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Body and Knowledge

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It is no wonder the human body is constantly pointed at as the ultimate battleground in almost every struggle. Power in its changing forms wants to control it, turn it into a tool (so that it can be finally discarded) or transform it into a hybrid machine; the soul wants to be rid of it so as to fulfil millennial myths of redemption; those who own it (or inhabit it or are it) want to tame it into something manageable and pliant, a living business card in good shape and able to perform. Goals, desires, fears orbit around it and it is getting harder and harder to understand why, as every discourse seems to miss a crucial fact: the dichotomy from which it stems is false.

Body and soul are not two separate entities and the former is not the prison of the latter. Western culture has been living under this illusion since its beginning and it is so strongly set in our minds that we don't find any logical fault in the expression "my body", that hints at the fact that it is just another of our belongings, like a briefcase or a sofa. What else would I be, should my body be taken from me? What am I, without my body?

And it seems so obvious, yet no one spares it a thought. According to the implicit tale that justifies this representation, some accident brought our true selves (soul or awareness or whatever) into these lumps of flesh to be punished or saved after long (and probably well-deserved) suffering; only intelligence and reason enabled us to survive and then make a better living, get stronger, freeing ourselves from a fate of blind passion and decay, until the next, final step: an everlasting, digital existence. A lot of work has been devoted to making our bodies redundant – in which technology has played a crucial role, giving us machines that are thought of as faster and smarter than us – but until recently

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there was still a fundamental issue where the centrality of the body could not be questioned: reproduction and birth, the continuity of the human species.

Again, it is no wonder that research tried so hard to change this. It was, and still is, a kind of imaginal necessity, so that every other reason, such as those listed by Beck (2016), can be seen – at least partially – as a handy Paretian derivation (D’Andrea, 2017). Which could let us glimpse the reason why that research resulted in such momentous side-effects: there is more to the ‘discrepancy between thought and action’ highlighted by Beck (2016: 25) than is apparent and it leads to the primordial unease that comes from this low-level schizophrenic self-representation. It is not “just fancy”, as most people would comment with a shrug and a grin: it is one of the best examples of how imaginary currents can drive a whole culture for centuries, biasing its research and its higher thoughts, pushing and prodding toward ends carefully constructed to meet any rational argumentation and yet having deeper meanings.

I would like to share a few ideas about this colossal misunderstanding about hierarchy and priority and about its actual consequences. Science – not imagination, even though I am more and more convinced there is no great gap between them – tells us that our first ancestors probably started walking the world more than three and a half million years ago and that what made the difference was bipedalism: ‘Walking came first [...]. Nowadays walking upright is considered to be the Rubicon the evolving species crossed to become hominid, distinct from all other primates and ancestral to human beings’ (Solnit, 2002: 35). Not sophisticated abstract thinking or the ability to make things: just standing up and walking. A purely corporeal thing. This just doesn’t fit with our current idea of ourselves, which declares that we exist because we are capable of thought: *Cogito ergo sum*. The fact of *feeling* ourselves in every moment of our life – in a way, Heidegger’s *Dasein* – is not enough, it is too humble a circumstance on which to anchor our unicity: we are what we are because of rational consciousness.

The fact that consciousness happened a few aeons after walking – and becoming *faber* and developing new cerebral structures and ways of coping with the inner and outer environments and creating symbolic and imaginal representations – does not seem to bother us. Thanks to its unobtrusiveness, the body fades into the background, refrains from the spotlight that the I – on the other hand – is more than happy to steal and so here we are, pretending to be celestial creatures with an issue with flesh and blood, more and more often conceived of as ballast to be jettisoned as soon as possible. I’d say it is high time we stopped pretending, also because this blatant forgetfulness is one of the main roots of the environmental problem: after all, if one does not accept the idea of being physical, why should he care for space and its quality? Descartes “taught”

us about *res extensa*, the absence of spatial quality and its essential measurable homogeneity, in an admirable constellation of imaginal delusions, which has sadly driven us onwards since then, with the brilliant results anyone can see.

Time to start accepting ourselves, then. We should accept, to begin with, the fact that – long before walking – we were successful stomachs which developed a neural network and then proceeded to equip themselves with a new set of bones and muscles, which made necessary other innovations, like a proto-brain, to manage it all. As Damasio observes, ‘what is missing from the traditional neuro-centric, brain-centric, and even cerebral-cortex-centric accounts is the fact that nervous systems began their existence as assistants to the body, as coordinators of the life process in bodies complex and diversified enough that the functional articulation of tissues, organs, and systems as well as their relation to the environment required a dedicated system to accomplish the coordination’ (2018: 66). Contrary to the common-sense narrative that affirms a substantial coincidence between humanity and consciousness/rationality, scientific evidence shows a significant interval during which human beings evolved by being “only” bodies in space: bodies that learnt how to move around dodging dangers and obstacles; that slowly at first and then more swiftly began acquiring schemes of reference and qualitative memories regarding that space – *their* space – perfecting movement and stoking the fire that probably led, much later, to self-awareness. Thus, the current attitude that focuses only on perception and cerebral representations runs the risk of completely missing the real blend of human knowledge. In Sheets-Johnstone’s words, ‘our tactile-kinesthetic bodies are epistemological gateways’ (2011: xxv) and a sharp consideration of their limits and potentialities would be a new and effective way to start understanding ourselves.

As the condition of body-in-space was the first “reality” we ever experienced, it has been and still is the bedrock on which we built every subsequent layer of meaning and understanding. When humans started describing the world, they sketched images and enriched gestures with symbolic constellations, as Durand definitively showed (1990), thus linking body to imagination. And when, later on, they developed language their first register was concrete, spatial; it was that same register that was tapped as abstract thought developed, so that most of our current ways of saying things still rely on it, even though we are scarcely aware of the fact: just think about social space and distance... Then consciousness took the lead and its first dream was about the Fall, the carnal damnation of a pure spirit who knew nothing of death and decay. A beautiful tale and a huge mistake. Accordingly, the clever evolutionary move of leaving attention free to cope with the external environment as long as the internal one did not send an alarm was misinterpreted as a total lack of importance of the latter, so much so that proprioception is not even among the

usually recognized senses; the constant flow of qualitative information about the inner condition was mistaken for the residue of a former state of unconscious animality and consequently misjudged, in favour of a corollary of the tale of the pure soul: being perfect, reason has to be itself free of every tainting influence from the body and its low processes. Feelings, instead, ‘provide important information about the state of life, but feelings are not mere “information” in the strict computational sense. Basic feelings are not abstractions. They are experiences of life based on multidimensional representations of configurations of the life process’ (Damasio, 2018: 97).

We have been wasting away whole dimensions of our being human and it has not been simply an inconsequential shame: our world is built on a partial representation of our actual complexity which penalizes aspects that are truly significant for our humanity, as Robert Kennedy acutely pointed out in his speech against GDP, and so our world is less and less human-friendly and welcoming, both in the social and in the spatial sphere. Not merely a partial representation, I should add: a wrong one. According to scientific evidence – which everyone worships provided that it says what everyone wants to hear – the order and the overall contribution to our successful evolution of the various components of our life process is as follows:

- 1) Body
- 2) Feelings/Emotions
- 3) Imagination
- 4) Reason

It is just a bit different from what we are used to thinking and it shows a fundamental truth that we forgot as well: life works cooperatively. It does not throw away the old in favour of the new, but it innovates and adjusts to make the most of what is there: ‘The story of the relations between bodies and nervous systems needs to be revised. The body, about which we are often casual if not dismissive when we talk about the lofty mind, is part of a massively complex organism made up of cooperative systems, which are made up of cooperative organs, which are made up of cooperative cells, which are made up of cooperative molecules, which are made up of cooperative atoms built from cooperative particles’ (Damasio, 2018: 63). Thinking that reason might have emerged and asserted itself *against* the body, the emotions and the imagination is ridiculous and dangerous and it has led us to the brink of catastrophe. One has to wonder how long will it take to start understanding ourselves and behaving accordingly. Hopefully not too long, as time is by now preciously tight.

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