

Alja Lah

Title: Embodiment – The need for wholeness

1. Introduction

Embodiment is one of the central themes in phenomenology and it is used in many different ways with different emphasis. According to The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy (1999) embodiment is the bodily aspect of human subjectivity. Merleau-Ponty's (1962) account of embodiment distinguishes between the objective body, referring to the physiological entity, and the phenomenal body, referring to the lived body as an individual experience. Phenomenological meaning of embodiment pertains to the phenomenal body and the role it plays in our lived experience. Johnson (2008) says "Our embodiment shapes both what and how we experience, think, mean, imagine, reason and communicate" (p.19). Nietzsche (1883) believed the "body is a great intelligence, a multiplicity with one sense (p.61) and this is the aspect of embodiment that I will explore in this essay – the embodiment of intelligence. I will then consider the role of embodiment in psychotherapy and give some personal examples of embodied work in psychotherapy.

2. Existential view on embodiment

Heidegger's philosophy is in many ways highly significant for the explorations of embodiment. Heidegger (1953/1996) grants a central role to moods as a primordial way of disclosing being-in-the-world preceding all cognition or will. Stolorow (2013) posits that moods encompass all of what is ordinarily meant by 'moods,' 'emotions,' and 'feelings and that they always already entail an implication of the lived body. Stolorow hence argues that Heidegger has placed the body, along with affectivity, at the heart of Dasein's disclosedness, thus granting it an ontological significance. Heidegger stated: "Every feeling is an

embodiment attuned in this or that way, a mood that embodies in this or that way” (Heidegger, 1961/1979, p.100). According to Elkholy (2008) Heidegger replaces the cognitivist “metaphysics of reason” with “metaphysics of feeling” (p. 6). He posits: “Through mood humans gain access to their world, to themselves and to their relations with others in the world in a manner that is prereflective and unthematic.” (Elkholy, 2008, p.4). In line with that I suppose one’s being-in-the-world can most easily be accessed with awareness of one’s own moods through the body. Understanding ontic affectivity rather than reasoning can lead to deeper understanding on an ontic as well as ontological level.

Merleau-Ponty (1962), inspired by Heidegger, wrote about the notion of the ‘body-subject’ in which experience begins with the body but, through the process of awareness and critical social judgement, extends into the social world. Meaning that our point of view on the world is our body and that our consciousness is embodied. In line with Heidegger’s notion of being-in-the-world and through the notion of the lived body he stated, “The world is not what I think, but what I live through. I am open to the world...” (p.xvii). Thus emotionality does not reside inside the body or the mind based on representations or reflexes but is out there in the dialogical relation of embodied human being and the world. Both Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger indicate that our experience, our way of engaging with the concrete world depends on the way it emotionally matters to us, our way of being-in-the-world.

Nietzsche explored his own experience and came to a realization that his body is everything he is, the body “does not say ‘I’ but performs ‘I’” (1883, p. 62). Moving away from Cartesian dualism he believed that the self is the body and the soul is just a word for something in the body. Paying attention to the body and listening to it is the way to “become what you are”. His *Übermensch* becomes reflective to the point where the body, soul and self are truly integrated. The problem is that we erroneously interpret the body’s experience. That results in doing harm with that which harms us. He writes, “we are unknown to ourselves, we men of knowledge – and with good reason. We have never sought ourselves...” (1887, p.15).

Johnson (2008) wrote about the difficulty that embodiment presents to philosophy and research:

“One of the hardest tasks you will ever face is coming to terms with the fact of your embodiment. What makes this task so very difficult is the omnipresent idea of disembodied mind and thought that shows itself throughout our intellectual tradition...” (p.19)

I wonder if this is the reason why we have become so disembodied at this day and age. Existential philosophers mentioned above do not see the way to our embodied knowledge in employing great sources of strength to subdue our bodies or our emotions; instead they suggest making the effort to understand them and with that understand ourselves for our own benefit.

3. Embodiment in psychotherapy

Embodied view of existence contradicts the view of intelligence residing in the mind and the body being a mere vehicle for it. Since the 17th century when Descartes presumed segregation between body and mind (Damasio, 1994) the dualist paradigm remained the basis of psychological sciences. Psychology presumes knowledge about experience from researching the “psyche”, placing the body as part of the context. Whereas embodied perspective acknowledges that we are creatures of the flesh (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). Similarly most psychotherapy approaches have the same underpinnings as general psychology. A chapter about “the body” in the Handbook of Counselling Psychology states “the importance of the body is minimized or overlooked altogether in virtually all introductory texts related to psychological therapy, psychotherapy and counselling” (Wahl, 2003, p.592). They seem to address the concept of embodiment merely through the concept of the body and thus reinforcing the dualist paradigm. Nevertheless there are researchers and practitioners who are taking forward the perspective of therapy as an embodied experience (Boadella,

1997; Sampson, 1998; Staunton, 2002; Totten, 2015). Geller & Greenberg (2012) are even placing emphasis on developing an embodied therapeutic presence as central to the therapeutic encounter.

Fuchs and Koch (2014) argue that emotions may not only be influenced by cognitive means, but also by modifying the bodily resonance. They can be diminished as well as increased. The experience of elusive emotions may be enhanced and differentiated by carefully attending to the bodily feelings, which has a particular psychotherapeutic importance. Rogers (1951) already pointed out that entering into a sensing, reflective, and affective mode as well as giving space to integrate the bodily feedback during the process of therapy is of utmost importance.

Gendlin (1981) has found that the successful therapy patients have an ability to pay attention to their bodily experience at the edge of what they can say. He calls that internal act focusing and describes it as a “process in which you make contact with a special kind of internal bodily awareness” (p.7), called a felt sense. A felt sense is usually not simply there, it must form by paying attention to the body. In the beginning it is usually unclear and fuzzy. Through certain steps it can become clearer and also change. According to Gendlin (1981) “a felt sense is the body's sense of a particular problem or situation” (p.7). It feels unknown but meaningful; it is a body's way of providing answers in regard to issues in life. Our bodies “know” so much about our situations because they are themselves sentient interactions. Therapy is supposed to deepen immediately with some clients if they are asked what physical sense comes in the middle of the body in relation to what is being worked on (Gendlin, 1999, p.207). Gendlin argues that the process brings change, which one recognizes as a distinct physical sensation of change and he calls it a body shift. This process of actually changing feels good and natural to the body: “The crucial move goes beneath the usual painful places to a bodily sensing that is at first unclear. The experience of something emerging from there feels like a relief and a coming alive.” (p.6).

Finlay and Evans (2009) describe to be present as a therapist is about opening to the other while being willing to give of self, having the courage to stay in 'the process' - to be emotionally present in the here-and-now encounter and embody ways of 'being' and 'being-with' (as opposed to just 'doing'), rather than be led by some intellectual principle.

Gerson (2010) writes about how her body in conjunction with her mind assists her in understanding her clients. She argues that the body's manifestations can be a quicker and more accurate way of seeing and understanding the drama taking place in a client. They provide direct access to the core of the conflict, when thought formulations and interpretations come much later. In her practice as a psychotherapist she has gone through a process of learning to trust her body:

"I feel grateful for what it brings up, for what it tells me, for what it can recognize long before my intellect can understand or my will is inclined to believe. ... the body is a compass in my work and in my life." (Gerson, 2010, p.15)

4. Case examples

I will illustrate the above discussed topic of embodiment with my personal experience in therapy from the side of being a client and being a therapist.

In a session with my therapist we were exploring my pattern of searching for someone to love and someone to love me, instead of loving myself. I described that it seems very hard to love myself, it doesn't feel natural to me. My mind just couldn't understand why loving myself is so difficult. I became tired of thinking and felt something in my chest so I suggested we pay attention to my body. I closed my eyes and my therapist guided me with questions about sensations in the body. I felt pain around my heart and heaviness in my head. After staying with these sensations for a while I felt the two are connected in an intricate way

as a double bind. The therapist asked if they have something to say, so I cleared my mind and listened. The words came out of me “The head is angry with my heart for hurting so much. And the heart said it feels small and constricted under the head’s authority”. In this moment my therapist asked “but your heart is not small right?” I broke into tears saying that it is too big for this world and longing to break free of the walls around it. I cried, releasing the pain and then the words just came out of me: “my heart is not too big for this world it just seems to constantly stumble upon very small hearts!” and I started giggling. I felt a deep release and a feeling of joy wash over me. I felt I can give my heart a break from the strict jailer that was my head. I felt I can mend my broken heart myself and eventually start to love myself. That gave me a feeling of trust and empowerment. When I opened my eyes I felt like I just went somewhere else, somewhere really deep and cognitively I couldn’t quite grasp what I just experienced. Yet it all felt very meaningful to me.

In the next session we continued to work in the same way and that is when I realized that my heart got broken when I was a child and it remained closed ever since. I had always known of the trauma I have been through, but until this embodied work, it never revealed itself with all the hurt and the lasting impact it had on me.

Parallel to this I was working with a client who was going through a similar process. For the purpose of this essay I will only describe the embodied work we did together. He was generally not feeling much emotion, instead overthinking and worrying about everything. When we were talking about his issue and his usual response was “I don’t know” I asked him if he has any body sensations. He took a minute and said he feels pain in his heart. I asked if there is anything else he feels. He said he also feels tightness in his head. I asked him if he could stay with that for a moment and listen to what the sensations are saying. After a minute or so he said that he feels really sad about the way things are in his life and just feeling so lonely most of the time. This was the first time he shared a feeling or emotion with me. This embodied exploration opened up a completely new way of being for him and also deepened the therapeutic process immensely.

5. Conclusion

In the essay I discussed embodiment as the inherent intelligence of the body without the need of a mediatory cognitive processing. Many existential philosophers wrote about the importance of embodiment in this way or another and it is slowly gaining recognition in some psychotherapy approaches. Through case examples I showed how much movement can happen in therapy in a very short time by paying attention to the body, to ourselves. We are embodied but the mind too often forgets that simple fact. I wish to emphasize that embodiment should not be seen as a technique in psychotherapy but as a consideration and acceptance of a person in her wholeness. Like the Delphic maxim inscribes, "know thyself", it most certainly implies the whole self and not just the mind.

6. References

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