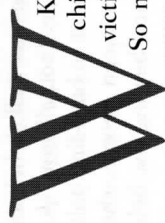


Against Exercise

MARK GREIF



ERE "IN THE PENAL COLONY" to be written today, Kafka could only be speaking of an exercise machine. Instead of the sentence to be tattooed on its victims, the machine would inscribe lines of numbers. So many calories, so many miles, so many watts, so many laps.

Modern exercise makes you acknowledge the machine operating inside yourself. Nothing can make you believe we harbor nostalgia for factory work but a modern gym. The lever of the die press no longer commands us at work. But with the gym we import vestiges of the leftover equipment of industry into our leisure. We leave the office, and put the conveyor belt under our feet, and run as if chased by devils. We willingly submit our legs to the mangle, and put our stiffening arms to the press.

It is crucial that the machines are simple. The inclined planes; pins, levers, pulleys, locks, winches, racks, and belts of the Nautilus and aerobic machines put earlier stages of technical progress at our disposal in miniature. The elements are visible and intelligible for our use but not dangerous to us. Displaced, neutralized, they are traces of a necessity that no longer need be met with forethought or ingenuity. A farmer once used a pulley, cable, and bar to lift his roofbeam; you now use the same means to work your lats.

Today, when we assume our brains are computers, the image of a machine-man, whether Descartes's or La Mettrie's,¹ has an old and venerable quality, like a yellowed poster on the infirmary wall. Blood pressure is hydraulics, strength is mechanics, nutrition is combustion, limbs are levers, joints are ball-in-socket. The exercise world does not make any notable conceptual declaration that we are mechanical men and women. We already were that, at least as far as our science is concerned. Rather it expresses a will, on the part of each and every individual, to discover and regulate the machine-like processes in his own body.

And we go to this hard labor with no immediate reward but our freedom to do it. Precisely this kind of freedom may be enough. Exercise machines offer you the superior mastery of subjecting your body to experimentation. We hide our reasons for undertaking this labor, and thoughtlessly substitute a new necessity. No one asks whether we want to drag our lives across a threshold into the kingdom of exercise.

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1. René Descartes (1596–1650), French philosopher who viewed humans as complex organic machines; Julien Offray de La Mettrie (1709–1751), French physician, philosopher, and author of *L'Homme machine* (*Machine Man*), which provided simple mechanistic explanations for much human behavior.

Exercise is no choice. It comes to us as an emissary from the realm of biological processes. It falls under the jurisdiction of the obligations of life itself, which only the self-destructive neglect. Our controversial future is supposed to depend on engineered genes, brain scans, neuroscience, laser beams. About those things we have loud, public, sterile debates, while the real historic changes are accomplished on a gym's vinyl mats, to the sound of a flywheel and a ratcheted inclined plane.

In the gym you witness people engaging in a basic biological process of self-regulation. All of its related activities reside in the private realm. A question, then, is why exercise doesn't stay private. It could have belonged at home with other processes it resembles: eating, sleeping, defecating, cleaning, grooming, and masturbating.

Exerciser, what do you see in the mirrored gym wall? You make the faces associated with pain, with tears, with orgasm, with the sort of exertion that would call others to your immediate aid. But you do not hide your face. You groan as if pressing on your bowels. You repeat grim labors as if mopping the floor. You huff and you shout and strain. You appear in tight yet shapeless Lycra costumes. These garments reveal the shape of the genitals and the mashed and banded breasts to others' eyes, without acknowledging the lure of sex.

Though we get our word "gymnasium" from the Greeks, our modern gym is not in their spirit. Athletics in the ancient institution were public and agonistic. They consisted of the training of boys for public contests. The gymnasium was closest to what we know as a boxing gym, with the difference that it was also the place adult men gathered to admire the most beautiful boys and, in the Greek fashion, sexually mentor them. It was the preeminent place to promote the systematic education of the young, and for adults to carry on casual debates among themselves, modeling the intellectual sociability, separated from overt politics, that is the origin of Western philosophy. Socrates spent most of his time in gymnasias. Aristotle began his philosophical school in the covered walkway of a gymnasium.

The Socratic and Peripatetic methods could find little support in a modern gym. What we moderns do there belongs to mute privacy. The Greeks put their genuinely private acts into a location, an *oikos*, the household. To the household belonged all the acts that sustained bare biological life. That included the labor of keeping up a habitation and a body, growing food and eating it, bearing children and feeding them. Hannah Arendt² interpreted this strong Greek distinction of the household from the public sphere as a symbol of a general truth, that it is necessary to keep the acts that sustain naked life away from others' observation. A hidden sphere, free from scrutiny, provides

2. German-American political philosopher (1906–1975) who wrote *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), *The Human Condition* (1958), and *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963); for a selection from the last, see the "History" section.

the foundation for a public person—someone sure enough in his privacy to take the drastic risks of public life, to think, to speak against others' wills, to choose, with utter independence. In privacy, alone with one's family, the dominating necessity and speechless appetites could be gratified in the nonthought and ache of staying alive.

Our gym is better named a "health club," except that it is no club for equal meetings of members. It is the atomized space in which one does formerly private things, before others' eyes, with the lonely solitude of a body acting as if it were still in private. One tries out these contortions to undo and remake a private self; and if the watching others aren't entitled to approve, some imagined aggregate "other" does. Modern gym exercise moves biology into the nonsocial company of strangers. You are supposed to coexist but not look closely, wipe down the metal of handlebars and rubber of mats as if you had not left a trace. As in the elevator, you are expected to face forward.

It is like a punishment for our liberation. The most onerous forms of necessity, the struggle for food, against disease, always by means of hard labor, have been overcome. It might have been naive to think the new human freedom would push us toward a society of public pursuits, like Periclean Athens, or of simple delight in what exists, as in Eden. But the true payoff of a society that chooses to make private freedoms and private leisures its main substance has been much more unexpected. This payoff is a set of forms of bodily self-regulation that drag the last vestiges of biological life into the light as a social attraction.

The only truly essential pieces of equipment in modern exercise are numbers. Whether at the gym or on the running path, rudimentary calculation is the fundamental technology. As the weights that one lifts are counted, so are distances run, time exercised, heart rates elevated.

A simple negative test of whether an activity is modern exercise is to ask whether it could be done meaningfully without counting or measuring it. (In sports, numbers are used differently; there, scores are a way of recording competition in a social encounter.) Forms of exercise that do away with mechanical equipment, as running does, cannot do away with this.

In exercise one gets a sense of one's body as a collection of numbers representing capabilities. The other location where an individual's numbers attain such talismanic status is the doctor's office. There is a certain seamlessness between all the places where exercise is done and the sites where people are tested for illnesses, undergo repairs, and die. In the doctor's office, the blood lab, and the hospital, you are at the mercy of counting experts. A lab technician in a white coat takes a sample of blood. A nurse tightens a cuff on your arm, links you to an EKG, takes the basic measurements of your height and weight—never to your satisfaction. She rewards you with the obvious numbers for blood pressure, body fat ratio, height, and weight. The clipboard with your numbers is passed. At last the doctor takes his seat, a mechanic who wears the white robe of an angel and is as arrogant as a boss. In specialist language, exacerbating your dread and expectation, you may learn your numbers for cho-

lesterol (two types), your white cells, your iron, immunities, urinalysis, and so forth. He hardly needs to remind you that these numbers correlate with your chances of survival.

How do we acquire the courage to exist as a set of numbers? Turning to the gym or the track, you gain the anxious freedom to count yourself. What a relief it can be. Here are numbers you can change. You make the exercises into trials you perform upon matter within reach, the exterior armor of your fat and muscle. You are assured these numbers, too, and not only the black marks in the doctor's files, will correspond to how long you have to live. With willpower and sufficient discipline, that is, the straitening of yourself to a rule, you will be changed.

The gym resembles a voluntary hospital. Its staff members are also its patients. Some machines put you in a traction you can escape, while others undo the imprisonment of a respirator, cueing you to pump your lungs yourself and tracking your heart rate on a display. Aided even by a love that can develop for your pains, this self-testing becomes second nature.

The curious compilation of numbers that you are becomes an aspect of your freedom, sometimes the most important, even more preoccupying than your thoughts or dreams. You discover what high numbers you can become, and how immortal. For you, high roller, will live forever. You are eternally maintained.

The justification for the total scope of the responsibility to exercise is health. A further extension of the counting faculty of exercise gives a precise economic character to health. It determines the anticipated numbers for the days and hours of one's life.

Today we really can preserve ourselves for a much longer time. The means of preservation are reliable and cheap. The haste to live one's mortal life diminishes. The temptation toward perpetual preservation grows. We preserve the living corpse in an optimal state, not that we may do something with it, but for its own good feelings of eternal fitness, confidence, and safety. We hoard our capital to earn interest, and subsist each day on crusts of bread. But no one will inherit our good health after we've gone. The hours of life-maintenance vanish with the person.

The person who does not exercise, in our current conception, is a slow suicide. He fails to take responsibility for his life. He doesn't labor strenuously to forestall his death. Therefore we begin to think he causes it.

It may be a comfort to remember when one of your parents' acquaintances dies that he did not eat well or failed to take up running. The nonexerciser is lumped with other unfortunates whom we socially discount. Their lives are worth a percentage of our own, through their own neglect. Their value is compromised by the failure to assure the fullest term of possible physical existence. The nonexerciser joins all the unfit: the slow, the elderly, the poor, and the hopeless. "Don't you want to live?" we say. No answer of theirs could satisfy us.

Conceive of a society in which it was believed that the senses could be used up. Eyesight worsened the more vivid sights you saw. Hearing worsened

the more intense sounds you heard. It would be inevitable that such a conception would bleed into people's whole pattern of life, changing the way they spent their days. Would they use up their powers on the most saturated colors, listening to the most intoxicating sounds? Or might its members refuse to move, eyes shut, ears covered, nursing the remaining reserves of sensation? We, too, believe our daily lives are not being lived but eaten up by age. And we spend our time desperately. From the desperate materialist gratifications of a hedonistic society, commanding immediate comfort and happiness, we recoil to the desperate economics of health, and chase a longer span of happinesses deferred, and comforts delayed, by disposing of the better portion of our lives in life preservation.

Exercise does make you, as a statistical person, part of different aggregate categories that die with less frequency at successive ages. It furnishes a gain in odds. This is the main public rationale for those billions of man- and woman-hours in the gym. The truth, however, is also that being healthy makes you feel radically different. For a segment of its most ardent practitioners, exercise in its contemporary form is largely a quest for certain states of feeling. A more familiar phenomenon than the young person who is unhappy physically from never exercising is the young exerciser who suffers from missing one or two days of exercise. The most common phenomenon may be the individual who judges, in his own mind if not out loud, the total healthiness of his state at each moment based on what he ate, what he drank, how much he exercised, when, with what feelings as he was doing it, and with what relation to the new recommendation or warning he just heard on the news hour's health report. One feels healthier even when the body doesn't feel discernably different. Or the body does begin to feel different—lighter, stronger, more efficient, less toxic—in ways that exceed the possible consequences of the exercises performed. This may be a more important psychic medicalization of human life than anything a doctor can do with his tests.

The less respectable but even more powerful justification for day-to-day exercise is thinness. It involves the disciplining of a depraved will rather than the righteous responsibility to maintain the health of the body-machine and its fund of capital.

Women strip their bodies of layers of fat to reveal a shape without its normal excess of flesh. Despite the new emphasis on female athleticism, the task of the woman exerciser remains one of emaciation. Men thin themselves too, but more importantly bloat particular muscles, swelling the major clusters in the biceps, chest, and thighs. They awaken an incipient musculature that no work or normal activity could bring out in toto. Theirs is a task of expansion and discovery. Women's emaciation is a source for feminine eye-rolling and rueful nicknames: the "social x-ray," the actress as skin and bones. Men's proud expansion and discovery of six muscles of the lower abdomen, reminiscent of an insect's segmented exoskeleton, likewise become a byword and a joke: the "six-pack," bringing exercise together with the masculinity of drinking.

Unlike the health model, which seems to make a continuous gain on mor-

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talities, thinness and muscle expansion operate in a cruel economy of accelerated loss. Mortality began when the first man and woman left the Garden. Everyone has to die, but no one has to shape a physique, and once body altering begins, it is more implacable than death. Every exerciser knows that the body's propensity to put on weight is the physical expression of a moral fall. Every exerciser knows that the tendency of the body to become soft when it is comfortable or at rest, instead of staying perpetually hard, is a failure of discipline. This is the taste of our new Tree of Knowledge. In our era of abundance, we find that nutrition makes one fat rather than well fed, pleasures make one flabby rather than content, and only anorexics have the willpower to stop eating and die.

Exercise means something other than health to a young person who conceives sexual desirability as the truth about herself most worth defending. And youth is becoming permanent in the demand that adults keep up an outward show of juvenile sexuality. The body becomes the location of sexiness, rather than clothes or wit or charisma. This is less true for society—which values personality still—than for the exerciser herself, who imagines an audience that doesn't exist. Sadder of all is the belief that an improved body will bestow bliss on the unloved.

The shock troops of modern exercise are women just past the college years. Only recently the beneficiary of a sexually mature body, and among our culture's few possessors by native right of the reduced body type we prefer—which we daily prefer more openly, more vehemently—the girl of twenty-two is a paradoxical figure as an exemplar of exercise. She is not yet among the discounted. But she knows her destiny. She starts immediately to get ahead in the race to preserve a form that must never exceed the barest minimum of flesh. A refreshing honesty can exist among exercisers who are not yet caught up in the doctrine of health. The rising incidence of smoking among young women, which worries public-health advocates, is coincident with the rising incidence of gym exercise, which doesn't. While the cigarette suppresses appetite (rebelliously), the StairMaster attacks calories (obediently). Each can become intensely, erotically pleasurable, and neither is really meant for health or longevity.

The doctrine of thinness introduces a radical fantasy of exercise down to the bone. It admits the dream of a body unencumbered by any excess of corporeality. Thanatos enters through the door opened by Eros, and exercise flirts with a will to annihilate the unattractive body rather than to preserve its longevity. Without an accompanying ideology of health, thinness would in fact liquidate all restraints, generating a death's-head vision of exercise. Health curiously returns as the only brake on a practice that otherwise would become a kind of naked aggression against the body.

With health in place, the aggression is more likely to be carried on psychically. It pools, then starts an undercurrent of hatred for this corrupt human form that continually undoes the labor you invest in it. One hundred twenty pounds of one's own flesh starts to seem like the Sisyphian boulder. Yet the bitterness of watching your body undo your work is restrained by a curious compensation that Sisyphus did not know. If the hated body is the scene of a

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battle, a certain pleasure still emerges from the unending struggle, and in a hedonistic order divided against its own soft luxuries, at least this pleasure, if no other, can be made to go on forever.

An enigma of exercise is the proselytizing urge that comes with it. Exercisers are always eager for everyone else to share their experience. Why must others exercise if one person does?

No one who plays baseball or hockey demands that everyone else play the sport. Sports are social. Their victories become visible in the temporary public arrangements of a game. Perhaps accomplishments recognized by others in the act of their occurrence can be left alone. The gym-goer, on the other hand, is a solitary evangelist. He is continually knocking on your door to get you to recognize the power that will not give him peace. You, too, must exercise. Even as he worries for your salvation, nevertheless he has the gleam of someone who is ahead of you already, one chosen by God.

Running is most insidious because of its way of taking proselytizing out of the gym. It is a direct invasion of public space. It lays the counting, the pacing, the controlled frenzy, the familiar undergarment-outergarments and skeletal look, on top of the ordinary practice of an outdoor walk. One thing that can be said for a gym is that an implied contract links everyone who works out in its mirrored and pungent hangar. All consent to undertake separate exertions and hide any mutual regard, as in a well-ordered masturbatorium. The gym is in this sense more polite than the narrow riverside, street, or nature path, where ever runners take over shared places for themselves. With his speed and narcissistic intensity the runner corrupts the space of walking, thinking, talking, and everyday contact. He jostles the idler out of his reverie. He races between pedestrians in conversation. The runner can oppose sociability and solitude by publicly sweating on them.

No doubt the unshareability of exercise stimulates an unusual kind of loneliness.

When exercise does become truly shared and mutually visible, as in the aerobics that come close to dance, or the hardcore body-building that is always erotic and fraternal, it nears sport or art and starts to reverse itself. When exercise is done in a private home, or in untenanted landscapes, or without formal method, apparatus, or counting, it recovers certain eccentric freedoms of private techniques of the self.

However, the pure category of modern exercise is concerned with neither the creative process of reproduction (as in activities-in-common) nor the pure discoveries of solitude (as in private eccentricity). It pursues an idea of replication. Replication in exercise recreates the shape and capabilities of others in the material of your own body, without new invention and without exchange with others or crossing over of material between selves.

It is a puzzling question, in fact, whether "you" and "your body" are the same in exercise. If on the one hand exercise seems strongly to identify exercisers with their bodies, by putting them to shared labor, on the other hand it seems to estrange them from the bodies they must care for and manage.

Contestation
Identity

Replication

Where does "fitness" actually reside? It seems to be deep inside you; yet that inside has risen to a changeable surface. And this surface is no longer one you can take off, as you did a costume in earlier methods of improving your allure.

Fashion historians point out that women freed themselves from corsets worn externally, only to make an internal corset, as they toned the muscles of the abdomen and chest, and dieted and exercised to burn away permanently the well-fed body that whalebone stays temporarily restrained. Though the exerciser acts on his self, this self becomes ever more identified with the visible surface. Though he works on his body, replication makes it ever more, so to speak, anybody.

Does this critique imply a hatred of the body? On the contrary. The ethos of gym exercise annihilates the margin of safety that humans have when they relate to their own bodies. Men and women seem more ashamed of their own actual bodies in the present environment of biological exposure than in a pre-gym past. An era of exercise has brought more obsession and self-hatred rather than less.

A feminist worry becomes important. It is certainly possible to make people used to displaying to others' eyes the biological processes of transformation. And this has been, at times, the aim of feminists, who intended to attack a patriarchy that vilified the natural body or that made biological processes a source of shame and inferiority. But the forms of exposure that have recently arisen are not in line with feminist liberation of the unconditioned body.

Patriarchy made biology a negative spectacle, a filth that had to be hidden. The ethos of exercise makes it a positive spectacle, a competitive fascination that must be revealed. The rhetoric of "loving the body" can thus be misused. With the extension of the cliché that one should "not be ashamed" of the body, people are less able to defend themselves against the prospect that their actual bodies, and biological processes, may be manifest at every moment, in new states of disciplining neither public nor private. It becomes a retrogression, a moral failing, in these people to wish to defend against exposure, or to withdraw their health, bodies, arousal, and self-regulation from the social scene, as if privacy of this kind were mere prudery or repression.

Once subjected to this socialization of biological processes, the body suffers a new humiliation no longer rooted in the distinctions between the revealed and the hidden, the natural and the shameful, the sexual ideal and the physical actuality, but in the deeper crime of merely existing as the unregulated, the unshaped, the unsexy, the "unfit."

Our practices are turning us inside out. Our hidden flesh becomes our public front. The private medical truth of bodily health becomes our psychic self-regard. Action in public before strangers and acquaintances has disappeared from the lived experience of the citizen and been replaced by exercise in public, as speech gives way to biological spectacle.

Your exercise confers superiority in two contests, one of longevity and the other of sex. Facing mortality, the gym-goer believes himself an agent of

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health—whereas he makes himself a more perfect patient. Facing the sexual struggle, the gym-goer labors to attain a positive advantage, which spurs an ever-receding horizon of further competition.

The technical capabilities of gym exercise in fact drive social ideals and demands. The exerciser conforms, in our era's most virulent practice of conformism. But exercise itself pushes medicine and sexual allure toward further extremes. The feedback does not stabilize the system but radicalizes it, year by year. Only in a gym culture does overweight become the "second leading cause of death" (as the news recently reported) rather than a correlation, a relative measure, which positively covaries with the heart attacks, the cancers, the organ failures, and final illnesses that were formerly our killers. Only in a gym culture do physical traits that were formerly considered repellent become marks of sexual superiority. (We are hot now for the annihilation by exercise and dieting of once voluptuous feminine flesh, watching it be starved away in natural form and selectively replaced with breast implants, collagen injections, buttock lifts. We've learned to be aroused by the ripped, vein-popping muscles that make Incredible Hulks of men who actually push papers.) Because health and sex are the places we demand our truth today, newly minted ideals must be promulgated as discoveries of medical science or revelations of permanent, evolutionary human desires.

The consequences are not only the flooding of consciousness with a numbed and regulated body or the distraction from living that comes with endless life-maintenance, but the liquidation of the last untouched spheres of privacy, such that biological life itself becomes a spectacle.

You are condemned. You are condemned. You are condemned." This is the chant the machines make with their grinding rhythm inside the roar of the gym floor. Once upon a time, the authority of health, and the display of our bodies and biological processes, seemed benign, even liberating. We were going to overcome illness, we were going to exorcise the prudish Victorians. But our arrows were turned from their targets, and some of them punctured our privacy.

The thinness we strive for becomes spiritual. This is not the future we wanted. That prickling beneath the exerciser's skin as he steps off the treadmill is only his new self, his reduced existence, scratching the truth of who he is now, from the inside out.

QUESTIONS

1. Were you surprised by the arguments Greif uses against exercise? List some arguments he has left out. Why do you think he has omitted these arguments?
2. Describe some other contemporary obsessions that could be treated in a similarly contrarian essay entitled "Against ____." What techniques might you adapt from Greif for your essay?
3. Write an essay called "For Exercise," arguing against Greif's piece.

Motherhood: Who Needs It?

BETTY ROLLIN

OTHERHOOD IS in trouble, and it ought to be. The rude question is long overdue: Who needs it? The answer used to be (1) society and (2) women. But now, with the impending horrors of overpopulation, society desperately *doesn't* need it. And women don't need it either. Thanks to the Motherhood Myth—the idea that having babies is something that all normal women instinctively want and need and will enjoy doing—they just *think* they do.

The notion that the maternal wish and the activity of mothering are instinctive or biologically predestined is baloney. Try asking most sociologists, psychologists, psychoanalysts, biologists—many of whom are mothers—about motherhood being instinctive: it's like asking department store president their Santa Clauses are real. "Motherhood—instinctive?" shouts distinguished sociologist/author Dr. Jessie Bernard. "Biological destiny? Forget biology! We're biology, people would die from not doing it."

"Women don't need to be mothers any more than they need spaghetti," says Dr. Richard Rabkin, a New York psychiatrist. "But if you're in a world where everyone is eating spaghetti, thinking they need it and want it, you think so too. Romance has really contaminated science. So-called instincts have to do with stimulation. They are not things that well up inside of you."

"When a woman says with feeling that she craved her baby from within, she is putting into biological language what is psychological," says University of Michigan psychoanalyst and motherhood-researcher Dr. Frederick Wertheim. "There are no instincts," says Dr. William Goode, president-elect of the American Sociological Association. "There are reflexes, like eye-blinking, and drive like sex. There is no innate drive for children. Otherwise, the enormous natural pressures that there are to reproduce wouldn't exist. There are no natural pressures to sell you on getting your hand out of the fire."

There are, to be sure, biologists and others who go on about biological destiny, that is, the innate or instinctive goal of motherhood. (At the turn of the century, even good old capitalism was explained by a theorist as "the instinct of acquisitiveness.") And many psychoanalysts will hold the Freudian view that women feel so rotten about not having a penis that they are necessarily propelled into the child-wish to replace the missing organ. Psychologists also make much of the psychological need to repeat what one's parents the same sex has done. Since every woman has a mother, it is considered normal to wish to imitate one's mother by being a mother.

There is, surely, a wish to pass on love if one has received it, but to women must pass it on in the same way is like insisting that every man's father is a gardener has to be a gardener. One dissenting psychoanalyst simply, "There is a wish to comply with one's biology, yes, but we needn't."

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