I Run, Therefore I Am

The Human Origin - a philosophical perspective on running

Words: Tjeerd Zwinkels
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Do humans distinguish themselves from the rest of the animals by defining themselves as human? When humans try to answer the question of who or what they are, they split off a part of themselves: their animality. Humans, according to Aristotle, are the zoon logon echon, the living being that possesses logos (language and reason), which in Latin became the animal rationale, the rational animal. In my view, it is the "currens animal rationale," the running rational animal.

Humans were designed to run, a lot. The evolution from ape to human gave us longer legs, we lost our fur, and we have the best developed heat regulation system of the whole animal kingdom which enables us to run for extremely long distances, even in hot conditions. What we know as runner's high is designed to make us feel good, while we're actually suffering immensely when, for example, we're fleeing from danger.

The purpose of running has always been survival. The release of endorphins prevents us from feeling the strain on our muscles. Endorphins suppress pain and stress, creating more space for a sense of happiness. Besides that feeling of happiness, running also gives us meaning and purpose because it's our evolutionary origin. Our senses are on edge, we become more creative, and we are intellectually more alert. We have partly abandoned this legacy through our highly technological culture. Is our well-being purely biological after all? Fitness offers many advantages. The industrial revolution and all the luxurious high-tech gadgets of modern times have not helped us stay fit. Since the advent of agriculture, and certainly since the industrialisation, humans have become increasingly less active.

I believe much of the unease in contemporary culture stems from the denial of our evolutionary past. Discomfort and malaise lead to a sense of futility and cynicism. I advocate for daily running, because running best connects us with the primal form of humanity: the running human.

Is there an existential difference between humans and all other animals? Sartre said, on the one hand, there is being, that is what it is: the mode of existence of a thing that has no choice; and on the other hand, there is the non-existence: human existence, which does not coincide with what it is. The glasses I'm currently wearing were designed by humans as being just that, glasses. To be precise, they were reportedly designed by Salvino d'Armate in 1284. The essence of the object is a tool that allows me to see the letters on my screen better while writing this article and nothing more, nothing less, but the fact that I sit here for hours typing letters doesn't make me a writer. I'm a human who writes, but I can be so much more. What about a wolf, a sheep, a penguin? Is the penguin essentially just a penguin, or is it also an animal that can be more than a walking bird? Sartre stated:

"If the human mode of being consists in not merging with itself, then humanity is also called to maintain that mode of being. It must remain human, therefore free, and not be tempted to regress to the mode of existence of a thing that has no freedom and therefore handed down to the forces of nature."

A person should never say that they are "just the way they are," that they have no choice, that society expects this or that of them and they shouldn't go against it. In other words, that it's all just a matter of fate.

When I say that humans are essentially runners, does this mean we're doomed to run? The answer is no, but herein lies the problem. I present you the aphorism of the lion and the antelope:

Every morning in Africa, an antelope wakes up. It knows it must outrun the fastest lion, or it will be killed. Every morning in Africa, a lion wakes up. It knows it must run faster than the slowest antelope, or it will starve.

It doesn't matter whether you're the lion or the antelope, when the sun comes up, you'd better run. The lion and the antelope know exactly what to do, but humans, due to the lack of danger and necessity, have lost their purpose in movement. So humans have chosen to be something other than ultrarunners. They've taken the liberty of reorganising their lives, but in the meantime, they're still stuck with a body designed for running. Like a Ferrari that you only drive in urban areas. A race car is designed for fast driving, otherwise the engine will falter. The car won't get enough heat, the fumes won't escape, parts won't get enough lubrication, carbon deposits will form on the exhaust pipe, catalytic converters won't reach operating temperatures, turbos won't reach full speed, condensation will build up on the brake pads, moisture in fluids will build up, and clutch wear will occur. Day 1 to 800 will be alright, but then problems start to emerge. Exercise is essential. For the Ferrari, but also for the human body. Every machine is meant to be used for what it was designed for; that's what keeps it healthy. I once owned a beautiful old Volkswagen van from the early 1970s (a Volkswagen T2). With its 45 hp, it was anything but a race car, but it ran best when used intensively. If I let it stand in the garage for a month, it would let me stand.

The Volkswagen and the Ferrari are just cars, that's what they are. They are a thing that has no choice of being something else, and that requires a certain level of treatment. Humans do have the choice to be something other than just the driver of that thing, but the vehicle that is our body remains a human body that also requires a certain level of maintenance. That doesn't change when a marathon runner chooses to be a race car driver.

For me, trail running is the ultimate freedom. Being one with your body combined with being one with nature is the greatest appeal of running on trails. When the distance becomes really long, the mental aspect also fascinates me enormously. How you can connect with yourself to get so much more out of your body than you initially thought that was possible. With my philosophical background, I ponder endlessly about the relationship between body and mind, and therefore also about the influence of (endurance) sports on the brain. I am an existentialist, which means that I, and only I, not something external, should give meaning to my life in an otherwise meaningless existence. Completely losing myself in sports is, for me personally, one of the ways to give meaning to my life. Endless running without a destination seems pointless at first, but it gives so much more than just physical well-being. French philosopher Albert Camus tried to show us by using "The Myth of Sisyphus," that despite being condemned to endlessly push a rock up a mountain, Sisyphus was still happy. Carrying out his task made him proud.

As stated, it's been proven that any kind of exercise is good for you. Besides releasing 'happy hormones', exercise also stimulates the formation of essential chemical connections in the brain. Exercise stimulates the production of new brain cells and strengthens the connections between them. Exercise improves the functioning of neurotransmitters in your brain, it also increases the amount of nutrients and neurotransmitters. This improves communication between brain cells, something that also occurs when making music or expressing creativity in any other way. The mind is often wrongly considered separate from the body. Plato believed the mind was its "true self," and Descartes agreed, leading to the famous statement: "I think, therefore I am." This "dualism," as we call it in philosophy, can undermine the appeal of physical exercise.

The human body is designed to run, to flee from danger. However, we've come to believe that comfort and convenience are the key to happiness. Large, stately homes, luxury cars with heated seats and yet, these very materialistic things don't seem to truly make us happy. I wonder when we lost sight of our origin and our purpose? Since we get our food almost thrown at us, the balance has been completely lost. These days, we simply walk into a grocery store where we can park our car, or at best, our electric bike in front of the store, and indulge ourselves the strangest adaptations of what we once called food. By "losing the balance," I mean that calorie intake is often disproportionate to what the average person burns in a day. As a result, we have become both mentally and physically weaker. Are we further away from becoming Nietzsche's 'Superman' than ever?

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Tjeerd is a Dutch philosopher and ultrarunner.