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 morphologist, phenomenologist, embryosopher

**THE EMBRYO IN US?  
 HALL OF HONOR AWARD TALK**

It is a great honor to be inducted into the "Hall of Honor of Prenatal Science" today. However, in this brief "award talk" I would like to question my "position" in the field of "prenatal science", a field of science that, let's face it, is not always taken for granted by either mainstream biology or mainstream psychology. Where do I as an embryologist stand in "prenatal science"? What kind of embryologist am I anyway, when one of my main goals is to bridge the fields of psychology and embryology? I was trained as a medical doctor, but I never worked as a therapist. I ended up in science and

teaching, becoming an anatomist-embryologist. Gradually I began to challenge that dichotomy of Being on the one hand and Becoming on the other and I became interested in morphology, a discipline that deals with "Why does the body look the way it does"? I searched for the meaning and significance of the body and its forms.



When I taught at the university, I always confronted the students with the limitations of anatomy in terms of knowledge of the so-called "first person body". That is what body philosophy calls the subject-body that you are and that you experience. How does this relate to the body as described by the anatomist, the so-called objective "the third person body"? As an anatomist I know nothing about the "first person body". At least not yours, nor that of my students. I used to ask my students: "Whose body do you want to be a doctor for? Your patient's body or science's body? I can only train you to be expert on the latter body". And so, I

did. Although "something in me" refused to accept this division. What is this "something in me" anyway? Today people say things like, "It's my genes," or "It's my brain. I always respond: "Oh, so it's not you?"

**WHERE YOU ARE DEFINITELY NOT FROM!**

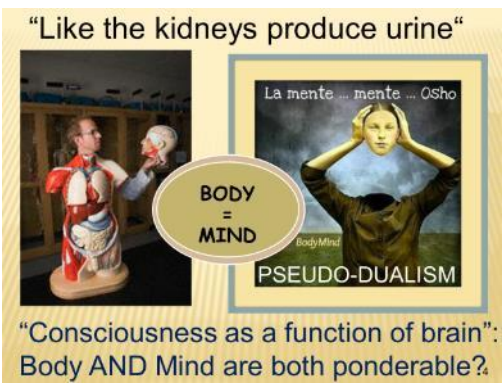


Actually, it seems to me that we still have not really come to terms with the philosopher Descartes and his "dualism" of soul and body. Like more philosophers (Damasio) I believe that with his famous statement "I think, therefore I am" Descartes was not positing a thought or a theory but was speaking of an experience, an experience within himself. Does not the child who asks us, "Where do I come from?" also ask from a similar experience, perception? Namely, that there is "something" within us that can only be experienced and lived by us personally, and

that is therefore apparently of a different order than my body. Simple philosophical logic: "You can only be aware of something if you are separated, distinguished from it.

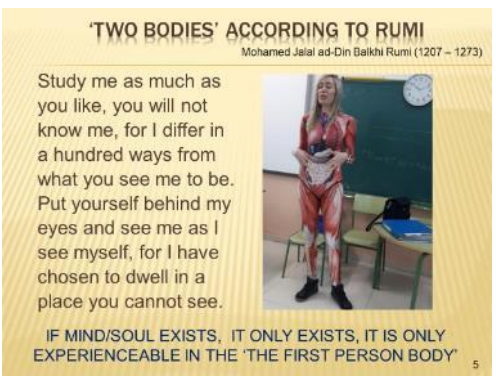
The child does not ask for the body. That's why I don't care about the usual, trite and short-sighted answers like "You came from your mother's womb". Or "You were made by mom and dad." Such explanations are philosophically and biologically untenable. I am also repeatedly confronted with questions like "When does the soul arrive in the embryo? Is there anything like spirit prenatally at all?" Such questioners apparently intuitively assume that soul is something different from the body. On the other hand, people today are told that soul (and especially consciousness) is an epiphenomenon of brain activity, and therefore cannot exist in an embryo.

Of course, I realize that embryologists and morphologists had found scientific explanations for the structure of the body in material substrates such as genes, cells, and tissues. In the body, that is. And that neuropsychologists expose soul and mind as "nothing but" a product, a function of the brain, and thus as corporeality. The possible Cartesian distinction between body and soul is almost eliminated. In other words, science has taken the soul away from us. Simply by denying it. Of course, they will say that they could not find it, but they searched for it in "the wrong body", so to say, Soul comes from the body or the brain: the neuro-genetic-determinism.



I really can't take seriously the oft-repeated pseudo-scientific argument that "just as kidneys produce urine, so brains produce our consciousness and thoughts". As if the kidneys produce urine! The fluid called urine actually pre-exists the kidney, as body fluids. The same is true of the brain. It is by definition impossible for the brain to produce anything like consciousness or "soul. Consciousness is the imponderable, the immanent, the non-bodily, according to Descartes and everyone's experience (!). (We nowadays accept such concepts as gender identity). One lives the whole day in/with a

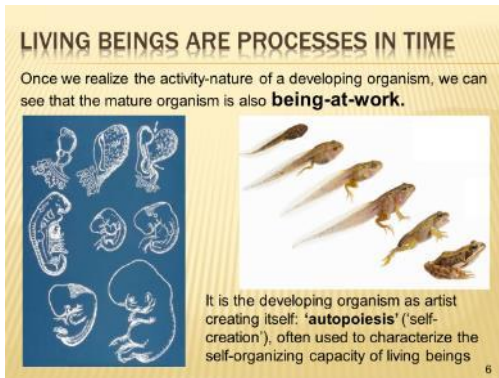
psychosomatic reality, of which one simply must conclude that one can experience and feel it, but not see and measure it. With advanced brain scans they claim to be able to "read your mind, your thoughts". It could be. But never, never will anyone be able to think your thoughts. It is so true, so inescapably true, what the 13th century philosopher Rumi said: "Study me as much as you like, you will not know me, for I am different in a hundred ways from what you see me to be. Put yourself behind my eyes and see me as I see myself, for I have chosen to dwell in a place where you cannot see me".



Rumi confirms my idea that the mind-seeking embryologist and the soul-exploring psychologist have nothing to do in the "third person body", in the scientific body that you have and so to speak full of brains and kidneys. [Perhaps also not in philosophical concoctions as the "mind-brain-body" concept]. If I am looking for mind and spirit, I have to be in the body of the "first person" (and philosophically and methodologically that is so to say impossible). That's where the phenomenological approach came in for me. A phenomenologist is more interested in meaning and significance of things.

But is there such a thing as phenomenological morphology? To understand objectively what forms mean? What is being expressed in a form, in a body? Two possibilities. Either: "There is no "something" that is expressed in the body" (In the background I hear: "There is no

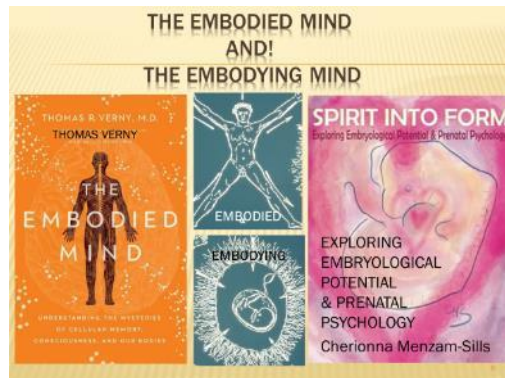
'somewhere' where you come from, child"), or: "That must be the soul (the res cogitans of Descartes), so inaccessible to the scientific approach by an onlooker and observer".



As a logical consequence of the aforementioned neuro-genetic-deterministic paradigm the prenatal human was increasingly seen as "not yet human", both physically and psychologically. However, it became increasingly clear to me that "The Embryo within Us" is not a past, just the phase of the first nine prenatal weeks that we leave behind, but that the embryo is the primary actuality of our body, still existing and functioning within us. The body is not anatomy, it is a lifelong process, a process of formation, of self-formation. Gestaltung (German) is the word. This could be called 'performance' in your

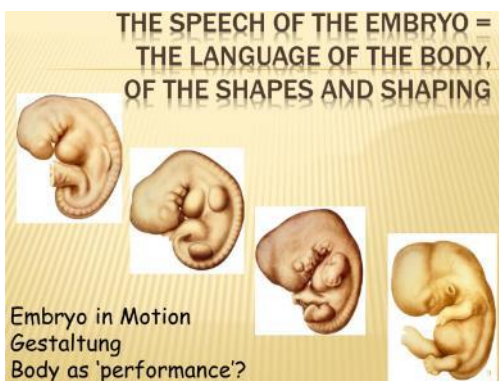
language. This principle applies to EVERY living creature. The frog does not come from the tadpole, even the tadpole is frog. Living beings create themselves, all their lives. We call this autopoiesis and it means that we are NOT machines. Life IS not, life BECOMES: living beings are appearances in time. So, as an embryo we do not become human beings, we already behave like human beings? So, again the question: What are we actually doing when we are embryos?

In the 1980s I got answers to this question from two different disciplines. Answers that turned psyche back into body and body back into soul/psyche. Ronald Laing, psychiatrist, a forerunner of prenatal psychology speculated: "Is it possible for we cells, before and after especially neural tissues arise, to reproduce in later phases of the life cycle transforms or variations of our first experiences? May our prenatal experiential patterns function as templates for some of our patterns woven into the complex knit of postnatal design?"



Through the German embryologist Blechschmidt came: "Soul or spirit is neither something that comes later to the body or is added to it, nor it is produced by the body in later life. No, soul is pre-exercised in the formation of the body". A body-forming soul? The consciousness that makes me speak these words now, is the same principle in me that is somehow behind the shaping of my body? The Embodied Mind (Thomas Verny) on the one, but also The Embodying Mind (or Spirit into Form (Cherionna Menzam) on the other hand!"

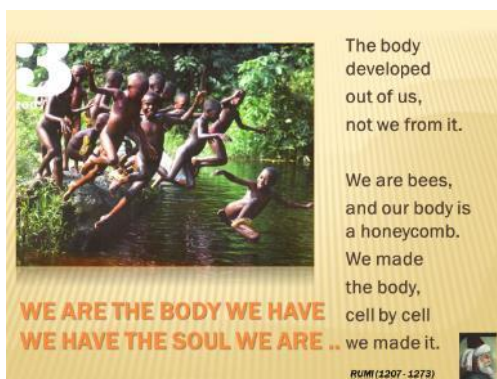
This opened my eyes: the language of the embryo is the language of the body, the language of forms. Behavior in other words. The gestures (a phenomenological principle, it involves much more than movements!) by which we form our bodies, later appear as physiology (function) and later still in our psyche as behavior! The body does not have a soul, it is soul. Now I could get into conversation with people who take seriously questions like Do we experience as an embryo?



And so, it has become my mission to "give back" not only to the embryo, but also to the human being, its soul. Soul and body are not a duality (and certainly

not a dichotomy), but a polarity: they are one. No spirit without body, no body without spirit (Rudolf Steiner). Man is Mind, Motion Matter as AT Still says. Our consciousness, our soul, is

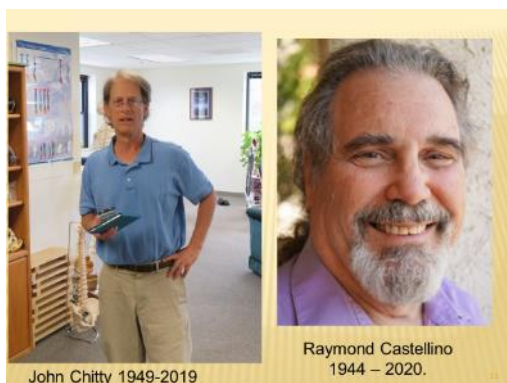
manifested throughout the body (Randolph Stone, but also Thomas Verny and Bruce Lipton). However, in each organ and body area, the relationship between them is different: from vital dormant unconscious knowing and acting in the embryo and organs, to self-conscious awakening and cognition in the "almost dead" brain. I disagree with the hype that consciousness and psyche are products of the body. Nor do I go along with the idea that the body is a product of the cells. The embryo shows very loud and clear, that it is "the whole", the organism that organizes itself into cells and organs, into parts, and orchestrates (through epigenesis and the like) the genes. I also disagree with the assumption that we come from a fertilized egg. We do NOT start as a cell; the zygote is a one-celled human body. We do not come from the body, we come through the body. Just as our children do not come from us but come through us (and therefore cannot and should never be a possession). No one should be anyone's possession. Never again.



I consider things like genes and brains to be necessary but not sufficient conditions for our existence. But I must also note that in much mainstream science, the condition for a thing is often confused with the thing itself. I have to look for spirit, soul in the same embryo where my mainstream colleagues cannot find those dimensions because they cannot see them and do not want to see them, are not allowed to think about them. The only correct dimension for prenatal existence is that of incarnation and embodiment. We are from conception on a being of soul and body.

"The body developed from us, not the other way around. We created the body, cell by cell we created it" (Rumi, 13th century!). Do you really think you have no memory or knowledge of this? Of course, you have. Not just in your hippocampus or so. In your conscious and subconscious body "of the first person", where you might dig it up, sometimes help is needed. That also is The Embryo in Us.

In closing I would like to say that I am proud to be inducted into this Hall of Fame along with the late Ray Castellino. I knew him. He attended my live Embryo course a few times and we discussed how to bring embryological concepts to practice and therapy. I admired him for his compassionate way to support people and families.



In this regard I would like to propose here and now, that my dearest American friend, the late John Chitty, be nominated for this Hall of Fame. I had the opportunity to present my Embryosophy course with John over 8 times in Boulder CO. I don't know of anyone else who as a therapist was so deeply committed to the, shall we say, traumatized child in all of us. As a teacher he introduced and practiced Randolph Stone's polarity thinking with such enthusiasm. Surely, dear John, you would deserve to stand with me under the roof of this hall. Thank

you, John, for the confidence you have always shown in me. Actually, it is you who brought me here.

12<sup>th</sup> November 2023  
 'Award Talk' Hall of Honor in Prenatal Science  
 Jaap van der Wal MD PhD  
 The Embryo in Us – Embryo in Motion