

George Hackenschmidt's Philosophy of Physical Culture and Its Modern Significance

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Abstract: At the beginning of the 20th century, the European physical culture movement catalyzed a significant shift in modern sports thought—from a narrow focus on athletic performance to an emphasis on physical education, health promotion, and personal development. George Hackenschmidt, a prominent figure in this movement, exerted profound influence not only in strength training and professional wrestling but also developed a systematic philosophy of physical culture centered on the body, mind, education, and health. Drawing on his representative works such as *The Way to Live*, *Man and Cosmic Antagonism*, and *The Three Memories and Forgetfulness*, this article integrates theories of physical culture, sport philosophy, and health promotion to trace the intellectual background of Hackenschmidt's physical culture philosophy. It analyzes the theoretical dimensions of his views on bodily ontology, mind-body unity, physical education, natural health, and personality development, and further explores their practical implications for public fitness, school physical education, health promotion, and the evolution of sport philosophy.

Keywords: George Hackenschmidt; physical culture; sport philosophy; physical education; health promotion

Introduction

In recent years, the focus of sports research has gradually expanded from competition to areas such as physical culture, healthy lifestyles, physical education, and quality of life, re-establishing the body as a central concern shared by sport philosophy and health sciences.

Physical culture, an essential component of modern Western sports thought, emerged during the period of social transformation in Europe from the late 19th to the early 20th century. While the Industrial Revolution rapidly advanced social productivity, it also transformed people's work patterns and lifestyles. Mechanized production and urban living led to a significant decline in physical activity, resulting in deteriorating physical functions, rising chronic diseases, and increasing bodily alienation—issues that gradually drew public attention. Against this historical backdrop, the movement promoting natural living, regular exercise, physical education, and character development gained momentum, becoming a foundational source for modern mass fitness and health promotion.

George Hackenschmidt (1877–1968) was one of the most representative practitioners and thinkers of physical culture during this era. As a world-renowned wrestling champion, pioneer of strength training, and advocate of physical culture, he achieved remarkable success not only in competitive

sports but also systematically articulated his views on physical training, healthy lifestyles, physical education, and personal development through works such as *The Way to Live* and *Man and Cosmic Antagonism*. He argued that physical training should not merely aim at building strength, but rather serve human holistic development, achieving harmony among body, mind, and morality [1,2,3]. This perspective broke away from the traditional performance-centered values of competitive sports and provided significant intellectual resources for contemporary sport philosophy and health promotion theory.

1 Historical Context of George Hackenschmidt's Physical Culture Philosophy

George Hackenschmidt's philosophy of physical culture did not emerge in isolation; rather, it was shaped by the convergence of European social transformation, the modernization of sports, and the rise of physical culture movements from the late 19th to the early 20th century. The Industrial Revolution not only drove economic and technological progress but also profoundly altered human labor, lifestyle, and bodily existence. In response to declining physical health, growing health problems, and the estrangement between humans and nature brought about by industrial civilization, a physical culture

movement arose across Europe, centered on physical education, natural living, and health promotion. Within this context, Hackenschmidt absorbed classical ideas of physical education, naturalist philosophy, and modern conceptions of physical culture, gradually developing a comprehensive and integrative philosophy of physical culture.

1.1 Development of the European Physical Culture Movement

Modern physical culture movements originated in 19th-century Europe, driven by nation-building, industrialization, educational reform, and advances in public health. Germany, Sweden, and Britain each developed distinct models of physical education, laying the foundation for modern sports thought.

Friedrich Ludwig Jahn promoted German gymnastics, emphasizing the use of systematic physical training to strengthen national physique, cultivate discipline, and foster national consciousness. Jahn believed that physical education was not merely about enhancing strength and endurance, but also a vital means of shaping character and instilling social responsibility [4]. His ideas integrated physical training into the modern national education system, exerting a profound influence on the development of physical education throughout Europe.

Per Henrik Ling established the Swedish gymnastics system, which emphasized anatomical, physiological, and medical foundations, advocating scientific and standardized physical training to improve bodily function and promote health [5]. Compared to German gymnastics, Swedish gymnastics placed greater emphasis on the scientific nature and rehabilitative functions of physical activity, laying an important foundation for the development of modern sports medicine and rehabilitation sports.

Meanwhile, Britain gradually developed a modern sports system characterized by school physical education and competitive sports. In the mid-to-late 19th century, sports such as football, rugby, athletics, and rowing rapidly expanded, with fair competition, teamwork, and rule awareness becoming key features of British sports culture. During this period, British sports not only advanced competitive sport but also reinforced the value of physical education in character development and social responsibility.

Building upon the developments of German gymnastics, Swedish gymnastics, and British competitive sports, Europe gradually formed a body culture movement with broad social influence. Body culture emphasized regular exercise, strength training, natural diets, outdoor activities, and healthy lifestyles, advocating that physical training should be accessible to the general public rather than limited to military personnel or professional athletes [10]. Numerous body culture magazines, fitness schools, and training institutions emerged, making body culture an essential component of public health initiatives.

During this era, Eugen Sandow, Bernarr Macfadden, and George Hackenschmidt jointly promoted the growth of the body culture movement. While Sandow focused on muscular aesthetics, George Hackenschmidt placed greater emphasis on the significance of physical training for personal development, spiritual growth, and a healthy lifestyle. He believed that strength was merely an outward expression of body culture; its true value lay in achieving balanced development of body, mind, and morality through sustained training. This philosophical orientation elevated George Hackenschmidt beyond the role of an ordinary fitness advocate, shaping a body culture thought imbued with deep philosophical meaning.

1.2 The Physical Crisis of the Industrial Age and the Response of Body Culture

The Industrial Revolution of the 19th century profoundly transformed human society and reshaped the human body. Mechanized production increased labor efficiency, yet much manual labor was replaced by machines, leading to significantly reduced physical activity among urban populations. Factory systems and office work popularized sedentary lifestyles, prompting growing societal concern over obesity, cardiovascular diseases, and neurasthenia [6]. At the same time, rapid urbanization brought air pollution, deteriorating living conditions, and accelerated life rhythms, intensifying the conflict between modern civilization and the body's natural attributes.

In response to the physical crisis brought about by industrial civilization, the body culture movement offered proactive solutions. George Hackenschmidt argued that many health problems in modern society were not due to inherent bodily defects but resulted

from disconnection from natural ways of living. In *The Way to Live*, he asserted that health stems from regular exercise, sufficient sleep, balanced nutrition, fresh air, and active labor—rather than relying solely on medical treatment. In his view, physical activity not only strengthens the body but also restores the harmonious relationship between humans and nature.

This perspective clearly reflects preventive medicine principles. George Hackenschmidt stressed that health management should prioritize prevention, enhancing the body's adaptability through improved lifestyle habits rather than treating illness after it occurs. This viewpoint aligns closely with contemporary health promotion theories and the principles of lifestyle medicine [7]. In recent years, extensive evidence-based research has shown that regular physical activity and healthy lifestyles significantly reduce the risk of chronic non-communicable diseases and improve quality of life [8], further confirming the scientific foresight of George Hackenschmidt's belief that "exercise promotes health."

1.3 Intellectual Origins of the Philosophy of Physical Culture

George Hackenschmidt's philosophy of physical culture is characterized by distinctive comprehensiveness, and its theoretical origins span multiple domains including ancient Greek sports thought, naturalistic education, philosophy of life, and modern physical culture movements.

The ancient Greek concept of *Kalokagathia* emphasizes the unification of physical beauty and moral beauty, and holds that physical education should facilitate the all-round development of human beings. Both Plato and Aristotle maintained that physical education, together with intellectual education and moral education, constitutes a complete education system [9]. George Hackenschmidt inherited this tradition, and regards physical training as a crucial foundation for personality shaping rather than a technical activity independent of education.

The ideology of naturalistic education exerted a profound influence on George Hackenschmidt. Jean-Jacques Rousseau emphasized in *Emile* that education should be carried out in accordance with the laws of nature, and argued that children should promote their all-round development through

physical activities and practical experience. George Hackenschmidt's viewpoints on natural diet, outdoor sports, sunlight, fresh air and manual labor are highly consistent with the concepts of naturalistic education.

Furthermore, the understanding of the holism of life in 19th-century philosophy of life further enriched George Hackenschmidt's view of the body. He rejected the mechanical separation of the body and mind, and emphasized that the body, will and spirit together constitute the complete life of a human being. This holistic view of life was further developed in modern philosophy of the body, embodied cognitive theory, and physical literacy theory [10].

2 George Hackenschmidt's Philosophy of Physical Culture

If the European physical culture movement at the end of the 19th century provided the historical context for George Hackenschmidt's philosophy of physical culture, then his genuine theoretical contribution lies in elevating physical training to a philosophical practice concerning life, education and personality development. Through the study of works such as *The Way to Live*, *Man and Cosmic Antagonism*, and *The Three Memories and Forgetfulness*, it can be found that George Hackenschmidt did not simply understand sports as competitive activities or strength training, but constructed a holistic ideological system with the body as the core, covering health, education, spirit and the development of civilization. This paper argues that his philosophy of physical culture mainly includes five interrelated theoretical dimensions: the ontology of the body, the unity of mind and body, the view of physical education, the view of natural health, and the view of personality construction.

2.1 The Body as the Foundation of Existential Life: The Ontology of the Body

George Hackenschmidt's philosophy of physical culture is first and foremost established on a positive ontology of the body. He holds that the body is neither an accessory of the mind nor an instrument for achieving social goals, but the foundation of human existence. Human thinking, emotion, will and social activities all depend on a healthy and energetic body; therefore, physical training carries a life significance that transcends sport itself.

In *The Way to Live*, George Hackenschmidt explicitly states that health is the prerequisite for a happy life and personality development, and it is difficult for a person with a frail body to fully realize their intellectual and creative potential. This viewpoint breaks through the dualistic tradition that separates the body and mind that has dominated modern thought, and aligns more closely with the ideological stance of the holistic view of life. The body not only has biological significance, but also serves as an important medium for individuals to participate in social life and realize self-worth.

Modern sociology of the body holds that the body is not only a natural entity, but also a key object of socio-cultural construction. Although George Hackenschmidt did not adopt the discourse system of modern sociology, his discussion on the value of the body has already gone beyond the mere physiological level, and interprets the body as an important foundation for personality development and civilizational progress, which is to some extent consistent with the understanding of body subjectivity in modern sociology of the body.

2.2 The Principle of Holistic Development Through the Unity of Body and Mind

George Hackenschmidt's philosophy of physical culture emphasizes the indivisible unity between the body and the mind. He rejects the interpretation of physical training merely as the growth of muscle strength, and argues that genuine physical culture should simultaneously facilitate the development of the body, mind and will.

In *Man and Cosmic Antagonism*, George Hackenschmidt points out that physical training not only changes human physiological conditions, but also influences individuals' mental qualities and moral cultivation. He argues that individuals who persist in regular training often demonstrate stronger self-discipline, a more positive life attitude, and a more stable psychological state. Therefore, physical training is essentially a form of mental training.

This viewpoint coincides with the ancient Greek concept of Kalokagathia. Ancient Greek education emphasized the unification of physical beauty and moral beauty, and held that an ideal personality must be grounded in a healthy body. George Hackenschmidt inherited and developed this thought, and regards physical training as an important approach to achieving personality perfection rather

than a physical activity independent of education.

In recent years, embodied cognitive theory has further demonstrated the close connection between the body and cognition. Scholars such as Varela argue that human cognitive activities are formed in the continuous interaction between the body and the environment, and bodily experience directly influences thinking patterns, emotional states and behavioral decision-making [11]. Although George Hackenschmidt lived long before the proposal of embodied cognitive theory, his discussion on the role of the body in promoting spiritual growth is ideologically consistent with the view on the unity of body and mind in modern cognitive science.

2.3 Physical Education: Sport as an Important Approach to Personality Cultivation

George Hackenschmidt argues that the genuine value of physical culture does not lie in cultivating sports champions, but in cultivating well-rounded individuals. He repeatedly emphasized that sport is first and foremost an educational activity, whose goal is to facilitate personality growth through physical training rather than merely improving competitive performance.

In his view, sustained physical training requires individuals to overcome inertia, endure fatigue, and adhere to their goals, and this process can cultivate a sense of responsibility, self-discipline and resilience. These qualities not only contribute to athletic performance, but can also be transferred to study, work and social life to promote the all-round development of individuals. Therefore, physical education is essentially a form of personality education.

It is worth noting that the physical education proposed by George Hackenschmidt has distinct characteristics of lifelong education. He argues that physical training should not be limited to the school years, but should run through the entire life course of an individual, making sport a life habit and cultural practice. This viewpoint is highly consistent with modern lifelong sports theory and the national fitness concept, and also reflects the foresight of his thought.

2.4 Natural Health Perspective—Body Culture as a Healthy Lifestyle

A key feature of George Hackenschmidt's

philosophy on body culture lies in his understanding of health not merely as physical strength, but as an integrated state of harmonious development between humans and nature, and between body and mind. In *The Way to Live*, he repeatedly emphasizes that human development should follow natural laws, with regular exercise, balanced nutrition, sufficient sleep, fresh air, sunlight exposure, and moderate labor collectively forming a healthy lifestyle—elements that are interdependent.

This idea emerged during the rapid advancement of industrial civilization. At that time, urbanization and mechanized production in Europe accelerated, leading to reduced physical labor, faster-paced lifestyles, and growing environmental pollution. George Hackenschmidt believed that while modern civilization had improved material living standards, it had also weakened the connection between the human body and nature, gradually detaching the body from its natural developmental rhythms. Therefore, he argued that body culture meant not only physical training but also returning to nature and establishing a scientifically sound and healthy way of life.

Notably, George Hackenschmidt placed great emphasis on integrating strength training with natural movement. He believed that strength training enhances bodily functions, while natural activities such as walking, swimming, hiking, and manual labor improve overall adaptability and ensure balanced development across organ systems. This perspective differs from later fitness models that overemphasize specialized training, aligning more closely with contemporary holistic health management principles.

In recent years, Lifestyle Medicine has increasingly become a major direction in international public health. Its core concept is preventing and managing chronic diseases through physical activity, nutritional intervention, sleep management, stress regulation, and behavioral change [12]. Numerous evidence-based studies have shown that adhering to a healthy lifestyle significantly reduces the risk of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, obesity, and certain cancers [13]. From this standpoint, although George Hackenschmidt lived in an era before the full maturity of modern medicine, his ideas about healthy living already exhibit clear characteristics of

modern health promotion.

Research on Green Exercise has found that engaging in physical activities in natural environments such as forests, parks, and water bodies can more effectively improve mental health, enhance emotional well-being, and increase motivation for sustained participation in exercise [14]. These findings further validate the significant value of Hackenschmidt's advocacy for natural living and outdoor activity, demonstrating the strong practical relevance of his health philosophy.

George Hackenschmidt's natural health perspective in his body culture philosophy does not simply advocate "returning to nature." Rather, it emphasizes building an integrative model of health encompassing physical activity, diet, labor, rest, and psychological adjustment—all grounded in active bodily engagement. This holistic view of health resonates strongly with modern concepts of proactive wellness, bridging a century of intellectual evolution.

2.5 Body Culture as Personality Culture—The Ultimate Value of George Hackenschmidt's Philosophy

If the body ontology answers "why engage in physical training," the mind-body unity perspective addresses "how physical training influences human development," and the views on physical education and natural health explain "how physical training should be conducted," then the ultimate question George Hackenschmidt's body culture philosophy seeks to answer is: "What purpose does physical training truly serve?"

An analysis of his major works reveals that George Hackenschmidt consistently understood body culture as personality culture (Culture of Personality). He believed that the ultimate purpose of physical training is neither to build larger muscles nor to win competitions, but rather to achieve personal development through bodily cultivation, fostering qualities such as honesty, self-discipline, courage, responsibility, and respect for others. Thus, physical training carries significant educational and ethical implications.

This perspective breaks away from the traditional view of the body as merely a "tool for competition" or an "object of aesthetic admiration," endowing bodily culture with deeper humanistic meaning. The body is not only the object of athletic

practice, but also a crucial foundation for personality development and life growth. George Hackenschmidt argued that a truly healthy person should possess a sound body, a balanced mind, and a strong sense of social responsibility—these three elements together constitute the ultimate goal of bodily culture.

In recent years, muscle circumference, body fat percentage, and visual appearance have gradually become key criteria for evaluating the body. Some fitness activities have shown clear tendencies toward commodification and aestheticization, treating the body more as a display object than as a subject of life development. In contrast, George Hackenschmidt consistently emphasized that bodily culture should return to health, education, and personal growth, its true value lying in promoting holistic human development rather than meeting external standards of evaluation.

George Hackenschmidt effectively elevated the value orientation of bodily culture. He raised physical training from a technical level to a cultural one, from mere physical improvement to the construction of character, and from athletic practice to life practice, transforming bodily culture into a philosophical inquiry about lifestyle and civilizational progress.

3 The Contemporary Value of George Hackenschmidt's Philosophy of Physical Culture

Any sports philosophy can only demonstrate its theoretical vitality when it continues to offer explanatory power and practical value in real society. Although George Hackenschmidt's philosophy of physical culture originated in the early 20th century, his ideas on physical education, holistic health, lifelong physical activity, and personality development remain highly aligned with the development direction of sports and health initiatives in the 21st century. Re-examining Hackenschmidt's philosophy not only deepens research into physical culture but also provides new theoretical perspectives for promoting sports and health in the new era.

3.1 Implications for National Fitness Strategy—Physical Exercise Should Become a Lifestyle

The "National Fitness Program (2021–2025)" calls for deeper integration between national fitness and public health, aiming to build a higher-level

public service system for fitness and improve the physical fitness and health levels of the population. However, in practice, certain mass sports activities still face challenges such as insufficient participation continuity, fragmented exercise behaviors, and overly utilitarian fitness goals. As a result, physical activity has not yet become a stable lifestyle for most people.

George Hackenschmidt's philosophy offers significant insights in this regard. He consistently emphasized that physical training should not be limited to athletes or fitness enthusiasts but must become an integral part of everyday life for ordinary citizens. In *The Way to Live*, he stated: "Health is not the result of short-term training, but rather the expression of a long-term lifestyle." This idea underscores the importance of sustained physical activity over temporary improvements in physical condition.

Modern public health research similarly highlights that consistent, long-term physical activity yields more stable health benefits than short-term, high-intensity training. The World Health Organization's 2020 guidelines on physical activity and sedentary behavior recommend regular physical activity across all age groups and encourage minimizing sedentary time to reduce the risk of chronic diseases and all-cause mortality. These recommendations align closely with Hackenschmidt's advocacy for lifelong physical activity.

Moreover, Hackenschmidt argued that physical culture encompasses not only sports and exercise but also labor, walking, outdoor activities, and overall healthy lifestyles. He integrated physical activity into daily routines rather than confining it to sports venues. This perspective offers valuable reference for China's current initiatives promoting "integration of sports and medicine," integration of "sports and healthcare," and the development of healthy communities. Future progress in national fitness should focus not only on increasing the number of active individuals but also on fostering healthy behaviors and cultivating a supportive physical culture environment, so that physical activity truly becomes a fundamental component of people's lifestyles.

3.2 Implications for Health Promotion and Proactive Health Concepts

As medical models shift from disease-centered treatment toward health promotion, the role of physical activity in public health continues to grow. The concept of proactive health emphasizes that each individual is the primary responsible party for their own health and should enhance quality of life through scientific exercise, balanced nutrition, psychological well-being, and healthy behavior management.

Hackenschmidt's understanding of health clearly reflects proactive health principles. He believed that health is not achieved through medication but cultivated continuously through daily life. Exercise, work, sleep, diet, and positive emotions together form a holistic healthy lifestyle, with all elements interconnected and inseparable.

Numerous evidence-based studies have confirmed this view. Both the American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) and the World Health Organization have shown that regular physical activity effectively reduces the risks of chronic conditions such as hypertension, diabetes, obesity, coronary heart disease, and depression, while simultaneously improving cognitive function and mental health. Although George Hackenschmidt lived in an era before modern evidence-based medicine had matured, his emphasis on prevention, self-management, and a healthy lifestyle aligns closely with contemporary health promotion principles. Particularly against the backdrop of China's advancement in "integration of sports and medicine," the development of "centers for physical activity promoting health," and community health management, his ideas on bodily culture still hold significant practical relevance today.

3.3 Implications for the Development of Modern Fitness Culture—Rebuilding the Humanistic Value of Bodily Culture

In recent years, the fitness industry has experienced rapid growth, with internet platforms and social media greatly enhancing public engagement in physical activities. However, under the combined influence of commercial capital and digital media, the body has increasingly become an object of consumption and display. Communication strategies such as "perfect bodies," "trending workouts," and "rapid fat loss" have, to some extent, reinforced external appearance as the primary criterion, while undermining the values of health

and education.

In this context, George Hackenschmidt offers an alternative perspective. He argues that the core of bodily culture lies not in outward form, but in personal growth achieved through sustained physical practice. Muscle strength is merely an expression of bodily culture, not its ultimate goal; true bodily culture should foster health, self-discipline, responsibility, and a positive attitude toward life.

This viewpoint carries profound implications for reflecting on current fitness culture. From the standpoint of sport philosophy, the body possesses both natural and socio-cultural dimensions. If the body is reduced solely to a consumer object, it risks alienation, leading sports away from their essential purpose of fostering holistic human development. Conversely, if the body is understood as a foundational element for personality development and life growth, sports can reclaim their educational and cultural functions.

3.4 Implications for Sport Philosophy and Bodily Culture Research

Bodily research has become a key focus within international sport philosophy, sociology of the body, and health humanities. Scholars are increasingly concerned with bodily experience, bodily identity, physical education, and the social significance of bodily culture, moving beyond mere athletic performance or physiological metrics.

George Hackenschmidt's philosophical contribution to bodily culture lies in his early transcendence of the instrumentalist view of the body, elevating it to the realms of life philosophy and educational philosophy. He maintained that the body is not merely a vehicle for physical activity, but also a crucial foundation for personality formation, value construction, and social participation. This holistic understanding of the body provides a historically continuous intellectual resource for the development of modern sport philosophy.

For Chinese sport studies, rediscovering George Hackenschmidt's thought holds two important meanings: first, it enriches the theoretical framework of bodily culture research, shifting sport history studies from biographical accounts toward deeper ideological analysis; second, it promotes interdisciplinary integration between sport science, education, medicine, psychology, and health sciences, offering new academic resources

for theoretical innovation in sports and health in the new era.

Conclusion

George Hackenschmidt was not merely a practitioner of physical training, but also a distinctive thinker in the philosophy of bodily culture. His philosophical framework on body, health, education, personality, and civilization reflects the developmental trajectory of European bodily culture movements and provides significant intellectual resources for contemporary sports philosophy, health promotion, and physical education research.

Of course, it is important to objectively recognize the historical limitations of George Hackenschmidt's philosophy of bodily culture. Constrained by the conditions of his time, his theories were primarily grounded in personal experience and philosophical reflection, lacking experimental support from modern exercise physiology, sports medicine, and evidence-based research. Moreover, his writings focused predominantly on individual physical development, with limited engagement on critical issues such as gender equality, social class, and cultural differences.□

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