



# WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE BODY AND SPORTS? FROM MERLEAU-PONTY'S BODY PHENOMENOLOGY AND PHILOSOPHY PERSPECTIVE

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**Abstract:** Merleau-Ponty is the founder of modern body phenomenology. His phenomenological masterpiece *Phenomenology of Perception* has greatly influenced the development direction of contemporary western cognitive science. The body theory runs through the beginning and the end of its philosophical thought, adopts phenomenological method to carry on the overview of the ontology of the body theory and turns the body into the cognitive subject's field. By means of literature and logical analysis, this paper attempts to summarize the connotation and extension of Merleau-Ponty's body theory, describe and interpret the ontological dimension of sports from the phenomenological perspective, bring sports back to the understanding and communication of exercise itself and, thus, trigger the thinking to provide multiple reference for the development of sports in each field.


**Keywords:** Body. Sports. Exercise. Merleau-Ponty. Body phenomenology.

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**Resumen:** Merleau-Ponty es el fundador de la fenomenología corporal moderna. Su obra maestra *Phenomenology of Perception* ha influido enormemente en la dirección del desarrollo de la ciencia cognitiva occidental contemporánea. La teoría del cuerpo recorre el principio y el final de su pensamiento filosófico, adopta el método fenomenológico para continuar con el panorama de la ontología de la teoría del cuerpo y convierte el cuerpo en el campo del sujeto cognitivo. A través de la literatura y el análisis lógico, este artículo intenta resumir la connotación y extensión de la teoría del cuerpo de Merleau-Ponty, describir e interpretar la dimensión ontológica del deporte desde la perspectiva fenomenológica, y acercar el deporte a la comprensión y comunicación del ejercicio mismo. De esta manera, se desea desencadenar el pensamiento para brindar múltiples referencias para el desarrollo del deporte en cada campo.

**Palabras clave:** Cuerpo. Deportes. Ejercicio. Merleau-Ponty. Fenomenología corporal.

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# WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE BODY AND SPORTS? FROM MERLEAU-PONTY'S BODY PHENOMENOLOGY AND PHILOSOPHY PERSPECTIVE

Xianshu Deng<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** Merleau-Ponty is the founder of modern body phenomenology. His phenomenological masterpiece *Phenomenology of Perception* has greatly influenced the development direction of contemporary western cognitive science. The body theory runs through the beginning and the end of its philosophical thought, adopts phenomenological method to carry on the overview of the ontology of the body theory and turns the body into the cognitive subject's field. By means of literature and logical analysis, this paper attempts to summarize the connotation and extension of Merleau-Ponty's body theory, describe and interpret the ontological dimension of sports from the phenomenological perspective, bring sports back to the understanding and communication of exercise itself and, thus, trigger the thinking to provide multiple reference for the development of sports in each field.

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## INTRODUCTION

Cognitive science is a precise subject, which studies the working mechanism of human mind. It was praised by Western scientists as early as 1950s. Before that, the traditional Western philosophy of "dualism of body and mind" has long guided people's cognition of the world, from Plato's philosophical thought to Descartes' "separation of body and mind", and has always controlled people's spiritual field. The "cognitivism" or "connectionism" that arises from this attributes cognition to various structural potentials, composed of technology, rules and procedures that can achieve a certain result. The body simply mechanically transmits the stimuli that various organs can obtain to the brain, allowing it to independently complete the cognitive activities of the brain itself. The cognitive essence of both is the ex vivo calculation of the functions of various receptors, effectors and their nervous systems. Philosophers always seem to live in a world of "mind," which is often driven by inertia and limited to body cognition. However, as Montaigne proposed that "soul and body cannot be separated" and "natural tendency of body", in the field of modern philosophy, "body" has been pushed to the stage of cognition, and its value of existence has been re-discussed.

Since the beginning of modern times, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty have exerted the most profound influence on the Western philosophical theory of the existence of the body.

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Compared with Nietzsche's "strong will," that is overemphasis on the value of the existence of the body, Merleau-Ponty reconciled the relationship between the body and consciousness, while emphasizing the body's value, and pulled the body back to the ontological dimension. In his phenomenological magnum opus *Phenomenology of Perception*, he discussed the body and its internal relationship with consciousness from the perspective of body perception. It is also a theoretical masterpiece on the ontological body that expounds aesthetics and art from the point of view of body perception. It not only makes the phenomenological theory more mature, but also makes the body and its philosophy of body and consciousness develop. However, whether it is the natural internal connection between the body and sports, or Merleau-Ponty's inspiration to sports in the phenomenological body theory, it seems that they are leading people to enter the new field of concerning the body philosophy and find mapping of sports philosophy in the phenomenological body theory.

## **1 FROM PLATO TO HEIDEGGER: THE REVOLUTION OF MERLEAU-PONTY'S BODY COGNITION THEORY**

The proposal of Merleau-Ponty's embodied cognition was once considered a revolution in cognitive science. Not only does it enrich and expand Western philosophical theories, but it also adds humanistic characteristics to capitalist societies that pursue advanced technology. By generating knowledge through the interaction between the body and the world, the understanding of things is achieved. The body is not the subject or object of knowledge, nor is it the manifestation of its existence through analysis and synthesis. Generating knowledge is not creating knowledge, but discovering its form of existence.

### **1.1 THE THEORETICAL DILEMMA OF THE "DUAL THEORY OF MIND AND BODY"**

Philosophy can provide principles and methods for cognitive science, belonging to the conceptual field, while science and technology can be utilized by humans to generate surplus value, belonging to the practical field. Against the backdrop of Western capitalist societies pursuing advanced and sophisticated technology, what theory can guide the practice to generate greater value is what they pursue. The good application of computational and functionalist concepts, embedded in traditional cognitive science in practice, also feeds back traditional philosophical ideas, applying their precise computational methods to the derivation and conceptualization of theories. This seemingly feedback of science and technology on theory is actually generated by concepts, and various thinkings and rationalities dominate the generation and development of theory. It is not so much a progress in cognitive science as a mutual action between subject and object. The consequence of equating the world with the spirit is that humans are conceptualized. If the world is equated with matter, humans

become machines. Therefore, how to choose is a difficult problem for humans. The former is the “absolute spirit” advocated by Hegel, while the latter is the Latin American view that “humans are machines”. Therefore, the choice of either this or that arises, namely the nihilistic worldview represented by the spirit of human beings and the material world that determines human beings.

## 1.2 DEPARTURE TO EMBODIMENT: AN EXISTENTIALIST SHIFT IN BODY COGNITION

Merleau-Ponty is one of the most important French philosophers and thinkers in the 20th century, and a typical representative of existentialism. His *Phenomenology of Perception* is another great work of phenomenology, which has influenced the development of Western philosophy after Husserl and Heidegger. In addition, *Phenomenology of Perception* is all about asking for meaning, constantly questioning the intrinsic nature of human actions and decisions. In the metaphysical era of the West, the phenomenon of phenomenology is regarded as the God’s revelation to man, and the understanding of the God’s enlightenment is very important. After the exploration by Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology gradually established its academic status and methodology foundation.

As early as 1907, in his lecture on “Things and Spaces”, Husserl raised the question of the body’s structural function in the context of extensive analysis of the associations of perception. He argued that the body is a possible condition for other objects and that every world experience is mediated through our embodiment. (Dan; Duan, 2015, p. 274) After interpreting Husserl’s “transcendental” thought, Merleau-Ponty insisted that the phenomenology he pursued was to “[...] return Husserl’s essence to existence” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. vii). It can be seen that the thought of embodiment was not original to Merleau-Ponty, but it also had its own features. It can be seen that whole\unity and other words are the key to his embodied cognition from his *Phenomenology of Perception*.

Throughout Western philosophy, the concept of the “body” seems to have been silent. Plato of the Ancient Greek period believed (Plato, 2002, p. 64) that “[...] if we want to acquire pure knowledge of something, we must get rid of the flesh, and let the soul itself meditate on the matter itself”. It indicates that the idea is separated from the body, which has the implication that the mind overrides the body. Aristotle (1999, p. 84) said: “The soul belongs to the internal physical activity, is the cause of the body’s birth, death and movement”. Augustine also pointed out clearly: “As a spirit of all things created by God according to itself and destined to be saved, the soul reflects the divinity of human beings, while the body is the vessel of original sin” (Augustine, 2004, p. 367). Since then, although Descartes is a great advocate of “mind-body dualism”, philosophers fully affirmed the body’s physical status. Descartes has been almost stuck in a rut of focusing on the mind and suppressing the body. The body and so on seem to have little chance to enter their minds.

If the body's absence was a cognitive fallacy in the ancient Greek and medieval philosophers' writings, the exploration of the body by modern philosophers is a revolutionary correction. From the absolute "suppression" of the body to the construction of the transition thought of "body subject," we have to mention Montaigne, who said: "The soul (inner) and the body (outer) cannot be separated, our body is easy to unconsciously show the natural tendency of the inner [...] Caesar often scratches his head with his fingers, which is the physical action of a difficult problem" (Blog, 1985, p. 82). This shift from the subject of consciousness to the body's subject means the gradual transition from the understanding of the world through by thinking to the body through action, which is the modern philosophy of epistemology. Nietzsche had a profound influence on the development of existentialist philosophy, when he said: "Countless errors are caused by consciousness [...] Simply put, with consciousness alone, mankind is bound to collapse and perish" (Nietzsche, 1984, p. 39). Later, Heidegger's existentialism brought the body's existence back to modern philosophy, advocated the meaning, value and way of existence, and reflected a humanistic concern.

Modern Western philosophers always associate the relationship between the body and space and give the body spatial meaning. That is to say, the body has spatial attributes, and it can be said that the body itself is composed of space. However, The Marxist space ideology, that endows natural space with social attributes through practical activities, has replaced the abstract space ideology of capitalist alienation. Then, there is the body's value in social space with respect to existential epistemological philosophy. Fortunately, before Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of the body came into being, there were no other theories about confronting the subjectivity of consciousness, which meant that if human consciousness was regarded as the subject of cognitive activities, the meaning of cognitive existence would not belong to human body itself, but to consciousness, and cognition would lose its meaning and value. In view of this, Merleau-Ponty (2001, p. 6) rejects the philosophy of conscious subjectivity and bluntly says: "My body is not only a part of space in my opinion, but if I have no body, there is no space in my opinion". Not only that, he wrote in his book *The Visible and the Invisible*: "The whole space is nothing but the fog tightly wrapped by people called the perceptible world and the historical world, the body and spirit of the body and the human life, the present and the past wrapped in the whole" (Merleau-Ponty, 2018, p. 107). Therefore, Merleau-Ponty turned cognitive science to the ontological dimension, re-examined "cognitive activities" from the perspective of body phenomenology and initiated a new round of theoretical revolution of body ontology.

## 2 MERLEAU-PONTY'S BODY THEORY

"The problem of the world can begin with the problem of the body" (Lu, 2006, p. 27). The concept of the body is particularly important to the modern philosopher Merleau-

Ponty. The body's position is extremely significant in the development history of Western modern philosophy. The philosophical sages believe that the body and space are interrelated in a special way, which is wrapped around each other rather than displayed side by side. However, throughout the history of Western philosophy, the body is not independent most of the time, but is an accessory of consciousness. Merleau-Ponty opposed this view of the body as a tool for the subject to achieve certain expectations, which caused the dilemma faced by the philosophy of consciousness and blocked people's exploration of the body itself. Therefore, this view of the body, which is transformed from epistemology to ontology, encourages human beings to regard the body as a way of living.

## **2.1 SUBJECT OF COGNITION: THE BODY ITSELF**

Before the birth of existentialism, the subject of cognition should be pure consciousness, and people get to know the world through the mind. When talking about the cognitive behavior analysis, although Merleau-Ponty also mentioned consciousness, but it is not the same with Descartes' "coi" and Husserl's consciousness. He says: "The mind does not think according to itself, but according to the body, and the body and the consciousness are united" (Merleau-Ponty, 2019, p. 55). That is to say, the body is not an object in relation to consciousness. In the process of cognition, although consciousness participates in the whole process and is indelible in the human brain, its subjectivity is always "absent present" at the moment, and constantly accepts every activity fragment of practice. Consciousness at this moment is the pre-reflective body's manifestation form. Since the subject of cognition is not consciousness, then what is the subject of cognition? Merleau-Ponty opposed the separation of consciousness and body and the subjectivity of consciousness, and proposed "body-subject", that is "[...] the body is the common structure of all objects" (Merleau-Ponty, 2001, p. 300).

### **2.1.1 BODY: SPATIALITY AND TEMPORALITY COEXIST**

The body with space and time together determines that the subject of cognition is the body itself. All cognitive activities take place in the body's specific space. The universality and spatial nature of cognition make people always in the cognition of the surrounding environment. However, this does not mean that time is missing in the cognitive process. On the contrary, it is precisely because cognitive activities have the pressure of time that consciousness can get rid of the subject's inertia and be in a situation of selflessness. What is more, Merleau-Ponty (2001, p. 183) once said: "Timeliness also determines that any experience of our own has its own sequence, is the internal form of body perception". As consciousness itself, it knows that the cognitive behavior carried out by the body subject is completed within a certain time, but in this way of the body leading to the subject,

consciousness is also related to time itself, which is mainly reflected in the perfect cognitive activity of the individual, requiring the body and consciousness to be completely immersed in it. “In general, the body is meaningful to ourselves and others only when it occupies a specific space and place and moves through a specific temporal correlation” (Zhou, 2013, p. 23-29). This temporal correlation is not derived from the body, but only from the time in the body. “This spatial and temporal association of presence based on the body is incorporated into a ‘situational spatiality’” (Merleau-Ponty, 2001, p. 135-138). Moreover, cognition occurs in the body under a state of real-time stress.

From the surface, individuals can complete cognitive activities in a relatively leisurely state, so as to achieve the purpose of cognition, but such leisurely cognition is not without pressure, because we are ‘living minds’, must be understood according to the subject under the pressure of interaction with the environment (Wang, 2018, p. 180).

Subjects participating in cognitive activities get rid of social relations in the real society, make judgment, analysis, understanding, synthesis, evaluation and creation, become cognitive performers, and the value of the subject’s existence is also reflected. There is no doubt that spatiality and temporality, as potential traits in the body, constantly discipline the logical order and the cognitive subject’s rules.

### **2.1.2 BODY: EXISTS BEFORE CONSCIOUSNESS**

The subject of cognition points to the body, which is also reflected in the body’s existence before consciousness and has its own independence. First of all, the body’s existence is presupposed in advance without being dominated by the other. In addition, the body’s structure and schema also have intentionality, which guides the direction of my cognition. Merleau-Ponty also praised the body as the “tacit cogito”, which is the preconditions of all expression, as distinct from Descartes’ “verbal cogito”. The body, as the silent consciousness, perceives the world according to the body’s empirical intention. In different cognitive links, the body will have different intentions. Due to the absence of consciousness, the body in cognition forgets the difference between the body and the world, so as to spontaneously and silently organize our perceptual life without obvious perceptual representation and explicit conscious efforts. Second, the body precedes consciousness, which is not just before and after digital time, but a priori in the logic of genesis. At this time, the body is a pure body involved in the unconscious, which can also be said to be the “element” of the occurrence of things. However, this does not mean that consciousness does not exist, but emphasizes that consciousness gets rid of its subject status. Only when consciousness enters cognition and has relations with the surrounding world, can the body, consciousness and environment form a unified whole, the way of existence of the body in the world can be manifested, and the value of its existence can be realized.

### 2.1.3 THE BODY: THE KEY TO INTERACTION AND TRUTH EXPLORATION

Merleau-Ponty (1968, p. 284) says: “The body and the world are made of the same ‘flesh’, and the flesh of my body is shared by the world, and the world represents the flesh of the body, invades it, and it invades the world”. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, on the one hand, the world is the correlativity of the body’s intention and behavior, which exists relative to the body and comes into being with the body’s birth. At the same time, the body is the world’s pilot and planning. It is its meaning giver, and the world cannot exist without the body. On the other hand, the body must be supported by the world, which is the basis of our existence, and we can realize our subjectivity only by entering the world through the body. In the process of the interaction between the body and the world, the body acquiesces its epistemological status while realizing the world’s cognition. However, the body at this time is only a tool body rather than a value body. Therefore, before interacting with the world, it is necessary to transcend the subject’s body, follow the trajectory of the body’s intention, and establish an exploration mechanism belonging to the *nouveau* body. Secondly, we need to cross the dialectical level of the relationship between the subject and the world to explore the source of truth or meaning, and then, understand the thing itself. That is to say, the search for a “third dimension” as a new “field of being” outside the standpoint subjectivity. Thus, the concept of “flesh” as an ontology emerges. Here, we can interpret it as “truth resides in the body,” that is, the person inside. Although the concept of ‘flesh’ was mentioned in another work after the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty was, in the final analysis, implementing the phenomenological principle of “going back to the thing itself” and restoring the transcendental self to the phenomenal body. He talks about that to get back to things, one must be grounded and let the body perceive the world.

Merleau-Ponty tried to explore things in the process of the interaction between the body and the world, and turned to the promotion of ontological philosophy. This ontological exploration builds a bridge between tradition and modernity, subject and object (Yu, 2019, p. 24-29). The experience of body perception allows us to return to the pre-reflective body experience, where value and truth are born in the most original and authentic state. It is through the way of “body-world-interaction” that he realizes the exploration of aesthetic and artistic truth. This also constitutes the essence of his embodied phenomenology theory. However, after a preliminary understanding of the knowledge related to the body ontology, people will ask: how do we understand the way the body exists? Next, follow Merleau-Ponty’s steps to further explore the body under the body’s phenomenological perspective and find clues to the philosophy of sports.



## 2.2 THE WAY OF BODY EXISTENCE: BODY SCHEMA

The concept of “body schema”, proposed by Merleau-Ponty in *Phenomenology of Perception*, showcases the way the body exists in the world, which is a “spatial aspect of the situation” where everything appears at the dual interface of external space and body space (Merleau-Ponty, 2001, p. 137-139). As the “flesh of the world,” the body is only the smallest unit of what constitutes the world. At this time, the “body” is universal and equal to the existence of all things. Therefore, the search for the essence of the body is obviously not achieved in this way. The body is a unique existence, which is not only the physical body of naturalism, but also the body of body and mind. More precisely, the body should be understood as “a way of being.” Heidegger expressed this special way of being with “the embodiment of the body” (Wang, 2016, p. 19-25). Merleau-Ponty (2001, p. 116) says that the body is the medium between human and the world, and body is also the way of being, which is more basic than the mind. Therefore, just as we cannot think about the world in terms of pure consciousness or thinking, we cannot think about the way the body exists in terms of pure physical concepts. Western sages usually realized their understanding of the world from the level of consciousness, rarely touching the body. At most, the bodies were regarded as the general carrier to achieve their goals by the subject of consciousness. But this metaphysical conceptual cycle can lead to Sisyphus’s dilemma, forcing people to rethink this way and the meaning of human existence. Merleau-Ponty (2005, p. 2–4) says: “The world existed before I could make any analysis of it”, that is, the world existed before consciousness. It can be confirmed that the body, as the hub connecting with the world, has the meaning of “initial subjectivity.” Merleau-Ponty insisted that “[...] the way we perceive the world is because of the wonders and mystery of the body” (Yan, 2016, p. 144). Moreover, he continued to hold that (Zeng, 2014, p. 116-125): “The ‘body’ in the relationship between man and the world is a ‘phenomenal body’, that is, the body in intentionality. The ‘phenomenal body’, in this intentionality, not only includes the integrative body achieved by intention, but also the world closely connected with the body achieved by intention.” In fact, the “body”, in the phenomenal sense of having an ambiguous way of being, is the “body” that Merleau-Ponty was concerned with when discussing the body schema.

“Body schema” is originally a concept in the field of physiology, but it does not express the body’s physical sense. That is, the body is not a pure physiological structure, but the intentional connection between the meaningful world’s body and the surrounding world in a specific situation. Consciousness gives expression to the body in action by reflecting on the phenomenal body. Merleau-Ponty (2005, p. 181) says: “Conscious life is supported by the arc of intention, which projects around us our past, future, human environment, material situation and all the relationships in which we are involved”. It is under the guidance of the arc of intention that habit becomes an important manifestation of “body schema” in people’s life. However, although habit is not the knowledge of the body’s certain operation, it is not

a fixed pattern of unconscious participation, but has its own generation mechanism. When the body comes into contact with an object, the perception of the object has been generated. In the further in-depth cognition of the object, the contact with the object will be repeated many times. The repeated actions are not at the same cognitive level, but get closer and closer to the essence of things through “iteration”. Before the “next” contact with the object, the body will reflect on the “last” cognitive process, through consciousness at this time, to achieve the renewal and correction of habits in the way of quantitative change and qualitative one. At the same time, Merleau-Ponty’s body schema is a kind of spatial schema, whose expression is carried out in space. “The body is the initial habit, habit is the process of the body to understand and grasp the world, habit is also a transcendental body space and external space continuous integration process” (Su, 2021, p. 121). Habits are spatial, of course, but within a stable range. “The space at this time presents itself as a fixed behavior habit, and this stability is based on the stability of the body schema” (Feng, 2017, p. 56). In a sense, the body not only regulates the consciousness, but also makes the consciousness serve the body and gives it stable characteristics. Therefore, the body is like a world. In this world, to obtain space, it is better to form stable activities. And those destabilizing factors will lead to the body’s disorder. Here, consciousness, relative to the body, is in a situation of passive and active, unconscious and conscious, separation and integration, dynamic and stable. In this situation, it can be found that there is only one body: body schema. As we all know, we live in a world of meaning. Meaning is due to the phenomenal body’s reflection. If the body is a world, then what is its relationship to the natural world? How is it connected to the natural world? It is true that the body has its own special purpose.

### **2.3 THE MEANING OF THE BODY’S EXISTENCE: THE WORLD’S EXPERIENCE**

Merleau-Ponty (2002, p. 31) says: “The experience of perception brings us back to the moment when things, truth and good are constructed for us, it provides us with a ‘logos’ of the initial state, it gets rid of all dogmatism, it teaches us what is the true condition of objectivity, it reminds us of what is the task of knowing and acting”. This is not to reduce human knowledge to perception, but to witness the birth of this knowledge, to make it as emotional as sensibility, and to regain rational consciousness. Merleau-Ponty aims to reveal the original form of human knowledge, occupied by rational consciousness, and the meaning of its existence in the world by means of the body, which also reveals the meaning of reason. Perhaps, body’s many weaknesses will hinder my understanding of the “real world”, such as the body’s fragility and perishability and so on. In order to break the ancient Greek philosophers’ belittling theory and religions on the body, it is necessary to abandon the previous thinking habits and re-open the body’s dimension. Merleau-Ponty regards the body’s limitations as the positive ability that we have in the world, and it can see through objects. Perhaps it is the

existence of this ability that limits the body to the level of meaning. We know that our bodies carry all kinds of meanings for our existence in the world.

“The ‘body’ here is embodied in the cognitive level as a kind of body experience that is immersed in the living world and carries on the whole life, and it carries on extensive construction of meaning correlation with the world” (THE EXPERT GROUP, 2022, p. 1-18). Therefore, we cannot view the body as an intermediary between ourselves and the world, and say that we interact with the world through the body. It is that we interact with the world as a physical experience. Similarly, Gadamer’s interpretations, starting from physical experience, argues that something is an experience if it has not only been experienced, but its experienced existence has acquired a characteristic that makes it meaningful to continue to exist (Zhang, 2014, p. 178). From the natural world’s perspective, tourists interact with the natural world through their bodies, and thus obtain existential significance, which belongs to the category of embodied tourism experience. From the social world’s perspective or human society, players are separated from daily life and in the game environment, and they interact with it to generate existential significance, which belongs to the category of game immersion experience. According to this, the activity of life in organic form is the activity of meaning that consciously expresses the value of existence. Rather than saying that we are body and soul in one, our body is conscious, emotional and expressive. Such bodies exist on Earth so that the world of meaning does not present an absence state dominated by consciousness and enrich is the meaning dimension of human existence.

### 3 DISCUSSIONS ON SPORTS PHILOSOPHY ABOUT MERLEAU-PONTY’S BODY VIEW

The body’s ontological significance can be highlighted in aesthetic activities. Aesthetic works, in reality, can only be explored in the whole-body interaction with others, while aesthetic and body will be sublimated in the continuous habit formation and renewal and communication with others. Therefore, to understand things, we should avoid the influence of all preconceived ideas return to the exploration of things themselves, which is the embodiment of preconsciousness rather than the theory about the body, and, then, explore in the process of “description” and “interpretation”. However, to find out what is the essence of sports is to answer the relevant questions about the existence of sports. The debate about the nature of sports has never stopped. Although they have not reached a general consensus on the question of “what is sports”, the metaphysical thinking mode of “subject-object dichotomy” of sports has thus been formed. (Yu *et al.* 2021, p. 11-20) Taking sports as the object of the object of consciousness and exploring the qualitative attributes of sports in the subjective judgment of the subject on the conceptual level, different ontological views of sports are generated due the different perspectives of the subject. In view of this, an exploration of the “way of being” of sports from a phenomenological point of view, an

exploration of Archimedes' fulcrum of "why of sports" from Merleau-Ponty's body theory, and an exploration of exercise itself.

### 3.1 EXISTENCE AND HABIT: EMBODIED INTERPRETATION OF SPORTS ONTOLOGY

Cognitive activity is the interaction between human body experience and the world, which is the existence with ontological significance. As for implement the process of cognition, Merleau-Ponty used the concept of "embodied" to overcome the cognitive logic habit of "subject-object dichotomy" and create a unified communication field of mind and body. It can not only interpret the characteristics of embodiment and experience of cognitive activities, but also complete the world's cognition in the body. From the perspective of phenomenology, the ontology of sports transcends the level of subject consciousness and enters into the exploration behavior of "body schema," and experiences the world through the reality presented by exercise. In the process of experience, the significance of the body's existence is constructed. At the same time, the body, as the carrier, completes the interaction between "body and world" through embodied sports practice, which is a specific physical activity manifested by the body as the medium. Merleau-Ponty believed that the body's ontology is generative, and the ontology of sport also contains generative characteristics. The first is the generative existence of sports rules, and the second is the innovative generation of sports development laws, which indicates that sports not only develop according to the established theoretical goals, but also the occurrence of unconscious participation. In addition, sports existence belongs exclusively to the human beings' existence and is the human beings' generative existence in their survival and development (Liu *et al.*, 2020, p: 1-9) To some extent, sports reside in the body and precedes consciousness, which belongs to the transcendental nature in the logic of genesis, and thus establishes the world of sports culture. Although sport itself is an abstract concept without unconscious participation, it does not prevent its value of existence from being manifested, which is embodied in the identity with the body. In the process of physical movement, human behavior and physical behavior appear at the same time. Only the body can give the meaning of the existence of sports. Therefore, the physical ontology is the concrete expression of the athlete's physical and mental input in a specific space and situation, rather than the athlete's athletic performance.

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty further deepens the thought of "phenomenal body" through the discussion of "habitual body", and gradually leads to the body ontology, which also inspires us to focus on the "habitual" body in sports ontology exploration. The body expresses itself through periodic circular movement, the subject points to the body itself, and the habit is the body schema, namely the concrete expression of the body's way of being. When it comes to the connotation of sports in the past, there are sports education, competitive sports and physical health. Although sports are endowed with multiple

ontological meanings, to some extent, they are all artificial preconceived theoretical thinking, ignoring the way of existence of sports and the “perceptual” dimension of expression and presentation of human life activities. Therefore, from the phenomenological point of view, we should turn to sports itself, emphasize the body’s existence as sports in a customary way, focus on the interaction between the “body” of language and the “other” of habit and produce results. Sport takes itself as the main body, repeats the movement continuously within a certain time and space, and forms the sports behavior that is infinitely close to the sports law. The people’s identity and the one of the sports make the purpose and task of sports stop in the body and manifest sports through the body’s movement. Sport and the body are mutual presentation, mutual creation and mutual achievement in movement. Therefore, the interaction between human sports behavior and perceptual expression of human life activities contributes to sports ontology.

### **3.2 RULES AND BEYOND: PHYSICAL CARE IN COMPETITIVE SPORTS**

The first law voluntarily accepted by people of different cultural backgrounds is the rules of sport. The humanistic spirit of sports shows the ultimate concern for the significance and value of human existence, and emphasizes the rational value of the main sports body’s competition “[...] abiding by the rules” (Li, 2016, p. 175). Merleau-Ponty, as a representative of existentialism, focuses on the study of human body itself. In accordance with this idea, he brings sports to the field of exercise itself, which emphasizes the organic integration of the relationship between sports and people. The humanistic care of sports culture field, formed in this process, is the care for the body in exercise. Especially in the field of competitive sports, advocating people’s life care, value respect and people-oriented competitive sports have become the ultimate value pursued by the whole world. However, although these humanistic concerns constitute the core spirit of sports culture, competition is not a simple pastime and play, but a historical and political social activity. Focusing on the development history of competitive sports, it not only forms the core of competitive sports spirit with humanistic concern, but also coincides with social development, leading to the transition from instrumental rationality to value rationality in time, and from abstract concept to concrete practice in space. Due to the influence of politics and capital, its humanity shows a tendency of being aloof. Of course, the development track of today’s competitive sports also deviates, which is reflected in the fact that the body itself of sports is ignored, showing excessive commercialization, instrumentalization and targeting, being limited by the body itself and losing its inherent essence. Therefore, in order to realize the correction of the development track of contemporary competitive sports, it is necessary to highlight the competition itself and return to the level of the interaction between the sports ontology and the human body. At this time, the sport becomes the world of the interaction with the body.

When discussing cognitive activities, Merleau-Ponty combined phenomenology and existentialism to develop a new view-embodied, but the cognitive subject points to the body noumenon. It can be known that the body in “competition” is the level of communication between exercise and bodies, rather than an object of existence. Because cognition happens all the time and is repetitive. However, its repetition is only continuous at the behavioral level, and the uncertainty of the content depends on the situational nature of the time and space. The intended body prompts active behavior according to its own experience and different cognitive situations under the regulation of body space. Merleau-Ponty (2005, p. 265) therefore, argues that “[...] all forms of human reason are based on experiences gained through bodily perception”. By attributing reason to the body, human beings transcend the purpose of reason set by subjective consciousness. That is, in the exercising body, the rule rationality, originally external to the body, is incorporated into the sports rules issued and formed by the body noumenon. The body itself follows its own rules and is constrained by the rules, as if it has a purpose. According to this law, the relation category between rules and transcendence is conceived in the body noumenon. Rules are the body’s internal “initiative”, while transcendence is the body’s “competition”. Only under the constraint of rules can sports people carry out the “free” competition of constantly transcendence to realize each other.

Indeed, modern competitive sports should deal with the relationship between rules and transcendence. The significance of the existence of competitive sports ontology is to constantly explore the rules of competition, even beyond the rules of human kinematics, to strive for one percent or one thousands of sports achievements. Taking the body as the research object to conduct scientific exploration, so as to form the so-called scientific theory, its essence is to serve for improving the competitive results. However, behind such body objectification, is the neglect of the communication between the “phenomenon” body and the “other” body. If the objectified body of competitive sports is the transcendence of the natural sciences, such as achievement and utility, then it is the transcendence of rationality in the process of the body’s ontologizing. In the competition with the “other” body, it helps to ease the aggression of human nature, so as to guide the body into the value presupposition of competitive sports itself--abiding by the rules. In this process, competitive sports have formed its essential connotation, characteristics and spiritual core. The return of the body itself can realize the body’s liberation and the one of mind, and the pursuit of freedom. Let the body “realize” that only in the compulsory operation of rules, with focus on the level of exercise habit, can realize the freedom of competitive sports itself.

### **3.3 SPACE AND FREEDOM: THE PHYSICAL DIMENSION OF SCHOOL SPORTS**

School physical education should help students cultivate interest, enhance their physique, improve their personality and temper their willpower through physical exercise (Xi,

2018). As the main component of school physical education, physical education carries the school physical culture and curriculum culture. For a long time, “cultural person” is the value pursuit of physical education development and the purport of Chinese culture inheritance. So, “Where does sports culture come from? How can it be inherited?” It is the essential attribute that physical education shows itself and is different from other courses. Therefore, it becomes another necessary turn of school physical education research paradigm to think about this kind of problem at the level of ontology.

Any form of school education curriculum has its specific cultural style. Physical education curriculum is no exception. On the one hand, physical education class takes various sports items as a means to form a series of physical activities, and then forms a holistic physical movement skill composed of fragmented physical exercise habits. On the other hand, every student is an independent individual. Taking the student’s body as the main body, they experience the world in the process of exercise. The formation of sports skills is also the process of the generation of sports culture. It can be known that curriculum is a kind of cultural practice with sports culture as its basic essence, and sports culture is a constructive and generative culture. It can be said that sports culture comes from the body. In different classroom situation, it is not only formed and constantly updated by the interaction between the perceived body and the “other” world, but also the same with the body. School physical education, in the new era, shoulders the important mission of inheriting sports culture, imparting the basic knowledge and skills of sports, and cultivating the discipline quality of sports. The existing sports culture and students’ bodies are mutually complementary. Cultural inheritance and students’ creation of new culture are carried out at the same time, so the physical education curriculum ontology is generated.

Merleau-Ponty’s embodiment not only includes “the body as an object” and “the unity of the body,” but also includes “the spatial nature of the body itself,” which reveals the important dimension of the existence of human’s spatial experience. The spatial attribute of PE class introduces students from the abstract space of cultural course to the learning field of body space, natural space and social space. Transfer knowledge learning from the conceptual form of conscious understanding to the skill formation from the body’s perception and experience dimension. From the micro-level of motor skill generation, kinesthesia enables the body’s various parts to interact with each other, establishes the relationship between various muscles, forms the movement rules of muscles, and helps people to discover their own body space and various changes of muscles under different movement environments. No matter rough or fine motor skills, space movement will be generated. However, in addition to the relationship between body space and skill generation, the natural space and social space in physical education classroom still have a profound impact on physical activity habits. Teachers’ organization, order and queue distribution of physical education classroom teaching will occupy space. Under the role of students’ “body-subject,” they gradually form

their spatial experience, which is called “positional spatiality”. The student-oriented classroom teaching emphasizes the value of the students’ existence. As Merleau-Ponty (2001, p. 183) put it: “Without the body there is no space”. The value of the existence of students’ body ontology is highlighted in the social space of physical education class. The students’ mutual communication in physical education class helps to understand themselves and others, find the appropriate social positioning and promote the formation of personality. Whether it is physical space, natural space or social space, it is closely related to the spatial nature of the body itself and is always linked to concrete intentions, thus making us trapped in the actual environment and, ultimately, losing the human beings’ most fundamental quality: freedom.

When the philosophers, represented by Merleau-Ponty in the 20th century, called for “freedom of the body,” should our physical education also advocate “freedom of the student’s body”? Merleau-Ponty believes that “[t]he freedom of art lies in the constant transcendence of our situation from the beginning, but after that we are still the same” (Bai, 2015, p. 31-37). This enlightens us: physical education teaching should pay close attention to the students’ original perception of physical experience, grasp the different teaching situations in the formation of motor skills, and fully respect the students’ cognitive level and understanding ability. Only by constantly surpassing the initial perception, we can achieve the body’s freedom. Merleau-Ponty advocated the unity of body and consciousness, and the sense of freedom of “the generation and change of flow experience” by entering the cognitive situation with “body-subject”. In a good PE class, PE teachers need to be aware of the existing cognitive situation in PE class and the congruence between students’ physical experience and students’ understanding, try to guide students into the field of body space, stimulate students’ active intention, fully create a “free” PE culture acquisition and exchange classroom ecology. Meet students’ desire for sports culture and pursue freedom beyond rational thinking.

## CONCLUSION

Through careful study of Merleau-Ponty’s body theory, on the one hand, it can be observed that he made a brand-new theoretical interpretation of the body with phenomenological methods, tried to make up for the theoretical dilemma of Western philosophy, turned the traditional mind-body dichotomy and conscious subjectivity thinking to the body essence, and opened the perspective of body ontology at the level of the relationship between the body and philosophy. On the other hand, the combination of body philosophy and sports philosophy provides an opportunity to enrich the connotation of sports ontology through the description and interpretation of “phenomenal body”. Following Merleau-Ponty’s correction of the traditional philosophical cognitive theory, this paper starts from the relationship between sport and exercise and, then, returns to the thinking of exercise itself, trying to explore the essential attributes of sports and the body’s ones from the



perspective of phenomenology. Based on the current development status of school sports and competitive sports in China, this article comprehensively discusses their relationship with exercise and further reveals the development laws of physical exercise.

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