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Do Bodies Tell the Truth? — Nick Totton

By Nick Totton

By Nick Totton. A philosophical examination of one of body psychotherapy's foundational assumptions: that the body is a reliable source of truth — that it does not lie, does not defend, does not strategise. Totton deconstructs this assumption with characteristic rigour, arguing that bodies neither tell the truth nor lie, because they are expressive rather than communicative.

KEY THEMES

— Do bodies tell the truth? A philosophical examination
— Bodies as expressive rather than communicative
— The danger of the body as absolute ground
— Whose truth does the body tell?
— Embodied relationship as ground for authenticity

The Foundational Assumption

Body psychotherapy has often operated with an implicit assumption that the body is a privileged source of truth — that while the mind can deceive and the words can lie, the body's responses are a more direct expression of what is really happening. This assumption has been enormously productive, generating clinical approaches of real power and depth. But it also deserves philosophical examination.

The most extreme version of this assumption — 'the body never lies' — is clearly untenable. Bodies routinely produce responses that do not correspond to any simple psychological 'truth': blushing that is not guilt, trembling that is not fear, tears that are not grief. The body's responses are complex, multiply determined, and contextually shaped — they are not unmediated expressions of an inner psychological reality.

A more sophisticated version of the assumption holds that the body's responses are more reliable than verbal self-report — that they are harder to consciously manipulate and therefore less likely to be used defensively. This is more defensible, but it still raises the question: more reliable in what sense, and for whose interpretation?

Whose Truth?

The key question that Totton raises is: whose truth does the body tell? The assumption that the body speaks an authentic truth that can be read by the trained observer contains a problematic power dynamic: it positions the therapist as the one who can correctly interpret the client's bodily expressions, and the client's own experience and interpretation as potentially unreliable.

This is structurally similar to the position of the parent who 'knows better' than the child what the child is feeling — which is precisely the kind of relational dynamic that body psychotherapy at its best seeks to counteract. A body psychotherapy that treats the body as an objective text to be read by the expert therapist may reproduce, in a somatic register, the very objectification it claims to address.

The alternative is a different relationship to the body's expressiveness: one that approaches it with curiosity rather than expertise, that holds interpretations lightly, and that maintains a genuine openness to the client's own understanding of their bodily experience.

Bodies in Relationship

The conclusion that Totton reaches is subtle but important: bodies in relationship can generate an authenticity of contact that carries its own authority, without this requiring us to claim that the body is a reliable source of objective truth.

When two embodied subjects are genuinely in contact — genuinely affected by each other, genuinely responsive to each other's bodily presence — something happens that cannot be reduced to either party's interpretive framework. This is the intersubjective dimension of embodied relating: the emergence of something real in the space between two people, something that belongs to neither one individually.

It is this intersubjective reality — the authenticity of genuine embodied contact — rather than any claim about the body as a repository of objective truth that grounds the therapeutic value of body psychotherapy at its best. And it is this that the emphasis on the therapist's own embodied presence, rather than on body-reading technique, is designed to cultivate.

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