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the clever body
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CONCLUSION

In a beautiful passage, Merleau-Ponty compares the body to language. Like the spoken word, the body is neither a pure instrument, ready to obey, nor an end in itself, wanting only to govern. Nevertheless, there are moments when our body, without any purpose, enjoys its autonomy and power. "Sometimes – and then we have the feeling of being ourselves – it lets itself be animated and becomes responsible for a life which is not simply its own. Then it is happy or spontaneous, and we with it."¹ The source of our enjoyment is, above all, the feeling of harmony and

unity due to the disappearance of the usual "I and body" tension. All too often, especially during illness, the body is perceived as an instrument to manipulate or an obstacle to overcome. Early in life, we learn how to bridle its impulses, needs, and desires and, because so much emphasis is placed on self-control, we tend to ignore its subtle messages and resonances. If, however, we value and seek awareness, we then experience our body as a source of power and possibilities, a dynamic unfolding of original performances, a creative force that responds judiciously to any perturbation and explores new movement combinations.

Extensive recent research has shown that, at different times, we do have such a pleasant perception of our activity. The terms "peak experience," "flow," or "movement meditation" are used to describe this highly pleasurable state.² Billiard players call it "dead stroke." It occurs when we are engrossed in an activity and the accomplishment of the movement itself becomes an intrinsically rewarding experience. In this particular moment, as the will to control the body disappears and the execution of the movement becomes effortless and flawless, we experience the delightful sensation of total involvement and the feeling of harmony and oneness with the different aspects of the motor situation.

An important element of these experiences is what has been called "transcendence of self" or "loss of ego." These expressions do not denote a dreamlike or unconscious state, but rather a non-critical, non-evaluating, fearless, relaxed attitude, a complete absorption in the task at hand. Without calculating the possible result, we execute the appropriate movements. We have the impression of being carried by our vital energies and moving on autopilot, so to speak. Enjoyment, in this sense, is not synonymous with health or fitness, but springs from a motor experience that leads to a heightened awareness of our autonomous body. It

may occur while we sing, play enthralling tennis matches, or walk along a beach.

Indeed, we come to experience pleasant sensations during the most diverse activities. One of them is lovemaking. The delight that one feels does not depend on some physiological processes alone, but rather on how one experiences one's body and relates to another. As Gernot Böhme has remarked, a sexual encounter elicits an unusual experience: the body reaches an altogether "other state" (*andere Zustand*).³

In our daily life, in a state of well-being, we identify ourselves with whatever lies beyond and ahead of us. Whether concerned with our projects, tasks, or goals, we may recognize that our body supports our intentions, yet we perceive ourselves as if we were "beyond it." We view it as a silent medium that allows us to reach our objectives and meet the demands of our everyday existence. If, on the other hand, we become tired, exhausted, ill, or are unable to correctly perform a task, we become conscious of our body. It appears in its materiality as an obstacle, making impossible the fulfilment of our plans. In the state of "ill-being," the body manifests its unavailability. It is no longer the imperceptible support that we vaguely sense, but an object asserting itself with a quasi-independence. It resists our efforts and desires. It is not what we are, but what we have.⁴ In the "other state," we do become aware of our body, but we don't experience it through our objectifying consciousness. As our consciousness submerges into the body, we live and feel it as if it were from inside. Such an inward awokeness may be achieved in lovemaking, dance, sport, meditation, or even breathing. While breathing, we may become aware of the inner forces working inside us and develop an "inward consciousness" of our body.⁵ Eugen Herrigel, in his famous work, describes how archery cultivates the "exquisite state of unconcerned

immersion in oneself.⁶ Here too, through the concentration on breathing movements, we come to a "primordial state." We feel all our energies from inside and are able to mobilize them at any moment with "rapturous certainty."⁷

Gernot Böhme writes about the "extraordinary significance" of bodily love.⁸ It allows us to achieve what usually eludes us under our contemporary living conditions, namely the experience of wakeful relaxation of, and enjoyable unity with, the body. We are always able to consider the acts of walking or drinking as if they were carried out by someone else. This is no longer possible in lovemaking. Here, as Jan Kott points out, the alienation of the self from the body is impossible. "It is then that the soma and the anima are one. When you can no longer extricate yourself from yourself, the experience is no longer someone's else."⁹

There are other occasions when we are truly pressed to give way to the body's ability to perform the appropriate behaviour. This occurs when we burst into tears.¹⁰ When we cry, we neither confront and use our body as an instrument nor express our inner state in an articulated manner. The self-control and self-transparency are no longer available means to deal with the situation. We find ourselves in an "other state," since, in the presence of a "constraining power," our body provides "an autonomous reaction."¹¹ The cardinal element of this experience is the act of surrender: letting ourselves be overcome by, or dissolved in, weeping; we yield to our body and allow its resources to respond.

In dance or play, our movements are an integral part of a more encompassing experience of space and time. The characteristics of the lived space of dance, defined by the absence of goals, specific directions, and fixed axes, promote and facilitate the experience of unity with the body

and the surrender to its capabilities.¹² The disappearance of purposive attitude changes the spatial structure to the same extent that dissolution of all oppositions heightens the state of alert but relaxed receptiveness. Without a concern for specific goals, we find ourselves in synchrony with the surroundings, consisting, above all, of the experience of equivalence and reciprocity.

As we establish a more intimate contact with space, we also come to free ourselves from the usual way of experiencing time. Our present is no longer an incomplete sequence that receives its significance only from future and past events. It is rich and complete in itself, almost as if it has some sort of extension or density. Stepping outside the objective and general order of time, we experience the present as a deeply satisfying moment of our personal becoming. However, neither the past nor the future loses its importance. The past is eminently there through the conservation of our acquired skills and incorporated values. This memory is also prospective since it allows us to improvise and invent new solutions. The future offers us not merely fixed tasks and limitations but, above all, possibilities to create and progress.

The value of the exquisite state has already been recognized, about two hundred years ago, by Heinrich von Kleist. In a remarkable short essay, he warns his readers about the undesirable consequences of excessive reasoning and calculation, and invites them to reflect after an action, and not before. Reflection impedes the harmonious unfolding of movements and hinders the beneficent working of bodily energies. Just like the wrestler who, in order to win, must act according to the "prompting of the moment," likewise, we should respond to unexpected challenges by renouncing hard and lengthy thinking and confidently relying on a

power that springs from our bodily feelings. "Life itself is a struggle with Fate; and in our actions it is much as it is in a wrestling match.... A man must, like that wrestler, take hold of life and feel and sense with a thousand limbs how his opponent twists and turns, resists him, comes at him, evades him and reacts: or he will never get his way in a conversation, much less in a battle."¹³ Kleist succinctly presents a paradox that, if properly applied, brings success to many human endeavours. The more our action is guided by our conscious will, the less we succeed. When we desperately try to ski or dance well, we make one mistake after another. It is, therefore, advisable to proceed in a reverse order. At the moment of action, we should abandon all attempts to consciously control our movements and trust the various resources of our body. In other words, we should get rid of all tense effort and purposeful planning, and not interfere with the infallible functioning of our body – the "splendid feeling" (*berrliche Gefühl*) inhabiting our clever body. All careful analysis of the implemented solutions should follow our action. This will serve to improve the spontaneous functioning of our body and prepare us to face new challenges.

In a delightful short story about play, Walter Benjamin presents a different view on our unconscious knowledge that is converted into movements. Playing in the casino is much like facing a danger: the body deals with the situation and disregards the dictates of the mind. (These kinds of challenges require bodily presence rather than presence of mind.) While placing a bet, the hand successfully guesses the winning number if the consciousness does not intervene. As soon as the player starts to "think right," the hand inevitably makes mistakes. "Play is a disreputable occupation because what makes the organism perform the most subtle and precise actions also provokes conscienceless behaviour."¹⁴

In another context, however, the value of careful thinking is assessed differently. William James believed that the chief problem with teaching, as well as with many other social activities, is that we tend to be too preoccupied with the results. We are too cautious about making a mistake and, consequently, calculate what we say or do. Hence the importance of forgetting all our worries, "taking the brakes off the heart" and trusting our spontaneity. The remedy for the tension and excessive self-consciousness lies in the recovery of a life-style that considers ease and relaxation as central values.¹⁵

How can we promote such a life-style? How can we achieve a more intimate and trustful contact with our surrounding world and foster some of our bodily abilities?

A life according to the gospel of surrender can hardly be achieved at will. Adults and youth need adequate opportunities to experiment with movements and take initiatives freely, without fear and constraint. The creation of a free space – a leisurely space for innovation – is what an educational system has to promote. Children could then learn early enough to combine concentration with relaxation, a paradoxical art that is, according to Aldous Huxley, the key to reaching proficiency in any field.¹⁶ It is through concentration that they immerse themselves in an activity and fend off all external disturbances. And it is through "wise passiveness" that they remove the barriers of calculating consciousness and allow the unrestricted functioning of their bodily powers.

Philosophers, educators, and even scientists plead, alas repeatedly in vain, in favour of an education where various bodily activities play a central role. They rightly claim that productive thinking cannot be confined to one or two specific subjects in the curriculum. The creative process grows out of the whole living organism. The practice of the arts could

heighten the pupils' sensitivity to the new and original, and make possible the use of self-expressive capabilities far beyond the realm of the school.

The introduction of singing or dancing into the educational systems is not enough. An altogether different understanding of the body is required. We should stop considering the body as an instrument, a machine, or an object of possession that responds to, or resists, external challenges. In many instances, our body is a partner; our creative potentials and already acquired versatile technical knowledge offer their support for our endeavours.¹⁷ There is a specific freedom of the body that becomes manifest in the astonishing independence of the hands and legs. They move not only with a remarkable agility, but also with a surprising ease. Hans-Eduard Hengstenberg sees in the body's ease a genuine virtue that, in our abstract and standardized societies, we tend to lose.¹⁸ This virtue consists of the remarkable ability of the body to mould its various parts into different shapes, move according to a variety of rhythms, and adopt new types of symbolic behaviour. It allows us to sense the prevailing requirement of a situation and form our body accordingly.

We then adopt a particular attitude that we might characterize with the expression of *syntony*. Syntony refers to the fundamental faculty of establishing a harmonious and sympathetic contact with the everyday world. We attain an accord between ourselves and whatever we are dealing with – the tree we prune, the origami crane we make, or the food we arrange on a plate. Syntony pertains, beyond the experience of vibrating in unison with something, to the character of the contact we establish with our own body. We no longer confront it, but allow its impulses, energies, and clever capabilities to guide our action.

Some individuals are very much in tune with their environment.¹⁹ They live with sympathetic ties to their surroundings because they acquired early enough the art of "getting out of the way," the consideration of their carrying body as a partner, and the ability to yield to its autonomous and creative functioning. To my mind, imparting this art to our children is one of the chief tasks of all education.

