

Pure Depth and Flesh

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The concept “pure depth” is discussed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty and others and it greatly fascinates me. I’m going to give something of an overview of these discussions and how “pure depth” contributes to our understanding of not only Merleau-Ponty’s *Flesh*, but also to our understanding of ourselves as percipient-perceptibles. In the context of this discussion I am going to consider dancing as a candidate for being a powerful exemplar of “pure depth.” Turning that around, I will then consider, in cursory terms, the implications for dancing when considered as “pure depth.”

To avoid the implications of a split dual structure to reality Merleau-Ponty must introduce unity and continuity among the parts. Yet, inseparability among its constituents would simply collapse reality. Somehow there must be distinctive constituents of reality yet they must not be separated from one another. Merleau-Ponty’s consideration of this thorny matter focuses on the arena of human perception. This makes sense given that it is through perception that we come to know the world beyond our own bodies. Perception is the fabric of our connection, the hedge against isolation. He creates a unified ontology by showing that embodiment unifies subject and object, thus overcoming the common subject-object dualism. However, to avoid the collapse of all distinction he had also to somehow accommodate distance and this led to his ontology of perception, to flesh.

Distance is key, however distance must be understood relationally and this suggests “depth.” The concern with how we perceive depth is an old one, usually understood as “a line endwise to the eye,”¹ and was thought as derivatively perceived, added to an otherwise flat and static image produced by a two-dimensional array of radiant energy on the retinal surface. Maurice Merleau-Ponty and James Gibson (among others) have rejected the classical explanation. Notably, Merleau-Ponty’s ways of resolving the issue of distance and depth then become fundamental parts of his flesh ontology. Depth comes to be understood as that which both allows difference and distinctness while creating a bond or connection or identity between perceiver and perceived. The exploration of depth is complex and profound.

James Gibson’s approach² is identified as environmental. For Gibson distance is an intrinsically dynamic concept that implies movement. We don’t actually see depth but rather we see one thing behind another. Movement reveals the occluding edges of objects that are separated and connected along the dimension of depth. Gibson formulates depth in terms of paradox, a “unity through disparity.” The environmental aspect of his approach is articulated in *affordance*, as he termed it. Affordance is understood as the value and meaning of things in the environment and value and meaning are always understood in terms of the relationship to the perceiver. In terms of my structuring of gesture affordance would correspond with the afferent side of the gestural loop. Thus depth is the dimension

¹ From Berkeley’s *New Theory of Vision* cited in Sue L. Cataldi, *Emotion, Depth, and Flesh: A Study of Sensitive Space* (State University of New York Press, 1993), p. 30.

² James Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1986).

that points both to the object and to the perceiving subject. Depth is the significance of surfaces in relation to the body.³

Merleau-Ponty held that an essential aspect of every meaningful perception is a spatial orientation. It is always already there because it must be presupposed in the body holding some place in the world as the locale for perception. This is then a primordial spatial orientation. I'll develop this later. Perhaps we might enhance our understanding of Merleau-Ponty's idea here in terms of proprioception, the ability already active at birth (and surely before)⁴ of the body to locate itself and its parts in space through movement. From birth the body simply exists and orients itself in space already existing. Merleau-Ponty holds that we come into the world as perceptible bodily beings, or, to anticipate his terms, we belong to the flesh of the world. The body is already oriented by being a body. The motor programs we are born with in a sense presume depth in their "reaching out" to touch an environment.

The body however has in its structure and behavior examples of distance and separation that are also unities. The hand touching the other hand (finger on one hand touching the other hand) is a favored example often contemplated by Merleau-Ponty. Another is the stereopsis in vision based on seeing with two eyes. We, in fact, see the world clearly, under normal circumstances, through two separate eyes that "see" separate images. We can test this easily by closing first one eye then the other in a variety of situations. Difference, separation, is easily confirmed. Yet, so also is the unity of vision. Even vision situations in which there is a distinct disparity between the images separately seen by our two eyes get reconciled and they "snap" into place as a unified image that is nearly impossible to then willfully separate. This separation yet unity is fundamental to Merleau-Ponty's consideration of depth. And, of course, the trigonometry embodied in stereopsis is a factor in depth perception.

Depth at this naïve level then is understood as that dimension by which we see something from "here" that is at its place "there." The "here" and "there" are contemporary in our experience. Here and there are joined in time through their visibility and this is "depth," a space of "copresent implication." When movement is factored in, as necessary to such perception, then, very much in the same terms as Gibson's affordances, Merleau-Ponty appreciates depth as a "sensitive space," as "living movement," as "lived distance."⁵ Depth, in this progressive consideration, becomes increasingly profound. It is that dimension that contemporaneously unites and separates. It is "a thick view of time." Depth is the "most existential dimension."⁶

Depth, we might here call it more properly "pure depth," then is a dimension that is primordial, allowing the perception of distance and the value of the distant. Primordial depth, in itself, does not yet operate between objects, between perceiver and percipient. "Pure depth" is depth without distance from here.⁷ In its thickness, depth preceding perception is perhaps difficult to grasp. Merleau-Ponty offers an

³ See Cataldi, pp. 31-34.

⁴ See Shaun Gallagher's presentation of neonate imitation, pp. 69-73.

⁵ Erwin Straus clarifies, "Distance is a primal phenomenon ... there is no distance without a sensing and mobile subject; there is no sentience without distance." Quoted from his *The Primary World of Senses* in Cataldi, p. 45.

⁶ Cataldi, p. 45.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

analogy that both depends upon vision and also foils vision to the point of its replacement by touch, by feeling. This wedge is “dark space,” the experience of night or darkness. In darkness seeing is thwarted, yet seeing into the darkness elicits a feeling of thickness, a density, a materiality, a tangibility, an intimacy. In dark space everything is obscure and mysterious. Eugene Minkowski, an early twentieth century psychiatrist, who offered the idea of “dark space,” held that “the essence of dark space is mystery.”⁸ The experience of dark space provides a means of trying to grasp pure depth. Pure depth is depth without foreground or background, without surfaces and without any distances separating it from me. Minkowski understood dark space, which Merleau-Ponty identifies with “pure depth,” as “the depth of our being,” as “the true source of our life.”⁹

Notably Drew Leder in his book *The Absent Body* (1990) critiques Merleau-Ponty for considering the body and perception only in the shallows of the physical body. We have noted that Merleau-Ponty occasionally includes interoception as in the inner feeling of outer touch, yet he does not consider mesoperception of proprioception. Leder notes that neither does Merleau-Ponty include the viscera. Based on Leder’s discussion, we might suggest that our own visceral awareness is an apt example of depth. The viscera are literally deep within our bodies and it seems we have a rather clear sense of viscera as at depth, yet always also “here,” as in functioning operations necessary for life. The relative absence of the viscera also renders their presence in terms of mystery. And the radical messiness of the viscera values this depth in terms of otherness, even offensive and terrifying otherness.

Pure depth is key to understanding flesh which, like pure depth, as pure depth, is always already there as “the formative medium of the subject and object,” (precessive) as the “inauguration of the where and when” (progenitive).¹⁰ The moving body is fundamental to flesh, because through movement flesh begins to understand itself or become aware of itself.¹¹ Flesh, without moving body, is only possibility, never actuality, percipience never perception. The moving body is then, as Merleau-Ponty termed it, a “percipient-perceptible,” that is, an entity possessing the power to perceive while also being capable of being perceived. The body is an intertwining of two sides, the adherence of a self-sentient side to a sensible side. The body as an intertwining blurs the boundary between the flesh of the world (depth) and our own bodily flesh. The body exists then in an ambience, a primordial given, of depth, the hidden dimension behind everything.¹²

This doubling is for Merleau-Ponty a reversibility. Reversibility is a way to express the interconnection among distinctions. A subject requires an object and vice versa; they are reversible; they move back and forth among themselves. Movement is essential for reversibility to be realized, for occlusion to be recognizable, for perception to take place. Yet, this reversibility is never complete. This is a fascinating phase in this argument, I think. Complete reversibility would result in identity among the distinctions and a collapse of perception; there would be no distinction of self and other and thus no perceiver. Complete reversibility would leave us lost in the world of perceptibles. Were the touching of one hand

⁸ Eugene Minkowski, *Lived Time*, (1933), p. 429, cited in Cataldi, p. 49.

⁹ Cataldi quoting Minkowski, p. 50.

¹⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 140, quoted in Cataldi, p. 60.

¹¹ Cataldi, p. 61.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 67.

with another to be completely reversible it would not be possible to distinguish one hand from the other. The images provided by each eye would be the same and there would be no negotiation and reconciliation between the two, no vision. The term “chiasm” here identifies this gap or cross-over space. There must remain this undetectable, in itself, space or gap or hiddenness for reversibility to be incomplete. Incomplete reversibility is not some flaw to be overcome in perception, it is rather the very motor that drives the movement of reversibility that allows for simultaneous interdependence and distance. Since the chiasm is hidden, since chiasm precedes and makes possible reversibility, it can be thought of as “depth” or better as “pure depth” as presented through the analogy of “dark space.” Chiasm, pure depth, this incompleteness is the source or condition of perception and at the same time unifies flesh ontology.

I am well aware that these ideas are difficult to grasp and tend to slip from our grasp even after we have a few moments of lightly touching them, yet these ideas, and I believe even our way of trying to think about them, are fundamental to our understanding of ourselves as sentient beings and to the way we study other sentient beings in the context of religion and culture. For example, given our discussion of the importance of difference in the academic study of religion as championed by Jonathan Smith, I think it would be a rather more elegant argument to show that it isn't really sufficient to say simply that incongruity/difference gives rise to thought. Rather difference is the gap or chiasm that both distinguishes us and unites us with our subject and without this gap, this difference, there simply would be no study of religion; the study of and the subject of study would be indistinguishable. Come to think of it that has more or less been the status of what we have for decades misidentified as the academic study of religion.

These ideas can also raise fascinating and provocative possibilities for understanding other aspects of our humanity. I want to turn now to dancing, considering it in these terms to both understand another reversibility, that is, how dancing may help us understand flesh ontology and also how flesh ontology may help us understand dancing in new terms.

I want to begin with the simple observation that dancing may be seen as a distinctive kind of making. It 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 choreographers make up a dance that is set on the bodies of others, there is no manifest dance or work other than when bodied. 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. Having just worked through Merleau-Ponty's discussion of perception and the body in terms of his flesh ontology, this description of dancing surely sounds familiar. It has similarities with 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 act 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 have identical bodies, the dancing body. The question then is where is the primal depth that precedes and makes possible the reversibility that occurs in dancing? 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 proprioception¹³ 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 yet set apart from the proprioceptively aware body. 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.

A quick note on the distinction between the danced other and the viscera as other may be useful here. First, the danced other is proprioceived as other, amounting to an awareness, a felt experience of other

¹³ We need recall the discussion related to proprioception initiated by Massumi’s work.

both to dancer and to one observing the dancing. Viscera is inferred as other only occasionally felt and then only vaguely so. The limited experience of the otherness of one's viscera is not available to an observer. Further, the incompleteness of the reversibility of dancer/dance distinguishes dancing as fundamental to the chiasm, the gap that enables self-othering. Even when the dancer appears totally occluded by the dance, she and we always know that it is the dancer that will re-emerge when the dancing ends. The depth that arises between self and viscera is that between surface and interior and functions similar to Merleau-Ponty's one hand touching another, yet his example has little sense of incomplete reversibility at all.

And before I let Leder and his viscera go, I must remind that Brian Massumi had a rather different interpretation of viscera. Here is what he wrote,

Viscerality, though no less of the flesh [than proprioception], is a rupture in the stimulus-response paths, a leap in place into a space outside action-reaction circuits. Viscerality is the perception of suspense. The space into which it jolts the flesh is one of an inability to act or reflect, a spasmodic passivity, so taut a receptivity that the body is paralyzed until it is jolted back into action-reaction by recognition. Call it the space of passion.¹⁴

Massumi's understanding of viscerality connects more with that to which we refer by the term "gut feeling." There is clearly more here to think about.

Dancing is a reversibility between dancer and dance, between self and other, yet it clearly is not a complete 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 may 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.

Dancing is that reversibility that is necessary and must precede Merleau-Ponty's favorite example of one hand touching another. While he can see and feel that the hands are separate hands, he holds 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 also has given much attention to the intermodality of sight and touch; he should have known Ian Waterman. 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 are *my* hands. While Merleau-Ponty understands the body as percipient-

¹⁴ Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, p. 61.

perceptible, it appears to me that this connection of the body to the world through flesh depends on the body being, more fundamentally, proprioceptive-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 distance of pure depth, before we can even place ourselves in the space of perception.¹⁵

Dancing is the most fundamental experience of the distinctness and separateness of the other, the environment, because that gap between self and other is momentarily crossed in a transcendence that joins and in so doing creates the bootstrap, by which we come to play in that mobiotic wonderland of perception, signs, metaphor, art, language, religion, and certainly everything else we might consider 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 a dancer 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, but simply because it is his own nature to do so, to dance. Without the fuller exploration that should be provided here, I would suggest that dancing is selected as the play 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.

It is of interest, well worth spending one’s career exploring, that dancing is nearly inseparable from ritual drama in cultures throughout the world, save perhaps the west. Dancing in many cultures is a loose synonym for religion.

Dancing 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. 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 experience the ideal.

¹⁵ This is what those newborn infants are doing in facial imitation.

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 or theological immanence. It bridges the distance between human and other-than-human while allowing that distance to remain. I think there is much potential for pursuing the study of religion in the terms of distance and the bridging of distance. Prayer, for example, is an act of communication bridging realms of reality. Pilgrimage is an act of movement across a landscape of particular types of affordances. Almost all religious ideas and actions are based on distance, types of distance, bridging distance, creating distance. Of course then all these distance-based religious elements rest on “pure depth.”

I really need to do another lecture building on this one that is based on Sue Cataldi’s book *Emotion, Depth and Flesh* (1993) that explores the interconnection between depth and emotion. Since religion and dancing are so commonly associated with emotion, with feelings, I think it important to continue this exploration of depth in terms of its connection to emotion.