

# Movement “In Itself”

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When you think about it movement is rather difficult to grasp. The very word “grasp” suggests that it is a thing that might be held in one’s hand or mind. Yet, that very idea is to deny the moving dynamic aspect of the movement we are trying to understand. Yikes. You can begin to understand the difficulty. Typically we chart movement on a graph or we think of a trajectory or we think of the point of initiation and conclusion. These are but traces of a movement event, a way of describing how movement unfolded over time and through space, but they are not ways of actually understanding the moving part of movement. Moving does mean that there is a transversal of time and space, yet the moving is to both be at some point in space and time and yet to not be “in” that point. Moving is incipience, or coming into being, or the energy that while in one place is pushing to be in another place yet unknown. Once manifest, that is having occupied a space/time location, it is trace or effect or remains of movement, rather than the moving part of movement.

Since dancing is moving, we can appreciate that we have a similar challenge in our study of dancing. Indeed, we need begin to appreciate that it is a different thing to understand dancing (that incipient, almost becoming, always in the process, movement) than it is to understand a dance or dances, which are the basic patterns of movements and rhythms that comprise the distinctiveness of a dance among many dances. A dance is when it isn’t dancing. In our studies here, we are first interested in understanding dancing, and then, with those insights and perspectives, we can look to particular dances.

Let’s look at this issue a bit more carefully assisted by the recent important work of Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual* (2002). He looks to the early twentieth century French philosopher Henri Bergson as establishing a shift to movement in itself in his response to the issues presented in Zeno’s paradox. You have likely heard this interesting paradox. Zeno was a pre-Socratic Greek philosopher (5<sup>th</sup> century BC) who described the passage of an arrow from the shooter’s bow to the target. He proposed that every space can be divided in half and this can continue infinitely. Given this property of space, an arrow would necessarily need to pass through any space to get to the next, yet since space can be infinitely divided the arrow would then necessarily have to spend infinite time passing through subsequently divided segments of space and thus, Zeno argues, could never reach the target. Henri Bergson’s analysis showed that Zeno’s paradox arises from an analysis of a movement trajectory rather than the movement itself. In Massumi’s terms

If the arrow moved it is because it was never *in* any point. It was in *passage* across them all. The transition from bow to target is not decomposable into constituent points. A path is not composed of positions. It is nondecomposable: a dynamic unity. That *continuity* of movement is of an order of reality other than the measurable, divisible space it can be confirmed as having crossed. It doesn’t stop until it stops: when it hits the target. Then, and only then, is the arrow in position. It is only after the arrow hits its mark that its real trajectory may be plotted. The

points or positions really appear retrospectively, working backward from the movement's end.  
... *A thing is, when it isn't doing.*<sup>1</sup>

Importantly, in this analysis, is that the movement is necessarily prior to any grasping of or formulation of or analysis of the movement. This is a working back from the movement to some post-movement construction of a trajectory. Perhaps this seems but a minor shift in perspective, one needed to help us keep from going crazy over Zeno's little mind-twister. However, Massumi goes on to outline the far-reaching consequences of this shift in perspective and they are remarkably significant. This deserves an entire course, but let me just mention several of these consequences to help us grasp something of Massumi's and Bergson's revelation.

- Movement is in its becoming, absorbed in occupying its field of potential. Movement cannot be determinately indexed to anything outside itself.
- A proper study of movement emphasized process before signification or coding. To do otherwise stops the movement, back-forms it into a grid.
- Thus, position is no longer the first concern with movement, but a problematic second. Position is retro movement or movement residue.
- Positionality is an emergent quality of movement.
- Passage is primary in relation to position. Passage precedes construction. Grids happen.
- Movement is ontogenetic, that is, a coming into being.

We can get a sense of the importance by returning to the opening couple of sentences in his book: "When I think of my body and ask what it does to earn that 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. Can we think a body without this: an intrinsic connection between movement and sensation whereby each immediately summons the other?"<sup>2</sup>

Massumi discusses the implications of this shift through the balance of his book developing not only on Bergson, but also on such figures as Gilles Deleuze and Charles Sanders Peirce.

To keep our central concern, dancing, to the fore, lest we get lost in diversions, my point is that quite in the spirit of Massumi's efforts to somehow get at moving "in itself" before we back into an analysis of the trajectory of movement, to develop an understanding of dancing as fundamental to being human and as an important category for the comparative study of human cultures and religions, we must find ways of articulating dancing "in itself" as necessarily prior to and constitutive of the study of dances. It is here that we will glimpse the interdependence of dancing with vitality, with energetics, with potentiality.

While a careful analysis of Massumi's work would take a long careful reading of his book placed in the context of a long history of scholarship, we can only look at several passages that provide key and important insights into our study of movement as essential background to the study of dancing.

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<sup>1</sup> Massumi, p. 6

<sup>2</sup> Massumi, p. 1.

To think of the body in movement thus means accepting the paradox that there is an incorporeal dimension *of the body*. Of it, but not it. Real, material, but incorporeal. Inseparable, coincident, but disjunct.<sup>3</sup>

The body is as immediately virtual as it is actual. The virtual, the pressing crowd of incipencies and tendencies, is a realm of *potential*. In potential is where futurity combines, unmediated, with pastness, where outsides are infolded and sadness is happy (happy because the press to action and expression is life). The virtual is lived paradox where what are normally opposites coexist, coalesce, and connect; where what cannot be experienced cannot but be felt—albeit reduced and contained. For out of the pressing crowd an individual action or expression will emerge and be registered consciously. One “wills” it to emerge, to be qualified, to take on sociolinguistic meaning, to enter linear action-reaction circuits, to become a content of one’s life—by dint of inhibition.<sup>4</sup>

In my efforts to understand human movement and dancing, I’ve become a huge fan of proprioception. These are the neurosensors that are wrapped around muscle fibers and are associated with ligaments in the joints. They sense stress and communicate with the central nervous system to adjust sensorimotor programs to monitor and shape movement. They are often placed in but a feedback role secondary to the central nervous system, yet I much prefer to understand proprioceptors as the processual places where brain and muscle and bone are functionally inseparable in movement. It is the proprioceptors engaged in movement that integrate the body. Given this important role of proprioception, it is little wonder that it is the subject of deep contemplation by innovative thinkers such as Brian Massumi.<sup>5</sup>

Proprioception, as Massumi understands it, “folds tactility into the body, enveloping the skin’s contact with the external world in a dimension of medium depth: between epidermis and viscera. The muscles and ligaments register as conditions of movement what the skin internalizes and qualities: the hardness of the floor underfoot as one looks into a mirror becomes a resistance enabling station and movement; the softness of a cat’s fur becomes a lubricant for the motion of the hand.”<sup>6</sup> Massumi here is showing proprioception’s central role in the “groping” movements by which we discover self and other as we also create ourselves in the context of our environment. Further, “Proprioception translates the exertions and ease of the body’s encounters with objects into a muscular memory of relationality. This is the cumulative memory of skill, habit, posture.”<sup>7</sup> Here Massumi is revealing the role of proprioception in gesture, a topic we will consider in much greater depth in later lectures. But basically he’s saying that our encounter with the world creates movement patterned memories in our bodies, which give us a sense of self and world. That is, proprioception “draws out the subject’s reactions to the qualities of the

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<sup>3</sup> Massumi, p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 30-31.

<sup>5</sup> See *Ibid.*, pp. 58-62.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 58-59

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59

objects it perceives through all five senses, bringing them into the motor realm of externalizable responses."<sup>8</sup>

There is a "double translation" offered by proprioception in movement that connects the self with the world, the body with the environment, translating both from the outside into the body and from the patterned movements of skill and gesture in the body to its agency and actions in the world. This double translation is always interactive and oscillatory and thus simply a deeper understanding of human movement. And further, as Massumi points out, proprioception is, in some sense, synaesthetic, in that it engages and integrates the common five senses.

Finally, proprioception is associated with affect, how one feels. In the simplest sense we often appreciate the sheer pleasure of moving. This is something children clearly experience in that they seem to run everywhere they go. We need to begin to recognize that there is a corporeality to feeling, to passion, to intensity, that is inseparable from movement and accomplished by proprioception.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.