

Somatic Platonism

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A crucial question in Somatic Therapy: What are the consequences—human, ethical and therapeutic—of the belief in an ideal type of human body?

Platonism refers to a way of thinking about the world which has permeated human history at all levels of society, from the peasant thinking about the significance of his life to the rulers of nations plotting the manipulation of world politics. Classically formulated by Plato (who was the most radical critic of his own position), it is a way of thinking which considers the concrete, singular, tangible objects of our experience to be deficient, "unreal," instances of a more perfect world which transcends our senses. The location of this world was uncertain for Plato; existed in the creative mind of God for the medieval theologians; and, since Immanuel Kant, has been more popularly located in the minds of idealistic human beings.

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The specific form of Platonism which is the subject of this article perceives, evaluates, and works with the individual human body - yours and mine - by comparison to some idealized design of the body. This form of thinking pervades most of the contemporary schools of somatic therapy, including some, like bioenergetics, which claim to reject it.

One day during a class for senior Rolfers some years ago, Ida Rolf asked us to strip to our underwear and stand together in front of her. As she looked at the ten of us, her shoulders began to droop and her expression became sad. "What a mess," she said, "there's not a one of you in this room whose feet are right." I remember sharing her sadness, feeling depressed that after all the years of working on my body, and of being a successful therapist, I still wasn't anywhere near being "correct." At that moment, it mattered little to the ten of us that we had all lived relatively fulfilling lives (most of us were over 40), and that our bodies worked unusually well. And it mattered little to Dr. Rolf that she had made a profound contribution to our lives and, through us, to the lives of our clients. We were all sad because our feet just weren't right.

Various kinds of bodies are thought of as either coming close to this ideal or deviating from it.

Our feet were not right because they did not look like the somatic ideal developed by Dr. Rolf, symbolized by the "blocked boy" which is the logo of the Rolf Institute. "Right" is defined by relation to an abstract design according to which the weight of the body is transmitted in a specific way through the fibula and tibia onto the arches of

the foot. This abstract design does not exist anywhere in the world of fleshy, sweaty feet: a fact which displeases somatic Platonists. The design has nothing to do with the actual history of men and women walking on the face of the earth. It exists only in pen-and-ink drawings and in the mental activity of people thinking about this ideal.

Other abstract designs exist in relation to which faithful disciples judge themselves and other human beings to be "right," "balanced," "sexually responsive," "good," or, by contrast, "blocked," "out of line," "a mess," "not

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really human." Sharing with Dr. Rolf the attempt to develop a precise design for an upright body integrated with gravity, one finds such people as F. Matthias Alexander and Bess Mensendieck. Finding these spinal ideals too rigid, the founders of bioenergetics, Alexander Lowen and Stanley Keleman, developed another ideal design based on the infantile body: protruding abdomen, loose jaw, bent knees, tilted pelvis. Lowen developed a set of "anti-ideals"; that is, a classification of body structures corresponding to classic forms of neurosis and psycho-

sis: the ideal compulsive personality, the ideal paranoiac body, the ideal homosexual body. Each metaphysical tradition in the East – the different forms of yoga, Taoism, Zen Buddhism, etc. – teaches a characteristic model towards which its somatic practices are oriented.

These various ideals, though different from each other, sometimes radically and contentiously, are based on a characteristic mode of thinking about the body which has these two qualities:

(1) The ideal is the same for all. Various kinds of bodies are thought of as either coming close to this ideal or deviating from it. For example, François Mézières, the creator of a form of physical therapy popular in France,

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teaches that the ideal form of the human body is found in the Greek art of the classical period. A disciple writes of her that “she taught us not to accept any treatment that is not directed toward that perfect form. The Greek artist didn’t attempt to express psychological, mystical or political contradictions – but rather a corporal and moral unity toward which each mortal, out of self-respect, should direct himself. Any deviation from this description indicates a corporal deformity.”¹

(2) The ideal is a specifically designed representation, a picture. Platonism is what might be called an idealism of content or image, in contrast to an idealism of process or function. One can have as his goal, say, the ideal spine as designed by Alexander. Or, one can have the goal of having a more flexible spine. The first goal is visually oriented, external to the person. Plato’s word for the ideals, *eidos*, comes from the Greek word meaning “to see.” The second type of goal is more internal, coming from a person’s experience of his or her unused possibilities. Moshe Feldenkrais, for example, is not concerned with how the body looks. He is interested in discovering the range of move-

ment possible for *this particular person*. The objections raised in this article do not apply to an idealism of process, without which there would be no growth or expansion.

Instances of Somatic Platonism in current therapeutic practice, having the two characteristics outlined above, are subject to several criticisms, all of which have been directed at more generalized instances of Platonic thinking.

(1) Somatic idealism, like religious and moral idealism, provides a constant backdrop of invalidation for human life. We are never quite right no matter how well things might seem. There’s always a vertebra out here, a hip slightly out there; one shoulder is always creeping up higher than the other. Life is not thought of as a somewhat sloppy process, involving stress, loving nourishment, anger, depression, joy, pain, pleasure, all interacting and producing the continually changing movie of life. It’s rather thought of as an ever-more futile attempt to become like X, to act like Y, with gravity, human indolence and egoistic passion winning the day. The experience of lack is so strong that it blinds one, like Ida Rolf looking at our feet, to the rich complexity of modest achievement.

(2) At the level of practice, Somatic Platonism hinders perception.

Ida Rolf taught an ideal template based on her observation that the tendency of humanity is to have lumbar vertebrae arched forward. The Rolf work is designed to move these vertebrae further back. After five years of practicing Roling, and having taken several classes with Dr. Rolf where we always analyzed the lumbar as too far forward, an anatomy professor turned Rolfer said to me, “My lumbar is too far back and so are those of a lot of people.” During the next day, I saw, to my shock, that out of six clients, three had lumbar spines which were curved backwards instead of forward. In later years, particularly under the influence of the work of Judith Aston, I came to perceive that this tendency is just as common as the other.

And so with Alexander teachers, bioenergeticists and Mézières practitioners: they see not *my* body, but *the* body as defined by their particular viewpoint. Somatic Platonism rein-

forces the already heavy filters of bias that block our eyes from seeing another’s body as it is. One sees what one wants to see, what one is accustomed and taught to see. Even to approach seeing what is requires a long discipline in clarifying the egoistic barriers which separate us from the other person. An idea of how the other person should look is simply a barrier to this process.²

(3) The narrowing of perception which accompanies Somatic Platonism is coupled with a rigidity of therapeutic practice. A creative, unpredictable response to *this person’s* unique being is replaced by a “recipe” applicable to all. A Reichian therapist will spend years working on the “eye-block” because he has been taught that until you open the “eye-block” the patient will be unable to assimilate changes in the “lower blocks.” Before a fourth hour, the Rolfer will always see shortening in the adductor muscles of the thigh, no matter who happens to be standing there. Mechanical behavior replaces simplicity of perception and the surprise of ever-new ways of working.

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(4) Therapies based on Somatic Platonism contribute to rigidity of behavior. In place of immediate organic responses to new situations, one’s behavior is constantly mediated by ideas of how one should look. Bioenergetic disciples are careful not to lock their knees or tighten their bellies. Rooms of Rolfers convey the stillness and rigidity of a group of people trying to be as tall and symmetrical as they possibly can. Even the responses to deep energy release during therapeutic sessions are mediated by the somatic ideal: there are predictable responses of people in primal therapy which are different from those involved in co-counseling, different again from practitioners of zazen.

(5) I suspect that working with an idealistic model is a major factor in producing the painful experiences which are common to a number of somatic

therapies. If I work on your foot, for example, with the idea that I know before entering your connective tissue where your ankle *belongs*, I will tend to force the ankle toward the "norm." But the direction in which I've chosen to move the foot may be in conflict with the organism's innate sense of rightness, and the conflict produces pain, often interpreted as resistance on the part of the client. From the perspective of this article, the client's experience of pain may signal, not necessarily his or her resistance to change, but a conflict between his or her bodily wisdom and the goals of the therapist.

(6) At its most dangerous limit, Somatic Platonism, like its more generalized form, is a tool both for political and personal power. The somatic ideal serves to divide an elite who understand and work towards the ideal from those who don't, especially from those unfortunates who can't.

For example, the founder of one contemporary school of body movement has designed a model of the body which is specific to the point of dictating an ideal location in space for each part of the body for each movement.

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One day I proposed to him this case of a young girl with whom I've worked over a period of years. She has cerebral palsy. When she first came to me at seven years old, she had a great deal of difficulty doing the simplest things: writing, walking, playing simple games. She was having serious problems in school where her teachers were frequently complaining about her behavior. I sensed in her an unusually loving and brilliant spirit. Over a period of four years of working with me and a number of other therapists, she functions at least as well as her peers: she skis, skate-boards, plays the piano, does well in school. But, I say to the founder of this school of body movement, she doesn't look anything like your ideal, nor will she ever. He looked at me with a poignant smile, and replied, "We must realize that certain people are not fully human."

During the final months of her life, Dr. Rolf wrote: "My goal, as I have said before and repeat, is to construct bodies which conform to what is evidently a pattern, a template. Then I would like to observe a small population of such bodies and discover whether there are consistent psychological changes flowing from this type of change. For example: what are the eating habits of such bodies; the smoking habits; how effective are they in planning their mental organization; and has planning and thinking become a more spontaneous and less torturous activity. It is such questions as these that will determine which of these methods [of therapy: Rolf or Aston, in this instance] is the one of choice. Of course, that "freedom of choice" involves a question of whose choice. The choice of the man or woman who is simply interested in speed and ease of a very pedestrian life or the man and woman who is interested in the human, cultural experiment of creating a population which with largely more idealistic goals leads into differences of cultural behavior. . . ."

But if one renounces ideal somatic designs, isn't one left with a lack of clarity and precision which would make it impossible either to train therapists or to promise clients any sort of predictable results? It is often in response to the invitation to teach and to communicate to the larger public that somatic ideals are developed. Brilliant therapists, like Rolf and Alexander, work for years on the basis of an inarticulate sense of how to get results.

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When they are asked to explain themselves, the trouble begins. Until the last decade of her life, Dr. Rolf spoke only of a very general vertical line of the body in relation to gravity. Until she began writing her book, she had never taught a specific visual design locating where the different part of the body should be. It is, in fact, astonishing to reflect on the demands placed on a

woman who had spent years as a research scientist, followed by years of studying traditional and non-traditional approaches to somatic therapy, and had practiced for some 40 years, now called upon to teach complete novices in a period of 14 weeks. One would expect her to be forced to make radical simplifications in her knowledge.

Insofar as one is familiar with a multiplicity of viewpoints, one is that much freed from stereotypical thinking.

Having puzzled for several months over the question of precision in teaching and practice, a set of images occurred to me one day as I rode the train from Paris for my first visit to Italy. Riding from the Alps to the coast of Portofino, along the Apennines and onto the Tuscan plain, I was deeply moved by the fact that the land I saw was the result of so many centuries of human history. Nothing in the landscape was sheer natural history. Roads had been built 2000 years ago to carry Roman legions into Gaul, the same roads that through the centuries would bring Goths, Vandals, Africans, Franks and Germans back to ransack the peninsula. Forests had been cut and replanted countless times. Mountains were changed as rock quarries were dug to build fortresses, Renaissance and Baroque palaces and churches, and monumental sculptures. Mussolini improved the rail and highway system. After the war, new factories and cities were rapidly pasted on the landscape. So what I saw out the window of the Palatino Express was the result of a complex interaction of natural forces (wind, rain, biological and zoological activity, earthquakes, etc.), cultural history, and the laws of gravity. If one, by contrast, were to drive from Gallup, New Mexico, to the Hopi Mesas, what one would see would be largely the result of purely natural forces with the exception of an occasional power line, a narrow two-lane highway, a small group of Navajo hogans, and the ominous yellow of the air polluted by the Four Corners power plant.

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son's body as a territory or country in which changes are to be made.

Let's say that one is invited to plan the construction of low-cost housing for people in northern Italy and eastern Arizona. No one of any sense, with perhaps the exception of a California land-developer, would deliberately try to plan the project by comparing these two countries with some ideal landscape. One could indeed profit from comparing them with each other and with other countries: studying the results of different climates, different soils, different geological histories, different combinations of cultural and natural history.

In relation to the intervention itself, there are two radically different approaches which shed some light on working with the body. In the first, more popular because more lucrative, the builder designs a template for a housing complex that can be mass-produced anywhere for a minimal cost. The template can be/has been, reproduced anywhere from eastern Arizona to northern Italy, with computerized variations in the necessary amounts of heating, ventilation and insulation, with minimal variations depending on materials easily available in the particular region. In contrast to the radically different designs of Old Oraibi and Rome which have evolved over centuries in response to organic human needs and the aesthetics of these particular communities, you have the new villages which respond to the needs of contractors and bureaucrats.

There are, however, city planners who base their designs on complex studies of such factors as the history of the area, the local aesthetic and spiritual context, the movement patterns of the population. Their attempt is not to design a city which is replicable anywhere in the world, but one which truly meets the variety of needs found in this unique community, while still remaining economical.

This latter type of city-planning suggests a model for the teaching of any particular form of somatic therapy in a disciplined, non-Platonic way. Each person's body is the result of complex, but law-abiding processes: genetic, neuro-physiological, anatomical, physical, psychological, sociological

and spiritual. Becoming familiar with these processes is a basic component in the development of a skilled body-therapist, the intellectual side of the training. What is especially relevant to the theme of Somatic Platonism is the phenomenon that insofar as one is familiar with a multiplicity of viewpoints, one is that much freed from stereotypical thinking.⁴ If one knows physics, one is not tempted to reduce all problems to psychology; one grounded in neuro-physiology will not be tempted to explain all pain either by guilt or by muscular tension; one who knows sociological theory will not view the problems of the world solely in relation to the upright structure of the human body.

It seems ironic to realize that the training of an architect or city-planner is some eight years, full-time, while many somatic therapists are trained in a matter of months.

The perceptual or intuitive component of somatic training would have the goal of learning to see the unique way in which each person has embodied these generalized processes. This requires on the one hand an extraordinarily high development of the different modes of perception. Concomitantly, it requires a high degree of self-awareness so that one's biases, negativities, projections are gradually separated from one's eyes and hands so they don't interfere with the world of the client. This combination of intelligent understanding of general patterns and the sensitive perception of uniqueness free the somatic therapist, be he or she Rolfer, bioenergeticist or chiropractor, from the stereotypical rigidities of Platonic behavior.

These remarks imply an extension of the training programs typical for the majority of somatic therapies. But it seems ironic to realize that the training of an architect or city-planner, prior even to entering upon an apprenticeship, is some eight years, full-time, while many somatic therapists are trained in a matter of months, to be released immediately upon clients paying very large fees. At the same time, the issues involved in somatic therapy

are at least as complex and serious as those confronting the city-planner.

The effective city-planner and the effective somatic therapist are those who are able to allow their clients to teach them how to use their variety of skills to serve the human community. We have outstanding examples of this approach in the somatics community. I have already mentioned Moshe Feldenkrais who teaches not how *the* body should look, but how to discover what the possibilities are for *his* body or *her* body. There is also the tradition originated by Elsa Gindler spread by her pupils, Charlotte Selver, Magda Proskauer, Carola Speads, and L. Ehrenfried. Their work is a monument to the innate wisdom of the organism and its abilities to discover and heal itself. At a time when the very existence of the planet is threatened by the clash of various ideologies, these men and women stand with those who witness the beauty of simplicity of perception and modesty of goal, over against the various manifestations of megalomania. For centuries, powerful minorities have manipulated the mass of humanity in the name of exalted moral and religious ideals. Our own life-span contains a long list of results of the attempts to create some sort of superior race. It is no service to humanity to participate in this madness even at the modest level of moving connective tissue.

NOTES

1. Therese Bertherat and Carol Bernstein, *The Body Has Its Reasons* (New York: Avon, 1979), p. 92.
2. The Autumn 1979 issue of *Somatics* has an article devoted to this issue by Elissa Melamed, "An Approach to Therapeutic Clarity for Somatic Practitioners," pp. 30-32.
3. From a letter in the monthly newsletter of the Rolf Institute, November, 1977.
4. The late Gregory Bateson devotes much of his *Mind and Nature* (New York: Dutton, 1979) to the manner in which increments in knowledge change not just the quantity of information we possess, but the quality of our knowledge. Cf. especially, Chapter III, "Multiple Versions of the World."