we find ourselves in a dynamic relation to values: right or wrong, well-timed or unsuitable, reached or missed. In his brilliant study on human movement, Paul Christian calls such an awareness of the quality of motor performance "consciousness of value in action" (*Wertbewußtsein im Tun*).<sup>3</sup> This value presents itself during the execution of the movement. If the movement is felt as right and successful, this is not due to its conformity to an ideal or correct way of moving, it is merely sensed as the most appropriate one with respect to the given situation. Christian gives the example of ringing a bell with a rope that goes through a hole in the ceiling into the bell-chamber. The ringer's action is successful only if, without comparing or selecting a motor form, his hand exerts the right pressure on the rope and, sensing the interplay of acting and reacting forces, finds the most suitable rhythm for pulling and letting go and, thus, swaying the bell. He does not know how he does all this; he just allows his body to find the right movement and the appropriate moment of release of the rope. As Buytendijk correctly pointed out, such an intuitive knowledge of values plays a vital role in sport, art, and many other activities. "My body discovers how I have to pull the rope of the church bell; it knows (in its own unconscious way) how the balance can be maintained

or recovered or what kind of movement and force should occur in the entire muscle system so that it can give the strongest impulse to the javelin or the discus, just as the hand releases it."<sup>4</sup> This kind of discovery does not lead to an explicit and rational knowledge, and the exact form of the movement cannot be defined in advance. The moving arm creates the form through a vague feeling of the positive or negative development of the action. While throwing a ball into the basket, the player adjusts the angle and the force, one to the other, in such a manner that a slight change applied to one of them implies the necessary modification of the other. A technically good throw is not necessarily a successful one and, conversely, a successful throw does not always display an excellent technical skill.<sup>5</sup>

In all these examples, spontaneity is opposed to reflexive willing: we no longer think or will the movement, we make an unreflective usage of the body by letting it discover and take the most suitable form.<sup>6</sup> Such a surrender to the body's ability to detect meanings and values occurs whenever our movements naturally adjust themselves to the characteristics of the objects or the tasks. While running on a slippery trail, or playing on the piano in a hall with bad acoustics, our legs or hands take a specific form; they are, as Viktor E. F. von Gebattel noticed, "forming themselves."<sup>7</sup> Our legs move more cautiously or our hands hit the keys more energetically. As we shift from one kind of activity to another, the change is even more notable. When working in the garden, swimming in the lake, or typing a letter, our movements adapt themselves to the task at hand. Each time, while executing a different kind of movement, the body has to modify itself. Gebattel was not wrong to speak of the working body, playing body, dancing body, fighting body, or loving body. Sporting activities, which consist of the succession of offensive and

defensive plays, require just such a shift from one form of bodily conduct to the next one. There is a defensively and offensively playing body. The change usually occurs spontaneously, without special attention or voluntary decision. Thanks to their consciousness of value in action, the players instantaneously modify their relation to the opponent or the ball.

In this context, Gebattel referred to a distinction, introduced by Straus, between the expressive movement of dancing and the purposive movement of walking. The former develops when the confrontation between subject and object vanishes in space; the latter unfolds in a space defined by a system of directions. Dance calls for participation and merging, whereas the purposive sort of walking consists merely of reaching a goal. Here again, we experience two different ways of spontaneously forming the body. In dance, the motor activity of the trunk is enhanced; in walking, the trunk keeps its stiff vertical position. The increased mobility of the trunk engages the body's organic energies. "The crescendo of motor activity in the trunk accentuates the functions expressive of our vital being at the expense of those which serve knowledge and practical action."<sup>8</sup> Consequently, the enjoyment of the dancer springs not only from the expression of an idea or a desire, and the disappearance of the usual tensions of everyday life, but also from the awareness of, and the trustful surrender to, the bodily feeling for the appropriate form.

THE CAPACITY FOR INVENTING | Sport activities strikingly illustrate this spontaneous variability, as well as the unpredictable achievements of the body. Martin Seel, in his excellent article on the aesthetics of sport, argues that the attraction and fascination a sporting event exerts on spectators consist in the perception of a successful outcome.<sup>9</sup>

Besides the optimal physiological condition, a remarkable performance requires various technical and tactical skills acquired over a long period of training. Yet, however thorough the preparation is, a spectacular goal or a record-breaking run remains an unpredictable event and only seldom is it the result of reflexive control and careful calculation. Great performances are achieved when the athletes, by adopting an attitude of unconcerned surrender, allow their bodily impulses and powers to organize the movements.

"During an instant or a certain time," notes Seel, "the trained physical body change into an autonomously functioning living body. The intentional action of the athlete change into the unintentional swing of his living body."<sup>10</sup> In fact, it is the enigmatic autonomy of the available body that induces, in both spectators and athletes, an aesthetic satisfaction. Although all the rules and obligations remain valid and are respected, the body seems to step beyond the limits and orientation imposed by the previous training and displays an unexpected virtuosity. Thus, athletes accomplish what lies beyond the level suggested by their training and experience, what, paradoxically, they are "unable to do." And, quite often, they view their own performance with astonishment. Hence sporting activities make manifest an important and highly attractive element, which is eloquently described as *Zelevation des menschlichen Unvermögen* – "celebration of human inability" – an inability of completely subordinating the body to the will and determining all aspects of the motor conduct.

Notwithstanding the intrinsic indeterminacy of sport performances, many consider that the athlete's proficiency consists in the ability to execute a series of complex, predictable and standardized movements. In truth, an auspicious achievement requires more than a conscious effort.

The voluntary decision invariably meets a limit, beyond which the body is no longer a docile instrument. If, as many rightly contend, doping products must be banned from the universe of sport, it is precisely by virtue of their power to push further this limit and, consequently, to silence the natural spontaneity of the body – a body that may offer either satisfaction or deception. Sport remains a meaningful human activity only if it leaves enough room for the manifestation of the imponderable energies of the body.

In any case, the desire to achieve a complete control is illusory. For the countless fans of the *Tour de France*, the beauty of professional cycling is not so much in the technical and tactical expertise but in the unpredictable achievement of the riders. However thorough and “scientific” the preparation for a race may be, dramatic reversals always occur and continue attracting crowds of spectators to the side of the roads. They are enthralled by the unexpectedness and perhaps also by the fact that, at any moment, chaos (the crash of dozens of star contenders) could emerge in an orderly world.

“The living body (*Leib*) completes what the physical body (*Körper*) is able to do.”<sup>11</sup> It does it not only through the adaptation and variation of the movements, but also by way of some well-timed innovations. We watch athletes respond to unforeseen challenges with speed and accuracy. To be sure, overcoming a sudden obstacle necessitates the rapid mobilization of the knowledge acquired through training. However, as Ricoeur perceptively argued in his analysis of the spontaneity of habit, the response is not merely the repetition of a learned and practised behaviour, but the launching of a new movement. “In their infinite variations, our flexible habits summon up a frequently disconcerting spirit of appropriateness: a reflection on mental or physical dexterity, on con-

versation or improvised eloquence, on the skill of living or culture, will show that each time that we parry a new situation we discover in ourselves astonishing resources to which it is wisest to trust ourselves."<sup>12</sup> If the body breaks with habitual gestures, it is due to the "inventiveness" and "capacity for probing" (*puissance d'essai*) concealed within the already acquired skills.

Beyond their ability to deal with disturbances and sudden challenges, athletes are also able to experiment with unusual and original solutions during the decisive phase of their performance. Their body, as Buytendijk has observed, is invested with a subtle sense of what can and should be tried or risked, with a  *finesse d'esprit*, with an "inexhaustible creative power."<sup>13</sup> Such a creative activity may embody the connection of two previously unrelated sets of movement. Arthur Koestler proposed for this act of synthesis the term *bisociation*. While association means organizing elements according to a customary set of rules and skills, bisociation is the act of combining previously unrelated dimensions of the experience. The bisociative movement creation arises suddenly and unexpectedly, it is an upward surge from some fertile layer of our body. When, in the closing moments of a ball game, the demand for a rigid pattern of movement linkage and organization decreases, and the conventionality of routine fades away, players are prone to propose a daring and odd solution.

While inventing new movements, athletes consider the motor situation as an action field whose characteristics they evaluate and immediately understand in relation to their bodily capabilities. As beginners, we have an altogether different perception of the moguls on the ski slope than we do after gaining some experience. We see them first as obstacles and only later as helpful means, since our movement, just as much as our sensing, is "a process of coming to terms with the world."<sup>14</sup> We confront

the golf course or water currents according to the abilities we have and we make use of them in relation to the challenges and possibilities offered by these natural settings. "When I slip and fall," writes Straus, "I experience smoothness differently from when I struggle vainly to get up from a glazed surface, and still differently when on an icy street I cautiously explore the condition of the surface before putting my foot forward."<sup>15</sup> Qualities and tasks are apprehended in relation to the implicit awareness of the capabilities of our body.

The  *finesse d'esprit* , brought to our attention by Buytendijk, is the body's capability to consider a possible complex motor accomplishment (jumping, rotating, or throwing) – a capability consisting of a feeling of correctness and aptness, an intuitive knowledge of what should and can be done in a particular situation. The body seems to know the characteristics of the action field and of its own available and transposable resources. "Each spontaneous behaviour in daily life is regulated according to the situation, but is, at the same time, 'exploratively' *improvised*. The physiogenesis is not determined (like a morphogenesis), but is, to a certain extent, *open* with regard to the range (*Spielraum*) of the possible. This is true in the case of climbing a mountain, driving a car, but also in that of the so-called habitual actions."<sup>16</sup> But to invent and risk, we must not only rely on this fine feeling but also possess the global form of the movement that we want to accomplish. We cannot represent such a possession. It reveals itself in our virtual and concrete doing. Just as musicians know the whole melody and this knowledge allows them to play the piece, likewise the implicit possession of a global form, an "amorphous source" generates the articulated execution of movements.

Eugène Minkowski has noted, in his phenomenological analysis, that the characteristics of spontaneity become better known when we contrast it with other types of human behaviour.<sup>17</sup> Spontaneous actions are

neither calculated and artificial nor strained and mannered. Their meaning and value do not depend on functional or utilitarian considerations; they are meaningful in themselves, merely in their direct, dynamic, and prompt manifestation. Not only are playful movements or unexpected combination of forms and ideas spontaneous, but also sudden discoveries, inventions, and exceptional and heroic acts. In just such an immediate and instantaneous manner, long awaited solutions may be found to theoretical and practical problems. Minkowski points out that the sudden emergence of ideas and surprising flashes are the fundamental traits of both spontaneity and a creative life. Indeed, in moments of inspiration, "there is a veritable bursting forth which comes, like lightning, to project its intense and exceptional luminosity on our inner life, without our being able to say whence it comes, and even without that question occurring to us, on the level of immediate data."<sup>18</sup> This bursting forth and emergence originate in the "dynamism of life" – a dynamism that carries us along and asserts itself as a fundamental trait of our body.

Spontaneous actions are deeply personal and authentic, in the sense that they express subjective sensations, impulses, intuitions, and inventions. Because they are prompted only in part by external influences, they can be considered as the true manifestation of our "inward life." The liberation from constraint may happen unexpectedly. First we might carefully follow a set of rules and, suddenly, without warning, we go beyond what we have planned and expected.

Buytendijk reminds us that the principles of efficiency, utility, and selectivity yield, here, to other values, such as exuberance, lavishness, and superabundance.<sup>19</sup> Full of unexpected ornaments and superfluties, spontaneous actions lack functional sobriety and calculated restraint. They display, to a remarkable extent, the deep-seated human desire for constant renewal and qualitative change, freshness, and excrement.

Minkowski evokes the close relationship between the autonomy of the body and the tendency to perfect the movements in absence of the need to adapt them to a specific goal.<sup>20</sup> Consequently, we are able to concern ourselves with their suppleness, sobriety, or grace. Indeed, graceful movements are perhaps the most successful products of the bodily impetus towards novelty and superabundance. Grace does not have much to do with mechanical precision or technical purposefulness. Rather, it is the result of individual variations and nuances, the entertainment of luxury, the original and qualitative envisagement of different motor options. Grace springs from the ability to express an idea or a feeling through a rich and astonishing spectrum of movement compositions.<sup>21</sup> It requires an intuitive and free improvisation, albeit within the realm of certain intentional structures and relations. In this state, the body is allowed to propose exploratory and useless motions which, in our everyday life and for obvious and necessary reasons, have been eliminated for the sake of uniformity and efficiency. With the introduction of the wealth of different alternative modes of action, the body seeks to exhibit its own internal and unconscious resources and, by making use of them, produce an abundance of forms.<sup>22</sup>

IMPROVISATION | Some of the above mentioned qualities are also constitutive elements of improvisation. What is needed for ingenious improvisations in music, dance, or play is a series of spontaneous actions, consisting of the variation and invention of forms. We tend to contrast improvisation with a calculated and carefully planned action. But the release from conventional and premeditated ways of performing does not mean that the improvisatory behaviour is altogether devoid of order and consistency. In every kind of improvisation we find order and repetition, assuring the preservation of the coherence and unity of the performance.

Children introduce surprising solutions into their play and, at the same time, conform to some self-imposed rules. Musicians propose unexpected melodic solutions while adhering to certain melodic and rhythmic formulas; they are working on models. Bruno Nettl defines the model as a "series of obligatory musical events which must be observed, either absolutely or with some sort of frequency."<sup>23</sup> These events or points of reference are tones, motifs, rhythmic figures, or chords, reoccurring more or less regularly in a given piece of music.

From the concept of model it follows that the improvising performers retain and store certain motifs and return to them at more or less regular intervals. No less important is their capacity to anticipate both new "tonal images" and their consequences. A successful improvisation comprises both the desire to achieve coherence through reaffirmation of already used elements and the readiness or impulse to invent and explore something new.

As Jeff Pressing called to our attention, it is an interaction with a "referent" or a "guiding image" that provides the musician with an impetus for improvisation. "The referent may be a musical theme, a motive, a mood, a picture, an emotion, a structure in space or time, a guiding visual image, a physical process, a story, an attribute, a movement quality, a poem, a social situation, an animal – virtually any coherent image which allows the improviser a sense of engagement and continuity."<sup>24</sup> Musical improvisation evolves, essentially, through a pathic-encounter: the referent seizes the musicians and "invites" them to generate new sound patterns. They explore and invent on the basis of the "continuous aural and proprioceptive feedback."<sup>25</sup>

All good performers display an urge to avoid mechanical repetition and, by keeping in mind the essence of the work, consciously embellish their

play with expressive modifications. Some go even further and spontaneously react to numerous momentary variables, making their performance "an exciting adventure." They translate their reaction into the music by introducing subtle "distortions": they play certain notes slightly faster or slower, louder or softer.<sup>26</sup> The most important source of these deviations is perhaps the tone itself. Like the capricious movements of the ball, the playful unfolding of tones holds the performers in their spell, exerts on them an attraction and generates the tendency to improvise. "Their own play is a play with us and our play with them."<sup>27</sup> Why are musicians so inclined to play with tones? Because the resonating tones themselves communicate an "impulse value," a compelling affective appeal to their bodies. It is the pathic character of their momentary auditory experience that elicits a particular response and provides an incitement for the subtle improvisation. Heinz Heckhausen affirms that "music-making may, in a more limited sense, become play when it is the object of improvisation, free variation, imagination. The player himself (!) creates the possible appeal for novelty, complexity, and surprising effect that retroacts on him and facilitates the continuation of formative activity."<sup>28</sup>

That is not all, however. Improvisation also calls for a sense of being carried along, giving and abandoning oneself to both the momentary feelings and the creative impulses of the body. Barry Green claims that during a fulfilling improvisatory experience the guiding model gradually fades away and becomes secondary. At this time, the music seems to emanate from the improviser's body.

*Liz began to experiment a little more: she played faster and slower; higher and lower; happily, romantically, and sadly; and observed the ways in which the dancers responded to every change in her mood. Then she slipped out of Bach's style completely and began*

*to play entirely from her own feelings, improvising with different rhythms and harmonic structures. She explained later that she had 'played without thinking' and let the music flow from her moment-to-moment sense of discovery.*<sup>29</sup>

The expression "sense of discovery" refers to the improviser's relaxed receptiveness that allows her hands to explore a new range of sounds and unusual harmonics as well as rhythmical effects. It also implies that she accepts the possible discrepancy between a specific intention and a solution arising from the body. The musical forms are no longer produced in the strict sense but discovered, and the resulting music may elicit an effective surprise in the performer.

Nearly all studies on improvisation emphasize the involuntary aspect of the performance. Jeff Pressing maintains that improvisation provokes in the performer "an uncanny feeling of being spectator of one's own action."<sup>30</sup> Alfred Pike believes that the jazz soloist methodically pursues a definite musical goal. Nevertheless, "during the fervour of improvisation, jazz ideas leap to his mind and fingers."<sup>31</sup> It would be, of course, erroneous to view the whole process of musical improvisation as an unconscious, automatic process, freed of all concentration and attention. "The new is rooted in the old."<sup>32</sup> The musician must build up melodic formulae during a long period of learning. In fact, as we have seen, improvisation usually begins and ends with the implementation of previously learned musical ideas. However, improvisatory performance requires more than just a capacity for perceiving, remembering, and reproducing patterns. These are completed with spontaneous inventions, thus making the shaping of melody and rhythm no longer consciously monitored. Now the music sprouts, as it were, from the depth of the body. Without purposeful pre-assessment and planning, the improviser surrenders to a "creative compulsion" that is present in the body.<sup>33</sup>

In his thought-provoking book, David Sudnow proposes not only to explain his progress through jazz improvisation but also to throw some light on the "nature of the human body and its creations."<sup>34</sup> At first, while learning various chords, he found the melodically appropriate scale for a particular chord and came up with a rather hurried combination of these musical formulae. Later, he attempted to fit together chords and melodic fragments. Finally, he reached a stage where he could stop being concerned with a suitable melodic pattern, and play, in a more relaxed and unhurried way, the notes that were not necessarily tied to a specific chord. A melody could be generated and sustained whether it was or was not appropriate for a chord pattern. Sudnow's play was no longer guided by a "rigid time schedule" and an anticipation of chord-specific formulae. He did not have to look "past the hands' ways to their destinations."<sup>35</sup> Rather, he was able to focus confidently on the moving of the hands and let his fingers choose the notes. Any note could have been used for his jazz improvisation. "Good notes were everywhere at hand, right beneath the fingers." A significant change occurred in the improvisatory process when the "melodic hand" was able to dispense with an abstract musical scheme or thought and, by "tasting possibilities," to produce melodies of its own accord. For Sudnow, such a change was accompanied by an experience of automaticity, an absence of conscious controlling and monitoring, a feeling of being guided by the creative capacities of his hand. Thus the hand responded to the produced sound or a momentary feeling, and not to the representation of an abstract musical idea.

One might consider with suspicion, or reject as "metaphysical," the desire to emphasize the vital role of bodily capabilities in generating improvised music, and view both the refinement of improvisatory skill and production of novelty merely as the proper use of the capacity for implementing internal motor programs. Simply put, the improviser oper-

ates with various internal models and not with the unreflective movements of the hands.

Eric F. Clarke, who subjects Sudnow's account to some criticism, defends this view. Improvising performers, argues Clarke, cannot "achieve fluency and accuracy" in the absence of abstract representation of "hierarchical structures of motor programmes."<sup>36</sup> They must construct and adhere to a more or less carefully elaborated harmonic outline or pattern. In the absence of the representation of complex "generative structures," the control and shaping of their performance become hesitant and slow.

For Clarke, the motor organization of music-playing is very similar to that of typing. He refers to an experiment designed for typing a text with and without advance information. Those who had no text preview performed much slower than those who had received information in advance. Therefore, "a literal interpretation of Sudnow's claim is untenable," since every improvisatory process is guided by a representation of motor programs.

There is, however, a significant difference between these two types of motor performance. The typist's hands must adapt themselves to a previously fixed series of events. The improviser, on the other hand, does not necessarily have to subject the movements to a preordained framework. Some artists may implement preordained motives; others, however, make no attempt to rely only on past strategies. Whether motives do or do not crop up in the unfolding musical development, the improvisatory process remains essentially open: new notes can be introduced unpredictably and suddenly at any moment.<sup>37</sup> Obviously, such openness does not cancel out the aptitude for coherent and consistent performance.

What Sudnow achieved was precisely a sort of releasing from a rigid commitment to a set of formulae. The notes he played were not

imagined in advance, but found effortlessly “right beneath the fingers” on the keyboard. When no text preview was provided to the copy-typist, the motor performance could easily have become inaccurate. In Sudnow’s jazz improvisation, however, “wrong notes” simply did not exist; almost any note could generate a good melody. Hence the confident and relaxed attitude: he knew that the solution chosen by the hands could always be used for a good purpose. Thus, the important thing in improvisation is not to develop structures of motor programs and then find a suitable solution, but, as Pressing says, to “accept the first solution that comes to hand.”<sup>38</sup> In short, improvisation is not a matter of always hitting the right key or always placing the accent on the appropriate beat.

Clarke’s objection presses us to raise an important question: should we consider the representation of movement – the mental image that is obtained on the basis of sensory impressions and previous motor experiences – as an indispensable condition of complex creative performances?

We are surely unable to form a mental image of certain familiar movements such as tying the knot of a neck tie. Therefore, Arnulf Rüssel contends that the basis of several complex motor performances is not a representation but a *readiness* towards the execution of movement (*Bewegungseinstellung*).<sup>39</sup> This expression denotes the inclination to consider the situation and perform the appropriate movements. Creative improvisation may proceed from this readiness and any attempt to focus on how the movement is to be performed, or how the various motor segments are related to each other, could make the performance hesitant and slow.

Paul Ricoeur also alleges that spontaneous improvisation depends on our bodily capacity to probe in all directions and not on the representation of a motor structure. It calls for a surrender to the body’s singular potential for invention, variation, and adventure. “In relation to this

inventiveness of habit itself, our perceived or represented models play only a secondary or critical role. The guiding scheme creates nothing, only judges the improvisation which approaches what was desired. In this sense it is always true that we do nothing voluntarily unless we have first realized it involuntarily."<sup>40</sup> We all know from experience that, after a certain number of trials, our body suddenly discovers the right or satisfactory way of moving and we do not really know how we succeeded. Such a discovery does not exclude the possibility of looking back and reflecting on the segments of our performance. We may also interpose a representation between our readiness to move and the execution of effective movement. However, such a representation could easily hinder, rather than promote, a creative accomplishment.<sup>41</sup>

SPONTANEOUS MORALITY | Why, after all, should we exalt bodily spontaneity? Amid the continuous demands of external conformity and the growing erosion of self-reliance, we have somehow lost the capacity to listen to our feelings, convictions, or desires and to act in accordance with them. We prefer to rely on stereotyped formulations or protective conventions rather than to follow our inner voice. In the final analysis, such a proclivity to conform encourages the gradual erosion of a key aspect of our moral fibre – the intuitive feeling that distinguishes right from wrong. No doubt our feelings need education; the more we live by them the more they offer us appropriate guidance.

When we yield to our feelings and rely on our spontaneous know-how, we are truly in contact with ourselves. This contact can give rise to what we might consider as unpremeditated good actions. Without a moment of hesitation, without considering our own interest, we might

bring help to a person in distress. Or without any lengthy moral reflections, someone stops doing the task at hand and walks with us to show the direction we seek. "Actions like that," writes Robert Spaemann, "make life worthwhile."<sup>42</sup> We can see in such an action, emerging from internal sources, the foundation of altruism. Through spontaneous movement, our fellow human beings often bring out what is the best in them.

"Ethics can never be purely and simply an affair of the mind," correctly states van Peursen.<sup>43</sup> It is not merely a matter of rationally understanding abstract arguments or values. It is an exercise in practical reasoning. It displays a qualitative distinction grounded in our feelings, and calls for the readiness to act in accordance with an affective appreciation of values. "Spontaneity is situational," says Eliot Deutsch, "it is a sensitivity to what is demanded by, and is at stake in, a particular context; it is not a reliance upon an inner sense of what is right/wrong in the abstract or upon an internalized, superego-like assimilation of an imposed rule."<sup>44</sup> We act not by relying on fixed formulae, but in accordance with our affective participation in the meaning of the given situation. Because of this, the notion of authenticity, the contact with our feelings, has great importance in any environment that encourages external dependence, fixed habits, and conventional living. Conversely, through spontaneous actions, we are better able to live according to the ideal of authenticity and, thus, gradually strengthen our moral sense.<sup>45</sup>

It is also worth noting that spontaneous movements help to foster another aspect of our moral life: the fine sense for nuance, delicacy, timing, and proportion – in brief, tact. Important social virtues, such as politeness, thoughtfulness, civility, or benignity, are rooted in this ability to perceive and value what is unique in a situation at hand and

outside the realm of the utilitarian and impersonal.<sup>46</sup> A mature practice of morality depends upon the capability to develop sensitivity towards the prompt and gratuitous stylization of forms of personal interaction, however superficial they seem to be. Morality is not simply a matter of obedience to some externally imposed rules; it calls, Helmuth Plessner tells us, for a behaviour inspired by enthusiasm and a "spirit of luxury."<sup>47</sup> The heart of ethics lies above and beyond all rigid regulations. It is grounded in our luminous and creative intuitions, in our keen sense of the exceptional and, accordingly, relates to spontaneity in a broader sense.<sup>48</sup>