Slaying the Invisible Man: a take on Alexander consciousness by Henry George MSTAT

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Introduction

Why does the self often seem to 'disappear' when we are engaged in activity? In this workshop, I drew on some philosophical, scientific and experiential accounts in order to explore this phenomenon in relation to the Alexander Technique.

What do I mean by a 'disappearing body'?

Writers of different backgrounds have described the way in which the body seems to 'disappear', 'vanish' or be 'absent' in activity. Below are three examples which help bring this curious aspect of our lives into focus:

When typing,

> 'I perch in a chair for hours suspending large portions of my corporeal existence in order to proceed with my specific task. This body is largely placed into background disappearance …' (Drew Leder)[1]

When reaching for a glass,

> '… all I experience is the look and taste of the wine as I drink it. I don't experience the various corrections made to the movements as my brain navigates my arm through the various obstacles on the table to reach the wine glass. I don't experience the change in the angles of my elbow or the feel of the glass on my fingertips as they adjust perfectly to the size of the stem. … As long as I stay in control I don't have to bother with the physical world of actions and sensations' (Chris Frith)[2]

When fetching a book from the bookcase,

> '… if I were to formulate the content of my consciousness in this regard, it would not be in terms of operating or stretching muscles, bending or unbending limbs, turning or maintaining balance; it would not even be in terms of walking, reaching, standing, or sitting. Rather, in the context of an intentional project, if I were stopped and asked what I was doing, I would say something like, 'I'm getting a book'. All the bodily movement entailed in that action remains phenomenologically hidden behind that description' (Shaun Gallagher)[3]

Part 1. The disappearing body and ideomotor action

In the first part of my workshop, I introduced ideomotor action and suggested it was related to the phenomenon of a disappearing body.

The ideomotor principle states that, over time and on an unconscious level, actions become associated with their sensory effects such that one need only think of the consequence of an action to initiate it. For example, over time, switching on a lamp becomes linked up in the brain with a particular sound, feel and visual effect. The ideomotor principle asserts that *idea* of the switched-on lamp (the 'ideo' in ideomotor) is then enough to initiate and control the action itself. William James first popularized this notion in the 19th century with his observation that 'we think the act, and it is done; and that is all that introspection tells us of the matter'.

Modern ideomotor theories[4] provide evidence that action can indeed be driven by 'end-state mental representations' in our brains such as a door opened, a button pressed or a field traversed. Since these representations are built on a lifetime of successfully completed actions, ideomotor acts are always controlled by what is known, or habitual, and they therefore take no account of the way the movement happens to be unfolding in real time. The similarity with Alexander's end-gaining is striking.

I have argued elsewhere[5] that the 'experience' of an ideomotor act therefore amounts to very little sensorially. This is for two reasons. Firstly, because ideomotor acts are generated by representations stored in the brain, they do not require any ongoing sensory feedback during the actual movement. Secondly, because the brain accurately predicts the actual outcome in advance, ideomotor acts do not even require a conscious interest in their own result. It is only when something unexpected occurs (for example, if the switch on the lamp is broken) that we are returned to our senses in the 'here and now'. When caught up in an

‘ideomotor attitude’, our movements are for most of the time carried along by a mental projection of a predicted future. As such, our awareness of the self in activity all but disappears.

I believe Muriel Barbary captures a vivid sense of ideomotor action in her 2006 novel, *The Elegance of the Hedgehog*:

> ‘Maman just went by in the direction of the front door, she’s going out shopping and in fact she already is out, her movement anticipating itself. I don’t really know how to explain it, but when we move, we are in a way de-structured by our movement toward something: we are both here and at the same time not here because we’re already in the process of going elsewhere, if you see what I mean. To stop de-structuring yourself, you have to stop moving altogether. Either you move and you’re no longer whole, or you’re whole and you can’t move’[6].

Part 2. Ideomotor action – the only way to act?

The narrator in Barbary’s novel goes on to contrast the ‘de-structured’ movement above with the ‘very fluid but above all very focused’ movement exhibited by a New Zealand rugby player she watches on television:

> ‘I got the impression that he was moving, yes, but by staying in one place. Crazy, no? Everyone was enthralled by him but no one seemed to know why. … That Maori player was like a tree, a great indestructible oak with deep roots and a powerful radiance — everyone could feel it. And yet you also got the impression that the great oak could fly, that it would be as quick as the wind, despite, or perhaps because of, its deep roots. … compact moments where a player became his own movement without having to fragment himself by heading *towards* … The commentators were sort of hungover but they couldn’t hide the fact that they’d seen something really beautiful: a player who was running without moving, leaving everyone else behind him. And the others, who seemed by comparison to move with frenzied and awkward gestures, were incapable of catching up with him. … So I said to myself: There, I have managed to witness motionless movement in the world: is that something worth carrying on for?’[7]

The second part of my workshop explored ways of acting which lie outside the ideomotor framework; ways of acting which arguably have much in common with Barbary’s description above.

One of the features of ideomotor action is that it is under our *direct* control. In other words, one only needs to think of the result of the action and the action takes place – again, we may remember William James’ notion that ‘we think the act, and it is done’. Other ways of influencing our musculoskeletal system – such as Alexander’s means-whereby or primary control – can be categorized as *indirect*. In the workshop, I suggested that a number of modern-day understandings from different fields of enquiry have similarities with the Alexander Technique because they too are concerned with the indirect control of human action. I explored six of them: James Gibson’s *Affordances*, Hubert Dreyfus’ *Skilled Coping*, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's *Flow*, Brian Bruya’s *Natural Human Action*, Tim Ingold’s *Correspondence*, and Victor Gurfinkel’s *Postural Tone*.

As an example, perhaps the most well-known among these approaches is *Flow*, a way of moving which athletes seem to enter when performing at their peak, and described by the man who coined the term as the as ‘the holistic sensation that people feel when they act with total involvement’[8]. With this in mind, a deeper understanding of Alexander’s principles could be gained by a familiarity with some of the attributes of Flow; for instance, I have found the exploration of notions such as *action-awareness merging*, *unambiguous feedback* and *autotelicity* (doing something for its own sake) to be helpful. As with Alexander’s own indirect procedures, Csikszentmihalyi is explicit about how Flow is only under *indirect* control, stating that ‘It is not possible to make flow happen at will … and attempting to do so will only make the state more elusive. However, removing obstacles and providing facilitating conditions will increase its occurrence’[9].

Along with the Alexander Technique, I believe that the six accounts of movement, skill and agency I explored in the second part of my workshop form a critique of ideomotor action. All of them have an affinity with so-called ‘ecological’ approaches to human action, and help to subvert or challenge the more dominant ‘cognitive’ explanations offered by neuroscientists.

And why might such approaches to action be necessarily *indirect*? It seems that acting in such ways requires the subject to relinquish full control and enter into a ‘mutualist’ relationship with the environment; or, as Rob Withagen and colleagues put it, ‘intentions should not be understood as mental states that are insulated from the agent’s body and the environment, and cause an animal to move … the animal–environment relation is the proper unit of analysis in understanding agency’[10].

I give the full background to these accounts in my forthcoming article, ‘Nine Modern Contexts for the Alexander Technique’[11].

Part 3. A new take on Alexander consciousness: the body schema

In the final section of the workshop I asked the question, 'What kind of consciousness for the Alexander Technique?'. In this, I argued that the six indirect approaches to action I described all rely on conscious access to the *body schema* which can be understood as *a holistic, three-dimensional map of the body which constantly tracks body parts in relation to each other and the environment*. Iain McGilchrist describes this map as being not just a picture, representation or sum of our bodily perceptions, but instead a 'living image, intimately linked to activity in the world – an essentially affective experience'[12]. It is for this reason that disturbances in the body schema are associated with profoundly distressing illnesses such as body dysmorphia and anorexia nervosa.

Although essential for all motor activity, it is often assumed that the body schema remains either unconscious or at best marginal to awareness, working in the background in order that we can successfully accomplish our everyday tasks. This is no doubt true for many people for whom an 'invisible body' is their default mode of being. It has been remarked upon by scientists in the following ways:

> 'Subjective awareness does not seem to be involved in "how" actions are performed'[13];
>
> 'Actual sensory feedback has a remarkably limited role in the experience of action in neurologically healthy individuals'[14];
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> 'Obviously, the neural mechanisms underlying consciousness have more important things to do than controlling the low-level executive details of our actions. It may even seem optimal, in terms of neural economy, to assume that a movement unfolds as planned when it reaches its goal'[15].

Anyone familiar with Alexander Technique, or with other understandings of movement such as the six I explored in this workshop, would probably beg to differ with these views. In developing an alternative perspective, I have found the work of the contemporary French philosopher Dorothée Legrand useful, in particular her paper entitled 'Pre-reflective self-consciousness: on being bodily in the world'[16].

Legrand maintains that the body schema is indeed conscious, and that it generates a type of 'performative awareness' which is particularly developed in dancers and other movement experts. For her, the subjective experience of the 'performative body' is distinct both from the 'invisible body' described above, but also from the experience of the 'opaque body'. This is where we use a 'spotlight' of attention to look at ourselves, such that our body and its parts are focused on as opaque objects which are clearly separate from their surroundings. In contrast, performative awareness does *not objectify* the body, is *pre-reflective*, and is concerned instead with *the whole self in relation to the world*. Despite its pre-reflective nature, Legrand argues that the performative body can nevertheless can be brought to 'the front' of one's experience without turning it into 'a mere intentional object'.

As my title suggests, working with the body schema and performative awareness is likely to be a way to 'slay the invisible man'. Not only is it is a probable foundation for the six indirect approaches to movement I explored in this workshop, but also for the application of the principles of the Alexander Technique. It has been said before that applying the Alexander Technique is akin to working on the body schema[17]; however, as far as I know, the Alexander Technique has not been explored before in relation to notions of the 'disappearing', 'opaque' or 'performative' body, or related in this way to ideomotor action or other indirect approaches to movement.

Henry George Biography

Henry George trained in the Alexander Technique with Peter and Eleanor Ribeaux at the Centre for the Alexander Technique, London. He is also a musician with a background in English literature and comparative education. He has published research reflecting his diverse interests: the science and philosophy of the Alexander Technique, private tuition in the UK, and Mahatma Gandhi's holistic vision for educating India.

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2 Frith, C. (2007) *Making up the mind: how the brain creates our mental world*. Oxford: Blackwell, p.105.

3 Gallagher, S. (2005) *How the body shapes the mind.* Oxford: University Press, p.33.

[4] For example, Hommel, B., Müsseler, J., Aschersleben, G. and Prinz, W. (2001) 'The theory of event coding (TEC): A framework for perception and action planning', *Behavioral and brain sciences* 24(5), 849-937.

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[6] Barbary, Muriel (2008) *The Elegance of the Hedgehog*. Trans. Alison Anderson. London: Gallic Publications. p.36.

[7] *Ibid*.

[8] Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1975) *Beyond boredom and anxiety: experiencing flow in work and play*, San Francisco: Jossey Bass, p.36.

[9] Jackson, S., Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1999) *Flow in sports*, Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, p.138.

[10] Withagen, R., de Poel, H., Araújo, D. and Pepping, G-J (2012) 'Affordances can invite behaviour: reconsidering the relationship between affordances and agency', *New ideas in psychology*, 30, 250-258, p.255.

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[16] Legrand, D. (2007) 'Pre-reflective self-consciousness: on being bodily in the world', *Janus head*, 9(2), 493-519.

[17] See, for example, Blakeslee, S. and Blakeslee, M. (2007) *The body has a mind of its own*, New York: Random House, p.37.