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## **Experience of the lived body as enigmatic text: Children's self-assessments of play in connection with the philosophy of physical being (*Leiblichkeit*)**

### **Streszczenie**

DOŚWIADCZENIE ŻYJĄCEGO CIAŁA JAKO ENIGMATYCZNY TEKST: DZIECIĘCE SAMOOCENY ZABAWY A FILOZOFIA CIELESNOŚCI (*LEIBLICHKEIT*)

Artykuł ma stać się przyczynkiem do uznania w szkolnym programie nauczania zabawy jako rozumowego doświadczenia ciała. Teoretyczna argumentacja pochodzi z filozofii *Leiblichkeit*, która podkreśla rolę *żywego ciała* w zdobywaniu i konstruowaniu świata. Tutaj pojęcie *ciała* (*Leib*) nie jest utworzone w opozycji do pojęcia *rozumu*; zakłada się natomiast wzajemne przenikanie się obu pojęć. Zatem, wraz z Schillerem, Nietzschem i innymi filozofami, widzimy zabawę jako ludzką, twórczą odpowiedź na przypadkowość życia. Ta filozoficzna postawa sprawia, że życie ukazuje się jako zabawa nawet wówczas, gdy składa się z wewnętrznych i zewnętrznych przymusów, które wydają się nie zezwalać dłużej na zabawę; w ten sposób można również zrozumieć słynne zdanie Schillera głoszące, że człowiek jest „w pełni człowiekiem, kiedy się bawi”, innymi słowy, wtedy gdy kieruje nim nie tylko konieczność. Filozoficzne rozważania zostaną odniesione do dziecięcych zachowań i teorii zabawy/gry, które stanowią empiryczną bazę w pilotażowych badaniach na dziesięcioletnich dzieciach z jednej ze szkół w Karlsruhe w Niemczech.

**Słowa kluczowe:** ciało, samooceny dzieci, zabawy, fizyczne samopoczucie.

tłum. z ang. Małgorzata Przanowska

### **The new physicality as critique of a reductive concept of reason**

In opposition to the spirit of his time, Nietzsche inverted the value relationship between body and mind. He redefined what was considered the great

reason of rational awareness as “a little instrument and toy of the great reason” of the body, of the animated corpus. In doing so, Nietzsche called for a radical reorientation of attitudes toward the body. No longer should the body be a servant to the soul, as the idealistic tradition would have it, but instead it should represent “the principle of productivity and creation” (Gerhardt 2000: 123). Nietzsche subordinated the spirit, or consciousness, to the body; and with this, as little reason, it steps back behind the great reason of the body. The little reason is equated with spirit or the consciousness that makes humans capable of saying ‘I’; the great reason is equated with the self that stands behind thoughts and feelings and is identified as the reason of the body.

To summarize, we can say that Nietzsche’s predominant thought in the 1880s was that the free spirit, though of necessity intellectual, could only become alive and aesthetic in alliance with its sensuality. Only in sensuality, in the sense of the earth, does all creation have a cosmic, geological, and biological function. For Nietzsche, the great reason of the body must always accompany the little reason of *ratio*. We can only unlock our intellect in a really productive way if we find our way back to our physical being, through which we are able to grasp ourselves as elements of life. This concept of a new physicality was taken up by Edmund Husserl, Helmuth Plessner, Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, and Gesa Lindemann, among others (Marsal and Dobashi 2008: 33–54).

Helmuth Plessner intended to challenge Descartes dichotomy between *body* and *spirit* with his concept of *positionality*, which indicated the reciprocal connection between exterior and interior, and illuminated the body relationship to the world around it and to its own qualities, or in other words, to its exterior world, its inner world, and its contemporaneous world. In this relational definition, humans occupy the highest plane, for not only do they *have* bodies, they also *are* (lived) bodies.

Through its *centric* positionality, the physical body is constrained by its relatively circumscribed place in space and time. The *lived body*, by contrast, has *excentric* positionality. As an animated body with consciousness, it reaches beyond its own boundaries and places itself in a here and now that cannot be relativized. Humans alone are possessed of a double character: both having a physical body and being a lived body.

‘I am, but I do not have myself’ characterizes the human situation in its physical being. Speaking, acting, and variously shaping things all involve the mastery of one’s own body which must be learned and constantly regulated. This distance within myself and toward myself first gives me the possibility to overcome it. It does not mean a fissuring and splitting of my basically

undivided self, but is rather precisely the precondition of becoming autonomous. When it is a question of mastering purely physical accomplishments requiring special skills, not only does manipulating the turn from being a body to having a body bring about the overcoming of distance, this is also its goal, is its object." (Plessner 1982: 63)

In this field of tension between *being a body* and *having a body*, a person must aim to strike a balance through his or her actions. Only a human can act independently vis-à-vis the milieu, of which the lived body is a part and shape his or her life in the sense of *being a body*. With *excentric positionality* Plessner tries to grasp the special situation of humans in their humanity. According to Friedrich Schiller, humanity can only be fully developed in play, a view culminating in his statement "A human is only fully human while at play."

### Experience of the lived body as enigmatic text

In play marked by direct experience of the body, the great reason of the lived body is united with the little reason of the spirit, especially in active play or role-playing. The body serves as informant for becoming aware of and expressing one own inner world of feelings, thoughts, and emotions, and also for an empathetic exploration of the world of others.

Self-reported play behavior, based on self-observation recorded over a two-week period, indicated a preference in games voluntarily chosen by children and young people for two play categories requiring direct physical experience: active games at 78.4% for boys and 54.5% for girls, and role-playing games at 31.9% for boys and 29.2% for girls.

Philosophizing is regulated speaking or, as expressed in Nietzsche's words, "Rational thinking is interpretation according to a schema we cannot cast off." (Nietzsche 1980: 193). The body as experienced from within in play and as constructed by attribution from without thus becomes, through language, an enigmatic text which the children must decode through the activity of philosophizing. As an example we will describe an interactive game that can be used to introduce the theme of the teaching units 'Who am I?, Partnership, Tolerance, or Foreign Cultures.' The game is called "Distance and Closeness." In it the class is divided into two groups, lined up in pairs in two rows about 2 meters apart. One partner slowly approaches the other and stops at the point where either party seems to begin to feel uncomfortable. The game was evaluated afterward by the children. To illustrate, here are some excerpts from the dialogues.

On the first level, the children talked about their observations:

K 16: I was laughing a little, and so was my partner.

K 17: I paid attention, like, to how my partner expression looked and how she had her mouth.

K 18: That you look your partner in the face, and how it looks and what he does.

K 19: I was always looking into my partner's eyes, and I really liked that. It was a lot of fun.

The players primarily observed their partners. They were most interested in the partner's facial expression, which they tried to read, and not the body posture. In the second step, self-perception and perception of the other was developed hermeneutically. This method is supposed to help the children develop a reliable, valid access to their own private inner world and minimize self-delusion or the inability to achieve such access. Insight through participation in one's own process, through the act of distancing and the interchange of perspectives, makes possible an access to the private worlds of others.

Central here is the question concerning the reasons for feelings experienced during the game. Two explanations predominated, one interactive: "I thought it was fun because you looked at your partner" (K 34), and the other situational: "I liked it that you did something you never did before" (K 37). Most of the children prefer to explain their positive feelings through the social experience; they interpret the friendly facial expression as permission to come closer:

K 69: I could tell by the expression on my partner's face that he was saying ok, I could come closer.

K 70: So when you look someone in the eye, you have the feeling you can tell if he wants it or not.

K 75: Because his eyes had a friendly expression, and it looked to me as if I could come closer.

K 78: When my partner laughed I knew right away I could go one more step.

K 88 takes this interpretation to be a general norm and applies it to her own situation: "I haven't known Jana for very long yet because she skipped a grade, she skipped second grade, and I knew I could go further anyway because she laughed and then I laughed too, and then..."

The children who attribute the way they feel to the situational aspect either feel animated by the new experience, thought it was fun too, because we never did that, and then we laughed some too (K 72), or else they feel unsure of themselves:

K 85: Because you never did this before, and then it's kind of strange.

K 86: You feel a little unsure of yourself sometimes. Should you go ahead or should you stop.

K 87: And because you feel nervous.

Since thinking and speaking are closely related, an important goal of philosophizing with children is the promotion of language ability. Because many of the children felt nervous, they worked out the range of meanings for this state of mind with the help of their experience. For example:

K 112: Sometimes it depends on how nervous you feel. It could be that you're nervous, that you're happy. For example Maike and I, we're in ballet, and we have a performance on Saturday, and we already did that last year, and we are happy, too, and nervous.

K 116: With stage fright, you're mostly nervous and mostly afraid about whether you'll do it right or wrong.

K 118: You don't know if you should go a little closer or not, if the other person wants you to or...

K 120: You're kind of excited, too.

K 122: You think... uh oh, should I go one step farther? What is the other person thinking? Should I go now?

Together the children consider in what other contexts they could use the concept "nervous":

K 126: So for example, when you're at a funeral you're kind of nervous and sad, somehow.

K 128: I went to see a film yesterday with my friends. While I was waiting for them I was nervous that they wouldn't be coming any more, because it was already five minutes before it was supposed to start.

K 142: Sometimes I'm nervous because, like when it's my parents' birthday, what I want to give them.

K 144: Before an exam you're nervous, too.

The children came up with a wide spectrum for the concept "nervous". The insecurity that is the basic feeling underlying the concept "nervous" refers to qualities of experience with uncertain outcome or which can be designated as "hope for something" or "fear of something."

With the help of the dialectic method, the palette of various opinions, positions, and states of mind can be surveyed.

K 155: Some children, they think no, I don't want that, and others, like Johanna and me, we got pretty close, and some have a bigger distance, because they think no, I don't want to go any farther.

K 156: I didn't get so close because I thought my partner didn't want me to come any nearer.

K 158: I got really close because I've already known Maike for a long time.

K 159: Since my partner was grinning so much I went farther.

K 161: My partner was about this far away and then I whispered to him, 'you can come closer' ...but he stayed where he was.

Almost all the reasons given for choosing a given distance relate to the relationship level between the play partners. The signals received regulate the distance. However, some children do not respond to non-verbal or even verbal (K 161) exchanges, but only pay attention to their own inner state of mind.

The speculative method offers a multitude of impulses; for example, the transfer to the future:

K 163: Maybe I would take a look, if I think, yes, she looks pretty nice, and then maybe I'd talk to her.

K 188: For someone who doesn't look so friendly, I'd ask if he...it could be that he's having a bad day, or if he...

K 192: If the person is looking so angry, if he's a tough guy or something.

K 196: I'd wait first and see how he is or something. I'd see how he is in the schoolyard, if he fights with other children, then I wouldn't talk to him.

K 197: If maybe he's having a day when he thinks it's stupid, first I'd wait 'til the next day to see how he looks at me then.

K 203: If you have a friend that you've known for a long time and know she's a good friend, she can't look so nice and friendly all the time.

K 205: It could also be that the other person is really mad at you or someone else, and then I'd ask if it's because of me or if I can do something to make things better.

K 207: Well, if I got sent off to camp and didn't have any friends there, and I'd see someone sitting there all alone with no friends, I'd go up to her and ask what her name is and so on.

The most important learning experience the children gained from this game was reflecting about the other person's state of mind. For one thing, it became clear to them that one can draw conclusions from the facial expressions of others about their willingness to be approached, but that the opposite conclusion should not be generalized. A "closed-off" expression would not necessarily indicate personal rejection, but could result from many other circumstances. The game encouraged the children to discuss in a differentiated way the topic of approaching a play partner.

## The statements of children about the significance of the game

*Play* is so deeply involved in the lives of children that they cannot imagine life without it. And so it is not difficult for them to describe with discernment the feelings that characterize such a life. In texts written on the theme “A magician casts a spell on the world. There is no more play,” the children portray such a world as *debilitating*, *gray*, and *boring*. The children there don’t know how they should occupy themselves; time seems to *stand still*. Rosalinde makes an effort to define this feeling more closely. She writes: “Sonja was soon bothered by boredom, but what could she do? She felt strange. She couldn’t describe this feeling, but it was awful.” As a result of the ban on games, the zest for life diminishes to a complete lack of energy. Thus Annalise notes, “After a week, we have hardly any energy left.”

In order to put an end to this situation, the children are willing to accept personal disadvantages such as *pretended losses*. To illustrate, we cite the text written by Julian:

### Player Tricks

It’s the beginning of summer and we’re playing handball against the Chancellor. We win, and the Chancellor gets angry and says, “I’m making a new law. From now on there are no more games, and whoever doesn’t follow the law will be put behind bars.”

It’s really terrible that there aren’t any more games. No more fun ever. And what should I do with all my toys? After a few weeks I’ve had enough. Suddenly I get an idea.

I challenge the Chancellor to one more game of handball. I say right to his face, “If we win again, everything stays the way it is, but if you win, we’ll be allowed to play again. OK?” He agrees.

Of course, we let the Chancellor win.

You can probably imagine what happened. (Marsal and Wilke 2005: 263)

The topic *Winning – Losing* occupies a central place in a class discussion of *the meaning of play*. The children suppose that losing is caused by a *lack of effort*, and that it results in a *loss of enjoyment*, and with that a *loss of meaning in play*. The most important thing, though, is not the victory, but rather the participation in the *game* as such. From this the moral imperative is derived that *losing* should not lead to breaking off the game. The loser should instead be happy for the winner.

K 70: It really isn’t so important, but if you always lose, then somehow..., then it isn’t so much fun any more.

K 71: So really, when you play, it doesn’t matter if you win or lose, because, well, the important thing is playing. And it’s fun anyway.

K 73: The main thing is that it's fun, because always winning the way Luise says isn't so much fun and, well, the most important thing in a game is to always have fun.

K 74: Actually it's the same with races; too, being in the race is the important thing.

K 75: You should also be happy for the other person, for example when your friend wins.

K 76: You shouldn't say, "Oh, now you've won; now I don't like you any more." That's mean.

K 77: Then playing isn't fun any more, if your friend says, "Oh, now you've won. Now I'm going to sulk." Then it's no fun to win any more.

In addition to pleasant emotions, such as those evoked by innocent scenarios like role-playing the family dog, anxieties can also be produced by other scenarios. These broaden the spectrum of experience and satisfy the children's sense of adventure in risk-free ways. Through these role-playing games the children feel bigger and more important, and their body sense is changed by the game:

K 135: So when my sister and I play dog, or a friend of mine and me, that's fun, and then you feel as if you really had a dog. Then I feel happy.

K 137: Sometimes I've played dog with my sister too, and then I always said "sit," and then she really sat down, and then I said "give me your paw" and she really gave me her hand and everything, and it was fun.

K 126: Sometimes it's fun, but sometimes you can play dangerous things, too, and then you can get scared.

K 130: No, then you feel so weird and it's exciting, somehow.

K 131: You feel bigger, too.

K 132: Scared.

K 133: Mysterious, because you have secrets.

K 142: I like to play fantasy games in the yard with friends from my child-care group, like with secret agents and big dinosaurs and things like that.

K 143: I often play with my friend that we are leopards or something, and then we jump around on the sofa or jump onto the table.

K 144: Sometimes I play caveman, and then I make holes with sticks, and then I get different things and put them into a hole and then I mix it up somehow with a stick.

K 145: And sometimes I play scientist in my room, then I make myself a tent with blankets and plastic tubes and then I get food from the kitchen, ketchup, then I made it like rhinoceros blood, I mixed in some water and then I tested it.



The stimulus “How does your body feel in fantasy role play, or when playing sports? Does it feel different than when you are taking a mathematics exam?” is supposed to encourage the children to take a more intensive look at their feelings and physical perceptions. The children identify the chief difference between *play* and *exam* as the *stress factor*.

K 146: You feel freer, because with a math test, you sit there feeling the stress. Because – if you don’t know anything you start to sweat and then you think, oh, what was that again?

K 147: And you’re under time pressure because – with normal games you can take your time, but with a math test, for example, now you don’t have so much time, I think.

K 148: When you’re playing you take more risks than with arithmetic, actually, because you always think, I don’t know that now, I’ll skip over it, and when you’re playing sometimes you think, I don’t know if I should jump down now, but then you think, yes I’m going to do it.

The children went into great detail when asked whether a person could grow through playing. They were of the opinion that games broadened their cognitive, social, and emotional framework because games allowed them to enter into different or future worlds. Also, children believe that *playing* causes physical changes in themselves. For example, they assume that their brains grow larger through playing.

K 158: You can also grow by thinking.

K 159: So, when you play grown-up you feel like one, and when you go to work, when you play “going to work,” then you think you have a bigger brain.

K 160: You don’t just get bigger with your body, also the nerve cells and the brain get bigger and bigger with experience.

K 162: And for example if you win a chess tournament you feel bigger too, because you think, oh, I won against all of them.

K 164: Playing ball, too, for example playing dodgeball! If you always catch the balls and the others can’t do it, you feel so great and you’re the only good one, and then you can save the team or something like that.

K 166: And then you feel proud, too, and you’re glad you did it. And then maybe people, then maybe the others say, yes, that was super, and things like that.

Through the focus on the feeling of inner growth derived from winning, the problem of *losing* also came up again. In their definition the children differentiated between bad and good losers. The *bad losers* can’t accept failure; they behave

with aggression toward the winner and attribute their defeat either to the winner's dishonest manipulations or to their own claim of unpreparedness. When *bad losers* win they make fun of the other players. Good losers, on the other hand, enjoy the game as such, are happy for the winner, and hope for their own success the next time around.

K 167: So there are bad losers and good losers. The bad losers get really upset and the good losers, they say: It was only a game. It's ok that you won.

K 168: Once we lost in a dodgeball game against our parallel class, and they made fun of us, and then we won and then they were all upset and got angry. They couldn't take losing, and we, we just ignored them.

K 169: Bad losers, they also say: Yes, but I wasn't even trying and I let you win. And it isn't even true.

K 172: You can't get upset about everything. You can say it's only a game, it's good that you've won, now we can play again.

K 175: In my free hour I won against someone like that, too. He kept saying, "I'm still in the first level, I'm still in the first level." And then when he lost, "I was playing badly on purpose against girls" and things like that, because he didn't want to admit that he'd lost.

Being a good loser counts as a high qualification for a player. In general, the children were greatly interested in the topic *play*. They spoke with great concentration and focus about their experiences and the thoughts they connect with *play*.

## Conclusion

In philosophy and ethics instruction, play, through the act of primary, active appropriation of the world, offers the opportunity to utilize all the anthropological potential relevant to judgment formation. Recognition and implementation of personally experienced and reflected values or norms is also promoted by the integration of intellect, emotion, and physical being encountered in the play experience. The chance for a critique of reason which philosophy discovered in the new physicality should also not remain unused on the didactic level, all the more so because the general dynamics of play, according to Frederick J.J. Buytendijk, connect with the needs of children and young people and offer them an obvious tool for testing their ethical decisions in a reflective deployment of their own bodies.

Especially noteworthy from a cultural point of view is the differentiated attitude the empirical study reveals toward the phenomenon *winning – losing*. Victory, especially frequent victory, as shown by their own play experience, does not necessarily promise an increase in the sum of happiness, since it carries with it a social risk. There is a danger, namely, that the play partner who loses will abandon the field and thereby bring the game to an end.

Play, however, signifies joy of living, energy, and personal growth. And so the most relevant point in playing is not the antagonism *winning – losing*, but rather the continuation of the game, the game as such. A good balance between winning and losing promises the greatest satisfaction. This attitude could prove to be a meaningful future variable, since it implies balanced justice and thus promotes a democratic frame of mind. For this reason John Dewey, like Nietzsche, attributed great significance to play. Dewey recognized the fundamental intellectual and social function of play. For through having an appropriate space for investigation, experiments, and learning from experience, the individual can grow and develop a free attitude. So together with Schiller, Nietzsche, and other philosophers, we view play as humanity's creative answer to life's contingency. This philosophical attitude causes life to appear as play even when it is made up of internal or external compulsions which would no longer seem to allow for play; in light of this one can also understand Schiller's well-known assertion that humans are "only fully human when at play" or in other words, when guided not only by mere necessity.

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