

THE 'BODY' IN JAIL: EXPERIENCES, MEANINGS AND IDENTITY

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The modern idea of imprisonment in the West seems to have intentionally portrayed corporal punishment as threatening. It was the foundation and the fulcrum of the principle of 'humanisation' of prisons. At the basis of this principle there is a common dichotomy: 'mind' and 'body' as two distinct things. This occurs so frequently that it might be thought that suffering of the mind (or soul) due to the deprivation of liberty is not comparable to the suffering of the flesh, to physical harm. Can there be, however, an obvious comparison? Behind a seemingly unbloody appearance, assuming a monist rather than dualist point of view, detentive punishment can take on a very different aspect. People who have gone through this experience speak of it as one which involves the person in their entirety and which can be described in the domains of both language and knowledge, mental and physical. "Life changes here" is an expression which could become global: people speak of this change and often this loss of self, as also being in the body and in the modifications of the senses.

Keywords: *monism, prison, body, constructivism, meaning*

INTRODUCTION

This paper is the result of seven years working in two male prisons in Venice, in particular the work dedicated to drug addicts, alcoholics and HIV positive men on the island of Guidecca. I was the clinical psychologist in these prisons and I had the opportunity to meet and speak with many people; prisoners representative of suffering humanity.

On a daily basis I was involved with the contradictory implications of an old idea, born of mind-body dualism: that mental punishment (deprivation of liberty) was in no way linked to corporal punishment. An idea which is inextricably political and 'scientific'. My colleagues mostly treated physical suffering – if not in a purely physical mode – as 'secondary effects'. Effects only explainable in terms of a psychosomatic vision, or at times simply unexplainable.¹ Under no circumstances were these attempts to explain or comprehend relevant to the meanings that the prisoners gave to their experience, to their own world, to others and to themselves.

¹ At best, 'mind' and 'body' experiences were first separated and only then, temporary recomposed.

In any case, this approach seemed unsatisfactory to me and was the source of long and interesting discussions with my colleagues. To me, imprisonment constituted a *global experience*, a unique narrative fabric that I perceived only artificially dichotomized in mind and body. I wanted to grasp the unitary sense, without contradictions. To attempt this, I needed a rigorous monist conceptual framework. Therefore, firstly I needed to clarify the epistemological assumptions with which I intended to look at these phenomena. Only then would I be able to understand the embodied experiences of the prisoners that I met.

This paper has two inter-related parts: the first, theoretic and abstract, the second more concrete and lived. Only the awareness of these new theoretical 'glasses' would have allowed me to see what I saw.

CONSTRUCTIVIST MONISM

Which Monism?

Therefore let us try to clarify the assumptions on which the following considerations will find grounding and along which they will develop. We

must start from the contraposition between dualism and monism.

Dualism, in which we are immersed daily on a cultural level, is clear to us, but the same cannot be said for monism. In my opinion, we can distinguish three epistemologically different forms of monism:

- *Reductionist monism*, which acknowledges one only substance form, confining the spirit to matter, or, vice versa, matter to the spirit. This is the monism, for example, of one who tries to reduce emotions, thoughts and 'mental disturbances' to the elements or the structures of our central nervous system. It is also the spiritualistic monism of one who holds that our bodily appearance is nothing but an emanation of the spirit.
- *Naive monism*, of the spinozistic matrix, according to which mind and matter are two modes of a single substance (Spinoza, 1677). This kind of monism is contradictory and hardly plausible since it reasserts in its terms what it apparently denies. In other words, it is the monism of the so-called 'psychosomatic theories', already originally prisoner of language, where the sustained unit splits and nullifies in the compound label 'psycho – somatic'. It is these theories in which an explicit relationship between mind and body is implicit: for example, psoriasis is *caused* by a psychological problem. It is precisely such a relationship which reaffirms a dualism which it only apparently denies.
- *Constructivist monism*, for which reality is not independent of the observer and thus is not a 'whole' of objects or 'phenomena' existing outside the self, whether defined in physical or mental terms, but a whole of effected discriminations, i.e. constructs.

I think it is worth examining this last form of monism more closely.

Monism, Constructivism and Knowledge

The argument that our knowledge of reality is an interpretation continuously liable to revisions

was, and still is, one with deep implications for our conception of knowledge. The consideration that everyone can see only through their own 'glasses' is the door through which realism is questioned and with it the presumed *factual reality* of the body as well as of the mind.

At this point, the next step toward radical or hermeneutic constructivism is the closing of another door, that linking the object and the subject of knowledge through information flow. Closing this door, with a seeming paradox, enables us to overcome and dissolve the historical dichotomy between object and subject, mind and body, realism and idealism; as it opens an even wider door.

Closed Systems and Environment

To conceive a living system as a closed system unreachable by any information from the environment means to consider this system as the expression of the structure of its connections (Maturana & Varela, 1984). It is this structure itself which determines its functioning, and not the environmental information. Therefore, a turn-around of what we are used to thinking takes place: the environment does not determine the specificity of the changes or their direction, but it is specified - constructed - by the system itself. Only if the environment is significant to the system can it start 'perturbations'. The knowledge process, in which life identifies itself, no longer refers to the entry of information. It becomes self-referential: from the entry of information, we move on to the construction of meaning. However, this construction does not take place inside an isolated monad, rather in a linguistic domain generated from and within social interactions. Once again, our idea of what both knowledge and life are changes.

Construct the Mind, Construct the Body

In what terms can we then deal with the mind and the 'body'? At this point, for instance, and given some preliminary remarks, it is clear that it makes no sense to speak of knowledge as the representation of reality, or of the body as an object distinct from the mind. In short, the stress is on the observer and on his being an active constructor of meanings, and who, as such, specifies distinctions. On the other hand, to distinguish is to

specify the properties of what we have distinguished. Therefore, there is a distinction among phenomenal domains because I can distinguish a unit from its constituent elements. For example, I can distinguish a coin from the atoms (elements) it is composed of: the phenomenal domain where a coin 'lives' is not the one where atoms make sense. They are phenomenal domains in a reciprocal relationship of specification that do not intersect at all. Will I ever be able to explain how I use my money in terms of nuclear physics? Could I ever explain the smiles of my children in terms of contraction of facial muscles?

Much in the same way, what we specify - or construct - as 'mind' corresponds to what we do as a global whole in a phenomenal domain that is different and doesn't intersect with what occurs in the physical phenomenal domain; i.e. in the domain of the system components. In other words, the smile and the physiology at the base of the contraction of the facial muscles are not in an explicative relationship among themselves. The coin and its atoms, the smile and the muscular physiology, like the mind and the body are distinctions the observer generates. These distinctions, or better, these discrimination units - to put it as George Kelly (1955) did - will be organised in what we can define as a *system of personal constructs*. We have moved from a universe of 'facts' to one of 'constructs'.

In this conception, our mind is the possibility that we - and all living beings - have to become the object of our knowledge; a possibility resulting from our interaction with others and, circularly, enables us to construct this interaction.

Identity and Co-Generation of Change

We are neither physical nor mental systems; more generally, we are systems in relation to one another. This is a fully biological as well as a mental concept; where 'biological' and 'mental' are not terms of the same antinomy but the recognition of the deeply biological nature of what we usually construct as 'mind' and of the deeply mental - systemic, ecological - nature of what we usually construct as biological. So, if the dichotomy mind vs. body is a construct and not a fact, why should I wonder what the interrelation between physical and psychological events is? It

would be like wondering what the interrelation between the atomic structure of the coin is and the way I spend it, or at the same time, even question myself about the relationship that exists between a caress and the lever system that governs the movement of the bones of my arm.

I am neither corporeal nor mental, but I can be constructed in both ways. Likewise, my preservation processes, those now more usefully described with a physiological language are not endowed with either a mental or a physical nature. Thus, I can describe myself: the same system of personal constructs, within different knowledge domains. We are the ones changing as systems - structures - and this change can be described in *both* mental and physical terms.

Identity can be endangered if something changes within the person's components, as changes in the domain of the self in relation correspond to a change in identity and therefore in the elements that specify the system. This is clearly evident when someone is diagnosed with a serious or dangerous illness. Or - strangely enough - when we become deprived of liberty. Our physical self is soon subsumed by our self in relation: by the nuclear constructs that rule our anticipation system and make up our identity. However, this perspective does not allow us to state that a mental change - in our world of social interaction - interacts with the bodily universe and provokes, causes a change in the latter. We are outside this ambit of a precise explanation, we are instead in the area of comprehension closer to the reading or co-writing of a text (Butt, 2004). Consequently - as far as physical and mental domains are concerned - it no longer makes sense to refer to an interaction between physiological and psychological factors. We will simply refer to it as a co-emergence. A co-emergence that is indicated to us. In fact, in both phenomenal domains we face certain transitions when our identity is endangered. Actually, these changes are transitions or better, the awareness of these changes is constituted by what Kelly defined as transitions: anxiety, threat, guilt and hostility. Transitions are what in another language is defined as emotions: the link between what we usually consider biological and what we commonly consider mental.

Monism, Body and Imprisonment

A constructivist monist concept of the universe in which we live makes us consider our body in a different way. It is not granted objectification, rather it becomes a hermeneutic matrix itself. Thus it can be re-interpreted and taken back to the self in relation. Gastritis, for example wouldn't be *caused* by the stress of a person who works too much or constantly oppressed by their caretakers, neither would it be the product of the interaction of a mental reality with a physical one. Instead, it would become a significant part of a wider and more complex narrative.

In much the same way, the idea of imprisonment also changes and can no longer be founded on the romantic concept that confinement is less cruel than physical torture.

What are we going to see with these new 'glasses'?

THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE SENSES

The Entry

Entering a prison often means entering another world. Bewilderment and confusion blended with a deep and indescribable innermost fear are the first feelings people relate. Those who experience it for the first time especially report how difficult it is to stay on their shaky feet which seem ready to give in at any moment.

Everything surrounding them is alien. All reference parameters are irretrievably lost and no object seems to have a familiar name. A prisoner told me how he had spent the whole of the first night in prison looking at a television: the only familiar thing he could recognise and to which he clung desperately.

Helplessness is the other feeling that seizes the people who cross that threshold. Time and space no longer belong to them. Bewilderment and helplessness are kept under control by concentrating on themselves. To maintain their self-esteem, they appeal to their co little common gestures which now have a deeper meaning: smoking a cigarette - no wonder almost everybody smokes in jail - or carefully folding their clothes at the foot of their cot, etc. But they need somebody to help them found this new world, otherwise they

will drown in confusion, they will let themselves go, get ill, or commit suicide.

I have already mentioned that prisoners are dispossessed of such fundamental life parameters as space and time. Space and time change in meaning and in such conditions it becomes difficult to move through them. Therefore many suffer from dizziness. The transformation of senses has begun.

The Meaning of the Self

What we were able to rule, discriminate and anticipate in our lives does not work anymore. In Kellian terms, the system of personal constructs has been upturned. The perception of the self in relation to others and to the situation is strongly threatened. As a matter of fact, many prisoners do not know where or who they are any longer. The sense of identity itself is endangered. The loss of any reference or the sensation of being different from what we have always thought to be involves what Kelly has defined as nuclear structures. Insomnia, dizziness and loss of appetite bear witness to this deep upset: certain and regular rhythms of life have become confused. The perception of this state of things is dramatic for these people who, in turn, desperately try to preserve their identity (Giliberto, 1998).

Smell

The smell, together with the noise and the screams is what immediately strikes whoever enters a prison. It is a typical, sharp smell made up of many emanations: the cafeteria, the bodies, the washing liquids.

Smell concerns two different matters:

1. It is an orientating track, it places the others and ourselves, it discriminates things' and directions.
2. It gives a feeling of intimacy. It helps us *recognise* something that belongs to our intimate and private universe, separating it from the outside - mother's smell.

The strong and aggressive smell permeates everything - on my return home I had the feeling it had glued itself on me - and levels differences, cele-

brating anonymity. Many prisoners defend themselves from it by losing or deadening their sense of smell. It is generally maintained that they get used to it and cannot smell it anymore. I wonder if there is something more to this. In the end what does 'to get used to it' mean? It is an idea that probably explains nothing. I need to make it clear in terms of choice: to cancel this disorientating lack of differentiation enables people to keep a little but untouched private space. In other words, these are the effects of some kind of sensory deprivation. The sensitivity to particularly strong or very different smells remains, although it is quite deadened.

Sight

In jail, you can watch or be watched, but often you cannot see or be seen at all. By *watching*, the other person is an object, preemptively *nothing else* but a certain thing - a prisoner, an operator, a prison warder; by *seeing* the other and propositionally a person. You can be curious but never interested in what you see.

The look also decrees the exercise of power. All doors are provided with peep-holes and any kind of privacy is denied for alleged safety reasons. Darkness is not only a punishment but also a refuge: the only possibility to avoid being seen. There is an asymmetry between the prisoner's and the prison warder's looks: looking at each other does not prompt any conversation. There is no reciprocity.

That seems to upset the sense of sight. Deprived of its communicative function, sight undergoes that process that Kelly (idem) has defined as constraint. A great number of prisoners keep their eyes down and seldom raise them to define a plane, a perspective, a communicativeness that no longer exists. Many prisoners report a lowering in their eyesight and when they get out they find it difficult to look at overwhelming skylines and distances. At that point the eye is used to focus on short distances, even planes, without ever opening on colours and wide depths. An elderly prisoner said, "If I had to lose something I'd rather lose my eyesight.... What is there to see here, anyway?"

It is very unlikely for prisoners to look at something for a long time and more difficult still

to hold someone's gaze. On the one hand, to escape someone's gaze is a way to deny one's precious privacy to the others, and on the other it avoids problems and conflicts: every prolonged gaze at somebody or something is suspicious or worse still, a provocation. The other people seem to have become vague objects that populate an inner world.

Hearing

In many cases hearing seems to take a completely different path with respect to eyesight: where the latter is limited, lax and blurred, the former seems to dilate and sharpen. A prison is noisy and it becomes important to decipher every little noise. I think it is this sense's duty to orient and anticipate what will happen in a short time. In an environment which is often experienced as hostile and persecuting this hyper-sharpness seems to have the role of tackling anxiety, threat and fear. I asked a prisoner, who always wanted to speak to me, a few minutes after my arrival, how he could so infallibly tell that I had set foot in the prison. His answer was amazing: he heard me arriving because the noises changed in some way. In short, prisoners frequently turn into bats.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE BODY

The Food, the Taste, the Stomach

Except for the first few days, people seldom lack their appetite in jail. Almost all of them start putting on weight, they swell. The food - the 'board' as the bureaucratic administration language puts it - always prompts demands, recriminations, rebellions and conflicts. It is never enough.

Sometimes you have the suspicion that the prison diet is part of the conviction: no pleasure can be allowed. As a definition the food in prison is tasteless. It is needed to fill oneself up, to introduce the necessary calories and to be kept alive and not let oneself be overcome. The body is a container, the body is the stomach. Pleasure and taste live in the palace of desire. Many prisoners spend a lot on so-called extra-board food-stuffs. Yet, nothing has the same taste it would outside. The same ice-creams of the same brand, sold in

the same way both in and out of prison are considered as a poor quality product and therefore meant for them.

I have always wondered what would happen if these people, on few possible occasions, allowed themselves to taste some food with pleasure. Would it be, perhaps, an intolerable dilation of a universe dominated by constraint? Would it be like flying and then falling badly?

The Swallowers

"I am a syphon that goes from my mouth to my asshole": said the first swallower I met. During the night the prison warders had beaten him up and isolated him for reasons I cannot remember and he had unscrewed the bolts that fastened his cot with hands that now were blood-stained and bandaged. He had swallowed the bolts. He had done it in a fit of rage. Anger often leads to and precedes hostility. But what was the anticipation this man wanted to keep at all costs? "It was the proof that I could do something even if they did not want me to." A little 'agency' in a sea of helplessness. Eating a handful of bolts as an extreme bulwark of the connective tissue of our identity: the possibility of identifying oneself with the way taken. The alternative? A much worse mutilation: the loss of the self.

The Mouth

We eat and communicate through our mouth. In the prison context this seems to make the mouth a key part. Those who are familiar with prisons are no longer surprised at prisoners who sew their lips. It does not happen that often, but it does. It is a gesture of nominal but precise value: I do not speak, I do not inform or have informed against anybody. This is an act that can be directed both to those who want the information and to the prisoners' community. Whoever is suspected of collaborating with the authorities, maybe getting his fellow-prisoners into trouble risks being banished into a world of exiles. In this case, the act of sewing one's lips is a tragic attempt to be re-accepted by the 'tribe'. In this ocean of exclusion, a further loneliness would be unbearable. A further loss of the self. Even if that act did not bring the prisoner back to his usual social relationships,

it would save his sense of identity and membership anyway.

The Teeth

In prison, many seem to be obsessed by their teeth. I do not know to what extent dental pathology is higher in those who are imprisoned compared to those who are not. As I work mainly with drug addicted prisoners, I have seldom met people with what can be defined as a sufficiently healthy set of teeth: toothless mouths, rotten and blackened teeth, swollen cheeks were quite normal. Anyway, in prison everybody seemed to look after their teeth in what I have always thought was an exaggerated way. The dentist was always longed for but also hated. The most requested treatment was tooth extraction. The idea was to uproot the pain. Immediately. In short, another example of the continuous constraint that rules the prison world.

The Skin

I have sometimes had the impression that in prison the skin says more than the mouth. The skin is like a sheet on which to write our name for the others to know it and for us to remember it. Whatever happens. The skin is also a border: our elastic walls. The skin contains and protects.

One prisoner's frequent dream was to find himself in the courtyard completely naked and skinless among the others. He could see his muscle bundles, his exposed red flesh. Nobody spoke to him but every now and then somebody spat on him and the saliva burnt and was infected. The meaning he gave this frequent night visitor was related to his vulnerability, the sensation of being 'invadable'. These were the meanings the prisoners' accounts revealed.

Skin Diseases

The French prison doctor Daniel Gonin (1991) points out how significant the jail population's dermatological pathology is. Actually, as Gonin himself underlines, eczema, lipoma, itches, redness, little ulcers and pustules are a usual sight among prisoners. Most frequently they are due to

lack of hygiene, forced promiscuity, bad food. However all these problems are spontaneously sorted out as detention months go by. The border seems to have been irrevocably raised and fortified. These people are inclined to define themselves as 'hardened'. "From now on the personal imprisonment wall is definitely set up. The hardened skin appears to be tanned both inside and outside," says Gonin. In PCP terms, constraint holds and the new role of 'prisoner' seems to be sufficiently waterproofed.

Tattoos

I have already anticipated that skin can be considered as a sheet to write one's name on. Therefore tattooing seems a way to mark oneself out, to be firmly singled out in a world that is perceived as unstable, insecure, out of one's reach, unpredictable. Thus tattoos, rather than being merely decorative must have significance and tell us something of the person bearing them. They tell of an identity. An elderly prisoner with alcoholism problems had had an elaborate drawing of a fish tattooed on his left arm. His hand was its tail and the drawing went up outlining a complicated interlacing of scales to his shoulder where, in the mouth of the fish, were three names. When I asked him an explanation he answered smiling, "I took notes." He further explained that he wanted to remind himself who he was - the fish - and who he loved - the names in the mouth of the fish. The tattoo was unusually beautiful and precise for one made in prison - usually they are drawn with clumsy and faded lines - and I admired it just as he was pleased by it.

A tattoo can also represent the membership to a community, and as such become necessary for survival. After a first imprisonment, few people leave without a bluish mark of five dots arranged to form the little petals of a flower in the socket between their thumb and forefinger.

Cuts

The prisoner's skin is often the map of his present and possibly previous imprisonment. Tattoos do not only describe a sometimes imaginative or dramatic topography, but also the scars cross the skin with their own route, at times interrupting a pre-existing drawing, or overlapping it. Scars tell

us a story too.

In prison, maiming and cutting are quite frequent. Usually cuts are made on the arms: there are many and they are regular, deep but never enough to cut ligaments or, more seriously, arteries. The prison staff often considers them 'demonstration acts' made to 'blackmail' the staff itself, and to get better consideration in their demands. Sometimes it seems to be so, at least this is the explanation the author of the deed gives. He thinks this the only way to draw attention, to point out his abandoned existence. Other times the gesture seems to have no reasons and baffles the operators. "Why did you do it?" is a question followed, if ever, by vague and unsatisfactory answers. However, a prisoner's inability to articulate meaning does not indicate the meaningless nature of the act. As for the swallows, I think it is plausible to assume that these people desperately try to keep some core role dimensions, i.e. their identity, the fundamental aspects of their ability to anticipate and alleger events. Now this is impossible if our life no longer belongs to us, if we cannot identify ourselves with the path we have taken. In a place where everything seems coercive and impossible for us to intervene in to be an active part, where others speak on our behalf and we have no voice, cutting ourselves is an act that belongs to us, it is a scream, it is the self-demonstration we exist. Once more both the skin and the flesh appear to be a surface to carve, write or throw on the meaning of our identity.

CONCLUSION

This study could be expanded to a consideration of sexuality, drug addiction, death and suicide in prison. Lack of space keeps me from such a thorough treatment of the subject. But I hope I have conveyed, though not as completely as I would have liked, the idea of how prison constitutes a corporeal punishment.

In dealing with this topic from a constructivist point of view, I have considered prisoners as basically committed to endowing their own world, others and themselves with meaning. Therefore, I have imagined them in a process implying, in anticipation terms, the maintenance of their identity and of their very lives. In other words, from within a single conceptual system, I have focus-

sed on their nuclear structures, and have considered the body 'construct' as subsumed by the self in relation. What has emerged?

The result was that the changes people in prison have to tackle co-emerge in the mental and bodily phenomenal dominions even if they are not necessarily in explicative relation. What has also emerged is that prison is usually constructed by the prisoner as a preemptive and coercive environment. That often undermines the meanings that constitute one's identity starting a change that involves the core structures and is dramatically perceived. People draw away from their role nuclear structure and find out they are different from what they have always thought, or simply move towards an unbearable nothing. What was meaningful in the previous life is excluded and survives in a shaky and restricted intimacy. People who are in such a situation react, often desperately, to preserve their identity. The uncertain identity survives because a further constriction, besides the prison context one, allows it to do so. Otherwise, and to the point of denying evidence, people withstand their helplessness and the expropriation of all fundamental parameters of existence, such as time and space, by marking, maiming or killing themselves. Yes, because even suicide can be a way of surviving, ignoring the loss of one's role and avoiding guilt. Other prisoners are completely changed by this experience: they are the ones who have been able to broaden their role. Despite the calm appearance of imprisonment every prisoner has a story to tell us, a story that is often carved on his body.

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