

Dancing as Making – 4

Sam Gill

I want to return to my earlier discussion of dancing as a distinctive kind of making. Dancing is distinguished by the relationship between the maker and the thing made. The dancer, in dancing, makes the dance. The dance is inseparable, physically inseparable from the body of the dancer, from the body of the maker of the dance. Even in the situations where a choreographer makes up a dance that is set on the bodies of others, there is no manifest dance or work other than when bodied, when danced. The existence of any dance is in it being danced and a dance cannot be danced apart from a dancing body. The distinction between the dancer and the dance is not difficult to discern, it is not ambiguous, and it is an aspect of the very designation of dancing. So the dance is other than the dancer, while being identical with the dancer. This description of dancing surely sounds familiar having just worked through Merleau-Ponty's discussion of perception and the body in terms of his flesh ontology. It is similar, in some senses, to the examples of two hands touching or of two eyes seeing, yet the dancing body presents a fascinating new wrinkle: there is no physical separation between the two parts, dance and dancer, these are identical bodies. It is in the movement called "dancing" that the body is at once separated into dance and dancer, self and other in some respects, a distance that allows reversibility, while at once holding self and other, dance and dancer, as unified, indeed as bodies identical.

Yet, how is this possible? Here is where "pure depth" becomes important. There is an important distinction between the quotidian moving body and the dancing body. Following Merleau-Ponty we would expect that "pure depth" exists in the perceptual space in which the body locates itself. However, in the dancing body "pure depth" must be otherwise located. The reversibility in dancing, unlike that of perception, does not take place between the perceiver and percipient, joined in the flesh of the world. Rather reversibility in dancing takes place in the body of the dancer, in the action of dancing, since in dancing self and other are distinguished while having identical bodies, the dancing body. The question then is where in dancing is the primal depth that precedes and makes possible the reversibility? We must look for an alternative to "dark space," that vision initiated experience of trying to see in the dark only to be foiled and thus forced into that thickness that is felt rather than seen. We can look immediately into that perceptive depth within the body that we have come to understand we are born with, perhaps even conceived with since it surely is functioning neonatally, and that is interoception or proprioception. These are the receptors by which we understand ourselves as bodies moving in space. These are the receptors that provide a sense of self, that provide the ground for movement itself that thus must precede all exteroception. Proprioception can be described in terms identical with those that describe "dark space," that is, as primordial depth that constitutes a medium of thickness with a tangible diffuse materiality that is not held at a distance.

While proprioception provides the birth of "pure depth" in the sense that self-necessitates a distinction, a distance from, other; proprioception alone is vague about the other, requiring the other to be nothing more than ambient space in which the body moves, in which the body is located. Dancing, however, is a making of an other and a concrete other, which is not set apart from the proprioceptively aware body;

indeed this concrete other cannot exist apart. The dancing body is at once self and other, both proprioceptively, rather than exteroceptively, experienced. As the essence of “dark space” is mystery, so surely must we so identify the essence of dancing. Dancing is the primordial depth that allows one to experience other and otherness proprioceptively and emotionally as one’s own body. Dancing creates depth without surfaces and without any distance separating other from me. Dancing is depth without foreground or background. The distance between self and other as experienced in the dancing body is pure depth, primordial depth, yet made manifest, made visible to others. Compared with “dark space” that foils vision and recoils to touch and feeling, dancing begins with that most intimate of feeling, with the thickness of feeling itself, in interoception and yet “shows” it in the observable act of dancing. Dancing is distinguished in the realm of movement in its identity with depth, with the mysterious thickness that allows the distance of self and other while holding them together in one body. Dancing is movement that is “pure depth” and thus precedes the movement upon which perception, or better exteroception, depends.

Dancing is a reversibility between dancer and dance, between self and other, yet it clearly is an incomplete reversibility. While “dancer” cannot be without “dancing” without making a “dance,” there is the constant awareness that the dancing may stop at any moment and then the reversibility terminates. It is also clear that it is the dancer who will remain rather than the dance. The dance is ephemeral even as it is fully bodied. This hidden incompleteness is not the weakness of dancing, but rather the factor that energizes it, that gives it value albeit a mysterious one. In dancing there is always that hidden emptiness or space or chiasm that only movement can maintain. We experience the collapse of “pure depth” when a dance ends, so it is the sustaining of the chiasm or open place in the bodied moving action of dancing that is the ground for the possibilities for affordance, for bearing meanings, but much more significantly, for evoking feeling and emotion. These are topics I must consider more fully, but unfortunately at another time.

Dancing is that reversibility that is necessary and must precede the stage that Merleau-Ponty contemplates in his favorite example of one hand touching another. While he can see and feel that the hands are separate hands, he concludes that they are united in being of one body. Yet, it appears that he holds this only because he can see that the hands are connected to arms connected to a common trunk or because in the past he has made this connection and now knows this connection due to personal history. He does not acknowledge that we already know without seeing that our two hands are of one body because we proprioceive them before seeing them as two and distinct, yet of one body. We simply know proprioceptively that they both are *my* hands. While Merleau-Ponty understands the body as percipient-perceptible, it appears that this connection of the body to the world through flesh depends on the body being, more fundamentally, proprioceptient-proprioceptable, for this is the primal and pure depth that is the embodied chiasm across which reversibility plays. We must know, in the sense of feeling in our bodies, the thickness or presence of pure depth, before we can even place ourselves in the space of perception.¹

¹ This is what those newborn infants are doing in facial imitation.

Dancing is the most fundamental dehiscence or breaking open that creates the hinge, or perhaps better termed the bootstrap, by which we come to play in that mobiotic wonderland of perception, signs, metaphor, art, language, ritual, and certainly everything else we might consider distinctively human. Dancing is the exercise and showing of “pure depth,” if it is not the actual action in which our existence is constituted.

There are plenty of examples that may help us see that, while Western cultures tend to diminish the significance of dancing or to value it only to the degree it is commodifiable, others have a different perspective.

The Hindu figure Nataraja, the lord of dancing, a form of Shiva, is significant. As depicted in the popular bronze images fashioned in the thirteenth century, Nataraja is dancing while holding in his hands symbols representing the five cosmic processes creation, preservation, destruction, embodiment, and release. His dancing is not a part of these cosmic processes, but the primordial grounding upon which all these cosmic processes become possible. His dancing is understood as *lila* or play and, as such, it is not done for any reason. Reason or meaning or affordance can occur only inside the cosmic processes. Nataraja dances simply because it is his own nature to do so. Without the fuller exploration that should be provided here, I would suggest that dancing was selected as the playful actions of Nataraja because the ancient Hindus comprehended that it shows and exemplifies the “pure depth” which in Merleau-Ponty’s terms is what necessarily precedes and is the ground for perception, for his flesh ontology. Dancing precedes and grounds ontology.

Dancing then as “pure depth” is the platform or primal condition on which are built the many dance forms that do have intention that take a specific form. Ballet and Javanese court dancing are highly codified dance forms that hold and show the most fundamental values of a culture, in both these cases, the culture of the court. On the platform of “pure depth” these dances create something like “pure ideals” for behavior, demeanor, comportment, presence, value, and so on. The “other” presented as the dance is no real other, but an ideal other, yet, in its dancing it is realized in real bodies in real movement in real presence. In dancing the ideal body of the dance is reversible with the quotidian body of the dancer, yet the reversibility is incomplete. The incompleteness is the depth that makes it possible for the dancer and those witnessing the dancing to actually experience the ideal.

It is of interest that children the world over dance before they speak. Kids respond to the rhythms of their environment not with quotidian or purposive or meaningful actions, but rather with that form of action that people everywhere identify as dancing. Surely this is the response in this critical stage of development of the dehiscence that exercises proprioceptively experienced pure depth, that exercises the pure joy of being human. And I believe, were we to study this carefully, children begin dancing at the stage in human development when the sense of self and the other is understood in the ways necessary to make possible the acquisition of language, metaphor, artifice, and art.

With these sorts of analyses we can appreciate why dancing is so commonly inseparable from religious and ritual acts. The embodiment of the “other” in dancing is an act of human transcendence and can be

an act of theological immanence. Dancing can bridge the distance between human and other-than-human while allowing that distance to remain.

When Ken Robinson spoke of the importance of teaching dancing in public education, the reason he gave to justify doing so was: “we all have bodies ... or did I miss something.” And his audience laughed. Not to distract from his message, but to argue that because we all have bodies we should teach dancing to our children with the same urgency as we do math and science will convince no one. Unfortunately we simply have not had a sophisticated and complex understanding of dancing and its importance to human life. I have argued the importance of dancing in more detailed terms supported by an array of broadly accepted research representing several fields of study. The conclusion, which is at least more specific and developed than to state that we should dance because we all have bodies, is that dancing is the most fundamental dehiscence or breaking open that creates the bootstrap with which we pull ourselves up to play in that mobiotic wonderland of perception, signs, metaphor, art, language, ritual, and certainly everything else we might consider human.