



THE CLEVER BODY

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ISBN 978-1-55238-594-4

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I | AUTONOMY

DYNAMIC STRIVING | All of us notice from time to time – while dancing, skiing, or playing tennis – that our body moves naturally, without conscious control or effort. It not only carries out a given task, but also appropriately responds to unexpected challenges and proposes surprising solutions. Sometimes, as we come to a rest, we ask ourselves: how did we do it? How did we ever come to perform such a movement? We then perceive our living body with a sense of unity and a feeling of harmony. We have the impression of being carried by our body's indwelling energy and competence.

We execute many movements in our everyday life without consciously controlling them. We eat, drink, greet someone, or drive a car with no thought to how we accomplish these actions. In a given situation, we do exactly what appears to be the most appropriate and useful. On these occasions, we do not consider our body as an instrument to be guided and used; it is lived as a silent, dynamic, and reliable support of our undertakings – an autonomous support, moving according to its own rhythm and speed.

Autonomy denotes the ability to act, move on one's own accord. The Greek *automaton* conveys a similar meaning: a being that is the source of its own movement. We may speak, in the wide sense of the term, of autonomy when the movement is prompted by a voluntary decision: I decide to go for a walk and, while initiating and guiding my own movements, encounter no constraint. In a narrower sense, bodily autonomy refers to movements that we accomplish without voluntary decision and conscious attention.

What makes such bodily autonomy possible? Our actions unfold thanks to an ongoing and dynamic striving inhabiting our body. We perceive this forceful striving when, after a more or less long period of immobility, we acutely feel a fundamental need to do something. Children satisfy their inner need to run and play once their class is over. Writers yield to an urge to interrupt their work with short walks. To describe this propensity to move, we may use terms such as drive, desire, interest, or yearning. In all cases, we refer to a primal vital energy that impels us to act or respond. This dynamic striving is present at all levels of our active life: it manifests itself in the satisfaction of our most basic physiological needs as well as in our passion, perception, learning, and quest of knowledge, love, beauty, recognition, or harmony. It permeates

the various strata of our being, as well as the most diverse activities that we undertake.¹

To be sure, many of these activities occur in our everyday space and unfold through a sensory-motor communication with objects. Our primary contact with the world is a "sympathetic understanding," an unmediated grasping of the physiognomic characteristics of objects: we find a street, a car, or a shop pleasant or unpleasant, attractive or unattractive.² Our sensation of the immediate appearances elicits a response. In a conversation, we hear more than the meaning of the words, we see more than the face of our interlocutor: we also hear the kindness in the tone of the voice or see a threat in the glance. True, we occasionally tend to detach ourselves from our actual situation and become an objective spectator of an event. We then seek to impose a control over our body by holding in check its propensity to respond instantaneously. Notwithstanding our effort, we are unable to completely eliminate the symbiotic aspect of our experience: we are seized and moved by some characteristic features. Yet, however important such an unmediated communication with objects is, our movements cannot be prompted without the elementary striving of the body. The motor response to a motivating quality does not occur and develop without our body's natural tendency to move.

Play, which begins at a very young age, is doubtless one of the human activities that benefits the most from the body's latent energy. Many playful activities start with an encounter with an object. Because of its manifold possibilities, this object exerts a fascination on the player, elicits a movement, and, once the play is underway, responds to any movement with a counter-movement. The readiness to yield to the object's "invitation" springs from a spontaneous urge to move, a compelling inner impulse to act.³ We may compare this impulse to the need to take a breath

– a movement, which is neither a reflex reaction nor a voluntary activity. When we hold our breath, we first feel a desire and, later, a strong urge to breathe: we *have* to breathe.

A tangible manifestation of the inner urge is what Buytendijk calls “youthful dynamic.”⁴ In this context, the concept of youthfulness does not denote a particular period in human life; it does not refer to an age but to a mode of being and moving. One of its important characteristics is the absence of direction: the movements do not follow a strictly prescribed plan and are not tied to specific starting points or goals that could enclose them into a fixed and definite framework. Rhythm is another significant aspect of youthful movement. While very young, as well as throughout our whole life, the rhythmic swinging of our body yields to a delightful play.

The inner striving of the body is one of the elements that make successful theatrical performances possible. Beyond the articulation of the written text, acting principally consists of moving in a particular space, the stage. Actors grimace and gesticulate in order to represent a thought, a feeling, or an image, provide an appropriate illustration for the text, and incarnate a specific role. Eugenio Barba speaks of the “dilated body,” a body that becomes the tangible manifestation of thought or feeling. Dilation is not merely the skilful expression of an inner reality. It is also the actor’s bodily presence in front of the spectator – a presence consisting of continuous change and growth, sustained by the flow of energies in the body. “The tensions which secretly govern our normal way of being physically present come to the surface in the performer, become visible, unexpectedly.”⁵ Michael Chekhov further probes this claim and asserts that the body must become animated not only by the energies necessary for the execution of everyday actions, but also by its creative

impulses. "The actor's body can be of optimum value to him only when motivated by an increasing flow of artistic impulses; only then can it be more refined, flexible, expressive and, most vital at all, sensitive and responsive to the subtleties which constitute the creative artist's inner life."⁶ Contact with the creative impulses endows acting with originality and ingenuity. In absence of this contact, it risks sinking to the level of a non-artistic and shallow copy of some of life's situations. Creativity in acting is rooted in the body, not merely in the bodily striving but, more specifically, in the basic impulse to respond to values and feelings, and to invent original forms.

It is useful, following the fine analysis of Chekhov, to distinguish between striving to do something and striving to achieve something.⁷ The former leads to the accomplishment of movements without aiming at a goal. The latter seeks to reach an objective and produce a result. It may consist of impersonating another human being, creating a form out of various materials, or of composing a melody. Having an objective, such as representing some subtle features of a character, or making a painting or a sculpture, does not necessarily mean that the formative activity consciously summons up the bodily striving in order to reach its goal. Gregory Bateson noted that, during a formative activity, artists do not deliberately seek to exploit the body's creative resources. "The artist may have a conscious purpose to sell his picture, even perhaps a conscious purpose to make it. But in the making he must necessarily relax that arrogance in favor of a creative experience in which his conscious mind plays only a small part."⁸ Artists, therefore, gratefully welcome the so-called "good moments" during which ideas, solutions, or forms come upon them, and their hands seem to be guided by impulses lodged inside their body.

Both forms of striving elude instrumental control in the sense that we may repress them, hold them in check, or consciously further and orient their dynamism, but we cannot produce them at will. They announce themselves as a continually available energy concealed in our body. Although rather schematic and brief, the foregoing account of some activities makes clear that the body is much more than an object that we are able to hold at a distance and manipulate according to some ideas or wishes. It is, above all, a subject endowed with a general vitality that encompasses all our activities and establishes itself as a fundamental condition of our human existence.⁹

THE CARRYING BODY | Paul Ricoeur considers this involuntary activity of the body, together with the conscious will, as primary anthropological characteristics: "Human existence is like a dialogue with a multiple protean involuntary – motives, resistances, irremediable situations – to which willing responds by choice, effort, or consent. I submit to the body which I guide."¹⁰ Growth or decline, gradual modification of our physical appearance, muscular vigour, or articulate mobility are just some of the involuntary occurrences of our body. In the course of our personal becoming, we undergo several important changes that we have to acknowledge. In a similar manner, moods overwhelm us and we have the impression of being pulled by them. They can be so intense, as in the case of a piercing grief, that sometimes we feel as if they exist independently and control the body. It would be accurate to say that the body, which wants to preserve a peaceful existence, is overpowered by the body.¹¹

The observation of these experiences prompted Jürg Zutt to assert that we are truly carried by a certain number of organs, of physiologi-

cal and psychological functions, and the irreducible fact of "being carried" (*Getragensein*) defines and guides our personal becoming. Being carried somewhere in space and time is one of the original modes of being a body. Paradoxically, we are carried and, at the same time, it is ourselves that carries us. "This being-carried carries us, from the spatial point of view, far in space and, from the temporal point of view, far in time, into the future. We *are* ourselves this carrying that carries us since I am my becoming: I become."¹² In other words, we are delivered to the autonomous vitality of our body since the needs, tendencies, changes, and desires of our carrying body precede and resist our will. When, for instance, we are hungry, we become aware of the modification of our carrying body and the hold that such a state has on us. Likewise, when we are fully immersed in cutting stone or wood, we may note that our own skilful movements are guided by a powerful "creative urge" (*Schaffensdrang*) within the hands.¹³

The body announces itself with its autonomy; without any voluntary decision or planning, our carrying body undergoes some modifications: it becomes hungry, restless, energetic, sad, or tired. Such modifications should not be understood as mere physiological changes. We become hungry in a personal manner, not independently of a specific situation, and in relation to a unity of factors conveying some specific meaning. Unless we are completely exhausted, we become tired when faced with a certain number of tasks we select and pursue. The bodily "not-being-able-to-do" cannot be separated from the subjective "not-wanting-to-do," from our personal response to an invitation or from a request to do something. The body that carries us is not a machine working independently of the world in which we find ourselves with our personal history and projects.

The world presents itself with qualities according to the change that occurs in our carrying body. Therefore, the various bodily modes of being – hunger, fatigue, thirst, or sadness – are not merely inner states, but also ways of finding ourselves in our concrete environment, relating to meaningful things, events, or people, and acting either upon or with them. Restless and agitated, we relate to other automobile drivers in a completely different manner than when we are calm and relaxed. We perceive a house as a welcoming haven if we are suddenly in danger.¹⁴

An agreeable and convenient manner of experiencing our body is in the state of well-being or fitness. Most often unnoticed, this state is characterized by the pleasure of finding ourselves in good physical and mental condition and having available energy to undertake various tasks. We find the immediate surroundings stimulating and friendly, and tend to relate to them with a sense of unity, integration, and even intimacy. We perceive the road, the field, or the hill as supports of our intentions and responsive to our actions; we view them as means that assist us in our carefully planned or spontaneous initiatives and allow us to reach our objectives. While moving, we may reach our destination with ease and efficiency, or we may ignore the principles of economy of effort and usefulness. We make, then, various detours, jump frolicsomenly, or remove and replace things without being able to give account of the functional value of our actions and the ways by which we execute them.¹⁵

ENDOGENOUS CAPABILITIES | According to Hubertus Tellenbach, the bodily impulses, drives, and urges are endogenous realities.¹⁶ They dwell in the body and move it in a rhythmic manner in order to attain an objective and thus fill a void. Various bodily processes and ways of being, such as being tired, fit, ill, or sleepy – induced by the dynamics

of the inner "vital flux" (*Lebensfluss*) – are also endogenous developments. Endogeneity refers to the origin of all these transitory experiences. It is a ground that shapes a manifold of vital processes and events. Some hereditary and permanent elements, such as talent, disposition, typical attitude, body type, characteristic of the intelligence, and dominant temperament, are also grounded in, and emerge from, this "original shaping power" (*ursprünglich prägende Macht*). Beyond some specific aptitudes and constant tendencies, a certain number of bodily capabilities are also rooted in the endogenous sphere. Since it pertains to the life of the individual, this sphere grants to all vital processes, traits, and dispositions a particular unity.

Whatever originates in, and develops from, this patterning force is not at our disposal the same way as, for example, an instrument can be. It is possible to modify the length and rhythmicity of our sleep and wakeful state. However, we cannot eliminate their periodicity. We are able to alter our body, but if we do, we succeed only to a certain extent. The process of individual maturation eludes our control. We cannot "will" responses to arise spontaneously from our body. The basic figure of *endogenous*, manifesting itself in our attitudes and movements, does not yield to a conscious manipulation; it resists instrumental domination. When we feel the need for food or rest, or instantaneously overcome an unexpected obstacle, we notice that something happens to us. Tellenbach speaks of the "non-voluntary," "non-disposable" aspects of vital processes, referring to their common feature: the *pathic*. The endogenous aspects of our experiences are not the results of our conscious decision and effort: *we are subjected to them*.

Buytendijk also considers the *endogenous* as a fundamental characteristic of human being. "The 'endon' refers to the hidden ground of the

'authentic' being-able of the person as human, considered as much in his general humanity as in his individual psychophysical existence."¹⁷ This "being able" is understood as both a hidden and a perceptible reality: while conversing, we perceive the act of speaking, but not the gift of speech as such. The human disposition of speaking is both bodily (as the capacity to structure itself in order to produce sounds) and personal (as the capacity to communicate meanings through the body).

Endogenous processes do not occur in an isolated manner, independently of a concrete context: our needs manifest themselves in our daily life; our dispositions and particular competencies unfold "in the full reciprocity" with people and objects.¹⁸ From this follows that we are able to exert some influence on this fundamental interaction. Since our talents and capabilities reveal a significant plasticity, we are able, through appropriate education, to refine and improve them. For Tellenbach, the expression "natural and intersubjective cosmos" refers to actions and material things that give an orientation to the endogenous processes and powers. Thus the *endogenous* is not merely a necessary reality but also a possible and desirable one, in the sense that, by withdrawing our will, we are able to adapt our action to their demand and to enhance their effect.¹⁹ Alluding to Goethe's ideas on the development of the eye, Tellenbach evokes two ways of considering our sensory gifts: we can instruct them, or we can be instructed by them.²⁰

Does surrender to the body's autonomous and available dispositions truly offer some beneficial results? Tellenbach speaks of the significant "advantage" of the *endogenous* when he evokes the "real" and "incomprehensible" knowledge that inhabits the organs of the animals and allows them to carry out meaningful actions in the absence of experience and reflection.²¹ He believes, however, that "the instruction that a human

being can receive primarily from his organs is relatively limited, though not altogether absent."²² (An infant is instructed by his organ when, for example, he starts to play and experiment with sounds and movements.) The knowledge that allows the animal to adapt itself to the environment can be found in the human body as well. However, according to Tellenbach, such a knowledge plays a less-significant role in the formation of human behaviour than it does in the development of the animals' movement and sensory perception. Humans need, above all, verbal instruction and social interaction.

True, before acting promptly and inventively while addressing a challenge, we must first learn most of the movement patterns. Whether we want to drive a car or ride a bicycle, we must represent and live a particular movement as a global form, a structure in which certain elements receive more emphasis than others. The visual control of these dominant elements must gradually give way to their "understanding." To understand a movement is to grasp and co-ordinate its various elements and, through repeated practice, feel that the form is adequate to deal with the environmental conditions. The adequacy required for cycling is obviously different from that of swimming. All the exercises that we carry out tend to promote a feeling of correctness and adequacy. "If this occurs," writes Buytendijk, "a melody of movement resonates in us and moves us like a dancer."²³ Without the control over our body, and familiarity with a skill, the execution of every single movement would require renewed efforts of assimilation, monitoring, and regulation. As Claude Bruaire noted, through learning, the "formless resources" (*informe énergétique*) of the body become "human" and "available" and we have the movement at our "habitual disposal" (*disposition habituelle*), ready to be used at any moment.²⁴ Thus, we come to acquire, sometimes not without some toil,

a great variety of motor patterns: we learn to walk, jump, swim, throw a ball, drive a vehicle, or play on the piano.

Once a motor structure is assimilated and understood, and the natural dynamism of the body is brought into action, the movements follow each other harmoniously and the necessary adjustments or variations happen by themselves. The body exhibits both its own organic powers and its already acquired versatile technical understanding. Its natural spontaneity has become truly human. The endogenous knowledge of our body announces itself to a greater extent than what is recognized by Tellenbach. The "spontaneous involuntary" (*involontaire spontané*) of our body allows us not only to respond successfully to the requirements of a situation, but also to invent all sorts of new movements. Drawing their energy from the body's natural dynamic striving, spontaneity, together with other capabilities, is an endogenous resource, offering guidance to a great number of actions, from the most elementary to the most unusual.

John Blacking's observation summarizes the train of thought of the present chapter: "Human behaviour and action are extensions of capabilities that are already in the body, and the forms and content of these extensions are generated by patterns of interaction between bodies in the context of different social and physical environments."²⁵ These capabilities are of central concern for phenomenological anthropology. In the pages that follow, I discuss them in more detail and highlight their significance.