

Moving and Dancing, Dancing and Gesturing

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“I’m dancing in the rain” is the line of lyrics that marks the moment of the “break into” dancing for Gene Kelly in that wonderful scene from film “I’m Singing in the Rain.” Yet, it was quite a few measures and I believe more than a full minute into the music where Gene was moving in rhythmic and meaningful ways before he started actually dancing. We began this section titled “Moving” noting that all dancing is moving, but not all moving is dancing. Our point was not to put immediate pressure on attempting to set forth the criteria that distinguish dancing among all the other forms of movement, but rather to acknowledge that dancing is movement, and an important form of movement in most cultures and religions, is to reveal its value and importance. And further with dancing recognized as movement much can be said of how to go about understanding it, its importance to being human, its relationship to meaning, its potential contribution to education, to human development, and much more. So simply by recognizing that dancing is moving, we can offer much insight about dancing without yet getting to the issues of what distinguishes it from other forms of movement.

We began by placing dancing and in a broader way human self-movement in the context of perspectives and values of contemporary American (and European) cultures. The folk theories that we tend to inherit without much question, we learned, are often not accurate or desirable when placed under critical examination, yet we were able to see that even then these folk theories bear some sense of trying to articulate some admirable and important qualities of dancing. Dancing fulfills many functions in popular culture. We found, rather appalling for sure, that dancing has been marginalized in public education, university education, and every forum that is charged with the responsibility for the education and human development. Christianity, we learned, is uncomfortable at best with dancing despite its peculiarly bodily based theology. Certainly we have to appreciate that the attitudes toward dancing, the roles dancing plays and is not allowed to play across the culture, and the folk theories and value statements all reflect and serve to impart the ethos, the values, the character of the modern American and western cultures. Dancing is at once a reflection of the cultural and religious values and beliefs, dancing (even in its prohibition) is also an important agentive arena in which these values and beliefs are insinuated in the people and institutions of the culture.

Recognizing that dancing is unarguably moving, then we can see that, as movement, it offers much to society. On this simple premise then we set out to consider movement. Maxine Sheets-Johnstone and Mark Johnson offered powerful and compelling evidence that movement is fundamental to the process by which humans discover themselves and their worlds. There is a primacy to movement. This is not simply a vague philosophical argument, it is grounded in neurophysiology. The sensorimotor-proprioceptive system is how human beings integrate mental and muscular systems through movement. The sheer majesty and overwhelming complexity characterizes these human systems. Further, we found that there is much evidence that as percipient perceivers, that is beings that can be perceived

and that can perceive others, movement is essential. Our sensory systems develop and operate with a fundamental dependence on human self-movement. No wonder that, at least since Aristotle, we have identified life, vitality, with movement, with self-movement. Movement is essential to brain development, to human development, to intelligence, to structures of meaning such as image schemas and bodily concepts, and to the plasticity that is fundamental to vitality and acuity throughout the whole span of life. Historically we have commonly been rather stymied by the question of “meaning” in dancing and music. By recognizing that dancing establishes what Lakoff and Johnson referred to as “image schemas” it can establish not specific meaning so much as the fundamental relationships, relationalities, rationalities, reasons, patterns, images that underlie the whole process of meaning making. Thus, a point that will be developed in other terms in another section of these lectures, dancing does not so much mean as to make meaning possible. How, we might ask, could anything be more important to being human than movement?

As we progressed through an examination and discussion of movement, we persistently illustrated movement and certain important types and styles of movement by reference to dancing. In this way we have not delayed our interest in dancing, but rather we have already begun to demonstrate how important dancing is among various forms of movement. Thus, dancing has already begun to take on a distinctive position among human movements.

To conclude this section and prepare to begin the next, we can say that dancing is a form of movement that is easily recognized among many other forms of movement and is, in some senses, discontinuous with it. It is significant that in Kelly’s dance, there is a precise moment when the dancing begins and we all recognize it. The choreographers and filmmakers knew it as well as indicated by their precise coordination of the “break into” dance with the first use of the word “dance” in the lyrics. From a neurophysiological perspective this is very interesting in suggesting that dancing compared with walking are two separate self-movements requiring separate sensorimotor programs, thus there is a “marked” moment when the movement shifts from one program, such as walking, to another program, dancing. And, at the other end, there is a “falling out” of dancing back into another sensorimotor programmed form of movement. Thus, we get hints that dancing is “marked” movement, clearly distinguishable even if it may be difficult for us to adequately or completely describe the attributes that “mark” movement as dancing. As sensorimotor program operated movement, we surmise that dancing is acquired through various methods: mimesis, instruction, practice, repetition, correction, and other means of skill acquisition. This suggests that dancing then is akin to if not a form of gesturing, which Marcel Mauss called “techniques of body” or *habitus*, as it was termed by Pierre Bourdieu. Gesture has often been relegated to either some complement to language that offers an emotional conveyance or as a form of language itself as perhaps best illustrated by the gestures of American Sign Language. Yet, while these are certainly important dimensions of gesture, there are much wider and, in my sense, much more interesting and profound approaches to gesture and gesturing. We will cover these in the next section. It is notable that Jonathan Z. Smith in a recent lecture outlining what he believed would be major perspectives and approaches to the academic study of religion over the next forth years indicated gesture as one of his 5 areas.

So now we turn to a consideration of gesturing and how it begins to illuminate for us important aspects of dancing. In terms of Venn diagrams, we can see that movement is delimited by one large circle, self-movement a somewhat lesser circle within that, gesturing a lesser circle yet, moving toward a closer study of dancing.