



The endurance of PE (hr Henrik Ling): Persistence of Ancient Ideals in the Lingian System of Physical Education

Ancient sport bore a face of Janus, poised between *sacrum* and *profanum*. It was at once a ritual expression of divine honor and civic unity, as well as a theatre of violence, exploitation and political display.

This duality is reflected in modern receptions. Contemporary scholarship has long foregrounded Pierre de Coubertin, whose Olympic revival mobilized Hellenic ideals as a symbolic banner for cultural exchange and peace. While his prominence is undeniable, I reason, he paid more heed to symbolism as a way to legitimize his movement, rather than historical continuity. The other face is the less examined but equally enduring reception that took shape in Sweden. There Pehr Henrik Ling's system of physical education embedded Greek and Roman principles into the national Swedish culture of *friluftsliv*. The pioneer

emerges almost as a kind of *paraleipsis* within the history of sport – scarcely invoked, yet precisely through this overlook, rendered all the more striking.

This article turns to that overlooked face, examining how Pehr Henrik Ling's system of physical education embedded ancient ideals into Swedish culture. Through this analysis, I aim to shed light on Ling's legacy. Still alive in Sweden's holistic approach to education and the ethos of *friluftsliv*, it serves as a continuity of antiquity as relevant today as the canonized Olympic revival.

From decline to renewal

Ling's framework arose in a Sweden scarred by wars, national decline and the loss of Finland in 1809. A collective regeneration was in urgent demand – both physical, moral, educational and civic. As

the pioneer, later dubbed as the father of Swedish physical education, Ling's model took shape while he worked as a fencing master, observing the therapeutic effects of structured movement. He drew insights from fencing, anatomy and physiology, enriched by his classical learning and Rousseau's natural education – a philosophy itself deeply embedded in ancient ideals²².

In his work *Gymnastikens Allmänna Grunder*, Ling reasons his model aims to bring physical education the same importance as it once held for Plato, Hippocrates or Galen²³. Thus, with the support of King Karl XIII, it finally materialized as the Gymnastiska Centralinstitutet in Stockholm in 1813 – the first state-supported institution of physical education in the world.

The model was articulated in a four-fold manner – pedagogical, aesthetic, medical and military. Each of those branches were deeply embedded in classical thought but reframed through nineteenth-century medicine and pedagogy, constituting a synergized shaping of not just athletes but, more importantly, healthy, strong, morally upright, and harmonious citizens as well²⁴.

Pedagogisk gymnastik
– The pedagogical branch

For Ling the pedagogical branch was the foundation of his framework. Its goal, as he put it, was to teach the individual to bring the body under the rule of the will²⁵. Essentially, addressing movement as a way for the body to educate and shape the soul.

Ling systematized exercises into gradual but natural progressions, simple to complex and aligned with each individual's age and capacity. From sitting upright with a proper posture to walking, running, jumping, climbing, lifting, swinging, balancing, swimming – each movement served a greater purpose for the person in question²⁶. For instance, Ling viewed that teaching a child to sit upright, walk steadily, and breathe, simultaneously fostered their attentiveness and steadiness of mind. Namely, he insisted each movement gained necessity in relation to the organism's unity, just as letters and figures gain meaning in science²⁷. Disorder in the body mirrored a disorder in the soul, and therefore the outcome of an insufficient or improperly adapted physical education consisted of either feebles (*veklingar*) or reckless brawlers (*slagskämpar*)²⁸.

22 P.H. Ling, *Gymnastikens Allmänna Grunder*, Uppsala 1834, s. 19–20.

23 *Ibid.*, s. 10: “[...] ty då torde gymnastiken engång hos nordbon återfå samma stora betydelse som den bade i Platos, Hippokrats och Galeni sinne.”

24 *Ibid.*, s. 78.

25 *Ibid.*: “Pedagogisk gymnastik, förmedelst hvilken menniskan lär sig att sätta sin kropp under sin egen vilja.”

26 *Ibid.*, s. 95.

27 *Ibid.*

28 *Ibid.*, s. 89–90.

What Ling cultivates in regard to this branch, is not simply nineteenth-century innovation, but a prominent dialogue with antiquity. His multifaceted education of the individual depicted here is an echo, if not a continuity, of Plato's ideas conveyed in his dialogue *The Republic*. The image of *paideia*, the philosopher favors, consists of an all-rounded education of the body, soul and mind, reflecting the state of the city (*polis*)²⁹. Moreover, Plato demands with regard to early education, that *gymnastikē* and *mousikē* be held in balance, for the excess of either distorts the individual³⁰ – a fact that Ling clearly conveys.

Seamlessly interwoven with Ling's contemporary restatement is likewise the value of moderation and inner discipline – *sōphrosynē*. The principle is found throughout Greek philosophy, as well as later medical literature. Hippocrates, in his treatises on regimen, repeatedly insists that health depends on balance, systemizing the need of movement, sleep, environment and diet in equitable measures³¹.

Ästetisk gymnastik – The aesthetic branch

Aesthetic gymnastics reversed the pedagogical direction – here it was the

soul that acted on the body, transforming it into a medium of expression³². Ling described this branch of physical education as a soul and body equilibrium, integrating both philosophical and practical application. Thus, this particular branch, he reasoned, curated those whose work is to express inner life outwardly, such as actors, orators or artists³³.

The spectrum of exercises ranged broadly across the domain of body language, namely gesticulations, balance and posture. Their quintessence, laid in a harmonious conduct. Each movement was to be performed in such a way that the image of the soul (whether a thought or a feeling) could appear clearly through the body³⁴. Ling emphasised: “[...] så vida känslan, som beherrsakar kroppen, är en, måste äfven uttrycket genom hela kroppen vara en”, meaning if the feeling that governs the body is one, then the expression must likewise be one, through the whole body³⁵.

This body-soul integration bears a striking resemblance to classical notions of the body as a transparent medium of the inner self. The predecessors of Ling's ideas being, for instance, the Quintilian formative pedagogy, consistently framed the bodily training as essential in the shaping of an orator³⁶.

29 Plato, *The Republic*, ed. and trans. Allan Bloom, New York 1968, 443c-e.

30 *Ibid.*, 403c–404b.

31 Hippocrates, *Regimen in Health, in Hippocrates*, Volume IV, trans. W.H.S. Jones, London 1959, I, II, s. 209.

32 P.H. Ling, *op. cit.*, s. 207.

33 *Ibid.*

34 *Ibid.*, s. 218.

35 *Ibid.*, s. 218–219.

36 M. Edwards, J.J. Murphy, *The Oxford Handbook of Quintilian*, ed. Marc van der Poel, Oxford 2021, s. 287.

Medikalgymnastik – The medical branch

In his medical physical education, Ling once again drew on the Hippocratic and Galenic regime, adapting it to his contemporary practice. The pioneer regarded illness as a disharmony between the organism's three forces – dynamic, chemical and mechanical³⁷ – akin to the Hippocratic humoral theory³⁸.

Ling, like his ancient predecessors, prescribed movement as a remedy for restoration. It was as curative as it was preventive, cultivating resilience against future illness. The exercises were precise, often personalised, sometimes assisted by a teacher, with the aim of mobilizing stiff parts, strengthening weak organs, and calming overstrained systems³⁹.

The parallels are palpable. Hippocrates recommended exercise as medicine, as Ling recalls⁴⁰. The pioneer's innovation of institutionalizing these insights into a systematic program of therapeutic movement gave the world the first ever physiotherapy.

Militärgymnastik – the military branch

While medical gymnastics sought to restore harmony to a disordered body,

military gymnastics began from another premise, namely – the body must be prepared to endure strain, resistance, and opposition.

Ling saw strife (*strid*) as a law of all nature, viewing existence itself as a continuous conflict between life and matter⁴¹. Rooted in this belief, Ling argued that true martial training lay not in yielding to that reckless aggression, but in the disciplined cultivation of harmony, readiness, presence of mind and unshakable courage⁴².

This ideal was realized through a dualistic approach. The body, Ling taught, is divided into an active and a passive half – one wielding the weapon, the other balancing⁴³. Every weapon, in fact, embodied this principle, carrying both offensive and defensive aspects. The two halves ought to act together, synchronously, and only then could true mastery be achieved. From this conception followed a broader militaristic lesson, depicting offense and defense not as opposed forces but as complementary parts⁴⁴.

Ling's pursuit of instilling this multifaceted balance in the military branch consciously echoed classical ideals. He sought a continuousness with the values of Plato's *paideia*, especially the education of the auxiliary class and the shaping of the *thymoeides* part of the *psyche*,

37 P.H. Ling, *op. cit.*, s. 18.

38 Hippocrates, *Nature of Man, in Hippocrates*, Volume IV, trans. W.H.S. Jones, London 1959, III–IV, 11.

39 P.H. Ling, *op. cit.*, s. 129.

40 *Ibid.*, s. 130.

41 *Ibid.*, s. 105.

42 *Ibid.*, s. 108.

43 *Ibid.*, s. 107.

44 *Ibid.*, s. 108.

encompasses the whole Swedish society, painting the civic ethos of *friluftsliv* where physical education and exercise is not a spectacle but an everyday practice, woven into national identity and social life. In this sense, I argue, Ling's inheritance may be said to surpass the Olympic revival in relevance. For while Courbetin resurrected a festival, Ling secured a culture. And in an age increasingly conscious of health and education, Ling's vision in dialogue with the ancient thought may not only be historically significant, but urgently pertinent.

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