

## 1 Physicality

### Activity

Lift a heavy stone, jump over a fence or run to catch a ball and you will be pleased with yourself. You will have a sense of your own power and ability. You will feel invigorated and possibly a little out of breath. Your pulse rate will raise briefly. You have done something, performed an action, acted, been an actor. Even if your capabilities are limited, as everyone's are to some degree, you will still want to exercise them, preferring to do what you can alone and accepting help only when needed. Catching a ball is a simple but disproportionately pleasing activity. An exercise in hand-eye coordination, it consequently feels like an achievement. Satisfaction comes with a clean take: when the ball smacks perfectly into the palm of your hand, sticking securely.

It is pleasing in and of itself to be active, I shall argue. Everyone needs rest and relaxation, of course, but these have to be properly balanced with activity in order to be enjoyed. Too much inactivity gets us down. Enforced idleness is torture. There are many different forms that activity can take, but to understand the role of sport in our lives, and in our societies, we should start with physical activity that is for its own sake. Although I shall focus on the importance of abilities in sport, my account will reject ableism.

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Swimming is as good an example as any to consider in more detail. There are some reasons why it might be necessary to swim but my focus here will be the most common case where someone swims for pleasure; that is, just for the sake of being active. Let us consider the ways in which we enjoy the activity of swimming. There is the sensation of the water on one's skin as one is unfettered by cumbersome outdoor clothing. One is surrounded by water and yet also with a sense of freedom in that medium. The real pleasure then starts when feeling the water slide over your body as you move through the water: when you are properly swimming. The four recognised strokes all consist in cycles of coordinated motions, mainly of the legs and arms, whose movements are synchronised. There is much else to get right too, though: your breathing, optimum head position and so on. Getting the technique right allows you to cut through the water at pace. We see that some are faster and better swimmers than others so we know that the technique can be improved with practice. Some swimmers make it look effortless but this is because they have mastered the technique. They have control over their bodies and know all the small details that can add efficiency. Novice breast-strokers might leave their fingers apart, for instance, as the water then offers less resistance. One soon learns to keep one's fingers closed together so that the hands form a scoop or paddle and that the feeling of resistance is what really matters and is how you pull yourself through the water.

The satisfaction of swimming is not just about control and mastery of one's own body, although that can bring a very great pleasure indeed. In this case, there is also

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a satisfaction in mastery over the water. One might recall one's childhood, entering water for the first time, and being scared that it could cover your face. Contrast that now with how you can kick off from the side and glide a quarter of a length under the water, knowing to blow bubbles out of your nose as you go. Feeling comfortable and at ease in the water comes from confidence in one's technique and then being pleased that one has conquered a fear and gained mastery over a potentially hostile environment.

The acquisition of new physical skills can itself bring a sense of achievement, even when you cannot yet execute those skills well. I don't mind admitting that I was a late swimmer and even now that I have much to learn. It had long bothered me that while I had developed a good stroke, I still couldn't dive into the pool. I had to climb down the ladder or shuffle into the shallow end off my bottom. I could tolerate the embarrassment but it annoyed me that there was something I was unable to do but which looked relatively easy when others did it. Where did one start on learning an ability like that at my age, though? Did I just need to take the plunge (literally)? Was fear the main thing stopping me? What would it be like throwing myself off a ledge into thin air? Would it hurt when my body hit the water? Could I bang my head on the bottom? Would I be able to get back up for breath in time?

Admitting my vulnerability and taking a few tips from a good swimmer, I one day resolved that I was going to learn to dive. Hence there was a first time when I crouched low on the edge of the deep end, looking into the water below me, arms extended, fingers together and

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pointing ahead, when I had to be brave and make the leap. The first attempt was not great, technically, but it was enough to realise that the water hitting your chest wasn't too painful. Within a minute I was back out and ready for another go. After a few attempts it felt like it was getting better and I could go straight from my dive into an underwater glide and then come up and start my stroke. I felt proud of myself, to an extent, for having conquered a physical fear.

It was not only that, though. My delight came from a sense of pride but also a celebration of my physicality. I had learnt and controlled my body adequately enough to be able to perform a novel skill. I was newly able to execute a significant physical action: cutting through the air and breaking into that potentially hostile environment. I felt alive, capable, powerful, in control of myself and my surrounds, in direct contact with my world, a human being, embodied.

#### Extensions

The pleasure gained in exercising one's physical abilities is not limited to sporting activities. One might gain pleasure from learning the quick and intricate fingering of a new tune on the guitar, for instance. A novice might be pleased just from learning to play their first recognisable chord. Playing a musical instrument can be a lot of fun in no small part because it requires skill, usually with both hands and a lot of concentration and coordination.

Likewise, one can gain pleasure in mundane tasks where one successfully completes a complicated operation.

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Setting aside employed work, which might bring no pleasure since one is alienated from the product of one's labour, consider a household task performed for one's own benefit. Suppose you bought a Scandinavian flat-pack bed that you are excited to have but then find that there is an 86-step self-assembly to complete. The assembly requires holding large planks in place, balancing components in order to slot them together, reaching around corners, screwing in 104 bolts, turning the whole bed over, and so on. There might be some frustrations along the way but, if the task is executed successfully, some self-satisfaction is likely. This is possible for all sorts of chores, tasks and labours performed not for wages but because you wanted them done. Being capable feels empowering in a range of contexts.

There is a further physical pleasure that can be found in some work, and maybe even some musical or other activities, but especially in sport and recreation. This is the pleasure of a good workout. When I swim I like at some point to go for it hard, to put in a sprint over a length, or to have an extended swim, testing the limits of my endurance. At the end of it, I might feel tired, my pulse and respiration are fast and I can feel aches in my muscles, sometimes even burning sensations. It is pleasurable nevertheless. When one gets very fit, exercising hard can bring feelings of euphoria, a strong physical pleasure mixed with the pain and fatigue.

Apart from the immediate sensational pleasure, there can be a use to pushing these physical limits. As in the case of playing a musical instrument, abilities can be lost through lack of use. With physical fitness, we know that it is

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not just skills that can be forgotten, but capacity can decline too. Periods of inactivity will see muscles gradually waste, cardiovascular efficiency fall away, weight increase, and it will become generally harder to exercise next time. Activity makes more activity easier and fitness can usually be increased by pushing oneself a bit beyond one's comfort zone each time.

How far can physical fitness be extended? In our own case, we cannot be sure. As most of us are not professional athletes, we have practical limitations on how often and how long we can exercise, so we do not know our ultimate capacity. We can get some hints by extension, however, when we look at what the best athletes do.

There are some skills that require such a level of dexterity that we might think them not humanly possible. Consider Simone Biles' beam routine in which she performs manoeuvres that were previously thought too hard for anyone to execute in a controlled enough a way for competition, such as a squatted triple spin on one foot (Biles has four unique gymnastic moves named after her). Similarly, there will be some acts of endurance that we might at some stage think impossible, such as running a marathon in under two hours. Eliud Kipchoge proved in 2019, however, that this can physically be done, although he did not run the distance in competition conditions. Still it showed us something important and was enthralling in its own way. Biles and Kipchoge push forward those limits of human capacity on our behalf. They tell us something about ourselves not as individuals but *qua* human beings. We human beings can, after all, perform these feats. This might be why we can take

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vicarious pleasure from seeing others exercise their physical capacities.

The connection between sport and physicality is loose. Physicality is one part of sport; but only a part. And physicality is important outside of sport too. Nevertheless, to understand sport, and our interest in it, we must acknowledge our physical embodiment. Much of what I have said could apply also to activities like dancing, indeed any activity where we use our bodies in a skilled and demanding way. Dancing requires a high level of fitness in order to do it well but can be done to various levels of expertise. With dance, it might be even more obvious that the activity serves no immediate purpose and is done largely for its own sake, for the pleasure it brings. Of course, it is possible that someone dances because they need to get fit or because it can be a social activity and a way of meeting people. But for the most part, I maintain, we dance for pleasure. It is possible to show off, when dancing, and it has long been a convention to dance in order to attract possible partners. Showing off can be more innocent than that, however, since it can be an additional pleasure to display one's capacities to others. We are social beings, after all, and do not practise and exercise our abilities simply for our own pleasure. Just as a musician can take some pride in mastering a difficult piece in private, a public performance adds something. It means that others may not only enjoy the music but also marvel at the dexterity and control on show. Perhaps there is nothing shameful in this showing off. We want to please others. Performing an ability that those others lack is not necessarily a bad thing, which it could be if done in a spirit of gloating. If

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the ability is exhibited in a spirit of pleasing others, after many hours of dedication in order to acquire the requisite skill, then usually the performance is welcome to its viewers.

It seems that we get this in the case of sporting and recreational abilities too. Spectator sports are for our entertainment and consumption and it would be very rare, even perverse, to resent an athlete for having got so good at their chosen sport. Some professional athletes are annoying, certainly, but that is usually because of their perceived personality flaws rather than that they are good at their sport. Displaying one's physical prowess is not of itself a vice. Gloating or using it to belittle others might be.

We can then have a satisfying complementarity, where it can be a pleasure to show your physical abilities to others and pleasurable to see others show their physical abilities. This is a foundation for sports spectatorship since we should acknowledge that sport is not just about participation. For many people it is mainly about watching.

**Being Bodied**

Philosophers spend much time considering the nature of the mental and frequently ignore the significance of physical activity. What I have described so far, however, suggests a celebration of the fact that we are bodied beings, able to take pleasure in what we can do with our physical existence.

There is a tradition, deriving from Descartes, which denies that we are essentially physical things. This is appealing *prima facie* because a person is not just their body. The body can survive the death of the person, for instance, even



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though it usually decays once death has occurred. Might we then also think that the person can survive the death of the body, where death is merely the parting of the soul from the body and where the person lives on as a disembodied soul? There would be a problem with this view, however, if persons are essentially dependent on their bodies, even if they are not identical with them. I support a nuanced version of this view in which we are essentially physical beings and this is a fact upon which the pleasure of exercising physical capacities to a degree rests.

The Cartesian tradition directed our attention towards the nature and existence of mind, but philosophers have started to take embodiment seriously, Merleau-Ponty being a key figure. I am slightly nervous about use of the term ‘embodiment’. This suggests that there is a thing, in the body, that has become *embodied*, when it previously was not; or it is at least possible that it is not in a body. Just as someone without power can become *empowered*, it suggests a prior lack. I am not persuaded, however, that a person can either be *disembodied* or *unembodied* in the first place, in which case being *embodied* might also be misleading. In the interests of clarity, then, I will just say that we are bodied.

The claim I make is that it is not merely a contingent feature of our existence that we are physically bodied beings, contrary to the Cartesian view. Descartes argued that he was essentially a thinking thing. He would cease to exist only when he ceased to think, not necessarily when his body ceased to be. He could at least imagine, so he supposed, that he lived a disembodied existence in pure thought.

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I am not sure that we should concede the possibility to Descartes too readily, however. It seems like he is imagining the minds that we have received and experience as bodied beings, and the thinking that we are able to perform, as if being bodied were some dispensable component of it, which you could discard, just as you might throw away a ladder once you have used it to get out of a hole.

What if, instead, the causal interactions that we have with others, and with the physical locale in which we are situated, shape our nature and identity not just in the past but on an ongoing basis? Everything that I learn, or that stimulates my senses, has come originally through my body. Maybe I can do maths purely in my head now, but the techniques were originally taught to me in interaction with my teachers. And, even now, so much of how I approach the world is shaped by being bodied. I interact with other people who recognise me and in many ways treat me as a white, middle-aged man. Think of how different would have been the experiences that have shaped my personality and thinking had I been black in a mainly white society, or a woman, or facially different, or much shorter than I am, or brought up in a completely different culture at a different place and time. What I think and how I think is shaped by my situation, which I acknowledge to be a position of many privileges. Bodies have locations and orientations in space and time, whereas thoughts do not in the Cartesian framework (which has some appeal; is your thought that today is Thursday to the left or to the right of your desire to be rich?). And think of the confidence with which I walk down the street because I am an able-bodied man, capable