

Kinesthetic Sense—The Dancer's Sense

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I regularly teach a course called “Religion and the Senses.” In preparing for and teaching this course I’ve read a good deal not only on humans as perceptual beings, but on the remarkable and amazing aspects of every one of our commonly designated five senses: taste, touch, smell, sight, and hearing. The study of human senses is endlessly interesting and in ways that we all can almost always personally experience because we are sensory beings. Yet, as is obvious, I have an abiding and persistent love of dancing and thinking about dancing. As I have read about dancing I have often tried to understand what senses are the dancer’s sense or senses. For a long time, I was left disappointed. As I ticked through the various senses, while each in some way is involved or might be involved, none seemed to be essential to dancing. Taste seems negligible. Touch is certainly present in that dancers are always in contact with the floor and sometimes with one another, yet that didn’t seem sufficient as “the dancer’s sense.” Smell is possible in that dancers sweat and can smell themselves and other dancers, but that won’t serve very well for the dancer’s sense. Dancers usually depend on sight to relate to the space and to other dancers, but it certainly isn’t necessary. I think fondly of the amazing tango that blind -- and cantankerous -- Lt. Col. Frank Slade (Al Pacino) dances in “Sent of a Woman.” So can’t depend on that one.

That leaves only hearing; and, while dancing is most often done to the accompaniment of music heard by the dancer, clearly one can dance in silence (some postmodern dancers intentionally did this) and the deaf have no trouble dancing. Let’s look at a video of the Trish Brown dance company that dances without music or sound. So what might serve as the dancer’s sense, just some combination of these? That never felt satisfying. Or perhaps, I mused, dancers don’t really rely on senses in any distinctive way. But we have to hate that notion since dancing is such a sensuous bodily action; how can we possibly ignore the senses in something so inherently sensual?

Then I discovered that some do not consider the five senses to adequately cover the full perceptual spectrum, the full capabilities of human beings. The sense most commonly invoked at this point is often referred to as the “kinesthetic sense” and sometimes as “proprioception.”¹ Kinesthetic refers obviously to movement and we are somehow aware of our own movement, of the position of our bodies and the parts of our bodies by means other than the common five senses. Proprioception refers to neurological receptors located in the muscle fibers and the ligaments that sense load and tension on muscles and send that information to the spinal column or to the brain to let the brain know how things are going at the muscular and joint level. Proprioceptors functions to prevent injury, to maintain balance, to allow for awareness (usually unconscious) of the location of body parts relative to the rest of the body and to surrounding space. Proprioception works in conjunction with and as a part of our sensorimotor system which both directs movement as well as monitors the consequences of movement resulting in movement adjustments as well as knowledge of interactions with self and world through movement.

¹ These terms are not actually synonymous. I will develop a fuller discussion of proprioception in later lectures. However, at this introductory point I will not overly complicate.

Very cool; I'm beginning to be satisfied that this "sense" could certainly qualify as the dancer's sense, yet having just discussed the "primacy of movement" we can see that it is much more. Without even needing a detailed neurological description of the functioning of the sensorimotor system located in the cortex of the brain and how through signals sent from the brain to body parts (efferent) to initiate self-movement or the various afferent (towards the brain) neurological signals that come from the muscles and joints back into the spinal column and the brain, we can appreciate that this neurophysiological system is operative in our appreciation of the primacy of movement as well as dancing.

Translating Sheets-Johnstone a bit here, we are born into the world with sensorimotor programs already in place to move and to sense the physiological reactions we get to that movement. This seems no different or mystical than being born with a heart that beats, lungs that breathe, arms, legs, and so on. Our heart beats and functions to provide life because of its inseparability with preset neurological programming and physiological/muscular functions. So too we have neurophysiological programs that operate, identical with being alive, to create movement and know how to build awareness and knowledge based on the experience gained through movement. This requires both brain based direction of movement and muscle based readings of the interaction with body and environment. Seen this way the sensorimotor system—comprised necessarily of neurology and physiology, of brain and muscles—is the "animate organism" described by Husserl and discussed by Sheets-Johnstone.

I'll return to proprioception and other interoceptive senses by which we engage self in a later lecture because these have begun to play a rather important and insightful role in our understanding of movement and human perception. It will be our task to apply this knowledge, these perspectives, to dancing. At the moment, we must simply understand that, as living beings, we are animate organisms. We come into the world moving and this movement is how we understand self and begin the lifelong process of building concepts and knowledge and skills by which we live meaningfully in the world. The kinesthetic sensorimotor proprioceptive givens integrate body and brain, experience and conceptual knowledge, perception and the perceptible. Dancing, as moving, both benefits from this aspect of all human movement and plays its own part in being heuristic as well as expressive, that is, dancing is a means of investigating the world as well as a way of performing agentive actions. Dancing creates meaning and value as it also expresses meaning and value.

Should we be even slightly convinced that this is an important way of understanding dancing, we can immediately see the limitations on many of our received ideas of dancing that dismiss dancing as being of any value whatsoever to education and of isolating dancing from religion because it is thought to be limited to body is some base, or merely physical, way.

The door to a greatly expanded understanding and appreciation of dancing is swinging open. We will continue to focus on aspects of movement trusting that they also apply to dancing, realizing that at some point we must return to a consideration of what it is precisely that we can identify as what occurs when one "breaks into" dancing, when we start "dancing in the rain" rather than just "singing in the rain" as we walk rhythmically down the street.