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Re-educating the Body

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Abstract

This article means to investigate the philosophical concept of human embodiment in relation to physical education. As human beings not only do we have a body that we can control, but we 'are' our body and live embodied in the world, as the German thinker, Helmuth Plessner, puts it in one of his many contributions to the philosophical anthropology of the twentieth century. Elaborating on this concept of human embodiment, the article explores a form of physical re-education that takes as its starting point this aspect of being in the body which has been and is still being underestimated even in the physical educational system. Re-educating the body in this aspect includes becoming more aware of the states, postures and expressions of the body so as to be able to remain connected to the body and to get to know oneself better as being in the body.

Keywords: embodiment, re-education, Helmuth Plessner, body awareness

Introduction

In an essay on the body and how we talk about our body, the French poet and essayist Paul Valéry writes:

We speak of it to others as of a thing that belongs to us; but for us it is not entirely a thing; and it belongs to us a little less than we belong to it [...].
(Valéry, 1964, pp. 35–36)

What Valéry points to in these lines is the fact that we most often relate to our body as to an object of which we find ourselves in possession and in control; but there exists another side to this matter that we call 'our body', and it is that we also belong to the body without being fully in possession or in control of it.

The first to explore this last aspect philosophically in the twentieth century is the German thinker Helmuth Plessner, who describes it as being in the body. As human beings not only do we have a body, but we 'are' our body and live embodied in the world, as he puts it in one of his many contributions to the philosophical anthropology of the twentieth century. Although having a body and looking at it as if it were a thing remains the privileged human way of relating to the body, as Valéry states in his essay, it should not be forgotten, as it has been so often, that we humans

also live in the body. The great majority of philosophers from Plato to Kant have conceived of the body as something of which the mind should be in control without considering the aspect of belonging to or being in the body, which Valéry points to and Plessner explores philosophically as an essential feature of being human.

The aim of this article is to elaborate on the concept of human embodiment so as to show the relevance of a form of physical education that takes as its starting point this aspect of being in the body. Insofar as we human beings are our body—as much as we have one—physical education could not only claim to explore an essential feature of being human that other subjects of the educational system do not. This article will argue that physical education should take a step further and insist upon re-educating its students primarily in the aspect of being in the body, which has been and is still being underestimated even in the physical educational system. The term ‘re-educate’ means, on one hand, that this kind of physical re-education has to do with remoulding the body consciously and, on the other hand, that this is something that physical education should keep taking up, as it really belongs to it as a natural part of working with the body. Re-educating the body in this sense includes becoming more aware of the states, postures and expressions of the body so as to be able to remain connected to the body and to get to know oneself better as being in the body.

Having a Body and Being Embodied

Helmuth Plessner began his academic work in two very different fields of investigation, zoology and philosophy. What might seem to be a rather unfit constellation actually ends up enriching his study of the ways in which we human beings relate to ourselves and our bodies. His scientific knowledge of animal life gives him a reference point from which he can approach human embodiment: whereas ‘the animal lives out of and into its own centre’ unconsciously, the human being is not that ‘centred’, precisely because its consciousness creates a certain distance from itself, its own body and its surroundings, which most animals do not experience (Plessner, 2003a, p. 360).

Plessner sees a link between the development of human consciousness and the evolutionary important step that our forefathers took as they began walking around upright. This released their heads and their arms from the ground, enabling them to ‘handle’ and to take possession of their surroundings in hitherto unknown ways. Being less ‘stuck’ to the world and maintaining a distance from it, they slowly discovered not just the world around them, but also their own bodies as something that they could possess and control (Plessner, 2003b, pp. 63, 172–176, 180–182).

Plessner is well aware that the great majority of animals are in remarkable control of their bodies. They control them through and through without at the same time being at a distance. Their body control is instinctive and centred. The human control of the body, in contrast, has gone through a development, marked by the separation from the ground and the distance from its surroundings, which leaves every human being standing, so to speak, on its own two feet, a bit more unstable and a little less centred than an animal. Every newborn child still has to discover for itself that it is more difficult to keep its balance standing upright than with the whole body or the four members on the ground. To this is added the relatively late maturing of the

human being and the inhibition of its instincts which makes adaptation and keeping its balance a continuous and strenuous effort. It is, however, thanks to this whole development that the human species has come to dominate the world and its own body to an incredible degree; but it is also the same development that exposes every human being to the danger of losing contact with its own body and to regard it only as a manipulable thing in its possession.

To have a body entails a certain objectivization that Plessner sees as an integral part of controlling one's own body. However, the danger of losing contact with one's own body becomes real when this objectifying approach is seen as the only way of relating to the body, which is thereby turned into a mere instrument. If Valéry is right when he assumes that the body to us as human beings is not entirely a thing and that it belongs a little less to us than we belong to it, then we really stand in danger of losing more than we gain by turning the body into something like an instrument. We lose sight of what Plessner calls living in the body or being embodied, which means to live submerged in the body without being able to lift ourselves out of this 'bundle' and maintain a distance from it. The shape of the human body determines in great part how we perceive and conceive of the world and is itself moulded by the ways in which we have and hold our bodies.

The radically new philosophical insight that Plessner presents in his anthropological investigations is that as human beings we have a body, which we relate to and speak of as if it were a thing, and at the same time we live in the body without making it into an object, although we might not be aware of it all the time. In contrast to the animal, which lives centred in its body, the human being lives eccentrically, by which Plessner understands that it senses and experiences itself as living in the body (Plessner, 2003a, pp. 360–365, 2003b, pp. 64, 190–195.). It is barred from returning once and for all to its own centre and being purely instinctive, as if evolution had not taken place. As human beings we speak of our body and what we feel, but not only that, we can also experience our body as a barrier or as an obstacle, for instance when suffering from a disease. An animal, surely, also senses its own body, but it does not form a concept of having it or of having a disease, which is something that pertains only to us, as we can reach a point where we feel ourselves stuck in the body as if we were living in a jail.

Plessner very often compares the particular human aspect of having a body in which one is alive to being stuck or submerged in an opaque 'sheath', which is a rather sinister, though very common analogy in the Occidental tradition (Plessner, 2003b, pp. 178, 223, 310).¹ Although the body under certain circumstances will appear like that to its carrier, it is far from the only way in which we human beings experience our body while at the same time being in it. In the following section I will try to show the relevance to physical education of Plessner's philosophical–anthropological concept of having a body and being at the same time in it. A discussion of other modern investigations of human embodiment, and of what could be called the neglect of human embodiment in philosophy and education, is also presented.

The Relevance of Human Embodiment to Physical Education

In her book *Embodiment and education*, Marjorie O'Loughlin addresses 'the ever-present tendency in education towards the de-corporealisation of knowledge' and proposes

instead ‘to return embodied subjects to the centre of all discussions about knowing and the production of knowledge’ (O’Loughlin, 2006, p. 8). The tendency to privilege cognition and vision at the expense of sensing the body and being aware of its multiple senses is, she sustains, present in ‘the dominant curriculum discourses’:

At the formal and institutional levels the curriculum is still to a large extent evaluated in terms of whether or not it conforms to standards of rationality and abstraction. (O’Loughlin, 2006, p. 16)

This rationalistic view of education forms part and parcel of Occidental philosophy, which has made ‘the mind’s eye’ into its main scope in metaphysics, epistemology, ethics and even pedagogy. In its most radicalized version, which O’Loughlin finds in the modern consumer society, the body is seen as one more possession to be corrected and manipulated so as to fulfil its physical desires and to live up to the ideals of materialism. In the midst of all the commercials on walls and screens that speak mostly to our eyes and turn us into spectators, we tend to be forgetful of ourselves as embodied beings in a world that touches us and meets us through our senses from our feet to the top of our heads.

It is because of these tendencies in modern society to devalue the sensual and emotional potential of the body that O’Loughlin calls for urgency in reassessing ‘educational theory, practice and policy’:

To assist in overcoming the still influential view of knowledge as disembodied, an embodied and multi-sensorial approach needs to be taken to the curriculum and to pedagogy. (O’Loughlin, 2006, p. 52)

It is not the purpose of this article to follow the author in such major considerations of the whole educational system. However, her diagnosis of the tendency to lose sight of being embodied in the educational system and her proposal to investigate ‘what it is to be a body’ and its ‘connection to the forces which shape it’ (O’Loughlin, 2006, pp. 4–5) are pertinent also to the curriculum of physical education. As Andrew Sparkes has observed, within physical education the body has most often been dealt with:

in a fragmented and mechanistic manner [...] as something to be dissected, manipulated, treated, measured, or performance-enhanced, in ways that reflected the biomedical roots of this subject as it developed in schools and institutions of higher education. Regardless of discipline, the body has tended to be viewed as an object in an abstracted, theoretical manner. (Sparkes, 1999, p. 171)²

The discussion on the absence of the lived body in physical education is not about denying the important role that a more objectifying understanding of the body should still play in physical education, nor is this discussion confined to the Anglo-Saxon world. In the late 1960s Plessner and colleagues published an anthology on cultivating the body in sport and ‘gymnastics’, as physical education is often called in Germany and the Scandinavian countries (Plessner, Bock, & Grupe, 1967). In this publication several contributors stress that one of the main purposes of physical education (*Leibeserziehung*) should be to cultivate the *Leib*. In German there are two words for

body, '*Leib*' and '*Körper*': the first word refers to the lived body, whereas the second, which comes from the Latin *corpus*, connotes the body as an object.

Two of the contributors in the anthology demonstrate how the integration of the lived body or *Leib* in physical education goes back to a romantic idea of education as play and recreation (Röthig, 1967; Schmitz, 1967). The learner is invited to follow the flow and rhythm of nature spontaneously without making the body into an object. In contrast to this organic understanding of how to educate the body stands a more systematic training of the body, based on physiological and anatomical knowledge, which has its origin in Western medicine. Seen from this perspective, which Sparkes in the quotation above calls biomedical, the body is almost exclusively seen as *Körper* or *corpus*, as something that can and should be controlled and disciplined so as to strengthen and straighten it out.

The problem is that these two approaches to the human body have almost always been opposed, and so have their representatives, the educators. In the end, the systematic and scientific view has gained the upper hand, which is why theoreticians such as O'Loughlin and Sparkes have begun to draw attention to the more organic pedagogical approach that asks about how we experience ourselves as being alive in the body and embodied in the world. Inspired by Alasdair MacIntyre, O'Loughlin also calls this aspect of being body 'human animality' or 'creatural existence', which comes close to Plessner's conception of being in the body. Embodiment or *Verkörperung*, as Plessner calls it, is a somatic feature that we human beings share with the animals. What distinguishes us from the animals, however, is—as we saw earlier—that we are, to a greater or lesser degree, conscious of our embodied condition and can objectify our body. Plessner explains on more than one occasion that what makes human embodiment unique is that *Leib* and *Körper* are intertwined, so that we live in the body while being at the same time more or less aware of this fact (Plessner, 2003a, pp. 367–368, 2003b, pp. 355–357, 396–397). This insight into the ambiguity of the human somatic constitution is particularly relevant to physical education as it opens up a way to cultivate the body, where the two pedagogical approaches to the body mentioned above are not opposed, but complement one another.

We will return to this in the next section, where we look at some of the practical consequences that this philosophical–anthropological insight entails for the exercise of physical education. Before that I shall elaborate further on the concept of human embodiment, as there is more than one way to understand what is meant by this. Plessner's philosophical–anthropological studies on embodiment have hitherto been almost unknown. Even in Germany it was not until the last decades of the twentieth century that scholars began studying his work more thoroughly. The most influential philosopher of embodiment in the twentieth century was and still is Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose thoughts on the body's direct and immediate grasp of the world have inspired a lot of theoreticians as well as practitioners, especially within physical education. Using the German terminology, the human being is all *Leib* in the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, who takes every objectifying approach to the body to be mistaken.

To Plessner, whose pioneering work on embodiment came out in the 1920s, objectifying the body is not a misconceived way of relating to it, but is integrated in the

human somatic constitution. When we laugh, cry or fall ill the body appears to us as something of which we are not in control and still we are submerged in it. We suddenly find ourselves at a distance from our own body, but at the same time we might have the feeling, paradoxically enough, of falling deeper into it without being able to lift ourselves out of this 'skin'. In such situations we may come to realize that we both are and have a body, which is a double relation between being in the body as *Leib* and being at a distance from the body as *Körper*.

Merleau-Ponty barely touches upon this double relation and he says almost nothing about 'somatic sensations, such as explicit kinaesthetic and proprioceptive feelings', as Richard Schustermann has observed. Schustermann (2005, pp. 165–169) criticizes Merleau-Ponty for neglecting the fruitful option of lived bodily reflection through self-conscious awareness of the body.³ Although Plessner's examples of reflective body awareness are often cases of disturbance or disease, his concept of having a body and being at the same time embodied does make room for 'lived bodily reflection', which will prove to be a very useful phenomenological concept both practically and theoretically in physical education.

To summarize, the strong pedagogical tendency to favour abstract and conceptual thinking could be balanced from inside the educational system by a form of physical education where the key focus is human embodiment. Even physical education has been and still is influenced by a very theoretical, mechanistic way of looking at the body as an object to be disciplined, measured and performance-enhanced, to use the words of Andrew Sparkes. Now, there should still be room for this way of looking at the body, but if it is the only or most dominant way, then physical education might lose more than it gains. If Paul Valéry is right that the body belongs a little less to us than we belong to it, then physical education should not only make more room for, but also take as its starting point new ways of exploring this wider field of belonging to the body. Instead of basing the curriculum exclusively or mainly on the body as something that we have in our possession and in our control, there are good reasons to integrate from the start this corporeal field called human embodiment, which includes sensations, emotions, bodily expressions and postures, in physical education. Being in the body and being alive in it form a wide field—probably much wider than our conscious control of it—which can only be explored through a heightened awareness of what goes on inside the body. Plessner's philosophical–anthropological concept of having a body while being at the same time embodied can explain what it is that allows us to enhance our consciousness of the body even while we are doing exercise. It is not just that we are embodied beings like the animals, but we remain at a distance from our body while being embodied, and it is precisely this double relation of being simultaneously on the inside and on the outside that distinguishes our human animality and allows us to increase or even better to deepen our lived bodily awareness.

Physical Re-education

This last section is dedicated to the practical integration of the philosophical–anthropological conception of human embodiment in physical education. What were just called new ways of exploring consciously the human corporeal field of being and

belonging to the body were in fact developed in the West in the 1960s and 1970s, and if we look to the Orient this approach to the lived body belongs to a millenary tradition.⁴

In an article entitled 'Somatic literacy: Bringing somatic education into physical education' from 1994, Paul Linden tries to integrate some of these traditions, for instance the Feldenkrais Method and Aikido, into physical education. He defines somatic education as:

the educational field which examines the structure and function of the body as processes of lived experience, perception and consciousness [...] focusing in a practical way on the interactions of posture, movement, emotion, thought, self-concept and cultural values. (Linden, 1994, p. 15)

It is a similar approach to physical education that I will take here, although I will focus more on posture and movement without any intention of bringing something from the outside into physical education that was not somehow already there. It is true, as we have seen, that human embodiment has been almost absent in physical education, but as physical educators have never stopped working with the body, it is, as far as I can see, sufficient to reconceptualize physical education so as to bring out this aspect of somatic education.

What I understand by the term 'physical re-education' is the innovative way of working with the body that teaches us how to be more aware of its states, postures and expressions; much in the same way that postural re-education works with the conscious remoulding of the body. The following practical example of how to deepen our lived bodily consciousness is inspired by this therapeutic technique and also by Oriental body work.

Finding one's centre

Keeping the philosophical–anthropological insight into man's eccentric being in mind, the first bodily aspect to take up in physical education would reasonably be what Occidentals call the 'centre of gravity'. The Japanese name this centre *hara* and in Chinese traditions it is called *tan tien*. The important thing, however, is not the name, but how to locate this zone, which cannot be pointed out with mathematical precision, as it should be located from the inside through bodily awareness. It is situated just below the navel, inside the body, and forms a true centre from which every human being is able to keep and improve his or her balance. As stated earlier, standing and walking upright makes us humans into eccentric beings who are—more than other animals—vulnerable to losing our balance, which is why it is basic to learn how to keep it.

An easy way to start 'centring' one's body is to loosen the waist, relax the pelvic floor, and let the groins sink a bit so that the knees also bend slightly as if we were about to sit down in a chair. These adjustments, which have to be made consciously without force, permit the body to ground itself and sustain its own weight with a good grip on the floor, which is essential in keeping the balance. However, instead of sitting down we feel our body weight equally distributed in the lower body, which now forms

a firm base with increased strength in the legs. If the pelvic floor is relaxed, hanging loosely, then the lumbar region and the coccyx will also hang straight down making it possible to breathe and move the body more freely. The firm base liberates the upper part of the body from tension and facilitates the alignment of the back with the rest of the body.

Alternatively, one could also start this sort of training of body awareness lying on the floor and using the hands to bend the knees and lift them up towards the stomach. This movement makes the lumbar region relax immediately and gives one who practises the opportunity to be more conscious of his or her breathing from the centre of the body. Furthermore, the contact with the floor straightens the back and makes the shoulders sink naturally, especially when the legs are dropped, keeping the knees bent with the feet on the floor.

Whether standing upright or lying on the floor, this exercise consists in remaining conscious of the centre, even feeling it, whereafter one can move on to making conscious contact with other parts of the body. This is basic in all therapeutic methods or martial arts and should be so in physical education too, because if we are not able to find and to hold our own centre, so to speak, we will be caught off balance again and again. The unbalance will have to be continuously compensated for either by collapsing certain body parts or by building up tension, often without being conscious of this. For instance, many people accumulate a lot of tension around the abdomen and the waist, which not only limits the motility of the whole centre, but also restricts blood circulation in this area and in the legs, producing discomfort and even pain.

Grounding and centring the body in the way just described presents a form of physical education that explores human animality, understood as having a body of which one is in control while at the same time being in it. Much of the body work on the floor, grounding the body, heightens the sense—first of all the tactile sense—of being alive in the body. This should play a fundamental role in re-educating the body in the same way that most children uses the phase of crawling as a basis for increasing their stability and improving their balance. Thus, re-educating the body is really about taking something up that is most often left behind even in physical education, namely embodiment as a term for perceiving and experiencing with the body, as do the animal and the child. Instead of leaving behind these stages of development that still form part of our physical constitution, they are incorporated into education in ways that allow the practitioner to gain proprioceptive control of the body, i.e. sensing and being aware of the body through an inner equilibrium of tension, relaxation and coordination of different body parts. This sort of re-education promotes, rather than a control over the body, a control from inside the body developing a sense of the potential inherent in being embodied.

The elaborated concept of having a body and being at the same time embodied in no way excludes traditional forms of physical education or body training. On the contrary, the more knowledge the students have of the body, the more they will be able to relate consciously to each part of the body. Basing the reconceptualization of physical education on the awareness of being in and belonging to the body, but without excluding scientific, biomedical knowledge of the anatomy and the physiology of the body, opens a way to integrate the organic understanding of the natural, spontaneous

flow of the *Leib* with the systematic, power-enhancing training of the body as *Körper*. This second aspect of physical education does not in itself prepare the students to remain connected to and conscious of their bodies, which is first added with the deepening of body awareness that not only seeks to prevent unconscious unbalances from building up in the body, but will also help students to detect and correct bad postures and even to express themselves more consciously. Furthermore, as Paul Linden puts it, ‘somatic education methods’ offer a chance of bringing those who feel awkward and ashamed about engaging in fitness activities into the fold of active movers (Linden, 1994, pp. 16–17).

Re-education in this sense is not easy work, but is something that will have to be taken up again and again, as unbalance and tension are natural parts of body mechanics and should not be wiped away altogether. The purpose of lived bodily reflection is to release unnecessary and unconscious tension in the body and to use the energy that has been set free more consciously and intelligibly. Integrating body awareness training with physical education can help students to move and act in more efficient, strain-free ways without accumulating unnecessary tension in the body. This is important both for physical education itself, as it assists in enhancing physical performances and helps to prevent injuries, and also for the rest of the educational system and society in so far as it teaches us how to remain connected to the body. Physical re-education could form a new basis to fight the still more prevailing tendency in modern society, as well as in the educational system, to immobilize and even abandon the body, for instance spending hours at a desk or in front of a computer, using only mental energy without being conscious of the rest of the body. What it means to be physically educated should not be confined—if it ever has been—to ‘shape’, i.e. the form of the body and being in shape, but should include the conscious remoulding of the body.

Notes

1. Plato borrowed the saying that the body is a grave from the Orphics, and certain Christian traditions take the physical body to be nothing but inert matter from which a great part of the world’s evil springs.
2. See also Sparkes (2002, p. 146): ‘As I have argued elsewhere, much recent theorizing about the body has tended to be a cerebral, esoteric, and ultimately disembodied activity that has distanced us from the everyday embodied experiences of ordinary people. Where bodies have been focused on, they have been heavily theorized bodies, detached, distant, and for the most part lacking intimate connection to the lived experiences of the corporeal beings who are the objects of analytical scrutiny’.
3. For a recent discussion of the relevance of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology to physical education, see Thorburn (2008).
4. I am thinking of disciplines like Yoga and Qi Gong which we know belong to thousand-year-old traditions, although they have undergone many changes over the centuries.

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