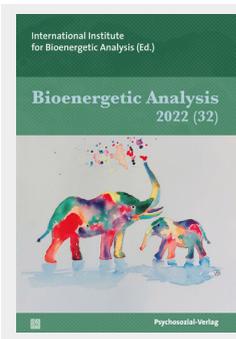


Christoph Helferich

You Are Your Body



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Considerations on the Relation between Self and Body

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Abstracts

The essay examines Alexander Lowen's basic assumption that "you are your body". Many aspects of our culture, however, contradict this statement, identifying the ego with the linguistic-mental processes of the brain. According to the author, the phenomenological perspective, focusing on subjective experience, allows us to conceive the person as a "living organism", a perspective that therefore supports Lowen's original assumption. A brief clinical case illustrates this thesis.

Keywords: western dualism, phenomenology, lived body, embodiment, nurturing contact

Você é o Seu Corpo

Considerações sobre a relação entre Self e o Corpo (Portuguese)

Este ensaio examina a premissa básica de Lowen de que "você é o seu corpo". Muitos aspectos da nossa cultura, no entanto, contradizem essa afirmação, identificando o ego com os processos linguístico-mentais do cérebro. De acordo com o autor, a perspectiva fenomenológica, focada na experiência subjetiva, nos permite conceber a pessoa como um organismo vivo, uma perspectiva que apoia as premissas originais de Lowen. Um breve caso clínico ilustra esta tese

Tu sei il tuo corpo

Considerazioni sul rapporto tra il sé e il corpo (Italian)

Il saggio esamina l'assunto di base di Alexander Lowen che "tu sei il tuo corpo". Molti aspetti della nostra cultura, però, contraddicono questa affermazione, identificando l'Io con i processi linguistico-mentali del cervello. Secondo l'autore, la prospettiva fenomenologica, incentrata sull'esperienza soggettiva, permette di concepire la persona come un "organismo

vivente”, prospettiva che sostiene quindi l’assunto originario di Lowen. Un breve caso clinico illustra questa tesi.

Vous êtes votre corps

Considérations sur la relation entre le Soi et le Corps (French)

Cet essai examine l’hypothèse de base d’Alexander Lowen selon laquelle “vous êtes votre corps”. De nombreux aspects de notre culture contredisent cependant cette affirmation, en identifiant l’ego aux processus linguistiques-mentaux du cerveau. Selon l’auteur, la perspective phénoménologique, centrée sur l’expérience subjective, nous permet de concevoir la personne comme un “organisme vivant”. Cette perspective soutient donc l’hypothèse initiale de Lowen. Un bref cas clinique illustre cette thèse.

Tú Eres Tu Cuerpo

Consideraciones sobre la relación entre el Self y el cuerpo (Spanish)

Este ensayo examina el supuesto básico de Alexander Lowen de que “tú eres tu cuerpo”. Sin embargo, muchos aspectos de nuestra cultura contradicen esta afirmación, identificando el Self con los procesos lingüístico-mentales del cerebro. Según el autor, la perspectiva fenomenológica, centrada en la experiencia subjetiva, nos permite concebir a la persona como un “organismo vivo”, perspectiva que, por tanto, apoya el supuesto original de Lowen. Un breve caso clínico ilustra esta tesis.

Du bist dein Körper

Überlegungen zum Verhältnis von Selbst und Körper (German)

Der Essay untersucht die Grundannahme von Alexander Lowen, dass “du dein Körper bist”. Viele Aspekte unserer Kultur widersprechen jedoch dieser Aussage und identifizieren das Ich mit den sprachlich-mentalenen Prozessen des Gehirns. Die phänomenologische Perspektive, die sich auf das subjektive Erleben konzentriert, erlaubt es nach Ansicht des Autors, die Person als “lebendigen Organismus” zu begreifen, eine Perspektive, die somit die ursprüngliche Annahme von Lowen unterstützt. Ein kurzer klinischer Fall veranschaulicht diese These.

Ты и твое тело

Размышления об отношениях между “я” и телом (Russian)

В эссе рассматривается основной тезис Александра Лоуэна: “ты – это твое тело”. Однако многие аспекты нашей культуры противоречат этому утверждению, отождествляя “я” с лингвистическо-ментальными процессами мозга. По мнению автора, феноменологическая перспектива, сфокусированная на субъективном опыте, позволяет представить человека как “живой организм”, и,

таким образом, поддерживает исходный постулат Лоуэна. Этот тезис проиллюстрирован кратким клиническим случаем.

你是你的身体

对于自体和身体的关系的思考 (Chinese)

本文检视了亚历山大·勒温的基本假设：“你是你的身体”。然而，在我们文化的很多方面，和这个描述相反的是认同大脑的语言思考过程的自我。据本人作者文中所说，从现象学的角度，聚焦在主体的体验上，允许我们去感知一个人作为“活着的有机体”，这是一个支持勒温的最初假设的观点，文中使用一个临床个案阐述了这个理论。

Introduction

In the second chapter of *Bioenergetics* (1975), Alexander Lowen, starting from the notion of energy, presents the basic concepts of his thought. In the section “You Are Your Body”, he writes:

“Bioenergetics rests on the simple proposition that each person is his body. No person exists apart from the living body in which he has its existence and through which he expresses himself and relates to the world around him. It would be foolish to argue against this proposition because one could be challenged to name a part of himself that is not a part of his body. Mind, spirit and soul are aspects of every living body. A dead body has no mind, it has lost its spirit, and its soul has departed” (Lowen, 1975, p. 54).

The reader is immediately led to agree with these statements, especially since the evocation of death leaves no doubt about the equation between person and body. However, Lowen’s discourse, which not surprisingly exhibits an apparent naivety, actually presents a great challenge to common sense. In fact, if we think about it, we are all convinced that our ego, the very core of our person, is much more than our body, that it is made up of words, thoughts, awareness, and that this ego resides not in the whole body, but in some part of the brain, the seat of self-awareness.

The identification between “person” and “conscious ego” appears so anchored in the common consciousness, in our daily lives, that it would not be an exaggeration to recognize it as common ground of our very culture. This would make Lowen’s principle *You Are Your Body* simplistic and reductive. In order to clarify the issue, let us first try to briefly look at the main reasons underlying this identification between the person and the conscious ego.

Ego: Self-Awareness

The first and most important reason for this identification lies in the instrumental relationship with one's body. Although our experience of the body is in reality very complex, it can be seen that in everyday life the body is considered essentially as an instrument for achieving our goals. The body is perceived as being at the service of the ego, of a helmsman who guides his ship according to his own will. And if the ship is beautiful enough, it also succeeds in satisfying the narcissistic desires of the helmsman.

The second reason for the identification between conscious ego and person is that our perception of the world and of ourselves is mediated by language. Our bodies and feelings are accessible to us through the mediation of words that name them and make them present to us. It is therefore easy to identify the core of our being with the function of language, and more broadly with our mental processes, the basis and medium of self-awareness, of the ego.

The third reason concerns memory, the pillar of our identity, which is also located in the brain. Memory, too, is linguistically mediated, a story composed of the many stories that shape our sense of self. By retracing the past with narrative memory, one usually experiences a sense of intimate continuity of self across time, a kind of "timeless self", *zeitloses Selbst*, as it has been called (Radebold, 2010).

You Are Your Body, then? We have briefly listed three powerful reasons why we tend to identify our ego with the linguistic-mental dimension rather than with our body. It is an immediate and spontaneous equation, which identifies the basis of our ego in the brain, in particular in that area where the creation of language takes place.

The Body as a Threat

But there is perhaps a deeper reason for skepticism about the statement *You Are Your Body*. It is a kind of deep distrust of the body. We tend to live in a state of war, or at least of constant concern and vigilance about the body as the seat of our animality, drives, sexuality and emotions in general. As a reminder that we have left the state of nature, we need only think of the biblical account of the expulsion from the earthly paradise. We are cultural beings, and in a long evolutionary process we have learnt to dominate the affective-pulsatory sphere linked to our corporeality, which nevertheless tends to be dangerous terrain, and requires constant vigilance and control on our part. In this sense, Socrates has been indicated as a cultural

model, as the first historical representative of an autonomous, independent and rational individual, on the basis of a perfect control of his affectivity (Böhme, 1988).

While we can usually manage the sexual and affective dimension of corporeality well enough, it is more difficult to accept its inherent foreignness and fragility. In many ways, the body appears as “other than self”, “foreign”, made of bones, flesh, liquids and other elements that follow laws and paths that are independent of our knowledge and will. We fear this otherness of the body mainly because of its fragility. The body as nature is exposed, its integrity threatened by dangers or diseases, even serious ones, which are beyond our control.

This difficult relationship with our corporeality is further aggravated by finiteness, transience and the threat of death. Awareness of finitude characterizes us as human beings, and precisely because we are endowed with awareness, it differentiates us from the world around us. It is what the philosopher Gernot Böhme has called a *Riss im Sein*, a crack in being, a hallmark of the human.

Western Dualism

So far, we have seen the reasons that refute Lowen's iconic statement *You Are Your Body*. These are the same reasons that underlie Western dualism, a view in which the human being appears as composed of two entities or dimensions, the soul and the body. According to this view, the soul usually represents the most precious, if not divine, part of man.

It is true that this view is frequently challenged today, but it is also true that it has profoundly shaped Western culture and thought for millennia. It is therefore firmly present in language and in the collective imagination, as well as in theoretical and applied science. The dualistic paradigm is still present, for example, in cognitive sciences, which postulate a consciousness that is separate from the body and the outside world, or in transplant surgery, where the human body is considered a set of parts that can be replaced at will: the ego or the soul is in any case somewhere else.

Given the current infinite potential of technology, we could mention many other fields of application in which the body appears as a mere *res extensa* and therefore as a pure object of the human will. But fortunately there are also countertrends, such as the field of psychosomatic medicine. Psychosomatic medicine is based on a profound awareness of the intimate connection between the psycho-affective sphere and the bodily-organic dimension and considers the organism as a dynamic unity of the two spheres in their manifestations.

Alongside the dualistic view that sets the ego and the body against each other, there is a general awareness of the original identity between body and person. As already mentioned regarding the instrumental use of the body, we are well aware that we *have* a body, the so-called *body-object*. But on an intuitive-existential level we also know that we *are* our body, the *lived body* in which one's personality is expressed (Helferich, 2018, pp. ix-xiii). It is especially in extreme situations, such as somatic pain or sexual problems, that suddenly our *being body* comes to the forefront, while usually the living experience of one's body, the *lived body*, remains in the background. Therefore, most people show little body awareness, and our culture suffers from a general "body forgetfulness".

Phenomenology

Body-object and *lived body* are terms coined and used in the context of phenomenology, the systematic science of subjective experience and its main structures. Phenomenology, which for a long time was considered a marginal philosophical branch in the shadow of Anglo-Saxon analytical philosophy, has in the last few decades become considerably more established and has actively contributed to a broader view of the human being. From now on, we will refer to the thought of a representative of contemporary phenomenology, Thomas Fuchs, philosopher, psychiatrist and holder of the prestigious Karl Jaspers Chair at the University of Heidelberg.

At the beginning of his programmatic essay *Das Gehirn – ein Beziehungsorgan* ("The Brain – a Mediating Organ", Fuchs, 2010), the author advances three incisive theses: "The world is not in the head. The subject is not in the brain. There are no thoughts in the brain" (p. 14). With these three theses, the author contests the dualistic paradigm prevalent in current cognitive neuroscience. As we have already seen, this is a paradigm in which consciousness is understood as an inner mental representation of a world and of an ego constructed in the brain. In this view, the body acts as a physiological support machine for mental processes.

The title of Fuchs' essay, however, already indicates a different approach: the brain is the "mediating organ" of a living being in a concrete surrounding world. In fact, the concept of a *living being* or *living organism* is for Fuchs the "primary entity" (p. 16), the starting point for understanding the brain and its functions as a mediating organ. According to the author, this mediation takes place in three central areas: firstly, mediation between the brain and the body-organism, which are seamlessly connected in circular processes of neuronal, sense-motor etc. refer-

ences, including affective and cognitive experiences; secondly, mediation between the organism and the surrounding world, coupled in a dynamic relationship; finally, mediation between the ego-person and others in the complex dimension of intersubjectivity, modulated from earliest infancy by reciprocal bodily experience.

Such mediations and circular connections have also been at the center of important developments in cognitive science in recent decades, which have converged in the so-called *embodied cognitive science*. According to this approach, subjectivity or consciousness is embodied in the organism's sensory-motor activity, and embedded in the perceptual, sensory-motor, affective etc. interaction with the surrounding world. Fuchs gives the example of a simple instrumental action such as writing a letter, an action in which the hand, the paper, the pen and the brain form a unity. It is a unity based on the dynamic and circular intertwining of brain, body and environment; we cannot separate the individual elements along a clear boundary between "inside" and "outside", between "self" and "non-self": "It would be as senseless as asking whether inhaled air still belongs to the outside world or already to the organism" (p. 18).

Let us recall, however, that in the phenomenological view it is always the living body that constitutes the link between the various dimensions of our existence; the body is, in the famous words of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "the vehicle of our being for the world". Within this configuration, the brain is undoubtedly the central organ of mental processes, that is, the locus of the processes that underlie consciousness. But in itself the brain "has no consciousness"; it is "the organ of possibilities" (p. 24). Possibilities that can only be realized in the life process of the person in its entirety.

Fuchs closes his essay with the following question: "If the subject is not in the brain, then where is it? I, the conscious, experiencing and acting subject, am not located in the brain, but always exactly where my living body is with all its biological functions that make possible and generate my conscious states and actions. I am a living, embodied being, and this means at the same time that I am not in a circumscribed location but always beyond my body, relating with the world and with others" (p. 25).

Conclusion

Let us return to Alexander Lowen's opening quote. If read in the tradition of Western dualism, the statement *You Are Your Body* would seem to reduce the

person to a mere physicality with no subject. On the other hand, if read in a phenomenological light, it appears entirely convincing and distant from a reductionist vision. Moreover, Lowen himself speaks expressly of the *living body*, the living body in which a person exists and through which he expresses himself and relates to the world.

Even more clearly, in the following paragraph, Lowen says about the body: “It is your way of being in the world”. This last statement strongly echoes thinkers such as Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. It is as if Lowen has here insightfully captured the core of phenomenological thinking before and after him. “The more alive your body is, the more you are in the world” (Lowen, 1975, p. 54).

Clinical Note

This last quote introduces a central claim of Bioenergetic psychotherapy. As we have seen above, an instrumental attitude towards our body prevails in our culture, which easily leads to various forms of alienation from oneself. This means that familiarity with one’s own body as well as attention to the deep psycho-corporeal experiences connected with it are not at all taken for granted; they are therefore explicit goals of the therapeutic process. And it was Alexander Lowen himself who developed in an exemplary way a wide range of bioenergetic exercises to promote this body awareness (Lowen, 1977).

After all, it is a re-education of self-perception and self-expression that requires a considerable amount of time. Time not only in the practice of exercises to be integrated into daily life. Let us think here first of all about the times and rhythms of the therapeutic process. The therapist easily underestimates the fact that the patient, to really feel himself and enter unknown spaces, needs time. On a technical level, the therapist must therefore learn to wait, to slow down the pace of the interaction at certain moments of the session. Feeling requires time: to explore gradually one’s own experiences, to find the respective body islands connected to them, and to make them one’s own by identifying with them. Through this identification with the deep bodily Self, the patient will finally be able to say: “I am my body”.

I would like to illustrate these considerations with a brief clinical case. Patient A., a retired nurse, grew up in various orphanages, left by a single mother who never wanted to completely break off sporadic contact with her daughter. From this extremely insecure bond, marked by a prolonged experience of abandonment,

the patient came to therapy tormented by a deep existential anguish, a sense of emptiness and loneliness, together with a strong anger towards her mother and the whole world.

During the first period of our work, her anguish gradually diminished, also thanks to the intense therapeutic bond which formed between us. Substantial problems persisted, however, such as her loneliness and chronic insomnia, problems that reverberated somatically in a marked shortness of breath and stiffness in her legs, which she moved as if she were marching. In order to deal with this sense of alienation towards her legs and to encourage a corrective experience of greater existential security, I asked her during a recent session to lie down on a mattress to receive support for her legs.

I use in cases such as this the techniques of so-called “nurturing contact”, developed by Malcolm Brown’s Organismic Psychotherapy (Brown, 1990). Nurturing contact is usually a soft, non-directive contact, sometimes rather long in duration, which allows the patient the possibility to enter an open psychic space (Helferich, 2015, pp. 34–38). With a solid contact, starting from the feet and lingering for a long time on the various segments of the legs, knees and thighs, I then pressed with both hands on the hip bones, the connection point between the upper and lower part of the body. Finally, I laid down crossways, resting my back on top of the patient’s legs and remained in this position at some length.

This experience, which lasted about half an hour, passed in complete silence. In the final sharing, the patient, thanking me for this contact, told me she made a long journey back into her past. A journey or a regressive experience that surprised and struck her and that led her to the awareness: “I have lived all my life in fear”.

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