

How Natural Is the Human Body?

What is "natural"? Many define "natural" as something produced by nature; not artificial or manmade. This suggests that for something to be natural it needs to be in its original primitive state; not domesticated or cultivated.

Is it possible for human beings to avoid being domesticated and cultivated? Humans everywhere are cultured and shaped simply because of our constant ability to evolve, adapt and change over time and geographic space. For example, everything from language, to our style of dress has changed since the Shakespearian era.

Therefore one could argue, human bodies can not be "natural", however, Mauss saw the body as man's first and most "natural instrument," "technical object" and "technical means" (Mauss M., 1979:104). Marcel Mauss tried to understand body techniques in a "triple viewpoint, that of the 'total man'" (Mauss M., 1979:101). Body techniques therefore are seen a socio-psycho- biological series of actions that "in the direction of a chosen goal" are "assembled by and for social authority," "generally governed by education" also "by the circumstances of life in common" and "of contact" (Ibid: 120,121,122).

These "circumstances" that Mauss refers to can be seen as the context of culture as humans are domesticated, individuals who seem to have the need to further separate themselves from each other and perhaps from our own bodies.

It is these cultures which make us who we are and shapes our beliefs and our 'habitus' (Mauss, M. 1979, pg 101), i.e. the way we eat, talk, walk, swim, have sex etc. Introduced by Marcel Mauss and further developed by Norbert Elias in the 1930s, 'habitus' can sometimes be understood as those aspects of culture that are anchored in the body or daily practices of individuals, groups, societies, and nations.

It includes the totality of learned habits, bodily skills, styles, tastes, and other non-discursive knowledges that might be said to "go without saying" for a specific group -- in that way it can be said to operate beneath the level of ideology.

Thus, Mauss's habitus not only fluctuates between "societies, education, [and] proprieties..." it also varies "with individuals and their imitations" (Ibid). In this sense, habitus is both subjective and individual.

Culture gets into your body and fashions everything about how you act. For example, girls raised in a convent walk with her "fists closed" (Mauss M. pg 100).

How? – According to Mauss, (pg 101- 102) a "child, the adult, imitates actions which have succeeded and which he has seen successfully performed by people in whom he had confidence and have authority over him". This is seen in practice in the 'Onioni' way of walking for women in this tribe. The daughter is ~~taught~~ to walk in this way. However, for mothers, it seems the most natural way of walking. This brings us to the questions – is there a natural way of walking?

Are ~~they~~ body techniques which are natural? Given that they vary in time and space, i.e. Maori women walk differently than English women; English women walk different now then they did 1920. BUT, they become so internalized, driven by ones body, so it ~~is~~ natural. Therefore no two 'natural's can be the same.

"...the ability to disapprove [don't walk like this etc] must be among the teachings abilities in the effort to establish a transmissible culture..." (Connerton P. 1989)

People really do care about their particular things, despite they are **learnt**, they feel natural to oneself, getting entwined into social identity of who you are, who your children should be. For example, John and Jean Comaroff on resisting colonial domination in South Africa- Colonial programme of reforms- targets bodily techniques (the way people walk, talk dress) and other everyday domains that affect people's bodily techniques (e.g. The way houses are built).

Studies reflect the extent of the variety of different body techniques, for example, Hewes G. W. (1955) looked at variability in human postures; geographical distribution and diffusion/borrowing as well as gender, status and group identity differences. He found variations in body postures when sitting, standing and working. These actions can be deemed as 'natural' actions which are taken by the body, for example the act of sitting is seen as a natural act, despite the posture that is taken.

R. Hertz (1960) built on the idea that there is a striking inequality between our two hands. This is reflected clearly as a social fact in modern society, according to different studies, 85% to 90% (Cardwell Clark & Meldrum, Clark L., Meldrum C. 2000, pg 309) of the population is right handed, the majority of the rest are left while a small percentage of people are ambidextrous. Hertz saw this pre-eminence of the right hand simply a reflection of the separation of life; into inferior and superior; weak and strong. This idea is supported in the Neur culture, "The spear, being an extension of the right hand, stands for all that the right hand stands for." (Evans-Pritchard E.E. ,1953, pg 4-5) For the Neur the right hand stands for all that is strong, vital and good.

Is there any organic/physiological reason for this difference in our hands? Pierre Paul Broca, French neurosurgeon, in the mid 1800, argued that we are right handed because we are left-brained. Hertz acknowledged that there is an organic difference for our right and left hand. [Following a Durkheim approach] He argued that even if there is a vague disposition to right-handedness due to organic/ physiological reasons it was not enough to explain the **absolute** pre-eminence of the right hand and the purposeful degrading of the Left hand. This is seen in Neur youths who put rings on their left arms in order to make them useless in order to emphasize the difference between right and left hands. (Evans-Pritchard E.E. ,1953)

These rings are a human intervention over and beyond the organic nature of the human body, just as Onioni walking is, Chinese foot binding, western high heels etc, which amplifies the organic asymmetry.

Therefore, Hertz argued that even if we were not left-brained we would still pre-eminently be one over another. This is linked to Durkheim's discovery that everything is broken down between the opposing profane and sacred; individual and society; dark and light; night and day; high and low etc.

"How could man's body, the microcosm, escape the law of polarity, which governs everything?" (Hertz R., 1960, pg 98)

"Thus we have two opposites, the one comprising the left side, weakness, femininity, and evil, and the other comprising the right side, strength, masculinity, and goodness." (Evans-Pritchard E.E., 1953, pg 5)

Although, sometimes these separations are not physically, but metaphorical and symbolical, for example, when in the question of left-handed people, the Neuhauser "simply say of a left-handed man that his left hand is his right hand. It is as a symbol, not as a thing in itself, that the left hand has significance for them." (Evans-Pritchard E.E., 1953, pg 7)

We have the ability to 'invent' a different human body, i.e. Chinese foot binding. It is because we have this ability to ~~modify~~ *modify* our bodies in different ways, unnatural ways, differentiating us from animals and ourselves. We are often refashioned in culturally specific ways.

However, we are restricted by our physical frame, these constrictions, the human skeleton and human structure, limits us to how we can use our bodies, so we cannot fly etc. Therefore, we could not have the possibility to make culturally specific ways of doing things if we're not so physically free. For example, "Humans postural habits have anatomical and physiological limitations, but there are a great many choices, the determinants of which appear to be mostly cultural." (Hewes G. W., 1955, pg 231)

When body techniques are seen as natural, we separate ourselves from them. E.g. (Stewart M., 1997, chapter 12) Gypsies separated themselves from bodily functions such as pleasures of sex, birth etc. This may be because these bodily functions brought all the others into the picture, such as growing old, waste and death as we

are after all temporary beings. So some societies may try to live in an almost fantasy world, with pleasures without death. They see the separation clearly as embrace life or embrace the other, death world.

In conclusion, despite that we are separated by culture, it is arguable that we are united by our human bodies in its most natural sense. We all have two eyes, ears, hands and legs; we all eat, drink and sleep. These are the foundations of natural states, which we all do. Although we have our own particular way of doing things, we still do them nonetheless.

However, the specific techniques connected to human bodies can never be natural; the way in which we do these things, not as long people continue to separate themselves from one another, through forms of culture.

List of references

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