Body Awareness and the Gymnastic Movement

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How do gymnasts and those who aspire to be gymnasts view the physically dangerous task ahead of them each time they mount the apparatus or step onto a free exercise area? Is it possible to be suddenly inspired to do the complex movements and simply perform them, or is it more involved than that? What is it like to fling oneself through the air with what seems to be little or no control? Even if control is possible, how does such control come into being, and how does one acquire its use for effective safety and aesthetic appeal? Although cues are available which provide the potential performer with directives for the experience of performing, the actual sensations are the possession of the accomplished performer. Doing the movement requires a body momentarily isolated from its bearings—a body free for an instant from dependencies and cues but a body which soon will come to earth again. How one cognitively and physically appropriates the performance is the focus of this article.

The Gymnastic Experience

I wake up in the night thinking of the movement. I mentally am on the apparatus thinking that the worst thing that could happen is that I can hurt myself, or I could miss a grasp or something.[1] There are days when you have to plan when you come in, like you have a plan to do certain things that you may be worried about doing, so you psych up for them early in the work out. Sometimes I go to sleep the night before, and then wake up because I can't sleep thinking about the movement and suddenly wake up with my hands sweating.

Gymnasts begin the preparation long before the final movement is achieved. They may do this by imaginatively living through the sense of the activity. The seriousness of the task initially demands more of the performer's time than he may willingly give, in addition to the mental preparation before the practice period. However, this demand may be compensated for by the hours of dreamful sleep. Days which are set aside, when the gymnast exercises his desires and wishes, often mean special mental preparation gradually building towards the specifically arranged time when the practice takes place.

If I plan to do a double back on the floor, which is a move I have just learned, for hours before I come into the gym I try to visualize the movement over and over again. On certain days when I am really worried about a move, I will really be thinking about it all through the day before the practice and during the warm up.

Finally the day arrives which coach and gymnast have agreed will be committed to exploring the possibilities together. For others it may

be just another day, but for the gymnast it becomes special in that the efforts which usually go into routine activities are overshadowed by the conscious effort during the day to mentally live those movements which later will capture the gymnast's full attention. Normally, gymnastic training is like day-to-day living; it is coping with usual problems by calling upon usual capabilities, but gymnasts also have unusual days and call upon unusual talents to overcome the tasks they set for themselves.

Setting out for the training location is a determined journey which takes the gymnast not merely physically, but mentally closer to his goal. Not only has distance been physically reduced when he arrives, but when he enters the building, time also has been diminished. It is as though little can separate the gymnast from the opportunity to reach his goal. He has finally reduced the space between himself and the place where he will seek his goal; all that remains is to wait for the moment of time he and his coach agreed to learn the new movement. The countdown has continued, and soon the moment will arrive.

Meanwhile, the gymnast begins to set his concentration on the performance and continues to churn the movement over in his mind, attempting all the time to focus on the aspects of the movement which will hopefully secure success. The intensification and gathering of subjective efforts are the source of augmentation which, accompanied by the contribution of the coach and the intersubjectivity of fellow gymnasts, contribute to the personal goals of the performer.

During the preparation stages of the gymnastic movement, the body is no longer taken for granted but becomes the object with which the gymnast has to deal; the object which now must not only be dressed, fed, and maintained but also must be physically conditioned for the stresses of learning a new movement. Each group of muscles is carefully attended to, and the gymnast finds ways of stretching them as he moves from one position to another. Special attention is given to those muscles which he feels will be responsible for the movement. How the gymnast now objectifies his body is evident in the language of the gymnast when he talks about the preparatory warm-up.

> When I warm up I like to take groups of muscles, say in my hip region and thoroughly stretch them and that makes me feel good and I relax. Then I stretch my shoulder joints by hanging from the bar . . . finally I hang for a few seconds from the rings in a very relaxed way.

The gymnast treats the body not unlike a race mechanic tunes the parts of the racing car. They must function efficiently, easily, and responsively. No parts can be malfunctioning at the outset of the performance. As the mechanic checks all systems, so the gymnast ensures that the parts of the body are finely tuned and ready for action. All the parts are checked to ensure that their potential is

maintained, and finally the body is attended to as a whole for reassurance that the complete unit is ready to carry out its function in the movement. Nothing is taken for granted; all twinges of irritation in muscles or joints are noted and their seriousness estimated. Gymnasts come to know their bodies well when they practice detecting and estimating sustained injury. They also are able to judge the impact of a malfunctioning body part on the performance of the movement.

A gymnast develops body awareness as an important function in the total system enabling him to reflect on his own well being. He is able to objectify this part of the system and estimate its suitability and fitness for the demands that soon are to be placed upon it. Not only does he examine body parts, but he also treats them as objects which will assist him in accomplishing the movements. Hands that provide grip and support and feet, from which force is transferred, are protected and reinforced to take the strain imposed upon them. Before he begins the training, the gymnast takes measures to ensure, for example, the stability of his wrists, by wrapping them carefully with tape and by securing his leather grips with an attention one would give to the placement of a ladder against a tall building. He holds his wrists out in front of him to examine his preparation, and having satisifed himself that this object of his security is ready, he is able to proceed with confidence.

Such objectification of the body and body parts is, in many respects, similar to Sartre's example of a mountain climber who prepares himself for the ascent of a mountain peak. Sartre's example not only reveals a dimension of objectification of body parts, but also assumes other dimensions which closely align with the dimensions of the gymnast as he prepares for the attempt and ultimate perfection of the desired movement. These dimensions emerge as ground structures of the phenomenological descriptions.

The Body as Object

In Danby's painting of "the hockey player in the dressing room before the game," he captures a single moment of preparation as the player secures his skates. The hockey player is, for a few seconds, alone and preoccupied with tightening the laces of his skates. Each length of lace is pulled tight to ensure that the foot is firm and comfortable within the skate. The concentration and attention to detail is again prevalent and necessary for the hockey player before he takes to the ice. Starting from the toe, each section of the lace is checked to ensure that it takes its share of the strain until, finally, the knot at the top of the skate forms a symmetrical matrix of support which the player demands. During the game he will unthinkingly rely on that extension of himself with no necessity to attend to it until he returns to the dressing room after the game.

Such moments of preparation, common to all who set out on everyday missions, must be put aside to allow us to prepare for what we have set out to do. The attention to detail depends on the seriousness of the mission, and it is obvious that tying our shoes to take a walk in the park may not deserve the care which is usually associated with appending the footwear necessary to climb a glacier. Nevertheless, in moments of preparation, body parts become objects which deserve special attention. The attention our body parts receive when the temperature outside is extremely low demonstrates that the body is a system which, when chilled, brings us discomfort. Moments of preparation relieve us from dealing with our bodies in situations where other concerns are more appropriate and important.

The preparatory stages which Sartre indicates for a mountain climber are stages similar to those described above. The person who intends to climb a mountain attends to the necessary equipment which he will take with him. For a mountain climber a faulty tackle, rope, or piton could mean death or a bad and unnecessary fall. The high quality equipment is viewed as an extension of himself. The boots aid the climber in gripping the mountainside, his fingers become hooks from which the climber may suspend himself, and the ropes, pitons, and specialized equipment ensure his spidery existence when he becomes embroiled in the business of ascending.

Similarly, the gymnast prepares himself before embarking on a more immediate mission. Gymnasts have to equip themselves with the necessary and appropriate clothing, and for some gymnasts the wearing of certain clothes becomes almost an obsession.

> I have to wear the same shorts at the competition as I wear at training. I would rather do that than wear something which I am not used to. I have handgrips which fit one hand and if I put them on the wrong hand I know immediately. I can tell without looking at them because after a time they take the shape of the hand.

In this preparatory stage the gymnast considers his hands as objects with which he has to contend. To prepare the hands for performance is part of a series of motions through which each gymnast must go. His hands grope in the chalk container as last minute instructions are given. Once the chalk has been thickly spread over the skin, the leather strap is slid into place and further layers of chalk are carefully rubbed onto the leather. The sensitivity of the gymnast to detect the fit of the device on his hand comes with his habit of using such extensions of himself when practicing movement. The shape of the leather strap becomes one with the hand, and he views such an appendage as necessary in his quest for movement on the apparatus. The leather strap secured at the wrist and pulled over the middle finger protects the palm of the hand. As the gymnast stands before the apparatus, his palms are turned upward and his fingers

semiclenched. His hands have become, not hands, as part of the body, but sensitive devices which will relay information to the gymnast as he performs the movement. The hands become appendages almost as the buckles are strapped to the wrists and the straps pulled over the fingers. It is as though the hand changes from a body part to a strong yet sensitive instrument upon which the gymnast relies to perform his movement. The hands become claw-like extensions of the muscled forearm and, once they grip the bar, the gymnast is reassured of the security of the hold. Sartre describes this dimension as one where

> this body of the subject as the end of its migration is realized as utensil, as domain . . . it defines itself through the chair on which it sits, the pavement on which it walks, and the threshold over which it stumbles.

The Body in its Subjective Dimension

Sartre's second dimension of the body is expressed as *le passe sous silence*, passed beyond in silence, and comes into being as the mountain climber by forgetting, in a certain sense, his plans and his body becomes involved in the actual activity. "The qualities of the body, its measurements, its ability, its efficiency and vulnerability," says Van den Berg, "can only become apparent when the body itself is forgotten, eliminated and passed over in silence for the occupation . . . for whose sake the passing is necessary" (1964, p. 108). The gymnast passes beyond in attempting to understand the movement of his body. By becoming absorbed in what the body does, he forgets it and reveals to himself what no passive study of the body could ever reveal. The efficiencies and abilities are discovered when the gymnast, for a fleeting moment, passes beyond his body in silence. For the gymnast the world has become a narrow existence as he approaches the moment which will reveal to him the real meaning of the movement. From a preoccupation with preparation, the gymnast becomes absorbed in the task before him and his thoughts are completely given over to it. The body, no longer objectified, is realized as the dimension over which he must seek control. There is no room in his mind for the encouraging words of others, or for the final cues from his coach. He is left with the reality of his body and its vulnerability. No longer does he listen to his coach, no longer does he accept the exchanges from his fellow gymnasts but, instead, he lives for himself, cutting off all forms of communication. He frees himself of all that would delay his arrival at an experience he has prepared to seek. Any physical perspective of his body is dismissed from his mind as he advances, and the temporary suspension of the physical self is replaced by the preoccupation of himself and the relationship of self to the event that is about to take place.

Van den Berg (1964, p. 112) suggests that the second dimension of the body comes into being under the eyes of his fellow man. This

holds true for the gymnast who now begins to become preoccupied by the challenge set out before him. As he begins to run or to approach the apparatus, he is consumed with concentration and he becomes one with his body. To be sensitive to any single moment during this short period of effort by the performer is to capture the intensity of effort and the total absorption of the individual as he attempts to perform the movement.

Danby's collection of sport pictures has singled out moments when the performers have halted in mid-flight. The diver is depicted leaving the springboard, while the gymnast is nearing the end of a swing on the bars. Each painting in its individual way recalls the facial expression which indicates not merely the effort, but the complete involvement of the individual as he pursues the movement experience through which his body falls. Thus Danby captures Sartre's "second dimension" of the body as it comes into being under the eyes of the observer. The body with its tense muscles, drawn eyebrows, and heaving chest, although frozen on canvas, allows the observer to see the athlete engrossed in the act. What remains is the task of transforming the experience.

The Body on Display

The oscillation of the mental life of the gymnast destroys and re-establishes the "passing beyond dimenson" so familiar to the performer. But the third dimension of the body comes into being when the mountaineer becomes aware that I am regarding him. However, the look of another may have differing effects upon the performer. Sartre suggests that at the moment that the mountain climber becomes aware that he is observed by others, the effect of being thus "objectified" may be detracting and *take away* from his performance. He knows that the other sees and criticizes just that which he himself must forget in order not to fail in his climbing. While Sartre considered the vulnerability of the body on display and the detracting and inhibiting influence such observations instill, there possibly could exist another mode. Added to the objectification as detraction is a look of another that influences the passing beyond for good, that makes the world bloom and renders the body more straight and supple.

The body builder is a good example of the onesidedness of Sartre's view. The body builder, for his success and gratification, requires the attention of the viewers. In the display of the body he becomes a living sculpture. The body builder on display, thus, may feel in the admiration and applause of his audience not a diminishing, but an enhancement of self and personhood. Van den Berg suggests that athletes have reached unexpected heights because of Sartre's third dimension: "Innumerable are the declarations of sportsmen that their achievements exceed their expectations *owing to the eyes* of thousands that are directed upon them" (1964, p. 115).

The second and third dimensions for the gymnast are not clearly defined nor separated. The lack of discreteness is in fact a source of concern for a performer. While he endeavors to maintain the state of "passing beyond" with all the energy and concentration he can muster, such efforts are destroyed when the look and the awareness of the look of another "bestows a fiat" on his efforts. But rather than being detrimental, this awareness can augment his already straining body. It may be that subjective activities (such as those which a gymnast does) in sports enhance the performance of the individual. Gymnasts, like body builders, benefit from the experience of being seen when they perform. Early in the gymnastic season, gymnasts compete in friendly meets, hoping that their performance will improve significantly if they demonstrate their movements in front of an audience. The loneliness of the training is contrasted with the act of allowing oneself and one's body to be put on public display in the hope of finding affirmation in the eyes of others.

The Kinesthetic Search

The physical and mental preparation which accompanies the learning process is practiced to provide a setting conducive to getting the "feel" of the move. Gymnasts, once they have performed a movement, can recall what it felt like to do the movement. Such an experience helps to identify a set of cues or feelings which contribute to permanent learning of the movement. However, gymnasts do not always capture the sense of the movement after only a few attempts, and they continuously go through the rituals which enable them to build towards the execution of the movement. With each attempt the gymnast learns more about himself and the requirements of effort which his body is being called upon to make. Once more he passes beyond and becomes engrossed in the movement until eventually he can, with regularity, achieve the feeling at will.

This gradual process may be expressed in terms of an internalization of awareness which shares commonalities with other gymnasts but, nevertheless, is an individual experience for each gymnast. Gymnasts discuss with one another the physical manifestations of particular aspects of the movement:

> Some people are more enthusiastic. Not only that, but it's the way you say things too. Like, often the coaches will say the same thing, but it's the way they say things which changes the whole way of seeing a move. For example, one coach will tell you and tell you, but you still don't get the idea, and then another coach will come along and provide the hint and the whole thing works out. One coach says "Hollow out!" and another coach will come along and give you a more precise hint, and you find yourself hollowing out normally.

How people say things and what is reflected in their words contribute to the accessibility of the athletic experience. Words which previously had little meaning are suddenly enlightening to the aspiring

gymnast when spoken by a less exasperated teacher, and the concern of the searching gymnasts is relieved by the right choice of words. The good coach tries to live the moments of the movement with the gymnast as they exchange gestures, words, and feelings. What remains is the task of transforming the experience of others into a personal experience.

That transformation takes place in a moment of time when the gymnast becomes engrossed in the search for the feeling which captures for him a stable understanding of the movement. The search for the feeling may be what motivates some gymnasts to achieve more complex movements. However, the access to that experience seems available to few, and only to those who persistently seek out that experience do such complexities become clarified. One gymnast expressed his search in the following way:

> For example, going into the second somersault of a double back is the feeling I want to get hold of. Getting that feeling of not knowing where I am and searching for the feeling is like a "rush." It really helps.

Seeking such a feeling may be considered a form of cognitive appeal; the gymnast searches for intrinsic experiences which the achievement of movement offers. As the experience develops into a permanent comprehension of the feeling of the action, the gymnast once more places his body in the context of the acquired movement.

For the gymnast the "rush" is often a temporary characteristic of the movement, and as progressions are recorded, the cognitive appeal fades in favor of an awareness of the body not previously permitted. Gymnasts acquire the experience which allows them to perform the desired movements at will, with precision and safety. Finding that stable point is necessary for gymnasts and often takes long hours of practice to achieve. With each attempt the performer places his body into the context of the movement, and finally the kinesthetic grasp of the movement is the culmination of the personal experience—that which the gymnast set out to do has finally been accomplished.

The Take Off

> I sit and stare at an object or the floor for what seems a long time, and I think of the energy it is going to take to throw the trick and the specific body control movements I have to apply to accomplish the major trick. I also do that on the floor; I stand at a point and get myself ready to go.

Those few moments of composure and of drawing himself together are important moments for the gymnast before he indicates his willingness to move. Each time the gymnast sets out to come nearer to the movement, he finds it necessary to gather his powers of concentration and make a commitment, not only to himself, but to

those around him. The act of standing still and of showing intent is a clear signal to coaches and fellow gymnasts that the time has come. The take-off is the commencement of a commitment which the gymnast now faces. Poised, he waits and nothing but a "decision" prevents him from commencing the movement. According to Linschoten (1968, p. 273), there exists an ideomotor activity by which the very representation of the movement provokes the movement. For example, "We know what it means to leave our beds on an ice-cold morning in a room that is not heated. The thought of getting up is simply unacceptable as long as we lie under the warm covers." Linschoten reminds us how we try to stretch the time out to another five minutes, but a sense of duty calls and rather than making a decision to arise, we suddenly notice that we are up.

> The take-off is the most difficult phase. Once I am in the air and coming down, I feel okay again. Once you are in the air, it's okay. But it is the initial movement. You have to commit yourself to doing the movement, and it is the commitment to yourself which is really hard to make.

In spite of what we call making a decision, there is no explicit "I will let it come to pass," in the experience. Once accomplished, the act of getting up can be considered, in Linschoten's terms, an ideomotor process (1968, p. 274). Somewhat similar is the process which provokes the movement of the gymnast into his commitment. The condition for this to occur is that there are no conflicting representations that impede the execution of the representation of the movement. Such conflicting representations do inhibit the process of movement. This happens when the gymnast is unable to see himself as the body moving through the air. Thus, when he finds himself racing towards the vaulting horse, he may abruptly realize that the representation of the movement had faded from his mind and he is forced to stop in his tracks and withdraw his efforts. Although a commitment had been made and a take-off witnessed, a conflict of representation in the mental life of the gymnast prevents him from successfully carrying out the movement. So it appears that with all the efforts which gymnasts put into their preparatory work, they are finally faced with commitment. "You have really got to want to do the movement" was the conviction of the gymnasts. But once the commitment has been made, the opportunity to break the deal with oneself is still an option which the gymnast can freely exercise. The continuous trial, refusal, and negotiation with oneself, seems to be part of the process of gradually approaching the moment when the performer "brushes" the experience.

Even though the commitment is made and the movement started, the option to hesitate may be taken during the brief moments of the movement; then, the gymnast is either guided to safety by the helping hand of the teacher or oftentimes crashes—hopefully to the

safety of the landing surface. Living to tell the tale or recalling the success of experiencing the movement is the mark of progress, and the gymnast returns to commit himself once again. With each attempt the commitment is made with more specific intentionality, and the option of breaking the "deal" is taken less frequently. Some gymnasts would agree that the first time is the hardest, after which the commitment plays a less significant role, and what takes over is the desire for complete understanding of the movement and with it a fuller and richer experience.

Notes

1. Unless otherwise noted, quotes are derived from interview conversations with gymnasts.

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