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The Will to Powerlift: Biophysical Reality and the Creation of Culture

There is an ongoing joke – often said with a sigh of despair – within various communities: those who struggle with mental health, or chronic pain, or disabilities of any sort. This joke might, in fact, be one nexus of these communities – what brings them together in irritation – and it goes like this: "Have you tried yoga?"[1]

The often-given unsolicited advice to "heal thyself" using physical movement speaks to a deeper issue at hand, one long-entrenched in our (at least, Western) mindset: physical movement is a cure for weaknesses, and one need only exercise to "get better." There is a link between the strength and training of the body, and the cultivation of the mind – a link present from the gymnasiums in Plato's *Republic*, to late nineteenth century strongmen like Eugen Sandow and Bernarr Macfadden, to "self-care" and "wellness" movements today.

"Weakness is a crime! Don't be a criminal!" went the slogan of American strongman and one of the "fathers" of the Physical Culture movement, Bernarr Macfadden.[2] And fertile, indeed, was his influence on ideals of masculinity, femininity, the health of the nation, mental well-being, and moral aptitude. One must be not just healthy, but *virile*, and the condition of the body reveals virility throughout our reality – mental, physical, emotional, and even national. One must display great fortitude, activity, and commitment in all elements of life.

What, exactly, is this virility? It is a potency, an affirmation of our "biophysical reality," our reality as an integrated part of the physical world around us. This is an embodied reality, a reality that physical fitness helps

1) There is even a podcast based on this quip. Georgia Young and Emma di Bernado, *Have You Tried Yoga?*, podcast audio, https://haveyoutriedyogapodcast.wordpress.com/.

2) Born Bernard Adolphus McFadden, Macfadden changed his name so that "it would seem powerful, something like a lion's roar." Robert Ernst, *Weakness is a Crime: The Life of Bernarr Macfadden* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1991), 18.

us reclaim, alienated though we may be. Our biophysical reality is, in some sense, the reality of Zarathustra, who proclaims that the body "does not say I, but does I."[3] This is a reality that is, in a sense, the *only* reality; one that is "of the earth," not of the soul. Zarathustra seeks to bring us back to the earth, in all of our physical potency. A sickly body is the result of a contemptuous soul, a soul that "intended to escape the body and the earth."[4] Esar Shvartz writes of this bio-physical reality, physical fitness, and self-affirmation, stating:

> What is then bio-physical reality? Bio-physical reality appears under any circumstances that limit our powers and arise our will for more power. The reader can immediately see that the overload principle is part of this reality, so is an aggressive opponent and extreme time and space factors. In the process of becoming fit, we deliberately create situations in which we become a part of a bio-physical reality. We become reality itself, an integral part of this earth.[5]

Physical fitness becomes a way to transcend the "sickly soul," a way of asserting ourselves, and our power, in this world. Fitness itself is a "fight against the alienation of man from his bio-physical reality."[6] Self-affirmation is exemplified in physical fitness; it is the way we achieve more power, a mode of resistance against passivity,[7] an expression of the Nietzschean will-to-power. Nietzsche himself writes, "more honestly and more purely speaks the healthy body, the perfect and perpendicular body, and it speaks of the meaning of the earth."[8] This perfect body is one achieved by the *Übermensch*.[9] Our physical bodies reflect worthiness, affirmation, potency, and moral superiority.

Bernarr Macfadden's writings reflect this conceptualization of physical and moral superiority. Macfadden expressed many American anxieties in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, particularly anxieties about both physical and moral decay in American citizens – and a way to combat this decay was through the perfection of our bodies. Many citizens at the time were "infected" with such anxieties: "decay was not only a theme of nineteenth-century health criticism, but it also pervaded popular media, scientific discourse, and political discussion. Darwinian ideas about evolution and progress went hand-in-hand with anxieties about its opposite, retrogression and social decline."[10] Compared to the physically "superior" ancient Greco-Roman cultures, humans were in a state of degradation.[11] Physical fitness itself was both a sign of – and instrument of – moral and national fitness. And so, a way to advance humanity on both individual and social levels was through attaining physical perfection – and the pinnacle of human physical perfection was *virility*.

Though Macfadden discussed virility in the context of *sexual* potency, it was not limited to sexuality; sexual potency was but one expression of the virile man. Virility was how one reached "peak" manhood,

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3) Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, eds. Adrian Del Caro and Robert Pippin (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 23, eBook.

4) Ibid., 6.

5) Esar Shvartz, "Nietzsche: A Philosopher of Fitness," *Quest* 8, no. 1 (May, 1967): 88.

6) Ibid.

7) Ibid., ...87

8) Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra,* 23.

9) "The overman is the meaning of the earth. Let your will say: the overman shall be the meaning of the earth! I beseech you, my brothers, remain faithful to the earth and do not believe those who speak to you of extraterrestrial hopes! They are mixers of poisons whether they know it or not." Ibid., 6.

10) Peter J. Miller, "The Imaginary Antiquity of Physical Culture," *The Classical Outlook*, 93, no. 1 (2018): 21.

11) "American critics were concerned that their contemporaries were not only degraded from the humans of the past, but from their competitors in the United Kingdom and Canada"; Ibid.

what made a man a *man*: "*men* – strong, virile, superb – and the first duty of every male human adult is to be a man,"[12] to the extent that "if you are not a man, you are nothing but a nonentity! A ciper!"[13] The perfect body is a virile one; it asserts itself. It is *actual*, rather than a "non-entity." Virility was present in all aspects of life, from our national enthusiasm, to our ambition, to our "noble deeds of valor."[14] The virile man fought against decay, and his body was the reflection – and instrument – of such self-affirmation. We might say that the virile man was the physical manifestation of the *Übermensch*. Like the *Übermensch*, the virile man resisted passivity and decay: "activity is the law of life. Inactivity means decay. Long-continued stagnation means death."[15] When "anything or any power ceases to be useful it disappears."[16] To be present, to be real, one had to assert power and dominance over one's environment. What better way to show physical dominance than by overcoming heavy weights, running as fast as possible, or growing muscles large enough to push back against any threat? We see here that the physical fitness fad was not just an outcome of the desire for physical health, but the quest for physical *superiority*, in which a sort of human destiny was fulfilled through excellence as fitness, and fitness as self-affirmation.

This conceptualization of reality – one that is "earthly," fully actualized by physical strength, one in which strength is moral perfection – comes with its own poison. With physical and moral perfection so closely tied, those who do not achieve physical perfection are deemed morally degraded and thus unworthy. Physical perfection as the mark of human advancement created an exclusivity that both produced and transmitted the normalcy of eugenics in twentieth century thought. Bodily fitness was a way to uphold the social order; Macfadden's publications in *Physical Culture* insisted upon a national obligation to be fit, to seek betterment, and to reproduce. When discussing Macfadden's *Physical Culture* magazine, Olaf Stieglitz remarks: "combined with other outlets of his publishing empire, Macfadden's magazine aimed at popularizing the idea that sport and popular culture could ultimately better U.S. society. Over time, notions of eugenic thinking became ever more important for that objective."[17] This included an appeal to mothers to have "fit" babies, and the way to have "fit" babies was to be fit oneself. In fact, per Macfadden, "mentally superior children are born of physically superior people."[18] Physical perfection was not just a reflection of anxieties pertaining to racial, moral, or national "decay," but in effect became its own "field of knowledge production"[19] – eugenics as an acceptable practice. Biophysical reality became a biopolitical ideal, a way to create, shape, and revise acceptable norms.

Of course, the demarcation of who is "fit" for society is still present. Social media trends in "fitspiration" – fitness inspiration – still speak to our physical fitness obsession. Fitspiration, or "fitspo," images typically feature young women performing (or dressed for) athletic activity, showcasing a strong, toned, and agile body. The goal is to promote exercise and healthy eating over previously dominant "skinny" body goals (known as "thinspiration"). However, "despite the fitness focus, the images promote weight loss and the importance of

12) Bernarr Macfadden, *The Virile Powers of Superb Manhood: How Developed, How Lost, How Regained* (New York: The Physical Culture Publishing Company, 1900), 5–6.

13) Ibid., 6.

14) "The fiery ardor of a patriot, the intense ambition of an enthusiast, the inspiration that influences noble deeds of valor, the sacrificial spirit that has time and time again caused the world to ring with praises of some hero, all spring from the same nervous energy which supplies the power of sex, the power of manhood"; Macfadden, *The Virile Powers*, 12.

15) Ibid., 120.

16) Ibid., 122.

17) Olaf Stieglitz, "'Mentally Superior Children are Born of Physically Superior People': Bernarr Macfadden's *Physical Culture* World and the Influence of Eugenic Thought in American Fitness Culture, 1900s–1930s," *American Studies* 64, no. 2 (2019): 248.

18) Ibid., 258.

19) Ibid., 243.

appearance, and only one body type is predominantly pictured in fitspiration posts, that is, a thin and toned body."[20] A common fitspo tagline is "strong is the new skinny." In a study surveying 130 female undergraduate students between 17 and 30 years old, Tiggeman and Zaccardo found that, after exposure to "fitspiration" photos on Instagram, subjects reported lower self-esteem and greater body dissatisfaction than they had after exposure to control (travel inspiration) images.[21] However, in conjunction with lower body image, women also felt inspired to be fit and engage in healthier eating.[22] In a similar study, Pritchard et al. found that "irrespective of focus or presence of text, exposure to fitspiration images decreases body satisfaction and increases negative mood, highlighting the potential negative consequences of engaging with fitspiration media."[23] Though fitspo culture is aimed at overcoming an obsession with "thin" body types, fitspirational images often have a more negative effect on women's self-esteem than thinspiration images.[24] Some of these negative feelings stem from "self-objectification," which arises when participants were exposed to images that focused more on appearances than functionality. These studies show that exposure to such images – images of "fit" bodies, displaying strength, power, and ability – *create* negative feelings toward oneself in those exposed to them. Fitness culture not only reflects our own anxieties, but often creates *new* ones, insofar as it creates new standards of acceptability and physical perfection – new systems of what is valued, and why.

Images which focus on the body's functionality might explain the continuing popularity of the fitspirational movement:

> Viewing images that focus on body functionality should elicit a less objectifying experience for young women and result in more positive outcomes on body satisfaction and mood than would posed images. This potential positive effect from viewing the female form actively doing something could help explain the popularity of fitspiration images and their inspirational value.[25]

One might think that a focus on ability, rather than mere aesthetics, is an improvement – but even that has its own realm of social and cultural exclusion. What of those whose bodies are not "functional"?

The social model of disability defines disability as a state that is *created* by social norms of "functionality." In the *Handbook of Disability Studies*, Adrienne Asch writes that communications, buildings, transit systems, aesthetic preferences, and the physical components of our daily routines all exclude people from participating in education, work, civic, and social life. While traditionally, professions (medical, bioethics, health care) assume that a certain level of functionality is necessary to live a fulfilling "normal" life, the social model argues that the problem of disability is not functionality, but rather the problem "of denial of civil, social, and economic rights and not one of biology and health."[26] The social model is usually contrasted with the medical model, which sees disability as a lack of functionality due to some impairment that the individual has.[27] The social

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20) Ivanka Pritchard, Annabel C. McLachlan, Tiffany Lavis, and Marika Tiggeman, "The Impact of Different Forms of #fitspiration Imagery on Body Image, Mood, and Self-Objectification on Young Women," *Sex Roles* 78, no. 3 (2018): 789.

21) Marika Tiggeman and Mia Zaccado, "'Exercise to Be Fit, Not Skinny': The Effect of Fitspiration Imagery on Women's Body Image," *Body Image* 15, (September 2015): 65.

22) Ibid., 66.

23) Pritchard, et al., "Impact of Different Forms," 789.

24) Ibid., 780.

25) Ibid., 790.

26) Adrienne Asch, "Disability, Bioethics, and Human Rights," in *Handbook of Disability Studies*, ed. Gary L. Albrecht, Katherine Seelman, and Michael Bury (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 2001), 301.

27) Justin Anthony Haegele and Samuel Hodge, "Disability Discourse: Overview and Critiques of the Medical and Social Models,"

model, then, sees functionality – and deficits thereof – as a result of institutional and social arrangements that, by their arrangements, exclude and thus *create* the disabilities; "it is society that imposes disability on individuals with impairments."[28]

Our bio-physical reality, reaching its fullest actuality in the "fit" body, does more than just reflect pre-existing notions of functionality and fitness. Physical culture creates new norms – norms for self-esteem, norms for who is "fit" for society, norms that actually *create* what we mean by "fitness" – for the world. The papers in this issue navigate, reflect, and expand upon these themes. In this issue, our contributors take us through our biophysical reality – its history, its virtues, its legacies, and its uses.

One thing that physical fitness – particularly strength and endurance – reveals is the agent's ability to voluntarily *suffer*. This ability is often seen as a virtue to be lauded. A strong person (physically) is a strong person (mentally); as before stated, physical fitness is seen as a reflection and cultivation of mental and moral fitness. Ralph Ellis explores the phenomenon of voluntary suffering in "Running and the Paradox of Suffering," asking: "what is there about the human psyche that enables the needed voluntary suffering? Or more precisely, what is the *inner conflict* that enables us to deliberately choose suffering in some cases, yet in other cases we cannot get off the couch, no matter how much we will it?" Voluntary suffering, Ellis argues, is not to enhance long-term pleasure or some way to avoid even more suffering down the road; it is not some means to a greater end. What then, he asks, motivates us to get into the habit of suffering – to get us up, off the couch, and onto the track?

Ellis uses these questions as a starting point to investigate self-motivation; reflecting upon – and rejecting theories based on pleasure-pain principles (including Aristotle, Kant, the Stoics, and narcissism), he turns to modern neuroscience, which identifies the pleasure-pain motivation as one of eight (play, rage, fear, care, panic, lust, seeking, and pleasure/pain). A mixture of his own track experiences, philosophical theory, modern neuroscience, and the experiences of professional athletes, Ellis's contribution shows us the power of play and seeking in motivating our chosen suffering.

Aaron Wood's essay, "Eugen Sandow: Performing New Masculinities," gives us the history of masculine health and fitness ideals, picking up the thread of the "classic" interpretation of physical culture. Taking us through a history of American masculinity, Wood contrasts the "domestic" (feminized) man of the 1830s and 1840s with the "new masculinity" that Sandow performed; one might say that, upon seeing this "feminine" American man, and comparing him with Greco-Roman ideals of manhood displayed in classical art, the American man seemed "degraded." Sandow presented a new ideal of a man – physically strong, and one who built that strength by embracing the virtues of self-control and temperance. This idea of masculinity was also infused with not-so-subtle ideas of eugenics; "by adopting the name Eugen, he could play on the term eugenics and boast of being 'well born' both through his physique and his name." Sandow's grip on American masculinity was strengthened by his nationwide theatre performances; physical culture was not only a moral crusade and a "racial necessity," but also a business opportunity. His business was one of providing a stability to masculine identity, which was in crisis due to economic and social shifts in the nineteenth century. Sandow established himself as a "fitspirational" performer: "the expectation of the modern male is not that he should look like Eugen Sandow, but rather that he should want to."

Of course, the normative ideals of what we *should* want to be are also exclusive ideals. In "Disability as a Cultural Problem," Johnathan Flowers uses the works of John Dewey to argue for a transactional model of disability. Disability is a *cultural* issue; in particular, disability emerges from the way the human organism interacts with their environment, which is structured through culture. Flowers's understanding of culture focuses

Quest 68, no. 2 (2016): 195.

28) Ibid., 197.

on our *embodied* habits; what we do with, how we arrange and organize, and what we expect from our bodies and those of others. To belong to a culture, our habits must be continuous with those of that culture. Thus, Flowers writes, "how the body transacts with the cultural environment serves to structure that which we call disability." Per this model, disability is not an "abnormality" in opposition to "ability"; rather, disability "is part of a range of human possibilities which emerge through transaction with a social environment."

When our cultural starting point is the "non-disabled body," disabled bodies will always be out of continuity with our culture; they will be "non-functional" because our habits do not sustain their functioning. The disabled person cannot embody cultural habits that were not made for, or from, them. This is most evident in "disability dongles," which are solutions to problems disabled persons did not know they had, for the transactions of disabled persons are interpreted through the lens of non-disabled persons. Flowers's transactional model emphasizes the ways in which disabled persons transact with their environment, an environment structured by culture and habit.

Joshua Hall's article, "On Justice as Dance" reframes social justice as "organistic empowerment," demonstrating the power of our physicality – our bodies – to "dance with" others as a form of "ethico-political" justice. Hall draws from traditional philosophical notions of justice – such as Plato's and Aristotle's – that he sees as compatible with the popular arts in order to present a new form of justice. Drawing from Agnes Heller's "ethico-political" justice, Hall presents justice as *dance*; ethico-political justice emphasizes our *embodiment*, our physical reality: "these ethico-political conceptions emphasize virtue, relationship, and embodiment, and thereby the embodied axes of race, gender, and sex. The latter, in turn, are central to both social justice and the popular arts on which social justice powerfully and captivatingly draws, including dance."

Justice as dance uses embodied reality, the way in which we move our bodies together, as a framework for interpreting and applying theoretical texts. We might say that, rather than reading a theory and *then* working out how to apply it to the world, Hall begins with *how we move our bodies in the world*, and uses that to reframe how we approach theory. We must "dance with" others when interpreting theoretical texts – especially pertaining to justice. This is a "strategic, creative reinterpretation of canonical historical philosophers, whereby one comports oneself toward them as dance partners." While the history of physical culture leads to many pitfalls in terms of new standards – and new exclusions – Hall shows us how physical culture can be used to reform those very issues (and more).

Our Forum section features Andre De Tienne's, "Peirce on the Symbolical Foundation of Personhood," and John DeCarlo's "The Horizontal-Ontological Nature of the Physical Culture of Cancers." De Tienne's contribution focuses on Peirce's logical basis for the symbolic process of personhood. Here, De Tienne presents Peirce's "logic of logic" – which formed the basis of Peirce's metaphysics – thus leading to the generality, vagueness, and teleology of personhood. DeCarlo's writing delves into neuroscience, and more, as he takes us on an adventure through the very stuff of physical life: our cells. While other contributors focus on issues of specifically *human* culture, DeCarlo provides us with a microscopic view of organic life itself. DeCarlo argues that cancers are an extension of the horizontal physical culture, with their own synergistic community. His work offers a rigorously scientific view of the building blocks of life, showing how science and philosophy can come together to provide new ways of understanding microscopic organisms.

We have in our "Discussion" section two contributions: James McLachlan's "From Platonism and the Farnese Hercules to Steve Reeves and the Peplum Hercules via a Radical Ohio Hegelian and his Socialist German Acrobats," and reflections on Richard Shusterman's *Ars Erotica* – and his responses (our "*Ars Erotica* Symposium"). McLachlan examines Sandow's and Macfadden's influences on cinema in the mid-nineteenth century, especially the "peplum" films starring Steve Reeves – films that were nostalgic for the idealized body types of Greco-Roman depictions. Showing us connections between the Turner societies, peplum films,

Hegelianism, and political optimism, McLachlan situates notions of the "ideal body" as a common thread in cinematic and intellectual shifts.

The *Ars Erotica* Symposium features commentaries on Richard Shusterman's newest book, *Ars Erotica: Sex and Somaesthetics in the Classical Arts of Love*. Contributions reflect various themes in Shusterman's work, from *ars erotica* and *ars vivendi,* to Daoist sexology and Indian erotology, to gender and power imbalances in the erotic arts. Uniquely, this section also offers Shusterman's responses to the reviews, giving this issue something like a Library of Living Philosophers, in miniature.

The variety of articles in this edition reflect the variety of ways in which we can approach physical culture. Physical culture is not only in the tangible, material world that surrounds us, but is present in the *values* we embed into the world through our actions, through our symbolic interpretations, through the kinds of habits we build. While traditional notions of physical culture have had quite negative consequences – ableism and eugenics, for example – our authors' contributions show how our physical embodiment can be used to *overcome* this dark history. If physical culture pertains to our biophysical reality, then it also leaves open the space to change our realities – change our value systems – through our embodiment.