



THE CLEVER BODY

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INTRODUCTION

DISEMBODIMENT | I had long wondered why the philosophy of body was not considered an academic discipline in the same way as the philosophy of mind, language, or art. Yet it is now the focus of academic interest as never before. Eminent scientists undertake, from the most diverse angles, the study of our physiological condition. Numerous analyses deal with the complex relationship between societal and political power and health and cultural practices. Apart from academic circles, the body is in the forefront of our everyday life. Of all ages, and in great numbers, men and women practice some kind of physical

activity: they run, ski, swim, or take daily classes of yoga or dance. There is a growing concern – perhaps even an obsession – for the preservation of health, well-being, and youthful appearance. Nowadays, the treatment of emotional and narcissistic disturbances includes the recovery of body awareness, the complete relaxation of musculature, and the refinement of postures and movements. People respond to rock or gospel music by moving their entire body, wearing unusual clothing and costumes, and enjoying an enhanced feeling of togetherness, a sense of *communitas*. Whether one is involved in rock climbing, *t'ai chi*, or the learning of postural improvement, the body is the centre of multiple interests and attentions and is recognized as an essential condition of self-discovery and self-realization.

Some philosophers and sociologists tend to view the “resurgence of the body” with critical suspicion and growing pessimism. They contend that the current exaltation of, and preoccupation with, bodily experiences constitutes a superficial reaction to our long-standing relation of estrangement. In essence, even though the body has become an object of vigorous training and refined care, nothing has changed: “The love-hate relationship with the body colors all more recent culture,” argue Horkheimer and Adorno. “The body is scorned and rejected as something inferior, and at the same time desired as something forbidden, objectified, and alienated.”¹

Indeed, when we pay close attention to some aspects of work, education, and health care, we must admit that this judgment is far from being unfounded. Being at the centre of so many interests and activities, the body is vulnerable to marginalization and neglect. Let us consider, for instance, how technological progress affects the bodily dimension of our lives.

The rapid spread of technological devices gives rise to the loss of immediate and intuitive contacts with tangible realities, the growing "abstractness" (*Entsinnlichung*), as Arnold Gehlen called it.² Due to the division of labour and the expansion of mechanization and automatization, the sensory contact of workers with the various material realities – stone, iron, or wood – becomes scarce. As the power over our natural environment increases, the bodily interaction with it decreases. The quest for domination and control cannot occur without stepping back from "the personal and immediate involvement in industry and commerce."³ Therefore, as Albert Borgmann pointed out, the bodily disengagement leads to the gradual degeneration and atrophy of the workers' original skills.⁴ Computerization minimizes the sensory aspects of their task. The inability to touch, smell, hear, or intuit the transformation process of various materials produces a sense of loss and vulnerability. The "embodied knowledge" is traded for the "mental involvement," the tactile response to any felt disturbance for the capacity to act upon abstract information. In her illuminating book, Shoshana Zuboff summed up the result of the "reskilling process" in factories: "Absorption, immediacy, and organic responsiveness are superseded by distance, coolness, and remoteness."⁵ Where distance is introduced and preserved, the bodily ingenuity can no longer play a significant role. The worker's body has an opportunity to move according to its own natural rhythm, and spontaneously respond to any unforeseen challenge, only if it makes an unmediated contact with some materials.

The growing number of "defensive devices" (Borgmann) puts a considerable distance between the body and the natural surrounding. In addition, they impoverish and flatten the perceptual field. These devices protect not only from temperature and light variations, but also from

physical exertion, from the delight of encountering unexpected situations and of overcoming some unforeseen obstacles. Today tourist travel to distant destinations illustrates quite well the ongoing attenuation of bodily commerce with reality. Daniel J. Boorstin remarked that we have lost our ability to travel and gradually became simple tourists.⁶ The travellers of previous ages faced the unknown and unfamiliar, dared hardship, kept alive their sense of adventure, and even risked their lives. Modern tourists tend to carefully plan their journey, shy away from all discomforts and risks, and expect “interesting” things to happen to them. Their journey to far off lands is no longer a strenuous and adventurous undertaking. It has become a commodity, a “spectator sport.” Aeroplanes, buses, cars, and hotels have formidable insulating effects; they allow “sight-seeing,” but no direct contact with indigenous communities. People driving through a natural setting in an air-conditioned car, while listening to their familiar music, remain untouched by the richness and depth of the landscape. They are cut off from the movement of life; they are unable to absorb it. “Such people,” observes Borgmann, “have not felt the wind of the mountains, have not smelled the pines, have not heard the red-tailed hawk, have not sensed the slopes in their legs and lungs, have not experienced the cycle of day and night in the wilderness.”⁷ For many tourists, the perception of a mountain or a deer is little more than a picture seen through the cameras’ viewfinder. Since they have no first-hand knowledge of the nature around them, they also fail to engage their bodily strength and discernment; their mediated experience goes together with the idleness of their body.

“The traveler, like the television viewer, experiences the world in narcotic terms; the body moves passively, desensitized in space, to destinations set in a fragmented and discontinuous urban geography.”⁸ Richard

Sennett's comment refers to our daily urban life. We reach our destinations by car, bus, or train, covering greater distances, without deploying corresponding levels of effort. Robert J. Yudell also holds that "we are increasingly replacing our own body movement with propulsion of the immobilized body. We are replacing motion with 'frozen speed'."⁹ In many public places – banks, stores, and libraries – we are even exempted from the task of opening doors with our hands. We encounter more objects than we did fifty years ago but do so at the price of executing a reduced number and variety of movements. If, for some reason, an unexpected mechanical failure occurs, we are challenged by a wide range of almost forgotten actions: we have to climb, bend, jump, and so forth. The disturbance triggers our bodily vigour and skill. A temporary loss of the centralized system of electricity, for example, returns us to an intimate contact with natural fuels such as coal and wood; encountering their resistance, we suddenly rediscover the unused capacities of our hands.

As I ponder the bodily engagement in a technologically shaped city, I learn that runners are now able to use "smart shoes" equipped with a computer chip that adjusts their cushioning level to the runner's size and stride. If this intelligent device is able to "sense" and adapt its shape to the characteristics of the ground, I wonder how such a discharge will affect the sensibility and inventiveness of the legs. Will this relief device make the use and refinement of some bodily capabilities completely obsolete? More questions could be raised when the dream of the "smart home," controlled under one central command, becomes an accessible reality.

To be sure, the swelling abundance of computers, cellular phones and other similar devices produces some very beneficial effects: they create instant connection between people living great distances from each

other, promote collaboration of all sorts, and even nurture friendship and love. But the expansion of electronic communication also reduces the number of face-to-face, spontaneous encounters on the streets and generates a web of disembodied forms of communication. It also erodes social skills.

Devices provide people a “hyperintelligence,” as Albert Borgmann has shown, but also make them lessen or lose their bodily presence. “The hyperintelligent sensorium, just because it is so acute and wide-ranging, presents the entire world to our eyes and ears and renders the remainder of the human body immobile and irrelevant. The symmetry of world and body falls to the level of a shallow if glamorous world and a hyperinformed yet disembodied person.”¹⁰ Disembodiment is not merely a well-informed but also an “unworldly” way to exist. It produces the tendency to ignore the subtle resonances of the body and, as a result, to relate to objects and people with emotional detachment. Furthermore, insensitivity arises from the routine of daily life, the lack of immediate contact with the concrete, and the inability to invest activities and objects with a symbolic content. One’s sense of inner emptiness becomes more acute in the presence of an environment that appears impersonal and insubstantial.¹¹

R. D. Laing made the distinction between the embodied and the disembodied self. Whereas the former “is fully implicated in bodily desire, and the gratifications and frustrations of the body,” the latter considers the body “more as one object among other objects in the world than as the core of the individual’s own being.”¹² The disembodied self is a performing self in the sense that, preoccupied with appearances, it displays a calculated, controlled, self-conscious behaviour. Not only does it dissimulate moods and desires under a perfectly homogeneous appearance,

but it also speaks and acts in an artificial manner. When one's own being continuously becomes the object of critical scrutiny, the capacity for spontaneous actions, intricate rhythmic patterns, and creative mimetic gestures is also paralyzed.

THE CLEVER BODY | Although I am well aware of the numerous factors that promote passivity and disengagement, I am not inclined to say that our bodily capabilities play only an insignificant role in our lives. On the one hand, various human activities – gardening, painting, or dancing – still allow us to rely on our bodily resources and thus feel ourselves, as it were, carried by them. On the other hand, even the refusal or inability to act in accordance with our bodily impulses cannot completely eliminate spontaneous and surprising reactions. An absolute control over the body is just as impossible as is a total integration or a lasting immersed state. Therefore, it would be mistaken to think that, in all our sensori-motor experiences, the disembodied mind proposes and the mindless body disposes.

We may, for instance, consider certain current educational methods and practices pertaining to our embodied life as expressions of resistance and a correction of the noxious effects of our technological civilization. Their purpose is to reject the obsolete conception that cuts off mind from the body and considers the latter as a complicated machine.

Philosophers, psychologists, and students of the anthropological medicine bring to our attention the limits and insufficiencies of a scientific method that ignores all the dynamic and reciprocal relations the body entertains in space and time. One can never understand the living body if one persists in treating it as a self-contained, mechanical structure, unrelated to a wider context. Thanks to its resources and communicative

processes, the body continuously transcends its purely physical aspects; it is a dynamic, moving form, an “orientation” (C. A. van Peursen), and an ongoing process of “bodying forth” (Medard Boss).¹³

In the present volume, I would like to show that the body is a mobile structure, endowed with some capabilities that we are able to dent or nurture, but unable to eliminate or create. Just like the heart in the organism, the living body is the source of an irreducible, autonomous, and creative dynamism, indispensable for the multiple relations we entertain with the world.¹⁴ I propose to describe and systematize in some detail the activities that benefit from the body's indwelling wisdom, consisting, above all, of delicate responsiveness and astonishing inventiveness.

I am not concerned with the various physiological systems and automatic processes that secure and preserve an organic stability essential for a healthy existence.¹⁵ The focus here is on our “prereflective body” (van den Berg), on the forms of its attitudes and movements, through which we communicate with things and people. “Prereflective life, that is, life as it is lived in our day-to-day existence, has no knowledge of physiology.”¹⁶ Van den Berg's statement applies not only to the acting subject – an organist who plays a fugue with the outmost agility – but also to the observer who analyzes and describes a specific motor experience. F.J.J. Buytendijk is right in thinking that we cannot understand from physiology how an acrobat or a violinist simultaneously executes some complicated movement patterns.¹⁷

Observing human activities prompted my interest in this study. I was stirred by the obvious fact: “the world is full of movement,” in the words of the American dancer Merce Cunningham. Full of intelligent movement. Eminent thinkers have also brought to my attention this kind of capacity, and I am indebted to them for their insights. They have argued

that the proper understanding of bodily intelligence is an indispensable condition for the discussion of the basic features of human existence. If we want to throw light on social relations, language, and artistic activities, or examine how we design and inhabit our living space, we cannot ignore how we experience our body. Therefore, the anthropological theories, which disregard the bodily basis of human life, are incomplete and contain serious flaws.

Etienne Gilson, in his lectures on the art of painting, rejects the view of those philosophers who claim that the art resides wholly in the mind and the hands merely execute the orders they receive. He admits that some painters, stressing the all-importance of the part played by the mind in order to gain a better recognition for their profession, are also guilty of generating such a misconception. Experience shows, however, that a painter, though in possession of a representation of the work to be done, relies on the capabilities of a "progressively educated hand." "Man does not think *with* his hands, but the intellect of a painter certainly thinks *in* his hands, so much so that, in moments of manual inspiration, an artist can sometimes let the hand do its job without bothering too much about what it does."¹⁸ If philosophers, declares Gilson, instead of only thinking about art, were required to make a painting, they would "realize how clever the body of an intelligent being actually is."¹⁹

The Dutch biologist Frederik J. J. Buytendijk is known mostly for his works on pain, play, and movement. In these contributions, as well as in his *Prolegomena to an Anthropological Physiology*, he makes valuable observations pertaining to the body. Beyond the previously accepted distinction between "thing-body" and "lived-body," he emphasizes the difference between the states of being conscious or unconscious of the body. In our non-reflective relation to the world, our body is never a mere

apparatus reacting to some stimuli, but an evolving subjectivity responding to meaningful sensory qualities. The responses to the surroundings comprise both activity and passivity, moving and being moved: "Each movement, including the looking, is primarily a pathic moment, a form of self-movement through being moved."²⁰ Thanks to our already acquired technical dispositions and the awareness of the demand of the actual situation, we know how to perform appropriate actions. Buytendijk speaks of the "available body" and this availability is manifest during the execution of a great variety of movements without conscious control. In addition, our body possesses a remarkable capacity to sense what can and should be done in a situation – it is endowed with a sense of values based on past experiences and open to future possibilities. Because of such an implicit awareness of norms and values, we are able "to think with our hands."²¹

Aldous Huxley's essays on education present a brief but original analysis of our human nature.²² Consciousness is obviously a central feature of human life. Our conscious self is associated with a certain number of what Huxley calls "merging not-selves." These, for their functioning, do not require attention and guidance. However, our conscious self can affect them in some ways: it can distort or curtail their contribution or, by earnestly abandoning itself to their powers, intensify their influence and effectiveness.

First there is our personal not-self, our habitual way of acting and reacting that is the result of the sum of experiences preserved by our body. Another not-self is our system of autonomously functioning physiological processes. These are in charge, for example, of oxygen supply, digestion, regulation of temperature, or muscular activity. A no less

important not-self is our bodily intelligence; it finds and proposes solutions for unique and unforeseeable problems. In moments of inspiration and illumination, we surrender ourselves to a spiritual not-self inhabiting a much wider realm. On rare occasions, the spiritual experience of the "ultimate ground of reality" makes us aware of the "universal not-self."

The aim of education, as Huxley sees it, is not merely the verbal transmission of abstract knowledge – ideas, theories, and information. There is much more to be done than merely sharpening the students' intellectual powers. The body needs as much care and attention as does the mind. "Our business as educators is to discover how human beings can make the best of both worlds – the world of self-conscious, verbalized intelligence and the world of the unconscious intelligences immanent in the mind-body, and always ready, if we give them half a chance, to do what, for the unaided ego, is the impossible."²³ That chance is given to the bodily intelligence when students acquire the art of combining relaxation with effort, "the art of getting out of the way."

For this essay on the clever body, I drew upon numerous other sources as well, particularly upon the contributions of the leading figures of anthropological medicine.²⁴ The research of these original thinkers is not guided by the traditional dichotomy of mind and body. It is rather concerned with the dynamic and complex correlation between the human subject and the world – a correlation, in which sensing and moving, space and time, reason and emotion, capabilities and opportunities are not rigorously separated.²⁵ This reciprocal interaction can be healthy or pathological, personal or impersonal, objective or intimate, general or unique, natural or symbolic. Without dropping the demands of objectivity, this approach examines the complex system of Gestalten

and also communicative actions in concrete circumstances. It prefers the active and sympathetic participation in lived and global experiences to the detached and analytical investigation of isolated processes. The outcome of such an enquiry is not a "fine theory" but a "plausible insight" that invites the readers to reflect on the characteristics and significance of their own experiences.²⁶ This book is a modest attempt to achieve this result.