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METAMORPHOSES OF MARTIAL ARTS

MEDITATIONS ON MOTIVATIONS AND MOTIVE FORCES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

In Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, change takes place at the whim of the gods, albeit often for clear reasons and with clear allegorical or didactic meanings. In Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, however, change is inscrutable, unfathomable, irresolvable, and simply something to be borne. The speculation animating the following reflection is that the global pandemic of 2020 induced a metamorphosis in the lifeworlds of martial artists, the psychological and emotional effects of which have been severe from the start, while the pragmatic consequences and implications for the near to mid-term future remain unclear. The future form, content, and cultural status of the entity 'martial arts' all remain uncertain. Future studies will undoubtedly map the changed terrain. But for now, in the midst of the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, what follows is a personal and theoretical reflection, written at a time and from a position in which there are more questions than answers. This reflection seeks to capture something of the structure of feeling of this situation and to reflect on its potential consequences for 'martial arts' and 'martial artists', as viewed from one (g)local position and perspective.

I intend to speak of forms changed into new entities
– Ovid, *Metamorphoses*

As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams,
he found himself transformed in his bed into an enormous insect.
– Kafka, *Metamorphosis*

PART ONE: GRIEF

Denial

By early 2020, I had already been through my own personal martial arts metamorphosis. For complex family reasons, I had switched from a lifetime of pugilistic training in 2019, in order to focus on something entirely new – grappling and groundfighting. This change immediately precipitated a kind of physical and intellectual renaissance for me. My energies, aims and interests had quickly transformed; new ideas, new research questions and projects were appearing, and I was more excited about the immediate future than I had been for some time.

Meanwhile, news reports increasingly heralded the approach of a new, sometimes fatal virus. Like many, I tried to ignore the approach of COVID-19. However, by mid-March 2020, in the UK, there was no avoiding it. My last BJJ class was a lunchtime session followed that evening by a kickboxing class with my children. After that I took the decision to pause training – 'for a while'. Near the end of March 2020, Britain went into full lockdown. There could legally be no more face-to-face martial arts classes for anyone in the UK, for an indefinite amount of time. Reports of similar lockdowns and restrictions continued to spread across the globe.

Soon 'a little while' transformed into a little longer. For how long, no one had any reliable way of knowing. At first, lockdown was unnerving, uncanny. What contributed most to the eeriness was not knowing, when, how, even *if*, it would end. Over and above many questions, one haunted me: When could I go back to training?

Yet I was lucky, and I knew it. I am white, propertied, middle class and middle aged, with a secure job, and a house that has enough rooms and technology for everyone in the family to have their own workspace and privacy. Not only that, we also have a relatively secluded garden. And the spring weather was kind. Like many others, I soon found myself digging out and dusting down a lifetime's collection of different pieces of training kit, from weights to weapons to punch bags and more; training alone, in the garden. Unfortunately, this did not provide me anything like a BJJ fix. So, with the money I was saving on neither commuting nor eating out nor paying expenses for the social lives of my teenage children, I bought not one but two different grappling dummies. My aim was to practice throws, locks and submissions, and to continue to develop new skills.

That was the plan. But, at the same time, there was a creeping dread, and a growing paralysis. To be able to train, I needed to learn, and to learn, I needed not only a teacher, but also a training partner. I had neither. So, I could not really train.[1] As for my university work, in the early weeks, I battled on, trying to finish work projects on time – proofs, indexes, issue 9 of *Martial Arts Studies*, and so on. But after finishing jobs that had already been close to completion, I found I could not begin anything new. At the same time, my Cardiff University students had quickly scattered to the four winds and were all on different time zones. This meant that teaching effectively fell to pieces too. Yet I had to complete their courses. So, to deliver lectures, I would try to find the quietest room in the house, the simplest software and best platform to record, upload, and communicate them. But, talking to myself in a bedroom was as dispiriting as grappling with a lifeless dummy. With no real-time feedback of any kind, it did not feel anything at all like giving a lecture. Quite quickly, it all came to feel quite depressing.

Anger and Depression

Elizabeth Kübler-Ross's 'stages of grief' model [Kübler-Ross and Byock 2019] is well known but often critiqued. It is most easily critiqued if one interprets it literally and simplistically. In its crudest form, the stages of grief model proposes a sequence, running from denial to anger, to bargaining, to depression, and finally to acceptance. Of course, these are descriptive terms for dominant emotional states after (literal or metaphorical) bereavement, and they can arise in any order, or even at the same time. For me, it was denial and anger that jostled for position at first. Before lockdown, like many, I denied that anything was coming or that it would have any significant effect. And I was angry that governments seemed to be over-reacting. There would be no global convulsions, no crises of any kind across societies, and certainly not in the world of martial arts training, I insisted. But then it arrived.

Like many, I still denied that it was really happening, or refused to accept that it would last very long. I felt generally annoyed, irritated,

1 BJJ practitioners have long supplemented their training with high consumption of online tutorials (Spencer 2014). However, during lockdown, I entirely lost my appetite for these.

and often angry about having to miss training, about being prevented from getting my regular fix, and having my weekly routines ruined. But living in this relation, flipping and oscillating between 'this *isn't* happening' and 'this *shouldn't be* happening' to 'oh my god, this really is happening' caused my emotional state to oscillate at first between denial and anger, and then between denial and something akin to depression. As I wrote in a blog post on 30th March 2020:

> **Am I doing fine? I'm finding it hard to concentrate, hard to stay motivated, hard to push forward on anything, hard to take seriously the idea that I am still supposed to be teaching university students, supervising BA and MA dissertations and PhDs, still on committees, still reviewing grant applications and book and journal manuscripts, still involved in the making of strategic decisions, still the editor of academic journals, still the organiser of conferences – conferences that I don't want to admit may not happen. I can't seem to get motivated to start work on anything that would take more than one session to complete; and things that I would normally finish in an hour are taking me all day, or longer. I'm putting things off, staring blankly at word documents, not able to engage with anything properly.**
>
> **Even exercise, even martial arts. When I took the decision to pause BJJ shortly before the lockdown became official, I decided to work on some BJJ-specific kinds of stretching, movement and strength drills and routines, in order to come back stronger. Three weeks later, I start them now, if at all, and have to fight against the relentless question, 'why bother?'**
>
> **And yet, I am exercising more now than I possibly could before. I'm probably over-training. I'm aching most of the time. And it gets harder to get anywhere with my exercise sessions. I find myself frustrated and disappointed that my aging body needs rest days to recover when I have all this time on my hands – or, not so much 'time on my hands' as 'time that I can't fill with anything else because I can't concentrate'. I walk down the garden, set up the punchbag, sweep leaves off the decking, put on the gloves, throw a few lacklustre jab-cross combinations and then just give up. I wander around, look in the fridge at my dwindling stocks of beer (the only thing I panic-bought in the run up to this) and wonder whether it's too early to start drinking instead.**
> **[Bowman 2020a; also available at 2020b]**

The 'stages of grief' model presumes a process of working through, working out and coming to terms with a new reality. As weeks turned to months, I knew that I was trying to work out what the reality was for me as a 'martial artist'. If you are not training, if you are not teaching, or learning – if you can barely bring yourself to practice at all – are you still a martial artist? For several months, my mind seemed to wrestle with an enforced transformation in my allowed identity statement: from the preferred 'I *am* a lifelong martial artist and I *am currently* learning BJJ'; to the crushing 'I *used to be* a martial artist, but I am *no longer* training'. To ward off the past tense from becoming the present reality ('I used to be…'), my coping mechanism took the form of *making plans*.

Bargaining

As spring became summer, I decided that even if classes resumed, I would not be able to return to training until after a planned summer visit with elderly relatives. Safety first. The belief that *I* was making an active decision felt good. Summer bloomed; my club's classes appeared online. I still did not participate. My BJJ instructor had once said to me, 'I'm not letting anyone else's ideas about fitness interfere with my training'. And yet, now, here he was, offering what were essentially online fitness classes. Even when, in late July, physical classes did start up again, there could be no partner-work – at least, not at my main club, which had to adhere to the rules of the community sports centre. Training had to be solo. There could be no contact. To me, this could not even begin to approximate to BJJ. It was not even equivalent to decaffeinated coffee or alcohol-free beer, as it did not even have the taste, smell, feel or look of BJJ. It was merely aerobics and stretching. At privately owned clubs one might find contact training. At many clubs, groups of four could form 'social bubbles', that could train together as normal. Should I join one? To get to any of these clubs would involve complex journeys and public transport. And members of my family are 'high risk'. Could I take the risk?

Moreover, soon autumn and winter would be here. Colds and flus are themselves coronaviruses, and they are so contagious through autumn and winter that this is said to be *their* season. I began to predict that a return to normal training – or anything like it – would be unlikely before the end of winter. All I could do (to continue to 'be', or 'feel like' a martial artist) was hope, and make speculative plans. Plan A and Plan B; best-case and worst-case scenarios. I wagered that privately owned clubs would be able to reopen their doors before classes held in public or community sports centres. I started to research which clubs I could possibly get to, and to speculate about when the time would be right. I did my research (in this case, AKA fantasizing), made my plans (AKA: 'wishful thinking'), composed my narrative (preserved my self-perception).

Even before the 'second wave' arrived in autumn 2020 I had already accepted that it would all have to be deferred until next year, and next year felt like a very long way away. Even then, a voice in my head told me that I was *still* being naively over-optimistic. Would BJJ *really* be able to return to 'normal' anytime soon? Or, in the absence of a vaccine, *ever*?

BJJ is, after all, perhaps the most physically intimate, most sweat-sharing and breath-exchanging of all the martial arts, and hence a hotbed for the spread of infection. And, even if classes did reopen 'properly', could I really risk going, with a clear conscience? Members of my family have respiratory and other health problems. Could I risk infecting them? And what about me? Sure, I may irrationally want to believe that I am immortal and invincible, and *maybe* I might only get a mild or asymptomatic dose. But 'what if…'? And what about 'long-COVID' – in which recovery is interminable, with enduring aftereffects of respiratory problems and fatigue? Do I really want to risk that?

Acceptance, or Ossification?

Recap. In 2019 a domestic crisis had transformed my practice of martial arts. Martial arts had long provided me with ever-unfolding sources of enrichment, pleasure, exercise, stress relief, identity construction, and so much more. But, through no fault of their own (thanks, rather, to the effects of a reactive attachment disorder within my family), they had been turned into sources of extra stress, creating day-to-day difficulty, and putting pressure on my parental obligations.

In the face of so many obstacles, I had taken time out, to pause and reflect on *why I was training martial arts at all*. I reflected at length and asked myself what I was getting from my current training – indeed, from training *per se* – and whether that was what I wanted, or needed, at this stage in my life. I came to the conclusion that my martial arts practices had become commitments, obligations and responsibilities that were now in a sense holding me back from developing in different directions, and that were causing more problems than they were solving. At the same time, I felt strongly that (1) I wanted to learn something entirely new, and (2) that I needed to train on my terms and at times that suited me, not someone else. This realisation and the choice I made to begin BJJ had proved exciting and energising. At the time it even felt emancipating. I found entire new reserves of energy, enthusiasm and excitement, both physically and intellectually.

Then, in mid-March 2020, I had to come to terms with having what felt like the love of my life taken away in the very first blush of the honeymoon period. And I constantly agonised about what would happen, what would remain after this second, globally shared, legally enforced period of abstinence and reflection. At first, I tried to carry on. I tried to train BJJ techniques with my dummies and with my teenage daughters – who were, unfortunately, neither keen, nor large or strong enough, nor skilled in any way. Moreover, what I needed was to be *taught*. And to have a training partner. So that fizzled out.

Of course, I had other options. I had decades of pugilistic experience to draw upon. I could practice and perfect the skills I already had. But kicking, punching and weapons training were the very things I had decided to move away from only months before. They no longer excited me. Punching a punchbag or swinging sticks around in this context was no substitute for what I wanted to do. In fact, such activities only served to remind me starkly of what I was currently *not* able to do. So, my martial arts training ground to a halt. Even taiji – which I have practiced consistently since the day I submitted my PhD in March 2001 – held no appeal. Was I 'accepting' that this was all over and done? It did not feel like 'acceptance', or 'coming to terms'. At least, not at first.

Therapy

If there is such a thing as comfort eating, there is also comfort exercising, comfort training. As a child I was surrounded by my father's free-weights. I kept them in my bedroom from an early age, and had first tried to use them when I was at primary school. In fact, my love of weightlifting has repeatedly derailed my martial arts training – especially during my teens and twenties. Far too often, I have chosen weight training over martial arts training. During lockdown I reverted to form. I even reverted to archaic and pre-scientific approaches to weight-training, finding comfort in doing the 'three sets of ten' of my youth.

At first, I told myself that I was weight-training for strength and joint mobility in preparation for a return to BJJ. I told myself I would supplement this with yoga for flexibility – again, for BJJ. But after a while, these initial justifications began to fade. Soon, I was merely weightlifting, if not 'for its own sake', then at least for health, strength and fitness reasons that no longer made reference to 'martial arts'. I did return to regular taiji practice, but principally for flexibility. I get bored of yoga and any other kind of stretching routine very quickly. Taiji keeps me as flexible as I need to be. It also helps recovery from other kinds of exercise, and (crucially) taiji always gives me a sense of (what we too easily label) 'wellbeing'.

There are many ways to describe and account for the sense of wellbeing produced by taiji. There are many explanatory vocabularies. However, in broadly conventional medical terms, physiologically it can be said to relate, at least in part, to the ways that taiji's relaxed, controlled and measured breathing and coordinated movement stimulates the parasympathetic nervous system (the 'rest and digest' system). As well as taiji, other practices, such as gentle pranayama, meditation, qigong, yoga, and even things like sunbathing or taking warm showers all generate a sense of wellbeing via the stimulation of the parasympathetic nervous system in similar ways [Tai et al. 2018; Figueroa, Demeersman, and Manning 2012; Lu, Hui-Chan, and Tsang 2016; Gerritsen and Band 2018; Chin and Kales 2019].

Higher-impact practices are said to stimulate the sympathetic nervous system, by exposing the body to stress. In martial arts training, the most obvious source of such stress/stimulation is sparring (although 'drilling' with weapons can also be highly stressful in this way). However, in my experience, there is something quite unique about BJJ 'rolling' (sparring) in this regard. This is because rolling is not driven by the aim of point-scoring or even gaining a knockout. It is often described as an activity which ends in the 'submission' of an opponent (exemplified by one person 'tapping out' to signal their submission). But, as far as the human brain is concerned, rolling is experienced quite directly as a fight for life.[2] This is not least because a primary target in BJJ is your partner's ability to breathe. Even when not actively pursuing a choke or stranglehold, partners will often try to crush the breath out of the other person (using bodyweight, knees, feet or hands to press down onto chest, abdomen or neck, etc), even if only to distract or debilitate an opponent so as to achieve another outcome, such as an arm or leg lock, for instance. It is this fight for breath that most acutely stimulates the sympathetic (fight or flight) nervous system.

Since every challenging BJJ roll produces the feeling of a fight for life, the end of a session is like the aftermath of a near-death experience, with all of the attendant exhaustion, elation, and camaraderie that goes along with surviving such encounters. A BJJ saying goes, 'if you don't roll, you don't know'. This has a range of possible meanings, but prime among them is that those who have never trained BJJ cannot begin to grasp its appeal, its feel, and its profound psychological and emotional effects. In a very real sense, BJJ can easily be regarded as a kind of therapy. The question is one of who it is that needs BJJ as therapy, and why.[3]

The contemporary condition (whether figured as modern or postmodern) has often been characterised as one permeated by sedentary media consumption, work-stress, insecurity, work/life imbalance, information overload, consumerism and indoor living [Žižek 2001; Bowman 2007]. The so-called 'developed', 'Western' world of consumer societies, neoliberal policies and deregulated economies, are acknowledged to be the cradle of 'diseases of affluence'. Part of the background noise of this environment is generalised anxiety. One biological feature of chronic anxiety has been said to involve the constant low-level 'running' or 'leaking' of aspects of the sympathetic nervous system – manifesting in the anxiety-sufferer's inability to 'switch off' feelings of stress and anxiety [Nestor 2020]. Activities that directly stress the mind and body – such as intense exercise and extreme experiences – have been connected with 'correcting' this constant 'leak'. The argument is that they may do so by, in a sense, giving the body a dose of 'real' (physical and/or psychological) stress, which thereby 'reminds' the body what stress actually looks and feels like. This thereby allows the organism to 'recalibrate' and switch off anxiety-producing chemicals in the absence of 'real' physical stressors [McKeown 2015; Nestor 2020]. Short-term, low-level doses of the kinds of stimulation that would cause lasting damage or even death in prolonged exposure is called hormesis, or hormetic stress [Hof 2020].[4]

2 BJJ-themed t-shirts often include the phrase 'tap, snap or nap', which indicate the ultimate endpoints of BJJ rolling: you have to tap (submit) because if you don't, then either something will snap (i.e., dislocate or break) or you will lose consciousness (nap). Rolling with an equally or more skilled partner in BJJ is experienced – neurologically, physiologically, psychologically – as a fight for life.

3 DS Farrer's recent article 'Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu is Therapy' does not deal directly with this almost literal therapeutic dimension [Farrer 2019]. Farrer either ignores this dimension or treats it as an unstated starting point – something so obvious that it need not be engaged directly, preferring as he does a more theoretically diverse approach. However, my sense is that all studies could benefit from engaging with the biological, chemical, neurological and psychological dimensions in play here.

4 Far be it from me to indulge in biological essentialism, or to regard 'nature' or 'biology' as trumping 'culture'. I have regularly critiqued this impulse. Rather, as Sloterdijk has put it, 'From the start, nature and culture are linked by a broad middle ground of embodied practices' [Sloterdijk 2013: 11]. In the same text, with reference to nature-vs-nurture debates, Sloterdijk observes: 'It has been stated often enough in endless discussions on the difference between natural and cultural phenomena – and the methods of their scientific investigation – that there are no direct routes from the one sphere to the other' [10]. However, he argues: 'In truth, the crossing from nature to culture and vice versa has always stood wide open. It leads across an easily accessible bridge: the practising life. People have committed themselves to its construction since they came into existence – or rather, people only came into existence by applying themselves to the building of said bridge' [11].

Using this vocabulary: in my life, taiji had long been my one-stop-shop for the parasympathetic stimulation route to 'feelings of wellbeing'. BJJ was my recently discovered *sine qua non* for a sympathetic nervous system stimulation route to the same (or equivalent) 'wellbeing' holy grail. Their effects on my physical, mental and emotional health meant that they were undoubtedly forms of 'therapy'. One had been taken away by the pandemic. This was the source of profound existential disturbance for me. And it made me wonder, more broadly, what might happen when such forms of therapy – specifically, activities that may not even be recognised by practitioners *as* therapy – are removed?

If martial arts 'answer a need', and if that need is something that predated and that will outlive 'martial arts' as an answer, the question is: what other answers to that need might present themselves? Ultimately, that is: what might happen to martial arts (and the identities of 'martial artists') if these alternative solutions turn out to feel, to be or to work just as well, or perhaps even 'better' than martial arts had before?

My speculation is that choosing to practice martial arts involves investing in the relevant social categories ('martial arts', 'martial artists'), and that this identification plays a huge role. Phrased differently, one might say that conscious motivations and identifications are key. The salient question is, what will happen to people's conscious motivations around martial arts in the wake of the social and psychological metamorphoses precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic, especially given that social distancing may remain a key dimension to preventing the spread of COVID-19 – something that, by the same token, is essentially a death knell for many martial arts?

PART TWO: MOTORS AND MOTIVATIONS

Motivation seems key. Motivations seem *prima facie* fundamental to people's decisions as to whether or not to practice martial arts. But, the issue of declared or professed motivations opens out onto many obstacles, contradictions, and undecidables - for both researchers and 'motivated' practitioners alike. Indeed, the topic of motivations is a pragmatic, philosophical and theoretical minefield. On the one hand, simply asking people about their motivations seems like an obvious thing to do vis-à-vis finding out why they do what they do. But, on the other hand, there may be reasons to conclude that perhaps people are constitutively incapable of knowing their own motivations, or *why* they do what they do.

Motivational Deficit

Studies of martial arts uptake and practice are often formulated in terms of motivations [Meyer and Bittmann 2018]. Methodologically, such studies approach the matter via people's own sense and statements of their conscious decisions about *why* they choose to do something. However, the problem here is that any consciously expressed motive, motivation or stated intention is at best merely one of several possible stories we might tell ourselves, or others, about ourselves. Sometimes such tales are told in all sincerity; sometimes they are tendentiously selected and edited collections of half-truths, packaged and repackaged, retooled and redeployed differently, to suit different contexts. *Motivations are narratives, and narratives are composed, not confessed.* The statement of a motivation is a construct, not a datum. The methodological implication here is that too great a focus on conscious statements of motivation may be limited and limiting for researchers. Such declarations can easily involve elements of delusory or ego-gratifying self-construction, romantic or cynical self-promotion, *ex post facto* rationalisation, and so on.

There is more than one way to problematise the validity or viability of motivations as the way to try to learn about the reasons for people's actions and activities. For instance, much has been made of Sigmund Freud's discussion of the hypnotised subject who is told under hypnosis that, when they wake, they must walk around the edges of a room, and not directly across it. After hypnosis, the subject is instructed to walk directly across the room but conforms to the instruction given while they were under hypnosis – and walks around the edge. Upon being quizzed about why they did not just walk straight across the room, such subjects give all kinds of rationalisation for their unusual behaviour. All of these are grounded in claims about their own 'conscious' decisions, motivations and intentions: 'I wanted to…', 'I needed to…', 'I thought I would just…', etc. The Freudian point is that the ego *thinks* it is in control, but it is not necessarily even *aware* of what motivates actions

[Weber 2000; Hall 2002; Farrer 2018; 2019]. Given the role played by factors of which we remain unconscious, our declared intentions, motives and motivations cannot be trusted.

The poststructuralist deconstruction of intentionality, led by Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes, took things even further. The ultimate implications of poststructuralist arguments about motivations and intentions are that not only are we not in control of the ultimate meanings of our actions, but also that we may not even necessarily be animated by the intention of having meanings in the first place [Husserl and Derrida 1962; Derrida 1981; Barthes 1977]. By the time we get to later poststructuralist work, the erstwhile human world often looks not only very 'machinic,' but also entirely lacking a mechanic [Protevi 2001].

Louis Althusser had already summed up much of this with his formulation: 'History is a process without a Subject or a Goal' [Althusser 1976: 99]. As Althusser explains: History 'does not have a Subject, in the philosophical sense of the term, but a *motor*'. Some may disagree with his contention that 'the given circumstances in which "men" act as subjects under the determination of social relations are the product of class struggles', and that class struggle is the 'motor' of *all* activity [99]. But once we acknowledge that there are complex social forces and relations acting on the contexts of our lives, many of which we may have no conscious awareness of and certainly no control over, the net result is the same. The analytical status of 'motivation' and 'intention' becomes opaque. Certainly, motivations and intentions exist, yet perhaps they must be treated not like the hand of God, but – to use Barthes' image – like 'a figure in the carpet' – i.e., a part of the rich tapestry of the context, but not a uniquely determining factor.

Maybe what we tell ourselves and others about ourselves may at most reflect the current condition of our narcissism. Certainly, there are methodological problems involved in confirming whether anyone's spoken representation of themselves matches their inner model, and whether either this representation or that self-model are adequate to any other 'reality' as verified by any other means. Put differently: if we base interpretations only on testimonials or interviews, we might never know with certainty whether we are hearing the truth, nor whether that declared or felt truth is actually correct, valid or reliable by any other measure. This is perhaps especially so when we get into the murky waters of accounts of *why* we do something.

From this perspective, the methodological primacy of asking practitioners about their motivations recedes. The issue may be resolved not by what we tell ourselves about our motivations. It may relate more to the question of what need a practice meets – a need that may exist outside of consciousness, or one that may defy clear or accurate verbal expression. Our rationalisations for our activities may well be alibis and pretexts whose real motors operate entirely outside of our consciousness.

Post-Therapeutic Stress Disorder

This is not to suggest that we are all automata. It is, in the end, merely to suggest that the question of *why* people think they do something may not only be less verifiable but possibly even less pertinent than the question of *what they get* from it. The distance between the perceived/declared motivation and what is actually derived could account for why people's declared motivations change over time ('I initially started because X, but now I do it because Y'). Obviously, before beginning, people don't necessarily know in any meaningful sense either what they are after or what they will get. You never know until you experience something what it will be like for you. But perhaps more significantly, it seems important to pose the possibility that *people may never really 'know' what they are 'getting', even when they are in the process of getting it.*

My intention in proposing this is not to disparage studies of intention and motivation (which have many valid aspects and make a range of contributions); but rather to try to capture a dimension to the question of what is 'got' from practice that exceeds the 'motivations' paradigm. Ultimately, while I want to enquire into similar issues, I believe we need to start from a different position or set of premises. Specifically, I want to propose that the conscious discourse of agents, and their conscious ways of conceptualising and articulating what a practice 'gives' does not necessarily capture a host of dimensions. Simply put, the discourse of conscious intentions does not capture the complete character of the transactions taking place.

Although practitioners may make reference to motivations ranging from self-defence to losing weight to gaining a black belt and so on, perhaps such rationalisations often fail to see, grasp, capture or communicate the 'real' reasons, which perhaps need to be formulated in different vocabularies (from the sociological to the philosophical to the psychological to the biological), rather than with reference to unitary or coherent models of motivations. At the very least, if we want to continue to work with a motivation/intention paradigm, it is important to incorporate awareness of the fact that there will be multiple incomplete, incompatible and contradictory levels of 'motivation' active *at the same time*, including some that are not present to conscious thought or able to find expression in words. Ritual, habit, community, identity, fantasy, as well as chemical, sociological, cultural,

economic, traditional, and other factors can all be less than conscious or inexpressible and should all be borne in mind when studying 'intentions'.

Given the functional complexity, multiplicity and possibly even the inexpressibility of what practices like martial arts 'give' to their practitioners, it is likely that losing martial arts practice during the pandemic will, at the very least, cause 'problems' for the practitioner. Stages of grief will be experienced. Substitute practices will be sought.

Switching to different sorts of practice may induce more than temporary changes. Changes may go beyond practical aspects of day-to-day routines, and morph into different values, enjoyments, investments, identifications, apperceptions and senses of identity. Indeed, in the face of the replacement of 'full' martial arts practice by collections of substitute practices – stretching, running, meditating, and so on – it may well only be personal reference to a residual sense of identity and motivation ('I am a martial artist, I do martial arts') that will keep martial arts 'alive'. Phrased the other way around: in the absence of full, formal group classes, and in the presence of substitute and alternative activities that feed different dimensions of the needs formerly satisfied by martial arts training, it may well be the very identity of 'martial arts' that is in jeopardy – or, at least, in metamorphosis.

The ultimate question is how durable this identificatory/motivational dimension is, and how well 'being a martial artist' and 'doing martial arts' will continue to measure up in comparison to more widely available alternative or substitute activities in a transformed environment. So, the pragmatic question is, what happens when the very possibility of being able to 'do' martial arts, or to 'be' a martial artist, are blocked for an indefinite amount of time?

In my case, in coming to terms with the absence of BJJ, I experimented with many possible replacement activities. Eventually, I constructed a combination of activities that in some senses seem to compensate for the absence of BJJ. It has already crossed my mind more than once that the pleasures and rewards of my new regimen may even come to jeopardise my planned return to BJJ in the future. So successful have my new-found practices and routines become in meeting my physical and psychological needs that henceforth I may question the need to leave the house to go to a formal taught martial arts class at all. And I may not be alone in thinking and feeling like this. This is a potential shared transformation that is perhaps the biggest threat to martial arts practice as we know it.

To make sense of the arrangement I came to, and to reflect on whether this is merely my *individual* solution or whether it has *wider* significance, it seems important to reflect on what it is that made BJJ into one of the most popular and fastest growing martial arts in the world (pre-COVID-19), and to think through what it seems to give to its practitioners, in terms other than facile 'health and fitness' or easy 'self-defence' or 'sport' formulations.

Proxy Religions

BJJ is (or was, pre-COVID-19) the world's fastest growing martial art. Understanding the reasons for its popularity and the implications of the spread of BJJ around the world as it penetrated and colonised the most intimate areas of the hearts and minds, identities and subjectivities, and daily lives of every one of its practitioners remains an important task for scholars of martial arts, physical culture and society. Its most well-known origin narrative gives it a mythic status, established by the monumental success of its practitioners in the first UFC events, and the revolution it precipitated in the world of martial arts in terms of revealing the need for martial artists and fighters to 'learn groundfighting'. However, this is only a small part of the explanation for BJJ's global appeal. Most practitioners are not competitive martial artists. Most turn to BJJ for reasons other than sport – and they stick with it for reasons other than those that led them to it in the first place. In short, BJJ is not merely popular because it is an essential component of MMA – which is today the world's most lucrative combat sport. Rather, with or without MMA, BJJ attains a very different status for its practitioners.

Words often used by practitioners include 'spiritual', 'life-changing', 'lifestyle', and 'way of life'. Public discourse on BJJ, in the form of the published and broadcast words of celebrity practitioners, news stories and non-specialist commentary on the practice, suggests that BJJ's unique appeal relates to a number of interlocking features of its physical practice. Firstly, it gives access to forms of intimate intersubjective encounter that are impossible elsewhere in life. These encounters stage life-and-death scenarios in controlled environments that teach the management of fear and aggression, transform one's relationship to pain and discomfort, and even to the limitations and capacities of one's own body, while also producing myriad forms of satisfaction and fostering almost immediate companionship with erstwhile strangers [Spencer 2011]. At the same time, BJJ offers a superlative iteration of an embodied philosophy of non-violence (or 'the lesser violence'), one that is not dissimilar to other martial arts such as taiji or aikido, but that supersedes these older forms in offering practitioners experiences and 'results' that align with contemporary health, fitness, beauty, strength and mobility ideals, neoliberal ideologies of self-investment,

self-management, self-reliance, and so on, as well as alignment with appealing philosophical worldviews as diverse as Stoicism and Taoism.

This quick sketch indicates something of the range of attractions and rewards involved in BJJ practice. Of course, there is a chance that this account may be too generalising. After all, can BJJ really be the 'same thing' – the same experience, with the same implications – for all practitioners, across all contexts? It is a poststructuralist cliché to assert that nothing means exactly the same thing twice [Derrida 1981; 1987]. Nonetheless, it is possible to agree with the idea that it will be at least slightly different for everyone, and yet to discern patterns of regularities in reiterated meanings and recurring values [Laclau and Mouffe 1985]. For, although a practice or a thing may not necessarily mean the same things across all contexts, or serve the same social functions everywhere, what it 'is' or 'does' is likely to relate to a familiar position within a predictable constellation of possibilities.

It is reasonable to affirm that there are regularly recurring key coordinates related to what BJJ may mean/represent, be, and do for its practitioners (which, of course, suggests some of the ways that 'motivation-focused' studies are indeed valuable). For instance, both the media discourse about it and my own ('autoethnographic') experience suggest that something specific to the practice induces a kind of 'spontaneous philosophy' [Macherey 2009] or 'organic ideology' [Žižek 2001; Bowman 2007]. The philosophies and ideologies of BJJ may vary or modulate across cultures, societies, classes, times and spaces [Farrer 2019], but there are some remarkably regular recurring features. These features relate to the explicit evocation of self-knowledge *and* community bonding, the values of embracing humility *and* hierarchy, as well as embodied subjective wellbeing *and* a kind of proto-'spirituality'.

The recurrence of such nodal points structuring the discourse in similar ways across multiple contexts is revealing – not just of BJJ as a globally popular practice – whose logic of spread is arguably similar in many ways to yoga [Singleton 2010] – but also of the ways that physical practices can morph into (proto-)religious practices [Spatz 2015]. Of course, we should hesitate before representing martial arts such as BJJ as being either 'spiritual' practices, 'cults', or neo-, quasi- or crypto-religions. Yet the rules, principles and rationales inherent to, or associated with, the practice of 'pure' BJJ (as opposed to its incorporation into MMA) do seem to involve ingredients and factors that induce a kind of evangelical worldview. Perhaps a study of BJJ, approached neither as an invented tradition nor as an example of orientalist misrepresentation, but rather as a modern, secular, sporting, health and self-defence practice, could cast new light on how, why and what it means to say that martial arts can become spiritual or religious practices.

None of this has been my focus, or could now be within the remit of this article. But, this quick evocation of the rewards and gratifications of BJJ – ranging from friendship to intimacy to improved physicality to changes in psychological dispositions potentially aligned with 'spirituality' – serves merely to give some context to the discussion of what kinds of practice might appear as potential 'replacements' when BJJ is no longer an option.

Desire

Peter Sloterdijk has proposed that 'spiritual' and even 'religious' practices are at root physical practices whose meanings and understandings have been wrenched in a certain direction. More precisely (and problematically), he argues that 'religion does not exist' and that there are only 'variously misinterpreted anthropotechnic practice systems' [Sloterdijk 2013: 84]. Translated into the context of martial arts practices, one might therefore say that there is no *necessary* connection between martial arts practices, spirituality and/or religion, but that it remains eminently possible that such connections might be made. The meditativeness of qigong and the mindfulness of taiji movements are both conducive to states of consciousness, perception, proprioception and interioception that might easily fall into the category 'spiritual' even for the most secular of modern students. The shared physicality, intimate sociality and institutionally managed messages of community generate a sense of shared identity, ideology and community in practices like BJJ which might easily be aligned with cults or religions.

This does not mean that in the absence of BJJ, practitioners will flock to gurus or swell church congregations. But it does indicate the kinds of *structures of feeling* that they may crave [Williams and Orrom 1954; Gregg and Seigworth 2010; Birchall and Hall 2006]. In the purely physical exercise realm, with the closure of BJJ schools, my social media feeds overwhelmingly suggest that many practitioners seem to have turned to yoga (and yoga-like practices) as a replacement activity. Given the requirement for flexibility, many BJJ practitioners already incorporated yoga and yoga-like routines into their weekly schedules. So, the route from BJJ to yoga was already established and well-travelled. However, this is not a simple two-way street. BJJ practitioners may often turn to yoga as a supplement to their practice. Conversely, there are no necessary reasons why yoga practitioners would turn to BJJ as a supplement to theirs. This is not to say that there are no yoga practitioners who take up BJJ. It is rather to say that while there is a *prima facie* obviousness to the supplementing of BJJ with yoga(like) practices, there would have to be a very specific 'martial arts motivation' for a yoga practitioner to take up BJJ.

This perhaps says something about the status of yoga in the contemporary landscape or ecosystem of physical practices [Singleton 2010; Spatz 2015] – at least, under conditions of lockdown or situations in which solitary activities in smaller private spaces dominate our lives. Yet the risk for the practice of martial arts like BJJ is not merely that it may take many years for the world to become safe enough for unfettered practice to resume. It is also that, in the absence of regular classes or safe-training, and in the presence of a smorgasbord of alternative practices of physical culture, it is not merely the *opportunity* but also the very *desire* that might be lost – or transformed.

Perhaps the ultimate question is the constitution and maintenance of desire. What makes people desire martial arts? What avenues will remain visible or viable to move practically into the orbit of that desire now and in the future?

Identification

I have argued many times that martial arts is a discursive entity produced principally by media [Bowman 2010; 2011; 2014]. Nor am I alone in this [Brown 1997; Hunt 2003; Goto-Jones 2016; Trausch 2018]. Film and television generated the figure of 'the martial artist' and put this identity out there as an option to be desired and worked towards. Without the media invention of martial arts and its incarnation in the various figures of martial artists, entire generations would not have identified as martial artists and would not have chosen one or another martial art as a path or practice.

The good news for martial arts is that it seems unlikely that the mediatization of martial arts will end simply because the pandemic has paused and problematised many kinds of training. Films will still need fight scenes [Kendrick 2019]. Fight games continue to be core staples of computer gaming [Goto-Jones 2016; Trausch 2018]. In the West, MMA, boxing and wrestling continue to be too big a set of businesses to expect investors and entrepreneurs to walk away without a fight (so to speak). Moreover, in countries like China and South Korea, it must be remembered, practices like wushu and taekwondo remain major and heavily supported strings to their diplomatic bows; integral to performances of national identity, and stitched into numerous social institutions – cultural, commercial and educational, from museums to schools to cultural industries to martial arts faculties within sports universities, and more. So, images of martial arts will continue to proliferate. Because of all of this, martial arts will continue to be available as sources of fantasy, identification, ambition and identity construction, internationally.

But there will be mutations. Maybe the growth of BJJ will slow. Maybe it will atrophy. By the same token, maybe we will enter a new boom time for more distanced practices – weapons-based practices such as HEMA, heavily solo styles, such as taiji, or solo-kata aspects of karate, well-covered styles such as kendo, Ludosport, maybe even archery, and so on. We will see reinventions, reorientations: maybe a reduced focus on sport here, an amplified awareness of 'mindfulness', 'breath-cultivation', maybe even 'qi' there [Palmer 2007], and so on.

In the face of the globalisation of a potentially fatal respiratory infection, the growth of interest in matters such as breathing, as well as cardiac, respiratory and circulatory health, must surely be regarded as *overdetermined*, or as *symptomatic* of wider contextual factors and forces. Can it be considered mere random chance that in July 2020, a national British newspaper published a feature article on a new book called *Breath* [Nestor 2020], a book that I immediately felt compelled to buy? Or that this book introduced me to what is called the Wim Hof Method – a health-focused practice based on breathing exercises combined with cold exposure (cold showers and/or ice baths, etc.), all of which, individually or combined, generate feelings ranging from intoxication and euphoria to sharpened perception and physical control, and which seem able to reduce feelings of anxiety [Hof, Rosales, and Robinson 2012; Hof, Jong, and Brown 2017; Hof 2020]? Certainly not. The international spread of breath-focused health practices during the COVID-19 pandemic is perfectly understandable.

When I began to practice the Wim Hof Method, I would refer to it as 'my Wim Hof Methadone'. This is because if I were addicted to BJJ, now 'illegal', this provided a kind of 'legal' substitute for something I had been getting from BJJ. The practice involved in the Wim Hof Method is quick and simple: one short session of breathing and breath holding sequences per day, plus a period of cold exposure (such as a cold shower or ice bath) per day, along with some basic yoga-style exercises as optional extras [Hof, Rosales, and Robinson 2012; Hof, Jong, and Brown 2017; Hof 2020].

Maybe the breathing and full and empty breath retentions have the same physiological effect as fighting against a chokehold. Maybe cold exposure is experienced on some deep level of the body as essentially equivalent to fighting for one's life against an opponent. Either way, on reading about the Wim Hof Method in Nestor's book, *Breath* [Nestor 2020], I initially tried it on a whim. I was immediately pleased with the 'natural high' effect of the breath exercises. This new sensory hit in a period of lockdown and isolation gave me enough reason to continue. One morning, I followed the breath-practice with taiji. This was quite a profound experience: my sense of perception seemed altered, slightly psychedelic yet precise; the world seemed dreamlike and yet my

movements and focus were crystal clear; I knew I was moving much slower than normal, but simultaneously felt entirely unclear about speed (in fact, I was unsure about the concept of speed *tout court*); and my movement and perception seemed uncommonly fluid: I felt more in control than ever, without needing or trying to be in control at all. I was hooked.

In those early days, I also became keenly aware that something had switched off my anxiety. I had read that Wim Hof Method could do that, but hadn't realised how enabling – how emancipating – it would be. I felt it intensely on a daytrip to a beauty spot with the family. I noticed I wasn't worried – about what time it was, about where we were, what the plan was, about our group dynamic, about what would happen if this or that were to happen, and so on. This was new for me.

Not constantly worrying, I found I could start doing. My desire to train taiji and to resume 'martial arts' (albeit solo) returned full force. I invested in a new punchbag and a new floor-ceiling-bag (AKA top-and-bottom ball), and loved the practice. I now accepted solo training – 'for as long as' – in the age of COVID-19. I was once again able to make my preferred identity affirmations about myself to myself: 'I am still a martial artist – I am still who I wanted to be'. Even though everything had changed – perhaps even the form, content, and meaning of 'martial arts' and 'martial artist'.

However, by the same token, it is no longer clear whether I now 'need' to return to a formal class of any kind – something that would signal the demise of my BJJ practice, if not my taiji or my percussive/pugilistic forms of training, in which I have enough years of training to feel able to train productively by myself, to some degree.

Being Singular Plural

Clearly, the reasons for people's interest, attention, desire and investment (or 'motivations') must all be approached in terms of the backdrop of broader cultural movements and complex moments. Today's cultural conjuncture is perhaps as strongly informed by media messages as it is by COVID-19 restrictions. For instance, since the nostalgic teen karate series *Cobra Kai* migrated to the mainstream in 2020 (moving from YouTube's less popular paid service to the near ubiquitous Netflix), I have had people contact me to ask if I could teach karate to their teenage children. The fact that I have not done karate since I was 14 suggests much about people's general literacy around martial arts. But more importantly it suggests that the (entirely non-referential and often counter-factual) 'karate' of *Cobra Kai* has been capable of capturing and redirecting (or constituting and organising) the desires of a new generation of potential martial artists. We may yet even see the emergence of 'actual' Cobra Kai classes and Miyagi-Do dojos around the world in the not too distant future.

Pointing out the power and place of different media in stimulating, generating and organising desires in and around bodily practices, belief systems and aesthetic and ideological lifeworlds such as martial arts, has been a key part of my intellectual project in the field of martial arts studies, since day one of my involvement in the academic discourse on martial arts. It gives me hope that today, when it is easy to feel as if are standing on a precipice, peering over the brink, expecting to see the void, all alone and all on our own, we still see the UFC, Netflix ninjas and teenage karate kids. These images, which so many 'serious' martial arts practitioners regard as an embarrassment, are actually key to understanding a great deal about the constitution and continuation of our practice.

We began with two epigraphs: one from Ovid, the other from Kafka; and the observation that while, on the one hand, Ovid's *Metamorphosis* depicts changes taking place for clear reasons that can be easily allegorized; in Kafka's *Metamorphosis* change is essentially obscure, impenetrable, uncanny and irreducibly disturbing. In our own present moment, it may feel like we are living through the latter: We might feel like we have become alien(ated) objects, locked indoors, prisoners, inscrutable to self and others. But I feel confident that we will ultimately – inevitably – turn our metamorphosis into the former.

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