



NATIONAL RESEARCH UNIVERSITY  
HIGHER SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS

*Elena Stankovskaya*

# **EMBODIMENT: THOUGHTS FROM AN EXISTENTIAL-ANALYTICAL PERSPECTIVE**

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*Elena Stankovskaya<sup>1</sup>*

## **EMBODIMENT: THOUGHTS FROM AN EXISTENTIAL-ANALYTICAL PERSPECTIVE**

Modern culture has a keen interest in the embodiment and comprehensive psychological approaches of conceptualizing the human body. Frankl proposed the theory of ‘dimensional ontology’, which included clear analytical models of human body but which were insufficient in many respects. This paper attempts to integrate existential-analytical ideas about embodiment and enrich them with other investigations in this sphere. The central argument is that the theory of four fundamental motivations developed by Längle is a useful way to comprehend the complexity of embodiment. This paper discusses the four levels of embodiment and the way in which the four fundamental existential themes are represented through embodiment.

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<sup>1</sup> Ph.D, National Research University Higher School of Economics, email: [stankovskaya@hse.ru](mailto:stankovskaya@hse.ru)

There are at least two important reasons for paying closer attention to the issue of embodiment. First, in the modern world body dissatisfaction has become so widespread that Rodin et al (Rodin, 1985) suggest the term 'normative discontent' to define the almost epidemic popularity of concern for the body. Orbach (2009) describes it as 'a crisis about the body itself' and states that 'body destabilization' is one of the most significant features of bodies in our time. The preoccupation with the body has different manifestations, which seriously affect nearly every aspect of a person's life; psychological well-being and self-esteem (Caruthers, 2005; Gilbert, 1997; Gilbert & Miles, 2002; Wolf, 1991), health and health related behaviors (Martin, 2007; Rumsey & Harcourt, 2005), relationships with other people, and careers (Rumsey & Harcourt, 2005). Secondly, the question of embodiment was raised within the context of investigations about personal agency, self and identity (Richert, 2002; Spinelli, 2001, 2005, 2007; Stern, 1985, 2002). Paradoxically, the embodiment of human experience becomes the point of intersection of the constructivist, humanistic and existential approaches to conceptualizing the self and the generation of meaning (Deurzen, 2002; Gendlin, 1997, 2007; Richert, 2002).

Although existential philosophy has generated useful ideas about embodiment<sup>2</sup> different versions of existential psychotherapy emphasize a person's spiritual capacities and frequently miss the complexity of human embodiment and the embodiment of the human spirit. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to provide a more comprehensive map for understanding and addressing embodiment in existential psychotherapeutic practice.

The version of existential psychotherapy examined in this paper is called 'existential analysis and logotherapy', and was instigated by Längle (Längle, 2000, 2011, 2012) through Frankl's logotherapy (Frankl, 1984, 1988, 2010). The model of embodiment proposed by Frankl is clear but insufficient in many respects. Längle and his colleagues developed and revised his ideas as a whole, but did not focus specifically on the issue of embodiment. This paper aims to integrate existential-analytical ideas about embodiment and present them in a more systematic way. Frankl's contribution is discussed in the first part of the paper, while the second part is devoted to the existential-analytical model of embodiment.

### **Frankl's 'dimensional ontology'**

The complexity of human beings is reflected in the theory of 'dimensional ontology', as developed by Frankl (Frankl, 1962, 1984, 1988, 2010). He distinguishes between three dimensions of human existence; the somatic, the psychic, and the noetic. According to Frankl, the somatic dimension is limited to man's biological aspects, and the psychic dimension is made up of psychic conditions and determinants. The noetic, or spiritual, dimension relates to

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<sup>2</sup> Merleau-Ponty's embodied epistemology; Sartre's theory of 'the look'

'specifically human phenomena', such as the 'will to meaning', self-transcendence, self-detachment, freedom and responsibility.

«Man lives in three dimensions: the somatic, the mental, and the spiritual. The spiritual dimension cannot be ignored, for it is what makes us human» (Frankl, 1962, p. IX).

Despite the differences between these three dimensions, they constitute the anthropological unity and wholeness of a human being. Therefore, the dimensional ontology tries to embrace both multiplicity and unity operating in human existence:

«Human existence is intrinsically, profoundly the coexistence of both ontological differences on the one hand, and on the other hand, anthropological oneness and unity because bodily, mental and spiritual phenomena and aspects are profoundly united within human existence. In the framework of psychology and biology, man seems to be what is usually called a closed system, be it of reflexes, of reactions or of responses to stimuli. He really seems in a way to be a computer. But seen in the light of dimensional anthropology, this apparent closedness of man no longer contradicts the humanness of man» (Frankl, 2010, pp. 143-144).

Frankl repeatedly emphasizes this oneness (Frankl, 1984, 1988, 2010; Palma, 1976) and stresses that 'in spite of all the ontological variations of the somatic, psychic, and noetic, the anthropological unity and wholeness of a human being has to be preserved and saved' (Frankl, 2010, p.82). In order to clarify the relationships between dimensions, he proposes a kind of hierarchy. He maintains that the noetic dimension is a 'higher dimension', which coordinates the somatic and the psychic through two human capacities - 'self-detachment' and 'self-transcendence'. Moreover, rising above one's psychosomatic constitution is considered to be a crucial and essential step in entering the realm of the 'genuinely human', or noetic.

Although Frankl pays considerable attention to the somatic dimension, his concept of the body is imperfect in several respects. First, he *reduces the body to a biological object or organism*. The *complexity of the human body* is overlooked in the dimensional ontology.

The human body is shaped by social practices and ideals, gender patterns and meanings associated with a specific *historical period and culture* (Foucault, 1986; Orbach, 2009; Sinclair, 2006; Smolak, 2004; Wolf, 1991). 'Our bodily codes and behaviours... show us that our taken-for-granted body is neither natural nor pure but a body that is inscribed and formed by the accretion of myriad small specific cultural practices' (Orbach, 2009, p.7). Socio-cultural bodily practices literally constitute corporeality and define the ways in which people move, dress, perceive and use their physicality and understand and address their somatic symptoms.

Interpersonal relationships are another constitutive force and essential condition for physical development (Bowlby, 1976; Orbach, 2009; Sartre, 1992; Spitz, 1945; Stern, 1985, 2002). As Spitz's (1945) investigations have shown, the fulfilment of biological needs is insufficient for an infant's physical development and survival. Orphan babies who failed to receive enough personal contact became easily ill, demonstrated developmental delays in their

capacity to move and speak, and died more frequently than those who had more attention from nurses. These observations mean that the human body is profoundly shaped by *relationships with others*. Nowadays, this view is supported by research conducted in various areas (Gilbert & Miles, 2002; Orbach, 2009; Stern, 1985, 2002). For example, the discovery of the mirror neuron system reveals that the brain is formed by encounters with others (Rizzolatti, Fogassi & Gallese, 2001).

Finally, the human body cannot be reduced to a biological object because it is a *basis for one's identity and self* (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Orbach, 2009; Stern, 1985; 2002; Richert, 2002). Although modern culture increasingly prescribes us to treat our bodies as objects (Orbach, 2009), this objectification contradicts the lived experience of, in Merleau-Ponty terms, the 'body-subject'. From this perspective, one not only 'has' their body, but – even more significantly – 'is' their body for themselves and for others. It is through their body that a person obtains a sense of agency and sameness and is identified by the other (Längle, 2012, Längle, 2014; Sartre, 1992; Stern, 2002). This connection between body and identity takes place at a social and personal level. The core of this idea is that a personal identity is constituted by the lived bodily experiences. Stern argues that preverbal senses of self are generated at birth in the form of an invariant pattern of direct experience, or of an infant's awareness. Hence, the verbal self is based on babies' 'vitality affects', which represent the body-mind unity; 'this organizing subjective experience is the preverbal, existential counterpart of the objectifiable, self-reflective, verbalizable self' (Stern, 1985, p. 6). Moreover, the senses of 'physical cohesion' and of 'affectivity' are named among the basic characteristics of self. Gradually, the infant learns to distinguish between self-events and other-person events and in doing so, develops themselves. This corresponds with a wider context of existential thinking about the embodied self (Längle, 2013; Merleau-Ponty, 1976; Sartre, 1992; Spinelli, 2005, 2007) and brings us to *the question of meaning*, the corner stone of Frankl's theory.

Frankl considers the will to meaning as a primary and 'genuinely human' motivation (Frankl, 1984, 1988, 2010). Frankl maintains that human beings are always directed toward values in the world, which are 'pointed beyond' them, and it is only through self-transcendence and finding meaning that they can fulfil their existence. At the same time, little is said in logotherapy about the internal process of 'searching' for meaning, or how exactly meaning is recognized among other values, and how people decide which stand to take in a particular situation. It is because of this that Längle revised and developed Frankl's ideas (Längle, 2000, 2011, 2012; Längle & Kriz, 2012). Specifically, Längle emphasizes the role of emotions and the lived experience in generating meaning (Frankl, 1984, 1988, 2010), and uses a specific technique called 'personal existential analysis', which aims to clarify a client's personal values and

motives, and define and develop their meaningful actions (Längle, 2000; Luginbühl-Schwab, 2008). Existential analysis and logotherapy argue that a person should generate and find *authentic* meaning, to fulfill their existence. In order to do this, the capacities of self-detachment and self-transcendence as described by Frankl are required, as well as a capacity for self-acceptance (Längle, 2011). Therefore, searching for authentic meaning is guided by a person's lived experiences. This view offers a link between existential analysis and logotherapy, and a broader context of existential and humanistic thought (Gendlin, 1997; Gendlin & Olsen, 1970; Richert, 2002; Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Spinelli, 2005).

The connection between meaning generation and the body has been clarified further by Gendlin (1997, 2007; Gendlin & Olsen, 1970). Gendlin and his colleagues analyzed the process of therapeutic change at the University of Chicago, and discovered the crucial difference between the successful patients and the others:

“What is the crucial difference? We found that it is not the therapist's technique – differences in methods of therapy seem to mean surprisingly little. Nor does the difference lie in what the patients talk about. The difference is in *how* they talk. And that is only an outward sign of the real difference: *what the successful patients do inside themselves*” (Gendlin, 2007, p. 4).

Subsequent studies helped Gendlin to better understand this key skill of the successful patients and to develop his concept of *focusing*. His view is briefly discussed here.

Generating explicit meaning occurs through an interchange between symbols (words, images, sounds) and the preverbal, an initially unclear internal bodily awareness ('felt sense'). Simply by being alive, a person has physically sensed some holistic knowledge about a situation. Although this bodily knowledge is intricate, fresh meaning can be 'carried forward' through a person's particular inward activity. The core of this activity is maintaining (bodily) contact with the felt sense. Gendlin proposed a six-step procedure to describe and guide the person's inward activity; clearing space, felt sense, handle, resonating, asking and receiving. Therefore, the bodily process is an essential part of generating meaning. The creation of meaning is 'carried forward' by bodily process.

This approach contradicts Frankl's ideas. For Frankl, meaning belongs to the noetic, or spiritual dimension. The somatic is meaningless; it only physically supports the expression of meaning or, by being rejected and 'raised above', opens up the spiritual dimension:

“Man's intrinsically human capacity to take a stand to whatever may confront him includes his capacity to choose his attitude toward himself, more specifically, to take a stand towards his own somatic and psychic conditions and determinants...Man passes this dimension (noetic – E.S.) whenever he is reflecting upon himself— or rejecting himself; whenever he is making himself an object— or making objections to himself; whenever he displays his being conscious of himself—or whenever he exhibits his being conscientious» (Frankl, 2010, p.73).

This opposition between somatic and noetic leaves what I consider to be a considerable gap in conceptualizing the generation of meaning, which may also limit psychotherapeutic practices. I would also like to comment on the Frankl's *concept of 'self-detachment'*. He describes it as a human capacity 'to put a distance between himself and his own biological and psychological make-up' (Frankl. 2010, p. 74), to 'rise above' the psychosomatic constitution. Given the above discussion, a more accurate depiction would be that self-detachment is a capacity of humans' wholeness to stand 'in front' of themselves, to put a mental distance between two different positions. The tension is not between the body and the spirit, but between one embodied spiritual position and another embodied spiritual position. In other words, it is part of an inner dialogue that mobilizes the 'oneness' of a human being.

In summary, Frankl's dimensional ontology simplifies and objectifies the human body. The body is understood solely as a biological object, as a 'tool' for a spirit. This view represents only part of the body's true diversity, which includes cultural, interpersonal and personal aspects. Presented below is a more coherent existential-analytical model of embodiment, which retains the notion of 'wholeness'.

#### **An existential-analytical model of embodiment**

Since the human body is not a simple output of genetics and biology, existential analysis and logotherapy must develop a more accurate picture of its complexity. The central argument of this section is that the *four fundamental motivations as described by Längle* (2000, 2011, 2012) are a useful way of addressing and conceptualizing the complexity of embodiment. The theory of four fundamental motivations describes universal themes and inevitable human questions, similar to some other conceptual frameworks which have been generated within the existential approach (Deurzen, 2002; Yalom, 1980). The theory therefore offers guidelines for psychotherapeutic practice and helps practitioners to understand their clients' difficulties and strengths. The way in which essential dimensions of existence are characterized and revealed to a person is a result of Längle's phenomenological investigations. Längle used the phenomenological method and discovered four essential dimensions, which at the same time work as primary sources of human motivation. Each motivation is briefly characterized below.

*The first fundamental motivation* deals with the question of physical and spiritual presence in the world ('I am – can I be?'). It is linked to the horizon of what is possible and real, current circumstances and external and internal conditions. At this level, a person makes an effort to maintain protection, space and support from others with the purpose of strengthening their ability 'to be' (Längle, 2012). *The second fundamental motivation* addresses the question of the quality of one's presence in the world ('I am – do I like it?'). Here they are occupied by human nature in its vitality and work on their attitude towards life. To experience the value of

their life, a person needs relationships, time and closeness to values (Längle, 2012). *The third fundamental motivation* refers to questions of authenticity and justice ('I am – how I can be myself in relationships with others?') and thus corresponds with the horizon of the ethically acceptable. At this level, a person defines and appreciates what constitutes their own uniqueness and the uniqueness of others. This dimension therefore creates opportunities for personal encounters with other people. The ability to evaluate one's own worth is originally based on the attention, justice and recognition that we receive from others (Längle, 2012). *The fourth fundamental motivation* focuses on the question of meaning ('I am – what do I live for?'). Here the person expresses their authentic position in the wider context of life, to develop their preferred and more valuable future (Längle, 2012).

The implications that this conception have for embodiment are as follows:

*The first fundamental motivation* deals with the body's factuality, such as the objective body's abilities and limitations, its biological and physiological regularities (respiration, digestion, growth, ageing, sexual function) and actual body size. This is in accordance with Frankl's understanding of the somatic dimension and with the idea of 'body as a body' (Orbach). Late capitalism has dramatically changed our relationship to this dimension of embodiment. Now, we have less contact with physicality itself and so are less aware of the bodily regularities that operate in our life. This results in what Orbach has termed 'bodily instability' and 'body destabilization' (Orbach, 2009). The body ceases to be a predictable and safe 'place'. The development of technology allows us to radically change and to transform our bodies; now we are less likely to take the body as a set of conditions that we must simply accept and deal with. Instead, we tend to perceive the body as a personal project, an object for perfecting and enhancing. Ignoring this dimension of embodiment becomes apparent when a person systematically does not get enough sleep, nutrition or physical activity. At this stage, the main questions are firstly what their bodily conditions and possibilities are, and secondly what is real and possible for a person.

*The second fundamental motivation* reveals the body as a flow of sensations, bodily experiences of needs and desires, and vitality. This corresponds with the 'inner body' as described by Bakhtin (1979) and with Gendlin's (2007) internal bodily awareness. The person 'turns to' their lived experiences and maintains a closeness with their feelings and sensations. The main question here is: How it is for me to be incarnated, to be inside my body? This level of embodiment is constituted by 'vitality affects' (Stern date?), and bodily experiences, which are phenomenological representations of 'being alive'. The core of this dimension is a lived experience that 'life is good'; the ability to sense that being alive is valuable and joyful. It is

therefore life enters us through our bodies, and we become a part of its process, which is in accordance with Gendlin's discovery:

“Another major discovery is that the process of actually changing feels good. ... The change process we have discovered is natural to the body, and it feels that way in the body. The crucial move goes beneath the usual painful places to a bodily sensing that is at first unclear. The experience of something emerging from there feels like a relief and a coming alive” (Gendlin, 2007, p.9).

Modern Western culture has only rarely analyzed this dimension of embodiment. We tend to think about our bodies and to evaluate them, instead of experiencing them (or more accurately, ‘experiencing’). At the same time, this dimension is crucial for people's psychological well-being. For instance, a phenomenological analysis of bulimia conducted by Längle et al (2013) shows that a lack of this personal capacity of ‘turning to’ oneself is one of the two main factors responsible for developing the disorder.

In *the third fundamental motivation*, embodiment becomes a way of creating human authenticity and personal encounters with others. A sense of self is a primary bodily sense (Stern, 1985, 2002), and the senses of personal agency, cohesion and continuity in time are based on embodiment. The third fundamental motivation also deals with social identities. Changing a person's physical appearance and making efforts to enhance and perfect bodies are culturally appreciated ways of constructing identities (Orbach, 2009; Wolf, 1991). The main questions here are: What is genuinely mine? What deeply, authentically corresponds to me in being my body?

According to an existential analysis, there is a spiritual power called “person” (Längle, 2000), and the aim of psychotherapy is to help a client to strengthen a dialogue with it and to make it more present in a person's existence. The “person” resonates with the current situation, and I would argue that *this resonance is bodily felt*. This view strongly corresponds to Gendlin's depiction of focusing. A feeling of relief, Gendlin maintains, is one form of the manifestation of this resonance, meaning in particular that something authentic (or “personal”) was ‘grasped’, or physically sensed. The ability to draw personal boundaries and appreciate uniqueness is based on this bodily-sensed resonance.

When readdressing and reinterpreting Spitz's (1945) observations, we may note that something that was missed in the development of those babies is both a stimulation of their vitality (the second fundamental motivation) and personal encounters with others (the third fundamental motivation). Hence, a touch and a look simultaneously intensify infants' lived experiences and transmit to them “person's” presence of a caregiver. By touching, smiling at, looking at the caregiver's “person” calls for the “person” of an infant. Therefore, these ordinary bodily actions are the very means of personal encounter and exchange. Sartre's theory of ‘the look’ also supports this view (Sartre, 1992). Receiving a look from another reveals the presence

of another agent in the world to a person. The look transmits one's attitude toward the other and at the same time opens up a person's new dimension (I-for-the-other).

The fourth fundamental motivation addresses the human body as the means of production, of constructing the future and of meaningful cooperation with others. This function of embodiment is also reflected in Frankl's (2010) dimensional ontology. The main question at here is: What is my being a body for?

The technological progress has seriously influenced the respective forms of embodiment:

“Where working-class bodies were shaped by the musculature of heavy physical work; low-paid jobs in the service industry and computer-based jobs across the class spectrum leave no such physical indicators. Indeed, many of us have to make an effort to move about during the day or as we work. ... The body is turning from being the means of production to the production itself” (Orbach, 2009, p.6).

However, we still do need a body to support our life projects, since it is only as embodied beings that we are able to act meaningfully in the world.

Therefore, the body is a part of reality that connects us with the horizon of possibility (the first fundamental motivation) and lived experiences, which allows us to “be alive” and participate in the flow of life (the second fundamental motivation). It is also a way of discovering our uniqueness, and our way of “being ourselves” (the third fundamental motivation). It is the means of production of a preferable future and of our agentive presence in the world (the fourth fundamental motivation). Frankl's dimensional ontology takes into account two levels of embodiment (the first and the fourth fundamental motivation), and leaves a gap at the second and the third levels of embodiment. All four levels of embodiment are influenced by culture and develop in the context of interpersonal relationships.

Although these levels are interrelated, it is useful to distinguish them for didactical and practical reasons. This model can be used in existential-analytical practices for conceptualizing individual cases and for planning the counseling process. It provides a map for ‘locating’ bodily concerns and disturbances, and helps people and healthcare professionals work out an appropriate psychotherapeutic direction. When working with clients, it is useful to investigate difficulties phenomenologically, such as which levels of embodiment are mostly disturbed, or which levels should be strengthened in order to overcome difficulties and develop a more satisfying embodiment.

### **Conclusion**

Taking Frankl's ‘dimensional ontology’ as a starting point, the complexity of human embodiment was revealed. It was shown that the concept of the body described in logotherapy is oversimplifying and reducing the diversity of embodiment to mere biology. In order to understand the complexity of embodiment, an existential-analytical model was presented. This model is based on the theory of the four fundamental motivations, as developed by Längle, and

the way in which the main existential themes forms human embodiment was shown. The four level of embodiment were discussed; the factuality of the body ('body as a body', according to Orbach); the experience of 'being alive'; identity and authenticity and way of constructing a preferable future.

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**Elena Stankovskaya, Ph.D,**

National Research University Higher School of Economics, email: [stankovskaya@hse.ru](mailto:stankovskaya@hse.ru)

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