

Dancing as Making - 3: Pure Depth

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To further appreciate dancing another insightful perspective to be introduced in this lecture is based on the work of French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty whose life-long work on perception inspires a number of important and promising insights when directed towards our efforts at understanding dancing.

Philosophers, particularly phenomenologists, are interested in perception. More recently cognitive science has entered the area. So also has critical theory, that weirdly postmodern philosophical multi-disciplinary discourse. Why so much attention to perception? It has arisen as the camera obscura model of perception has been set aside. In this view, perception was seen as operating like the black box camera. The outside world enters the body through the sense organs which, acting like simple lenses, project the world outside onto a screen inside our brains and does so rather objectively. Once this old model is set aside, the study of perception invites consideration of the deepest, most complex, most profound, most elusive, most fascinating questions and ideas related to what it means to be human. The visible and the invisible, mind and body, self and other, nature and nurture, masculine and feminine, production and seduction, agency and free will, movement and cognition, consciousness and self, and just about every dual choice we can imagine are now brought into new discourse. No longer are we struggling to settle the score and announce the final results, the side of the duality that wins. We now must try to comprehend and give imagery to complicated dynamic systems, structuralities, play, “body without organs,” “body without images,” flesh and mucous, chiasm—images that project us beyond the simple substances and patterns into a contemplation of dimensions that transcend the easily graspable yet fuel and motor the concretions of our existence. Every scientific advance has philosophical implications. Every philosophical idea suggests new scientific inquiries. We must look anew at the complex interactivity of sense organs and brain processing. Synaesthesia, the intertwining of the senses, is now more important and interesting than is the study of senses isolated from one another. And forgotten or overlooked or unknown senses such as proprioceptors and visceral perception are suddenly playing central roles.

Movement, which played no part at all in the camera obscura approach to the senses, has become important, even fundamental, to every arena in the study of perception. Movement is synonymous with the dynamic character of the present interests. While these various perspectives, various research approaches, remain separable, containable, they overlap profoundly. Here too we experience a jolt. No longer is it responsible to maintain isolation in the pursuit of one’s interests; it is incumbent on us all to benefit from the overlap.

We introduced Merleau-Ponty’s “flesh ontology” before and now return to it to add depth. Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s lifelong study was accompanied by a progressive shift in his understanding of perception and its implications for being human. Late in his life Merleau-Ponty had come to a new stage in his understanding, provocatively presented in his acclaimed essay “The Intertwining—the Chiasm.” The following key passage from that essay tracks this shift.

We have to reject the age-old assumptions that put the body in the world and the seer in the body, or, conversely, the world and the body in the seer as in a box. Where are we to put the limit between the body and the world, since the world is flesh? Where in the body are we to put the seer, since evidently there is in the body only “shadows stuffed with organs,” that is, more of the visible? The world seen is not “in” my body, and my body is not “in” the visible world ultimately: as flesh applied to flesh, the world neither surrounds it nor is surrounded by it. ... there is a reciprocal insertion and intertwining of one in the other.¹

Focusing on vision we get another sense of his understanding in the following passage:

Between the alleged colors and visible, we would find anew the tissue that lines them, sustains them, nourishes them, and which for its part is not a thing, but a possibility, a latency, and a *flesh* of things.²

Notable is Merleau-Ponty's use of the words “tissue” and “flesh.” Flesh refers literally to the soft tissue that is muscle and fat that cover the bones; that flesh is subcutaneous. However, the word also means the outer surface of the human body. Thus flesh also refers to the outside of the body, the skin surface. We have in this idea of flesh then an intimacy of two things—outside and inside—that are side by side, yet the single term flesh which may refer to either inside or outside joins these two separate things as two sides of a single thing. Furthermore Merleau-Ponty jolts us by insisting that this nourishing sustaining tissue is not a thing at all, but a possibility and a latency, which he then also terms *flesh*. Flesh, while physical, is a way of grasping a relationality, a structurality, or as he puts it a possibility and a latency. This intertwining is referred to as flesh, but also as chiasm which designates a crossing place.

As flesh literally indicates the interdependence and intimacy of inside and outside—in former discussions, between exteroceptors and interoceptors; subjectivity and objectivity; touch and feeling or emotion; and so on—Merleau-Ponty goes on to project, by analogy, the same relationship between the body and the world, a relationship which he also sees as one of flesh and thus there must be “the flesh of the world.” By this point it is clear that Merleau-Ponty is no longer talking simply about perception, he is also talking about what it means to be human in a profound and startling way. The depth and gravity of his idea is clear when he identifies his idea flesh as “an ‘element’ of Being,”³ “an ultimate notion,”⁴ “the ultimate truth.”⁵

Flesh is further fleshed out by Merleau-Ponty in terms of “hinge,” “fold,” “reversibility,” “turned inside out,” as well as “dehiscence,” “intertwining,” and “chiasm.” While vision dominates as the exemplar, touch actually underlies all vision examples. One would think that touch insinuates itself more and more as Merleau-Ponty moves progressively from the camera obscura model of the senses into his exploration of the idea of flesh. Touch progressively replaces vision as exemplary.

¹ Ibid., p. 138.

² Merleau-Ponty, *Visible and Invisible* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1967), pp. 132-33.

³ Ibid., p. 139.

⁴ Ibid., p. 140.

⁵ Ibid., p. 155.

How do we perceive depth? This is a basic problem that must be considered by anyone studying the senses. In this new world of flesh, this problem offers an important opportunity to further develop imagery that allows us to understand a bit more fully and concretely. Depth then and particularly the concept “pure depth” that accompanies and arises in the discussion of depth also offers an important opportunity to gain greater insight into our inquiries of dancing.

The concept “pure depth” is discussed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty and others and it greatly fascinates me. I’m going to give something of an overview of these discussions and how “pure depth” contributes to our understanding of not only Merleau-Ponty’s *flesh*, but also to our understanding of ourselves as percipient-perceptibles, as he identified us. In the context of this discussion I am going to consider dancing as a candidate for being a powerful exemplar of “pure depth.” Turning that around, I will then consider the implications for understanding dancing more deeply when considered as “pure depth.”

To avoid the implications of a split dual structure to reality Merleau-Ponty must introduce unity and continuity among the separate parts. Inseparability among its constituents would simply collapse reality. Somehow there must be distinctive constituents of reality yet they must not exist only as separate from one another. Merleau-Ponty’s consideration of this thorny matter focuses on the arena of human perception. This makes sense given that it is through perception that we come to know the world beyond our own bodies. Perception is the fabric of our connection, the hedge against isolation. He creates a unified ontology by showing that embodiment unifies subject and object, thus overcoming the common subject-object dualism. However, to avoid the collapse of all distinction he had also to somehow accommodate separateness, that is, distance and this led to his ontology of perception, to flesh.

Distance is key, however distance must be understood relationally and this suggests “depth.” The concern with how we perceive depth is an old one, usually understood as “a line endwise to the eye,”⁶ and was thought as derivatively perceived, added to an otherwise flat and static image produced by a two-dimensional array of radiant energy on the retinal surface. Maurice Merleau-Ponty and James Gibson (among others) have rejected the classical explanation. Notably, Merleau-Ponty’s ways of resolving the issue of distance and depth then become fundamental to his flesh ontology. Depth comes to be understood as that which both allows difference and distinctness while creating a bond or connection or identity between perceiver and perceived. The exploration of depth is complex and profound.

James Gibson’s approach⁷ is environmental. For Gibson distance is an intrinsically dynamic concept that requires movement. We don’t actually see depth but rather we see one thing behind another. Movement reveals the occluding edges of objects that are separated and connected along the dimension of depth. Gibson formulates depth in terms of paradox, a “unity through disparity.” The environmental aspect of his approach is articulated in *affordance*, as he termed it. Affordance is the

⁶ From George Berkeley’s *New Theory of Vision* cited in Sue L. Cataldi, *Emotion, Depth, and Flesh: A Study of Sensitive Space* (State University of New York Press, 1993), p. 30.

⁷ James Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1986).

value and meaning of things in the environment and value and meaning are always understood in terms of the relationship to the perceiver. Thus depth is the dimension that points both to the object and to the perceiving subject. Depth is the significance of surfaces in relation to the body.⁸

Merleau-Ponty held that an essential aspect of every meaningful perception is a spatial orientation. It is always already there because it must be presupposed in the body holding some place in the world as the locale for perception. Depth is then a primordial spatial orientation. Perhaps we might enhance our understanding of Merleau-Ponty's idea here in terms of proprioception, the ability already active at birth (and surely before)⁹ of the body to locate itself and its parts in space through movement. From birth the body simply exists and orients itself in space already existing. Merleau-Ponty holds that we come into the world as perceptible bodily beings; we belong to the flesh of the world. The body is already oriented by being a body.

The body however has in its structure and behavior examples of distance and separation that are also unities. One hand touching the other hand is a favored example often contemplated by Merleau-Ponty. Another example is stereopsis, seeing a single image yet with two eyes. We, in fact, see the singular world clearly, under normal circumstances, through two eyes that "see" separate images. We can test this easily by closing first one eye then the other in a variety of situations. Difference, separation, is easily confirmed. Yet, so also is the unity of the visual image. Even vision situations in which there is a distinct disparity between the images separately seen by our two eyes get reconciled; they "snap" into place as a unified image that is nearly impossible to then willfully separate. This separation yet unity is fundamental to Merleau-Ponty's consideration of depth.

Depth at this naïve level then is understood as that dimension by which we see something from "here" that is at its place "there." The "here" and "there" are contemporary in our experience. Here and there are joined in time through their visibility and this is "depth," a space of "copresent implication." When movement is factored in, as necessary to such perception, then, very much in the same terms as Gibson's affordances, Merleau-Ponty appreciates depth as a "sensitive space," as "living movement," as "lived distance."¹⁰ Depth, in this progressive consideration, becomes increasingly profound. It is that dimension that contemporaneously unites and separates. It is "a thick view of time." Depth is the "most existential dimension."¹¹

Depth, we might call it more properly "pure depth," when taken in this most profound sense, is a dimension that is primordial, allowing the perception of distance and the value of the distant. Primordial depth, in itself, does not yet operate between objects, between perceiver and percipient. "Pure depth" is depth without distance from here.¹² In its thickness, depth preceding perception is

⁸ See Cataldi, pp. 31-34.

⁹ See Shaun Gallagher's presentation of neonate imitation, *How the Body Shapes the Mind* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005). pp. 69-73.

¹⁰ Erwin Straus clarifies, "Distance is a primal phenomenon ... there is no distance without a sensing and mobile subject; there is no sentience without distance." Quoted from his *The Primary World of Senses* in Cataldi, p. 45.

¹¹ Cataldi, p. 45.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 48.

perhaps difficult to grasp. Merleau-Ponty offers an analogy that both depends on vision and also foils vision to the point of replacing it with touch, with feeling. This lever is “dark space,” the experience of night or darkness. In darkness seeing is thwarted, yet seeing into the darkness elicits a feeling of thickness, a density, a materiality, a tangibility, an intimacy. In dark space everything is obscure and mysterious. Eugene Minkowski, an early twentieth century psychiatrist, who offered the idea of “dark space,” held that “the essence of dark space is mystery.”¹³ The experience of dark space provides a means of trying to grasp pure depth. Pure depth is depth without foreground or background, without surfaces and without any distances separating it from me. Menkowski understood dark space, which Merleau-Ponty identifies with “pure depth,” as “the depth of our being,” as “the true source of our life.”¹⁴

Pure depth is key to understanding flesh which, like pure depth, as pure depth, is always already there as precessive, that is, “the formative medium of the subject and object” and as progenitive, the “inauguration of the where and when.”¹⁵ The moving body is fundamental to flesh, because through movement flesh begins to understand itself or become aware of itself.¹⁶ Flesh, without the moving body, is only possibility, never actuality, percipience never perception. The moving body is then, as Merleau-Ponty termed it, a “percipient-perceptible,” that is, an entity possessing the power to perceive while also being capable of being perceived. The body is an intertwining of two sides, the adherence of a self-sentient side to a sensible side. The body as an intertwining blurs the boundary between the flesh of the world (depth) and our own bodily flesh. The body exists then in an ambience, a primordial given, of depth, the hidden dimension behind everything.¹⁷

This doubling is for Merleau-Ponty a reversibility. Reversibility is a way to express the interconnection among distinctions. A subject requires an object and vice versa; they are reversible; they oscillate back and forth among themselves. Movement is essential for reversibility to be realized, for occlusion to be recognizable, for perception to take place. Yet, this reversibility is never complete. This is a fascinating phase in this argument, I think. Complete reversibility would result in identity among the distinctions and a collapse of perception. Were the touching of one hand with the other to be completely reversible it would not be possible to distinguish one hand from the other. The images provided by each eye would be the same and there would be no negotiation and reconciliation between the two, no vision. The term “chiasm” here identifies this gap or cross-over space. There must remain this undetectable, in itself, space or gap or hiddenness for reversibility to be incomplete. Incomplete reversibility is not some flaw to be overcome in perception, it is rather the very motor that drives the movement of reversibility that allows for simultaneous interdependence and distance. Since the chiasm is hidden, since chiasm precedes and makes possible reversibility, it can be thought of as “depth” or better as “pure depth” as presented through the analogy of “dark space.” Chiasm, pure depth, this incompleteness is the source or condition of percipience and at the same time unifies flesh ontology.

¹³ Eugene Minkowski, *Lived Time*, (1933), p. 429, cited in Cataldi, p. 49.

¹⁴ Cataldi quoting Minkowski, p. 50.

¹⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 140, quoted in Cataldi, p. 60.

¹⁶ Cataldi, p. 61.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

I am well aware that these ideas are difficult to grasp and tend to slip from our grasp even as we lightly touch them, yet these ideas, and I believe even our way of trying to think about them, are fundamental to our understanding of ourselves as sentient beings. Keeping these ideas in mind, I want to turn now to dancing. In my consideration of dancing in these terms I want to both show how dancing may help us understand flesh ontology and also how flesh ontology may help us understand dancing in new and important ways.