

PHYSICAL EDUCATION IS FOR HUMAN BEINGS

My title, you may think, is merely stating the obvious. Why would anyone waste time writing an article arguing that physical education is for human beings? Any P.E. teacher knows that well enough. In fact, bizarre as it may seem, there is a very widespread and influential, if largely implicit, denial that physical education is for human beings. A glance at most of the journals, visits to most departments of physical education, sport, and human movement studies, in colleges, polytechnics and universities, and the prevailing tendency in the education of physical education teachers gives the overwhelming impression that the concern is not with human beings but with machines. For the overriding, even exclusive, areas of study are the scientific, mechanical aspects of sport and human movement, such as, for example, exercise physiology and bio-mechanics. The dominant emphasis is on what can be weighed and measured and on the mechanics of the movements of muscles, bones, joints, etc. "If it moves, measure it," is the prevailing theme.

Of course, I do not in the least wish to deny the importance and value of such scientific study of human movement. There is no doubt that our understanding has been greatly enhanced by it, and if physical education teachers, and coaches have a grasp of such aspects, this can be of considerable benefit, for instance, in preventing injury and improving performance. So my argument is certainly not against science. It is rather against scientism, by which I mean the confused and grossly distorting assumption that the sciences can tell us everything that can be known, or at least is of any value, about human movement, and that attempts to say anything else about human movement must be insupportable subjective waffle.

To put the point another way, scientism consists in regarding the sciences as the only conveyors of the truth. This is to elevate the scientific to the status of a religious belief. Physical educationists are by no means the only ones who so often adopt this view. The conviction that only the sciences can give us the objective truth is a very common, and profoundly misguided, assumption of our age. It is a seriously distorting assumption in many aspects of life, including physical education.

It must be emphasized that in denying that the scientific is the only aspect of physical education which one should consider, I am certainly not suggesting that we need to dabble in the mystical, rapturous and soporific effusions which have been so damaging to the academic credentials of the study of physical education and human movement, and which are often passed off as 'philosophy'.

Perhaps I can echo Winch (1958):

... it should not be assumed ... that what I have to say must be ranked with some anti-scientific movements, aiming to put the clock back, which have appeared and flourished in certain quarters since science began. My only aim is to make sure that the clock is telling the right time, whatever it might prove to be. Philosophy has no business to be anti-scientific: if it tries to be so it will succeed only in making itself look ridiculous. Such attacks are as distasteful and undignified as they are useless and unphilosophical. But equally, and for the same reason, philosophy must be on its guard against the extra-scientific pretensions of science. Since science is one of the chief shibboleths of the present age this is bound to make the philosopher unpopular; he is likely to meet a similar reaction to that met by someone who criticises the monarchy.

To repeat, it cannot be too strongly emphasized that in rejecting the mystical and subjective as unintelligible, and as damaging to the credentials of physical education, one is not committed to the common assumption that the only meaningful questions are scientific. I entirely endorse and share the scientists' commitment to what can be objectively substantiated and refuted. But what I wish to point out as clearly as possible is that there are questions which, although not falling within the province of the sciences, are nevertheless open to fully objective examination. To assume otherwise is to assume the myth of scientism, and that we are dealing not with human beings, but with machines, mechanical bodies.

There is not the space fully to substantiate my contention here. I have written at greater length elsewhere.¹ But let me draw attention to just one or two obvious points which are sufficient to dispel the cloudy yet popular myth that our sole or overriding concern should be with the scientific.

One of the most important qualities of a good physical education teacher is his/her ability to encourage the right kind of motivation, so that children become enthusiastic about participating in the activities. Machines cannot be motivated. And motivation cannot be scientifically assessed. A good teacher can introduce children to new dimensions of experience in ways which will encourage them to continue to engage in the activities well after leaving school. Recently, while walking in the Lake District, I met, on a high ridge, two middle-aged gentlemen who told me that, while pupils at an inner city school, they had been introduced to the Lake District and to fell-walking by their enthusiastic physical education teacher. It was, they said, a revelation, and they had been coming here almost every year since. There are many such examples.

The aesthetic dimension is important in many or most physical education activities, and central in some. This is most obviously true, for instance, of dance and gymnastics. But many of us derive great aesthetic pleasure from almost if not quite every sport in which we have engaged or which we watch. Yet the aesthetic qualities of movement are certainly not open to scientific examination. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that, for instance, some gymnasts, skaters and divers are capable of more graceful movements than others. And the judgements involved here can be, and ought to be, fully objective. There may, of course, be disagreements as to the respective aesthetic merits of different performers, but that certainly does not imply that therefore aesthetic judgements are merely subjective, any more than the frequent disagreements of scientists imply that scientific judgements, and therefore the whole enterprise of scientific enquiry, are merely subjective.²

In recent times, the moral aspects of sport have been frequently in the headlines -- use of drugs, financial offers to athletes, teams going to South Africa, etc. And the physical education teacher spends a good deal of his/her time and energy every day trying to inculcate standards of fair play, etc. Yet clearly the moral aspect is not a scientific matter. Machines cannot be taught to be moral.

A great danger is the strong influence imparted in the education of emerging physical education teachers, for this is so often dominated by the study of mechanical and scientific aspects of human movement. Thus, almost inevitably, students and intending teachers are virtually indoctrinated into scientism. Since they are not presented, or not seriously presented, with other, at least equally important, aspects, it is hardly surprising that they move into their profession with the conviction that the scientific and mechanical are the only, or at least the only really valid and worthwhile, aspects of their subject.

There are certainly some colleges and departments of physical education and human movement studies which are aware of the danger of reducing the subject to an exclusive or predominant concern with the mechanical. For example, on a recent visit to one college I was delighted to find a genuine concern to try to give equal emphasis to what they called 'humanistic' aspects -- which seems to me an entirely apt title, which largely captures the spirit of my argument.

Yet even where other aspects are available, too often they are, unlike the sciences, taught by people who are inadequately qualified. Moreover, they are frequently merely token, nominal gestures, not taken seriously. At the college mentioned above I was surprised to find that even the scientists whom I met were clearly aware of the crucial need for balance, by providing

rigorous study of 'humanistic' aspects. But, regrettably, there are few such institutions.

Margaret Whitehead, in a timely recent article, correctly, in my view, argues that a significant underlying cause of the low level of esteem in which physical education is often held is the perpetuation of the dualist philosophy which regards body and mind as distinct entities. As she says, from an educational point of view which incorporates such dualism, "mind" takes precedence over "body" and "The body has been treated as inferior, at best a structure necessary for the mind to realise its ends."

In fact, the prevalent conception of the mind and body as separate entities is profoundly confused philosophically. They are not two entities, but one -- a human being, who has both physical and mental attitudes.

With respect, although I strongly endorse Margaret Whitehead's main thesis, I am uneasy about one section of her article because there may be dangers in the way she states her case. She criticises the view that "education is often seen as synonymous with the development of the intellect or of rationality." She criticises those writers on education who are clearly "of the opinion that cognitive skills are really the only ones worthy of development," and contends that there is a "wide variety of skills in addition to those in the cognitive area that are worthy of attention and development." She cites as examples, "the emotional, social and physical dimensions of our nature."

Now while I wholeheartedly commend and agree with her rejection of dualism, and its pernicious effect of denigrating the physical, this way of putting the point may be, or may give the impression of, conceding far too much to the dualist conception to which she and I are so opposed. To put the point starkly, the rational and cognitive are part of, inseparable from, the activities of physical education. These physical activities are not the activities of machines or animated bodies, but of human beings, who are essentially rational and cognitive.

I do not, of course, say that the cognitive and rational are the only or main values of physical education. The sheer exhilaration of the experience of movement, in dances, gymnastics, and sport generally is of great intrinsic value to many of us, and something we want to impart to the children we teach. But the activities of physical education, because they are for human beings, not machines, necessarily involve cognition and rationality. Games such as soccer, hockey and rugby are complex, as are gymnastic sequences. They require understanding. Coaches and teachers give reasons which can improve performance, and give greater satisfaction, only when understood. It is precisely because they lack the relevant cognition and

rationality that animals, although they can play, cannot engage in such games and sports.

It is a point of some significance that a human being is frequently defined as a rational animal. This necessary requirement of rationality and cognition, in order to engage in physical education activities, is a further clear indication of the profound misconception to which I am drawing attention, and which is a distortion of the very nature of physical education. For a machine is not capable of rationality and cognition. One cannot give reasons to a machine to enable it to improve its performance.

Physical education activities are obviously physical. But that does not in the least imply that therefore they are not rational and cognitive. On the contrary, only creatures capable of the relevant rationality and cognition could engage in them.

An exclusive emphasis on scientific aspects gives the distorted impression that we are dealing with physical, mechanical machines. In fact, as every physical education teacher recognises every day, there is far more to it than that - as is clear from any class of lively children.

Scientific aspects are important, but it is seriously to distort the character of physical education to regard them as the only, or even the most important aspects.

Physical education is not for non-cognitive, non-rational bodies or machines, but for human beings.

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NOTES

1. See Best 1978, especially Chapter 5.
2. See Best 1978, Chapter 7, and 1985 Chapters 2 and 3.

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