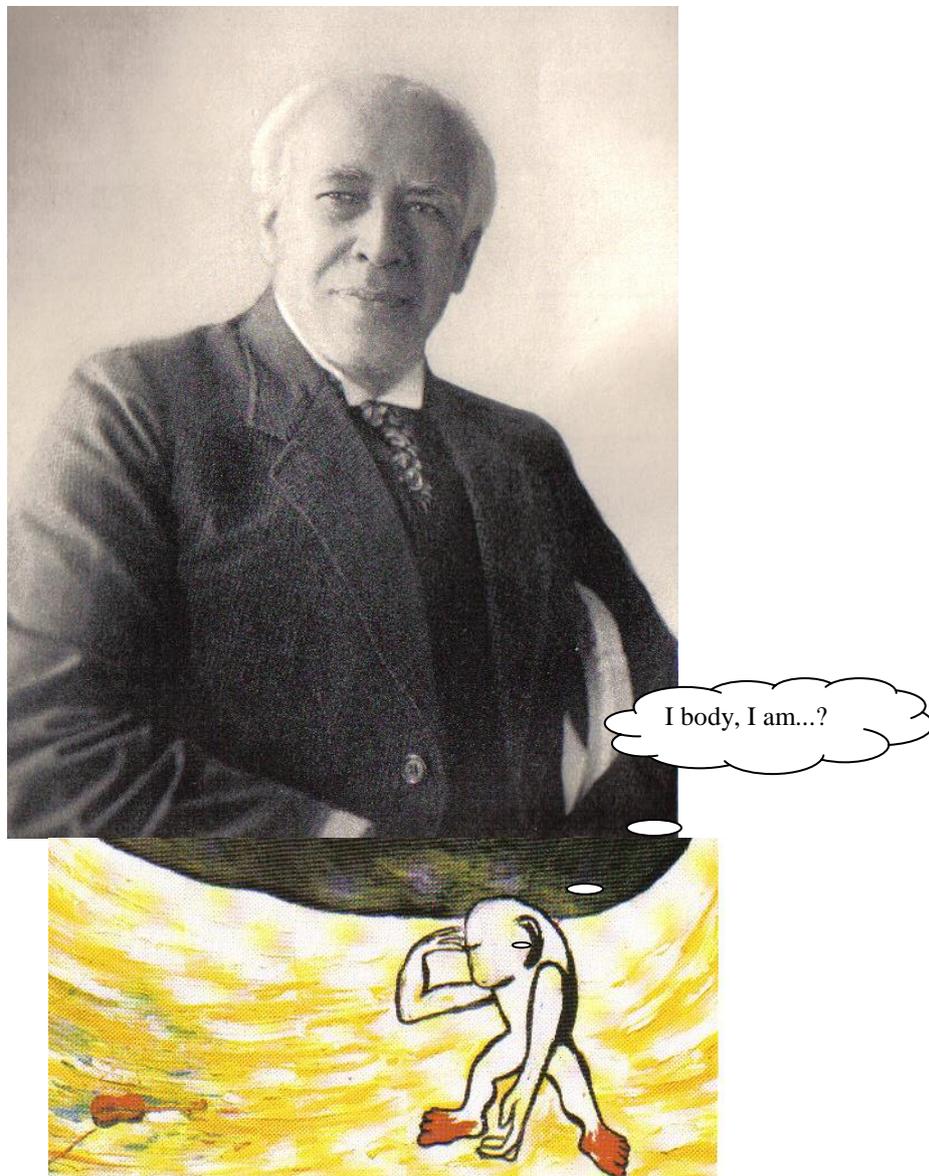


Stanislavski meets Embodied Cognition

How an acting practice illustrates a philosophical theory and reveals its limits.

afstudeerscriptie **Jurriën Rood**
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SYNOPSIS.

Varela's theory of *embodied cognition* is a promising new theory within the realm of philosophy of cognition. It bridges a notorious gap in epistemology: the Cartesian split between body and mind. This thesis puts Varela's bridge to the test, by comparing the theory with an existing human practice, from stage-acting as explored by Constantin Stanislavski. The latter has until now not been used for systematic investigation.

An inclusive definition of cognition is used, comprising all mental states (thoughts, feelings, beliefs, desires etc) - all that the mind does. Starting point is Varela's definition of cognition as 'embodied action', tying cognitive structures intrinsically to bodily action, presenting cognition as arising out of recurrent patterns of sensorimotor enactment. The working hypothesis is that if cognition is thus 'embodied' it should be possible to find the way back from this cognition to sensorimotor action.

Exactly this path, between mind and body, is extensively explored by the Stanislavski 'System'. This acting practice makes a systematic use of connections between body and mind, in a series of basic exercises. It provides a way of reaching certain forms of cognition, such as feelings, through bodily activity - not haphazardly, but systematic, controlled and repeatable. The System was established a hundred years ago and has not remained obscure; it has become the most influential practice in the theatre and then the cinema of the western world.

Following the claim of Embodied Cognition one expects a clear path to exist between cognition and the body. In a comparison with the System I present a way to verify this expectation empirically, in relation to human beings.

The research questions of the thesis are:

Can the System serve as an illustration of the theory of Embodied Cognition? And:

If so, can the acting practice also serve to show limits of the theory?

Or, put in a more epistemological vein: **Can the System show that cognition is embodied? And that all cognition is necessarily embodied?**

Chapter One presents a treatment of Varela's original philosophy of Embodied Cognition as well as an updated overview of recent research in this field. In addition a second philosophical theory is included presenting an even wider perspective on embodied cognition, as being embedded in social/cultural practices - presented by Schatzki, founded on Wittgenstein's legacy.

In Chapter Two the Stanislavski System is described, historically as well as practically. Emphasis lays on a series of seven basic exercises. They are described extensively, then stripped bare and schematized for comparative use.

In Chapter Three the actual comparison is made, between theory and practice. The result is a basic agreement as well as a limitation. A clear connection is found to exist between (some) cognition and the body. Offline cognition can be led back to bodily action via a certain form of mental imagery, forming a causally sufficient connection. But this causal connection is conditional on the possibility of a 'personal' mental image (Ip), meaning a particular case of a singular example. Cognition at the level of feelings and experience is thus found to be directly embodied. The first research question is thereby answered affirmatively. The found agreement is further explored in excursions into related sciences such as psychology and neuroscience, focusing on the central role of mental imagery.

Chapter Four focuses on the limitation found and the crucial role of language, again taking again a basic acting exercise as tool of investigation. Embodiment of cognition is found to be obstructed by a twofold process of generalization. First, ontogenetically, the private and fully embodied cognition of experience is generalized into public cognition, of knowledge. Secondly, within knowledge the process of abstraction has again a disembodied influence. Both generalizations are directly related to language. Language being the main tool in the socialization process, primal biological embodiment is found to be obstructed by its social embeddedness. Socialization diminishes the embodiment of cognition.

The embodiment theories under scrutiny both do apply, but only partly. Neither theory can account for all of cognition, nor for the gradual disembodiment of cognition taking place. Theories have to be combined and complemented by a hypothesis of gradual dis-embodiment through language. Suggestion is that only such a plurality of theories can give a full account of the relation of cognition and the body, due to the inclusiveness of the term cognition.

The second research question is thus answered affirmatively. And answering the epistemological version: the System practice shows that a part of cognition is necessarily embodied, but not all of it. It shows that higher cognition gets gradually disembodied. The strong claim of Embodied Cognition, that it has validity across the board, is refuted.

Findings about cognition are extrapolated to Mind, defined as the executer of cognition. Mind is found to consist of two modalities: An experiencing mind, fully embodied and closely tied to the body; carrier of feelings in the pre-linguistic sense – called EMind. And a worldly, socialized mind of feelings, thoughts, reason and higher cognition, largely developed as a result of language acquisition – SMind. In the ontogenetical development of humans and through the process of education SMind gains dominance over the experiencing modality of EMind. The latter can be regained by a conscious psychophysical procedure, as shown in the System exercises.

Philosophical consequences for our concept of Mind are discussed and illustrated in visual models: sketching the relations of Body, Mind and World in a basic triangle and showing the architecture of Mind arising out of the meeting of Body and World.

In conclusion results of this investigation are listed and some possibilities for further research are suggested.

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