

Dancing lessons: a biological & philosophical account of human distinctiveness as relevant to the proper study of religion

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I am deeply grateful to my longtime friend Jeff Lidke for suggesting and organizing this session. I am honored that it is hosted by the Body and Religion Unit and the Comparative Studies of Religion Unit at the American Academy of Religion (AAR), and the North American Association for the Study of Religion (NAASR). Their interest affirms my hope that this meeting may be broadly relevant to the study of religion. The participants in this session are all scholars I greatly respect. I am honored that they consider aspects of my work useful as a way of addressing important concerns regarding the study of religion and continuing the legacy of Jonathan Smith. I thank them all for their insights and critique.

Prelude

A steady and constant feature across the decades of my career has been everything Jonathan Smith. I did not fully understand a lot of what he wrote. His intellect and knowledge were so superior to mine that my admiration of him seems laughable. Yet I persistently read, reread, and listened to Smith, always finding exciting ideas on which to build. The news of Smith's death at the end of December 2017 was shocking. My thoughts about Smith's importance became focused when I was invited to make a presentation at the NAASR session honoring him during their 2018 annual meeting. I developed an urgency to frankly address the question, 'How for 50 years could I have found Smith and his work of signal importance to me when we were so remarkably different in intellect, knowledge, and interest?' I identified several areas – play, incongruity and difference, comparison, experience – that I realized I must consider. I began to appreciate that we

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both valued the exploration and articulation of what constitutes a *proper study of religion*, which I understood to be a study compatible with the traditional humanities and social sciences, and even the natural sciences, and one unapologetically situated in a secular academic environment. I had no intention of writing a book. I simply wanted to explore differences that were of common interest. When a book emerged from these reflections, I had little thought to publish, yet to support Smith's legacy I sent the manuscript to Oxford University Press, and *The Proper Study of Religion: Building on Jonathan Z. Smith* was published in 2020. I was stunned when notified of the AAR book award. I had not known it was being considered, thinking it to be a book perhaps too personal in style to even be published. I am deeply grateful for this recognition.

Contemporary work

The publication of *The Proper Study of Religion* (2020a) was preceded by *Creative Encounters, Appreciating Difference: Perspectives and Strategies* (2018a). Based on my lifelong experience of comparative studies, set in the contemporary world of strife and prejudice, I wanted to reflect on how important I believe it is to do more than tolerate or explain away differences. I sought to explore how appreciating difference is essential to creativity and humanity. *Religion and Technology into the Future: From Adam to Tomorrow's Eve* (2018b), which followed, is the most fun book I have written, and I think it offers some of my most creative insights. It is focused on making, especially the long history of the human attempts at making sentient beings, observing that such makings are commonly associated with religion. I explored robots, artificial intelligences, androids, cyborgs, automata, and synths in art, literature, television, and film. Most of these made beings are female. Studying examples from Galatea to the many contemporary Eves inspired my own making of a shocking god-killing female figure named 'Tomorrow's Eve,' offered as a harbinger. In the same year that *The Proper Study of Religion* was published, I wrote a memoir titled *Dancing Graffiti: Stories from my Life* (2020b), including essays on various life-reflection genres. I followed up with a book titled *Looking Forward in the Rearview Mirror* (2021a) musing about the future while reflecting on my travels in Australia, Southeast Asia, and Africa. Finally, eager to explore new styles and hybrid genres, I initiated a book series focused on the theme 'Aesthetic of Impossibles.' I aspire to make reader-friendly prose complemented by my own photography printed in a novel format. The first volume is titled *On Photography* (2021b); the second, more recently completed, is

On Moving: A Biological & Philosophical Account of Human Distinctiveness (2022).

On Moving was motivated by a couple of things I realized during my writing of *The Proper Study of Religion*. The first is that my career-long study of religion was motivated largely because I found religion, due to its very strangeness and penchant for trafficking in impossibles, to be a marvelous way to appreciate and understand human distinctiveness. *Religion has been interesting to me because of what it reveals about being human*. Second, I came to understand that my explorations of biology and philosophy, as they relate to my passion for dancing, also hold promise when shaped to address a proper study of religion. The final chapter of *The Proper Study of Religion*, titled ‘Smith’s Golden Bough: moving toward a proper academic study of religion’ sketches out these ideas. *On Moving* was birthed by the need for fuller exploration and articulation of this topic.

Dancing lessons

Thirty-five years ago, my dancing life was in tension with my academic life. Almost no one in the academic study of religion has focused on dancing, despite the near synonymy of religion and dancing in most cultures. My academic and dancing lives gradually merged as I studied dancing and religion in many cultures, while constantly dancing and teaching dancing. I learned much about dances the world over, but my many thousands of hours of dancing amounted to a makeover. I will offer a brief example to show a bit of the work I do. A dancing lesson, if you will.

Social dancing includes a physical connection between partners. It is a light, active touching of the hands of the partners moving their bodies together following simple conventions. The word ‘movement’ indicates a change of place, a halt. The study of religion, indeed academia generally, tends to seek the halt required of place: maps, principles, categories, classifications, meaning, explanation. Eliade’s ‘center,’ Smith’s ‘to take place.’ As a dancer, I prefer the active verb ‘moving,’ because the joy is in the dancing. The essence of moving is being in no place. Erin Manning (2009) describes moving as ‘becoming toward a potential future that will always remain not-yet.’ I often use the compound term self-moving to distinguish biologically active moving from passive moving, such as riding in a bus. Touching requires self-moving. In dancing, this self-moving touching is the biological mechanism for the communication and artful co-ordination essential to dancing.

Remarkably, this self-moving touching is at the core of the philosophical concerns of the 18th-century French philosophers Condillac and Maine de

Biran, who were interested in what awakens a sense of self, the awareness of being, thus opening the door to acquiring knowledge. They posited a man possessing all the human senses, yet inactive, indicated by composing him of marble. Condillac argued that this man would need only a moving hand that would eventually touch his own torso. He thought the feeling of solidity or mass of this encounter would awaken the man's senses and awareness. He was referring to proprioception, as it would eventually be known, an inner touch. This self-moving touching is essential to partner dancers and to groping newborns. Fifty years later, Maine de Biran, anticipating kinesthesia, held that the marble man did not need to touch himself; he only needed to move his hand, noting that there is a sensation in moving itself residing in its effort. The contemporary philosopher Brian Massumi captures this insight in the opening sentences of his *Parables for the Virtual* (2002), writing, 'When I think of my body and ask what it does to earn the name, two things stand out. It moves. It feels. In fact, it does both at the same time. It moves as it feels, and it feels itself moving.'

Philosophers in the 20th and 21st centuries explored the ongoingness of moving; yet, almost without exception, they use the halting noun 'movement,' rather than the active verb 'moving.' Identifying the primacy of moving as distinct to animals, Edmund Husserl coined the term 'animate organism.' He also reflected on the experience of hand-touching/hand-being-touched to show the 'double sensation' humans acknowledge as the reversible relationship of perceiver and perceived. Merleau-Ponty (1968) took up this hand-touching-hand example to explore and articulate his ideas of chiasm and reversibility in the construction of his theory of perception. Then, by analogy, he applied the self-moving-touching bodied experience to reality itself. He believed this 'flesh ontology,' as he termed it, to be 'the ultimate truth.' More recently, in his *Desire and Distance* (2006) offering a phenomenology of perception, Renaud Barbaras wrote, 'It is movement [moving] itself that perceives.'

Had Husserl and Merleau-Ponty engaged self-moving touching like partner dancers, rather than only their own two hands, their insights might have been richer and more fun. Still, these philosophers' insights and concepts were originated, inspired, and exemplified based on their own physical experience of self-moving touching. While we assume concepts to be abstract creations in the mind, focusing on the primacy of moving shows that thought has content only because of experience, always bodied, and ideas are only worth developing if fueled by corporeal feelings of assurance.

Coherence is denoted by designating us as animate organisms. Given the complexity and variability of the systems comprising our biology, not to mention our constant encounter with our ever-changing environment, I

find biological coherence astonishing. By the early 20th century, what was imagined by the early French philosophers had become biological knowledge. Nobelist neuroscientist and discoverer of the synapse Sir Charles Sherrington discovered and named this inner touch 'proprioception' or 'self-perception.' Proprioceptors located in the muscles and ligaments conjoin neuron and muscle in the sensing of the ongoingness of moving to refine it for efficiency and to prevent injury, and, as they do so, kinesthesia offers the feeling qualities of ongoing moving. Evolution has built into our biology the dynamic of congruity always paired with incongruity. The specific coloring of kinesthetic feelings correlates with the continuum of biological congruity and incongruity. Russian physiologist Nikolai Bernstein's (1967) studies show that our bodies have evolved so that efficient moving which minimizes injury is smooth, not jerky. Smooth moving biologically correlates with health, ease, efficiency, congruity.

Jerkiness warns of the absence of these qualities, of pathology. There is a biological basis for why we seek congruity. Yet incongruity plays an essential role. Paul Ricœur pointed out that 'incongruity gives rise to thought.' Jonathan Smith wrote positively of the 'ordeal of incongruity.' Agency is fueled by incongruity. Charles Sanders Peirce (1934) showed that the feeling of incongruity we call 'surprise' is the creative force that drives hypothetical inference, and thus the acquisition of all new knowledge. Life is the ongoing skilled negotiation of incongruity and congruity, with evolution building in a biological preference for congruity as well as the creative engagement of incongruity.

I propose that the common biology of proprioception/kinesthesia offers the feeling-based measure for all dynamic creative encounters. Societies, religions, and individuals create many systems comprised of gestures, skills, ways of life, practices that offer a bodied milieu of identity and familiarity experienced as feeling right or just-so or ours or mine or tradition. While such feeling experiences are attached to vastly different actions and practices when comparing individuals and societies, they are all biologically based in kinesthetic feelings. Appreciating difference requires accounting for how complex self-adjusting systems construct and engage specific skills, gestures, and patterns of expectations, which affect feelings measured in terms of smooth moving, as based in the biology of proprioception and kinesthesia.

The presence of and communication with the other is, for the partner dancer, gained not in some data collection or recording mechanism imprinting the information on a screen in our brains, to be rationally processed into artful action. It is not objectifiable or the product of reason. It cannot be understood as objective change of place. It is, rather, a feeling kind of

knowing of the ongoingness of the exchange inseparable from moving. It is the force of moving itself that communicates. Condillac and Maine de Biran knew this. As does Renaud Barbaras, who wrote that moving is 'the generative source of our primal sense of aliveness and of our primal capacity for sense-making.'

The ending dip

As students of religion, what might we learn from this dancing lesson?

1. Taking the primacy of moving radically avoids the unfortunate hierarchical dualities of the Cartesian *cogito*. The moving body has primacy. It is not the 'and also' or vehicle to mind. It is not a niche concern.
2. The proprioceptive/kinesthetic aspect essential to moving provides a biological and philosophical common ground for the appreciation of difference and the creativity of encounter.
3. As the biology of moving has evolved to privilege coherence, it has also evolved to respond creatively to the experience of incoherence. The biological standard for the evaluation of the degrees of congruity and incongruity is the quotidian feeling of smooth moving.
4. Cultures and religions reflect the biological valuation of coherence and incoherence by building specific practices, gestures, postures, habits, skills that, while they themselves are not natural, with repetition become gesturally naturalized, to the extent of feeling just-so to their adherents. These gestures and postures are prosthetically extended in art, music, architecture, language, and material tools and objects.
5. Accounting for the ongoingness of self-moving complements, if not replaces, the academic strategy of finding or concocting place, meaning, and being objectively conclusive.
6. The lives and behaviors of scholars and intellectuals, religious and secular, are, like their subjects, comprised of identity-creating postures, gestures, practices, and skills gained through years of repetition.
7. Concepts are corporeal. Even concepts such as mind, spirit, soul, and gods are all bodied in the quotidian prosthetic experience of perception and identity formation.
8. Repetition is essential to identity formation, gestural naturalization, and skill development.
9. The very ongoingness of moving, its being in no place, requires the co-presence of materiality and virtuality, an incorporeal corporeality.
10. It is moving itself that is the generative source of coherence and valuation and vitality and sense-making and creativity.

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