
Chapter 13

Embodiment, Sport, and Meaning

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As even a cursory glance at the history of philosophy attests, the significant task of elucidating and resolving the problem of the interdependence of mind and body presents a plethora of intriguing and intricate difficulties. Indeed, David Hume (6: pp. 76-77) asserted that there is no "principle in all nature more mysterious than the union of soul with body, by which a supposed spiritual substance acquires such an influence over a material one that the most refined thought is able to actuate the grossest matter."

The recent literature in the philosophy of sport has addressed itself, in part, to anthropological inquiries investigating the nature and structure of man. Specifically, the question of the relationship of mind and body and its applicability to, or manifestation in, sport has been actively pursued (1; 7; 12; 17; 22: pp. 33-42; 24: pp. 37-57). Unfortunately, philosophical research efforts concerned with the problem of embodiment and sport have often produced expositions replete with imprecise statements, contestable assertions and, at times, unsupported or simply erroneous conclusions. Thus, it appears appropriate to investigate anew the basis of contemporary perceptions of the ontological structure of man and, subsequently, to clarify some of the essential components of man's engagement in sport in relation to the formulated parameters.

The systematic theory of the relationship between the human body and the human mind developed by René Descartes provided philosophy with a conception of man with which it has struggled for more than three centuries. It is, therefore, necessary to scrutinize, in a limited manner, the labours and achievements of this renowned philosopher. Following the investigation of Descartes, the phenomenological anthropology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty will be delineated, including his significant criticism of Cartesian and ensuing mechanistic anthropologies, to provide a contemporary philosophical alternative for the resolution of the mind-body problem. Finally, the significance of the radical shift in the characterization of the nature of man will be analyzed specifically in relation to man's engagement in sport. At this stage it will be necessary to criticize certain philosophy of sport expositions deemed to be inadequate in light of the analysis conducted within this study and, also, to provide an orientation perceived to be more efficacious.

I

Descartes sought to develop a foundation for science that would avoid the presuppositions and inadequacies of Scholasticism and possess the rigorous certainty of mathematics. He contended that only through an extension of mathematical procedures to the investigation of things in the natural world could clear, certain, and final knowledge be attained.

Following careful and extensive deliberations utilizing, among other procedures and techniques, the process of "radical doubt" and the doctrine of "clear and distinct ideas," Descartes concluded that man is composed of two distinct substances—body and mind (or soul, to utilize Descartes' term)—the essential attributes of which differ radically. The body is viewed as an unthinking, extended, material substance; the mind is a thinking, unextended, immaterial substance. The body is an unconscious machine, as mechanical as a watch (3: p. 116), conforming to the unwavering and rigid laws of nature; the mind (the true "essence" of man) is a conscious and free substance possessing no qualities of extension and, therefore, not susceptible to, or dominated by, the mechanical laws of nature. The two substances are thus perceived to be totally distinct and independent.

The postulation of such an extreme bifurcation of mind and body, of course, elicits immediate difficulties. Despite the apparent impossibility of any interaction between two such dissimilar, demarcated, and mutually exclusive substances, open reflection on lived human experiences indicates that perhaps the distinction is not absolute. Although occasional, specific human activities may be performed unconsciously and mechanically, through reflex action for example, selected components of conscious perception and awareness, such as sensations of pain and sound, appetites of hunger and thirst, and the elicitation of emotions and passions, challenge significantly the dualistic structure through the implication of an intimate union between mind and body. Numerous other occasions attesting to, at least, a "quasi-substantial" union of the mind and body may be readily forwarded. In some sense, for example, it is surely legitimate to assert that the mind possesses the ability to suppress or re-direct sensual appetites. Also, particular mental states such as excitement or elation appear to manifest noticeable changes in the cardio-respiratory system and in the degree of intensity of the performance of physical activities.

Descartes, of course, was cognizant of experiences of the aforementioned nature; in the "Sixth Meditation" he claimed that they were the result of "certain confused modes of thought which are produced by the union and apparent intermingling of mind and body" (3: p. 192). To explain consciously directed or volitional action, Descartes acknowledged further that the body deviates from its mechanical procedures of performance at "the direction of the will," which in turn depends on the mind (3: p. 195). Such occurrences can only be intelligibly comprehended through the acknowledgment of some form of structural intercourse or unity of composition.

The admission that the mind consciously influences the motions of the body, and conversely is affected by its physiological states or activities, clearly demonstrates the basic difficulty of Cartesian dualism: namely, how can an extended, material substance be influenced by a spiritual substance that has no extension and, therefore, no spatial location for interaction? In other words, how can radically distinct substances form a substantial union?

In an attempt to respond to this difficulty, Descartes stated that the mind is indeed connected to the body, however, the nature of this interaction is, at the very least, obfuscated. Attuned to the necessity for the explication of mind-body interaction and fully aware of the constraints of his ontological edifice, Descartes couched his response in such nonspecific and imprecise terms as "occasion" or "spontaneous occurrence." Nonetheless, despite the utilization of, at times, deft linguistic manipulations, the essential difficulty remained unshaken.

Descartes attempted to solve the problem by asserting that the interaction of the mind and body is limited to one central location. Although the soul radiates throughout and "is in each member of the body," it exercises its functions most particularly in one specific part—the pineal gland, the apparent convergent or terminal of all nerve systems, situated in the midst of the brain (3: pp. 293, 345). Through its diverse manipulations in the pineal gland, the soul was postulated to regulate and thrust forth "animal spirits" (subtle and exquisitely refined parts of the blood, flowing to and from the brain through the arteries and nerves almost like "air or wind"), to direct the movements of the body's limbs (3: p. 333).

The choice of the pineal gland as the locus of the elusive connection and incarnation of the substantial union of body and mind, wherein the mind can exercise control of the body's movements and conversely be affected by the "animal spirits" agitated by physiological change, was certainly ingenuous, if not accurate. However, it was also "regarded as signally unfortunate" (5: p. 144) even in Descartes' own day. The reason for this reaction, of course, was that the introduction of "animal spirits," even of a highly rarified and special nature, was simply a matter of procrastination. The frustrating question of how there can be interaction between a substance that is purely spiritual and a substance that is purely material remained to be answered. The pineal gland, rather than providing a solution, appears to be simply an attempt at a "metaphysical tour de force."

Nonetheless, the influence of Descartes' philosophy was enormous. Enamoured by the thrust, mode, and content of Descartes' writings on the nature of man, a significant number of his contemporaries and

followers forwarded many concepts and theories based largely on his work. The ideal of a purely mechanistic doctrine of physiology, with its view of the 'body-machine' working under the strict dictates of mechanical laws, was accorded considerable support in the European scientific community and has guided scientists since the seventeenth century.

The influence of mechanistic physiology on the contemporary understanding of man in sport is vast and will be discussed shortly; however, it is first necessary to delineate briefly a substantively different conception of the nature of man.

II

The problem of relating mind and body in the manner attempted by Descartes may be artificially created. It is extremely difficult, if not logically precluded, to meaningfully synthesize two elements or substances which are asserted to be of such radically diverse, distinct, and discontinuous natures into one functioning, complex entity. However, the attempt itself to promulgate a conception of man rent thusly asunder may be the source of fundamental error. If the postulated bifurcation is perceived to be the major dilemma, the problem may be approached in an entirely different manner. Rather than forwarding and championing an inherent dualistic conception, a monistic approach which accounts for both consciousness and embodiment may be noticeably more productive.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (13; 14; 15; 16) dedicated his abbreviated philosophic career, to a considerable extent, to resolving the Cartesian problem of how man can experience himself as incarnate through a rigorous and adroit phenomenological analysis of man's 'being-in-the-world' and the nature of his corporeality.

Existential phenomenology in general, and the works of Merleau-Ponty specifically, are based on the tenet that "the most decisive trait of human consciousness, coloring all its manifestations, is that it is an *embodied consciousness*" (11: p. 10). Existence furnishes the point of departure. Man's contingencies, his finiteness, and his "being-in-the-world" as a subject are, thus, perceived as the starting points. Consequently, the Cartesian categories are opposed as presupposing too little and offering misdirection.

Man is viewed as an incarnate subject, a unity not union of physical, biological, and psychological events all participating in dialectical relationships. The motions and activities of the 'lived-body' are not distinct from consciousness; rather, consciousness is deeply embodied in them. Merleau-Ponty perceived man as a body-subject or incarnate consciousness—a

being in the world concerned with his unfolding in the world. The existence of a disembodied, separate, or distinct mind is emphatically denied. For him, body and mind are simply limiting notions of the 'body-subject' which is a single entity or reality neither simply mental nor merely corporeal, but both, simultaneously.

Any delineation depicting man as being solely an intellectual interiority (the mind), or the simple seat of sensations (the extended body), or even a union of these types of being is rejected. Phenomenologists repeatedly assert that the human body is not a mere thing or object subject to the inclinations of the mind, rather, it is a subject in itself, deriving its subjectivity from itself. "To say that the soul acts on the body is wrongly to suppose a univocal notion of the body and to add to it a second force which accounts for the rational significance of certain conducts" (13: p. 202).

Similarly to Gabriel Marcel, Merleau-Ponty raised significant questions concerning the appropriateness of such statements as "I have a body" or "I use my body." He emphasized the peculiarity and inappropriateness of conceiving of one's body as an object or implement. "The body is more than a commodious instrument that I could do without: my body is myself, the man who I am" (20: p. 49). The manner in which man lives his body from the inside presents a sharply different perception than the objective body which is externally observed through the delimited scope of the anatomical and physiological sciences. The 'lived-body' is not an object which man possesses, rather it *is* man and man is his body. Man's mode of insertion into the world is the body; it is his foundation in existence. It is "the constantly moving and constantly irrevocable manner in which I insert myself in reality" (23: p. 164). Therefore, it may be seen that "being a body" is a radically different characterization than "having a body" or "using a body."

However, there is a specific sense in which man does indeed "use" his body as an instrument, but certainly not in the same sense as he uses, for example, a hammer or a chair (26: p. 81). Since consciousness and the body may be described as inexorably inseparable—that is, consciousness is primordially embodied in the world—the body is man's means of perception of, and action upon, objects and the world. The body is not simply another object in the world, rather it is "an anchorage in the world"; it is man's mode of communication and interaction with it.

Thus, the rigid Cartesian structure of the mind-subject as a totally distinct and superior substance

somehow controlling the inferior body-object is perceived to be erroneous and replaced by a structure deemed more appropriate.

It must be noted at this point that the investigation of an incarnate consciousness, projecting itself in the world and fully immersed in its perceptions and experiences, necessarily elicits ambiguity. No longer can the account of man and reality be delineated with total lucidity.

I have no means of knowing the human body other than that of living it, which means taking up on my own account the drama which is being played out in it, and losing myself in it. I am my body, at least wholly to the extent that I possess experience, and yet at the same time my body is as it were a "natural" subject, a provisional sketch of my total being. Thus experience of one's own body runs counter to the reflective procedure which detaches subject and object from each other, and which gives us only the thought about the body, or the body as an idea, and not the experience of the body or the body in reality (14: pp. 198-99).

Ambiguity, rather than lucidity, is an integral component of the manifestation and essence of human existence. The numerous, diverse perceptions and meanings of embodiment; the lived experience of "the chiaroscuro of the body" (10: p. 46); and the open dialogue with the sensible world—are precisely the occurrences which must be investigated and not rejected because they violate arbitrary Cartesian doctrines of "clear and distinct" ideas. Human existence, due to the distinct nature of incarnate consciousness, is obfuscated and, therefore, ambiguity arising in its investigation is simply an indication that the analysis has not departed from reality or succumbed to artificial distortion or inappropriate reduction.

An analysis of man's incarnation reveals that man is an opaque and partially concealed 'body-subject' without clear and precise points of demarcation for the various aspects of his being; he is a unity of physical, biological, and psychological relationships necessarily interrelated and only meaningfully investigated when analyzed as a whole.

Man's 'being-in-the-world' is given a viewpoint only through his body. The body is "the seat or rather the very actuality of the phenomenon of expression" (14: p. 235); it is the locus of a dialectical relationship with the world and the fabric into which all objects are woven; and, finally, it is the center of openness, intentionality, and meaning-producing acts.

The body is our general medium for having a world. Sometimes it is restricted to the actions

necessary for the conservation of life, and accordingly it posits around us a biological world; at other times, elaborating upon these primary actions and moving from their literal to a figurative meaning, it manifests through them a core of new significance: this is true of motor habits such as dancing and sport. Sometimes, finally, the meaning aimed at cannot be achieved by the body's natural means; it must then build itself an instrument, and it projects thereby around itself a cultural world (14: p. 146).

Through his corporeality man is provided with a foundation in, and is open to, the world. Meaning arises, is created, and is constituted by the interaction of the 'body-subject' and the world through the body's power of expression. Man, dwelling in a world of fluctuating perspectives, possesses the possibility of unfolding diverse projects of personal import—in the laugh of a child, a gesture of a hand, the work of an artist, or the movement of an athlete, meaning is manifested.

Thus, in summary, the phenomenological analysis of man depicts him in a radically different manner than the inadequate and deceptive Cartesian dualistic structure which "portrays man as ontologically schizophrenic" (4: p. 156). Rather than stripping him of his existential character and delineating him as composed of two diverse and discrete substances, man is characterized as embodied consciousness—the distinction between the subjective and objective poles is blurred in the experience of the lived, meaning-bestowing body. Man is acknowledged as an open and engaged being dwelling in the world, capable of developing personal meaning in the process of actively manifesting himself.

III

It would appear to be most logical to assume that, of the multitudinous realms of human enterprise, the particular areas of the philosophy of sport and theories of physical education would be the most enlightened in regard to the nature of man's corporeality and, therefore, predisposed to advocate and actively support an image of man consummate with the phenomenological analysis of the 'lived-body.'

However, such an assumption would be most imprudent. The philosophy of sport is replete, both in theory and practice, with implicit and explicit restatements and affirmations of Cartesian dualism, despite occasional assertions to the contrary. The flight to the respectability and acceptability of the natural

scientific framework and the appropriation of stimulus-response and behaviouristic schema are much in evidence, with the ensuing result that man's incarnate being is more often objectified and reduced, than expressed or celebrated.

Paul Weiss (24), for example, in one of the first two philosophical treatises to investigate sport in considerable detail, stated that the fundamental task facing the athlete is that of eliminating the dissonance and disequilibrium between mind and body by struggling toward unification and harmony. According to Weiss (24: pp. 221, 218, 41), although he "starts with a separated mind and body," "the athlete becomes one with his body through practice," and "comes to accept the body as himself."

A very brief delineation of Weiss' conception of man will clarify the preceding statements and those which follow. In a manner similar to Descartes, Weiss divided man into two diverse substances—an extended, "voluminous" body characterized by "tendencies, appetites, impulses, reactions, and responses" and an unextended, immaterial mind, "a tissue of implications, beliefs, hopes, anticipations, and doubts." He asserted further that the two substances are linked by the emotions which are at once "bodily and mental, inchoate unifications of mind and body" (24: p. 38).

Much akin to Descartes' supposition of the pineal gland as the locus of the interaction between mind and body, recourse to the emotions (the nature of which remains largely unspecified), elicits and amplifies, rather than diminishes difficulties. Weiss stated further that the emotions require control, and to supply this regulating force he professed the existence of a "self" (24: p. 54). Unfortunately, he declined the opportunity to elaborate and clarify the intriguing distinctions and relationships among mind, body, emotions and self. The inevitable result is a rather bewildering and confusing portrait of man in general and the athlete in particular.

Of specific interest to the present discussion is Weiss' extensive and active support of a hierarchical, dualistic conception of man. He strongly and repeatedly emphasized the power of mind over body throughout his analysis of the athlete and his body. Weiss (24: pp. 41, 46) declared that an athlete, on his journey toward the attainment of excellence in sport, engages in a rigorous training program designed "to correct" or "to alter the body" by means of "adjusting the way in which the body functions," until it proceeds in accord with the mind's expectations; "man uses his mind to dictate what the body is to do."

Whether young or old, all must learn not to yield to the body, not to allow its reactions and

responses to determine what will be done. The body is to be accepted, but only as subject to conditions which make it function in ways and to a degree that it would not were it left to itself (24: pp. 53-54).

The dualistic structure immediately evident in the preceding statements is reinforced continuously in Weiss' analysis: the mind uses, alters, directs, controls, restrains, restructures, disciplines and conquers the body (24: pp. 40, 217). The precise and pointed terminology clearly demonstrates that, for Weiss, the athlete utilizes the body as an object; he must subdue and control his corporeal aspects. This orientation obviously depicts the athlete as "possessing" a body rather than fully "being" a body.

In much of modern sport theory and practice, the human body is completely reified and reduced to the status of an object to be altered and manipulated or an obstacle to be surmounted. To utilize Sarano's (20: p. 63) suggestive metaphor, the body is often perceived as an entity which "must be bridled as a restive mount." Thus, in preparation for athletic endeavours the body is drilled, trimmed, strengthened, quickened and otherwise trained to improve its fitness and functioning and often handled as an instrument or utensil to be appropriately directed and mastered.

In accord with such an orientation, the anatomical, kinesiological, bio-mechanical, and physiological sciences are intensely and tenaciously pursued and granted almost exclusive sanction to scrutinize, analyze, and manipulate man's corporeal nature and his participation in sport. As a result, the athlete is often regarded as "capable of being completely understood by means of stimulus-response conditioning, laws of learning, transfer of training, and neurological brain wave analysis" (9: p. 176).

However, as the phenomenology of the body demonstrated, objective approaches are inadequate and inappropriate to fully comprehend the nature of man's embodied being. The 'body-subject' not only is sensed, but also does the sensing. The body perceived totally as an object is, in a legitimate sense, drained of its humanity; it is a dead body devoid of its vivifying, expressive and intentional abilities and qualities.

The rejection of Cartesian concepts and dichotomies permits man to rescue the objectified, maligned, and mistreated body to attain an increasing awareness of the depth and richness of his 'lived-body' and to approach it as a diverse and dynamic reality. Rather than continued repetition and support of discrete, hierarchical notions of mind-body interaction, it appears to be substantially more fruitful to transcend such limiting orientations. If reductive approaches

are altered and mental-physical polarities are eliminated, it is possible to accord the physical attributes of man due respect as integral facets of his nature and, subsequently, to rejoice in the total aspects of the conscious body. Consequently, instead of perceiving human action as depersonalized movement largely, if not totally, comprehensible through external quantification, the unfortunate manner in which much of sport is currently viewed, such activities may be openly apprehended as configurations inscribed with shapes and qualities expressive of the texture of the being of the participant.

Man is anchored and centered in the world through his body which provides him with an oriented focus for action and projection. "Nothing is more expressive than the human body, our hands and fingers, our dancing feet, our eyes, our voice in joy and sorrow" (17: p. 114). It is through the power and gestures of the 'lived-body,' fully and openly engaged in dialogue with the world, that man discloses, establishes, and broadens the personal meanings of his existence. Moments of "intense realness" available in sport provide opportunities for the unfolding of new insights and the restructuring of previous perceptions. During instances of total immersion and dynamic individuation man unfolds his powers, becomes aware of his capabilities and his limitations, develops forms of self-expression, and affirms himself.

In addition, it should also be noted that "the body is the vehicle of an indefinite number of symbolic systems" (16: p. 9). Consequently, sport, as a vibrant form of human endeavor capable of manifesting and transmitting affective states and meanings, may be viewed both as a symbolic medium and as a potentially artistic enterprise capable of releasing and celebrating the creative subjectivity of the participant.

Thus, it may be seen that the open and aware athlete apprehends and experiences his body neither solely as an object or an instrument to be manipulated nor externally as others view him, but rather, as a multi-faceted being totally, uniquely, and indelibly an embodied consciousness. The comportment of the body is the manner in which man exists for himself and sport permits him to attain acute insight into the depth and mettle of his existence. Further, sport affords the athlete the opportunity not only to become aware of his incarnation, but it also "multiplies, extends, consolidates, and confirms this insertion" (20: p. 154), through engagement in the world in the form of projects which express his individual being.

In conclusion, it may be asserted that if the radical philosophical shift from Cartesian to phenomenological conceptions of the nature of man is acknowledged and accepted, the distinctive potentialities of man's

participation in sport may be vigorously and profitably explored. Rather than concentrating solely on the objectified, treadmill image of sport, predominantly centered upon the development and attainment of physical strength, motor skills, and technical efficiency, it appears to be legitimate, fruitful, and imperative to focus upon the full range of dynamic, lived experiences available therein.

Through free, creative, and meaning-bestowing movement experiences, man becomes cognizant of the limits and potentials of his existence. His actions in sport represent, express, and affirm his capabilities, intentionality and mode of being. In short, sport may be characterized and extolled as the celebration of man as an open and expressive embodied being.

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