

The Problem of “Feeling” in Dance Practice: Fragmentation and Unity

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Introduction

The questions that I want to ask in this paper are centred around the situation of the student dancer as she stands at the side of the studio in technique class, watching her teacher and her colleagues perform. The world she inhabits at that moment is pregnant with the potential for success or failure. She watches her teacher demonstrate some material. She must make sense of this material and attempt to perform it herself. On what basis does she do this? How *aware* is she of the process that she attempts to direct herself through? If she successfully performs her teacher’s material she will be happy—she will have had a “good” experience. If she is unsuccessful she may become despondent. All of this occurs in the context of how her student colleagues perform in the same task—whether she gauges herself to do better or worse than her peers. In the context of this class she must move between the roles of “spectator” and “performer.” How she “feels” about her performance in each of these roles and her negotiation of herself between them, I would think, are of the utmost importance, both to how *well* she performs and also to her state of happiness.

The Problem of “Feeling”

What *is* the “problem of ‘feeling’ in dance practice”? The “emotional” world of the student dancer may indeed cause her problems, but this may partly be due to a problem of “feeling” in another sense—that of “reliability.” If dance is based on movement, then surely a dancer must have a reliable sense of movement in order to be able to dance. If that “sense” is unreliable—that is, it does not accurately convey to the dancer the details of the movement she directs—then that is a practical problem, one that may well give rise to the “emotional” situation of “feeling bad” about her practice. In this paper I will consider the way Frederick Matthias Alexander and the contemporary Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben both discuss aspects of the problem of the unreliability of “feeling” and can be seen to arrive at similar ideas concerning unity.

That “feelings” in this sense—in the sense of “sensation”—are not to be trusted is an ancient tradition in philosophy. In Plato’s *Phaedo* Socrates paints a picture of an incorporeal soul imprisoned and deceived by its bodily senses.¹ The insistence of the soul as a separate entity in and of itself entered the modern period via Cartesian dualism and still persists in various forms. Today, the idea that an incorporeal “soul” or “mind” is the essence of human *being* has been challenged by what might be termed the corporeal turn of “body theory” and the apparent privileging of the “body” over the “mind” in the field of “somatics.” However, the problem of dualism is not solved by simply tipping one end of the seesaw up. In fact, I’m

not sure that the problem of mind-body dualism can be solved by what is in effect a “taking of sides.” To return to the potential problem for dance practice, it would seem obvious that, by and large, a body is required to move and that that body must be somehow directed. Plato cemented an enduring distinction between the “intelligible” world of forms and the “sensible” world of bodies. However, for the dance student the Platonic distinction may be unclear, and, in any case, dancing for her seems a predominantly *sensual* matter. She *sees* her teacher dance, and if she can only intuit how it would “feel” then her successful performance would be assured. Surely the metaphysical speculations of philosophy can be ignored if the reliability of “feeling” could just be ensured?

What Is “Feeling”?

Unfortunately the project of making “feeling” reliable is not clear. The complication arises with the question, What exactly *is* “feeling”? Contemporary science has moved beyond the limitation of a mere five senses. The problem for a practice such as dance is that a so-called sense of movement or kinaesthesia is in reality a combination of proprioceptive sensory modalities themselves combined with other intero- and exteroceptors—senses such as pressure, sight, and hearing (for example, see Berthoz 2000, 25–27). In physiological terms, any sense of “kinaesthesia” must be a combination of non-“felt,” knowing information—that cannot be consciously perceived—for example, from the vestibular apparatus, muscle spindles and golgi tendon organs, accompanied by “felt” senses, such as the registration of pressure underfoot or air passing over moving limbs. In this sense, “feeling” is already beginning to straddle the supposed body-mind division. But “feeling” is an odd term and one that moves with slippery ease between the physiological and the psychological. In the same thought “feeling” may connote a general sense of physical sensation and also encompass the more psychological phenomena of what might be termed “emotional” “feelings” of unease, anxiety, or joy and happiness. I do not wish to formalise here a particular distinction between the terms “feeling” and “emotion,” as authors such as Brian Massumi and Antonio Damasio have attempted—as yet there is no consensus as to the distinction.² Indeed, common experience would rather suggest the reality of an ambiguous blurring between the two terms. The student dancer has never known a thought outside of the context of feeling and she has, by definition, never “unknowingly” experienced sensation. It is precisely this blurring—in lived experience—of the supposed division between “mental” and “physical” that the term “feeling” enacts, and that I wish to exploit. If the ambiguous slipperiness of the terms is acknowledged, then this very ambiguity can possibly be constructively employed.

F. M. Alexander and “Sensory Appreciation”

The unreliability of “feeling,” and the elaboration of a technique for dealing with the problem that this presented, were key concerns of Frederick Matthias Alexander in the development of his technique for bringing about a change in human *being* from the habitual to the conscious.³ Alexander’s first two books, in which he lays out the principles of his technique, reveal a development in his discourse concerning this topic. In *Man’s Supreme Inheritance* (Alexander 1996, originally published 1910/1917) he tended to use terms such as “kinaesthesia,” “feeling-tones,” and “sensory appreciations” as synonyms for “feeling,” a usage that was unsurprising given the prevalence of such terms at the beginning of the twentieth century, especially surrounding the arts. However, in his second book, *Constructive Control*

of the *Individual* (Alexander 2004, originally published 1923), probably under the influence of his famous pupil the American pragmatist philosopher John Dewey, Alexander was no longer using the same range of terminology. Instead he tended to use the singular “sensory appreciation” as a concept and principle theme. For Alexander, it was predominantly no longer “kinaesthesia” or “feeling-tones” or “sensory appreciations” that were unreliable but rather “sensory appreciation” in the singular. By replacing the plural terms—in which the subject of the phrase was denoting “feeling” as in “sensations”—with the singular term “sensory appreciation,” in which “appreciation,” as in *understanding*, becomes the subject of the phrase and “sensory” its qualifying adjective, Alexander was able to link the idea of “feeling” with that of “conception,” especially with respect to direction of activity. In making such an apparently subtle shift from “appreciations” to “appreciation” Alexander can be seen to have radically improved his ability to talk about the self as an essentially autonomous psychophysical being. In doing so, he commingled the physiological with the psychological and implicitly *embodied* faculties such as “interpretation,” “judgement” and “conception” that were normally thought of, following Plato’s division, as being on the side of the “invisible and intelligible” rather than of the “visible and sensible” (Plato 1997). Alexander intended a broad psychophysical scope for his term:

all so-called mental processes are mainly the result of sensory experiences in psychophysical action and reaction . . . in our conception of *how* to employ the different parts of the mechanism in the acts of everyday life *we are influenced chiefly by sensory processes* (feeling). Thus we may receive a stimulus through something we hear, something we touch, or through some other outside agency; in every case, the nature of our response, *whether it be an actual movement, an emotion, or an opinion*, will depend upon the associated activity, in action and reaction, of the processes concerned with conception and with the sensory and other mechanisms responsible for the “feeling” which we experience. This associated activity is referred to throughout my work as *sensory appreciation*. (Alexander 2004, 22, emphasis in the original)

The “associated activity, in action and reaction” is surely another way of articulating the problem of the relation between the “inside” and the “outside,” between “world” and “self.” The real problem is that there is no such thing as a “raw” perception separate from the individual’s interpretation of it. Perception always occurs within the context of previous experience, which, in a sense, is a memory or history of previous interpretations. The “outside” goes “inside” and in doing so it acquires a point of view. Once an aspect of the world “enters” through the senses, it is added to experience, but, importantly, experience is added to it. Both the “stimulus,” the outside that is now inside, and the experience, the inside that was outside, are altered by their meeting. “Sensory appreciation” is the individual’s interpretation of the totality of sensory input in the context of personal experience.

“Feeling” and “Unreliability”

That “feeling”—in this wider sense—is unreliable should not be surprising. Logically, unreliability relates to the issue of truth and is not necessarily a guarantor of falsehood. If a witness is “unreliable” they are presumably unreliable insofar as there is some doubt as to whether or not they are telling the truth. “Unreliability” doesn’t mean “false” or “not true.” It just means that there is an element of uncertainty. So “unreliable” means “potentially false” and “potentially accurate.” Sensory appreciation can be deceptive, and it can be more or less

accurate. What it can *never* be is *reliable*. The problem is that sensory appreciation is an appreciation that is necessarily based on incomplete data, on partial information, a situation that arises due to the partial nature of the array of physiological transducers and also to the partial, interpretative nature of memory and experience. It can never be “complete” in that it arises out of a dynamic, unfolding, personal history that is ultimately finite.

To return to the emotionally charged state of the student dancer, whose anticipation of happiness rests on her ability to secure success in technique class: if reliability of “feeling” is in question in her practice, it would seem that her hopes will remain unfulfilled if “feeling” is inherently unreliable and destined to remain so. She is now faced with the possibility of merely being able to “do it or not.” Although the technique class hopefully offers the student dancer a “promise of happiness,” it also holds—via the unreliability of “feeling”—a promise of terror: that is, the terror of failure. The technique class, in this sense at least, is a truly emotionally charged environment. Such a situation does not bode well for dance pedagogy, or the happiness of the student dancer.

The Problem of “Feeling” in Aesthetics: “Artist,” “Spectator,” and “Aesthetic Alienation”

Part of the problem with “feeling” is the sense in which it is inextricably linked with the idea of what it is to be human. This idea is further complicated by the degree to which art is taken to be central to humanity and ideas about “feeling” are seen as central to art. The Greek root of the word “aesthetics” is *αἴσθησις* (*aísthēsis*), which meant “perception” or “sensation” and later came to mean “the sensory involvement of the spectator” (Agamben 1999, 2). In ancient philosophy the tendency was to regard this sensory effect of art on the spectator as an unreliable source of truth, and Plato’s negative views on art are well known. In *The Man without Content* (1999) the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben develops a radical critique of aesthetics that challenges traditional ideas about the artist, the artwork, and the spectator and the nature of the relationship between them. Agamben traces the development of an “aesthetic alienation” in which “art” becomes split into “art as it is lived by the artist” and “art as it is perceived by the spectator.” Art comes to

alternately [present] two sides that cannot be put back together into a unity. The side that faces the artist is the living reality in which he reads his promise of happiness; but the other side, the side which faces the spectator, is an assemblage of lifeless elements that can only mirror itself in the aesthetic judgement’s reflection of it. (Agamben 1999, 11)

The implications for the student dancer as she observes her teacher during a technique class are serious, for she is unwittingly placed in the situation of being *both* artist *and* spectator. The alienation of these two roles is mirrored in her sense of alienation from herself as she tries first to *understand* what her teacher demonstrates and at the same time dwells with the potential for failure when she attempts to *perform* it. If her understanding of what she sees is unreliable, then it should not be surprising if her attempts to put this understanding into practice are at some remove from her teacher’s demonstration. As a potential artist, or dancer, she reads in the material of the technique class her “promise of happiness.” But as a spectator she sees only an “assemblage of lifeless elements.” The “aesthetic alienation” is mirrored by an alienation from herself and her practice.

As a counter to the fragmenting effect of aesthetic alienation, Agamben returns to a conception of art and artistic practice derived from ancient Greece. The term *ποίησις* (*poiēsis*)

designated the pro-ductive activity of human *being*—the bringing forth into being of something that did not previously exist. It meant production in the sense of any truth-making or truth-revealing activity, not just in the more limited literary sense commonly understood today. The term was understood in relation to τέχνη (*technē*), art, craft, or skill, without distinction between “artist” and “craftsman” as currently understood. In this way, human being is seen in itself as a *poietic* activity, a continual bringing into being—the revealing of the truth of an existential self. Human *being* exists in and as a *shared* clearing, illuminated and revealed by *being* itself. In this context ποίησις (*poiēsis*), pro-ductive activity, functions as a *shared, communal* enterprise, and not as the solipsistic self-expression of a notional and egotistical “artistic will.” This idea invites a more communal and inclusive sense of art and artistic practice in which any human activity can be considered “poetic” and anybody can potentially be understood as engaged in artistic practice. Viewed in this way there is a direct continuum between what is commonly thought of as everyday practice and what is commonly thought of as artistic practice. Dance practice too can be viewed as a continuum between what the dance student does in her technique class and her potential future practice as performer or choreographer. However, this more fundamental idea of art is difficult to find in the world we currently inhabit, in which *Britain Has Talent* and all are invited to *Strictly Come Dancing* in search of an elusive *X Factor*. Any “art” that is found here flourishes but briefly before checking in to “rehab.” Perhaps insofar as Britain “has talent” it may not “have art.”

According to Agamben, the idea of artistic creation came to be separated from that of spectatorship in such a way that the spectator came to assume a passive, supposedly “disinterested” role. In this cleaving of creation from spectatorship, the original sense of shared wonder of *being* and the bringing into being of artistic practice was lost:

The wonderful was not yet an autonomous sentimental tonality and the particular effect of the work of art, but an indistinct presence of the grace that, in the work, put man’s activity in tune with the divine world of creation, and thus kept alive the echo of what art had been in its Greek beginnings; the wonderful and uncanny power of making being and the world appear, of *producing* them in the work. (Agamben 1999, 34)

What is at stake here is the loss of the Voice⁴ of human *being* itself. To “have a Voice” is to have a stake in creation—to “have a say.” If “creation” is reserved only for a special, separate group of “creators,” then the Voice of human being is fractured: Artists “have a say,” but it is now suspect. Since it is no longer a communal activity, art can now no longer reliably “speak” for all—it is no longer a reliable form of “the truth.” For the rest of humanity, relegated to the condition of spectatorship, what is there left for them to “say”? Toward the end of his book Agamben sums up this crisis in the arts:

the castle of culture has now become a museum in which, on the one hand, the wealth of the past, in which man can in no way recognize himself, is accumulated to be offered to the aesthetic enjoyment of the members of the community, and, on the other, this enjoyment is possible only through the alienation that deprives it of its immediate meaning and of its poietic capacity to open its space to man’s action and knowledge. (Agamben 1999, 111)

The question is, Has “an indistinct presence of grace” been lost from the dance studio, and, if so, what does it mean for the Voice of the student dancer and, can it be returned? How can she “recognise herself” in the technique class in such a way that she can regain a sense of her *poietic* capacity?

Poiēsis and Praxis

In his return to a more original conception of art, Agamben makes use of the Aristotelian distinction between *artistic*, or *poietic* practice, as opposed to *πρᾶξις* (*praxis*), action. “Action is not production, nor production action” (*The Nicomachean Ethics*, 1140a; in Aristotle 2004, 1140a, p. 149), for “production aims at an end other than itself; but this is impossible in the case of action, because the end is merely doing *well*” (1140b, p. 150). This is because “every art is concerned with bringing something into being” (1140a, p. 149): *ποίησις* (*poiēsis*), production, is therefore based on *γνώσις* (*gnōsis*), knowing, and is characterised by *γένεσις* (*genesis*), the birth, of something new. *Πρᾶξις* (*praxis*), on the other hand, produces nothing new because “an action is an end in itself” (Aristotle 2004, 1139b, p. 147). Perhaps the confusion for the student dancer, along with her potential confusions about “feeling,” lie in the “technique” of technique class? For the Greeks, *ποίησις* (*poiēsis*), production and *τέχνη* (*technē*), art, craft, or skill, as mentioned earlier, were understood together. Mere *copying* or *mimesis* would fall under *πρᾶξις* (*praxis*), action, since it would not be producing anything new and would require no knowledge. Insofar as she understands herself to be trying to *copy* her teacher’s demonstration of material, the student dancer will be engaged in *πρᾶξις* (*praxis*)—practical activity in which “the end is merely doing *well*.” But, as Aristotle maintained, *πρᾶξις* (*praxis*) is not *ποίησις* (*poiēsis*)—it is not production; it is not *art*. For the student dancer to produce—that is, give birth to something new—she will need to acquire *knowledge*—she will need to learn how to *know* what it is that her teacher is demonstrating rather than merely trying to imitate it. The confusion in “feeling” between the un-“felt” *knowing* of proprioception and the “felt” *sensation* of “kinaesthesia” creates the possibility for deception since there is no way for the student dancer to reliably know *what* a movement she sees “*feels*” like or, even, what a movement she herself conceives of “feels” like. As long as the student dancer is fixated on the outward form of her teacher’s movements, she will be unable to translate them into the inward form of her own, for they are two different things. She will be trapped in the problem of the unreliability of “feeling”; she will have unwittingly created the condition that Plato has Socrates criticise in the *Phaedo*, and she will believe that “the truth is what the body says it is” (Plato 1997, 83d, p. 73).

When the dancer stands at the side of the studio, the conception upon which her immediate field of potentiality is based is determined to a certain extent by “feeling”: a tacit equation between what she wishes to accomplish and what it *might* or *ought* to “*feel*” like. The *unreliability* of this conception of “feeling,” viewed as a Foucauldian dysfunctional “apparatus,” is what engages her and limits the immediate possibilities of her performance. For, as Agamben argues in a recent essay, “apparatuses must always imply a process of subjectification, that is to say, they must produce their subject” (Agamben 2009, 11).

In order to regain her productive capacity, the student dancer must embrace the problematic nature of “feeling” in all its unreliable glory. *Recognition* of the essential unreliability of “feeling” will enable a *recognition* of the tacit apparatus it has constructed in the technique class—one that turns *ποίησις* (*poiēsis*) into *πρᾶξις* (*praxis*), “artists” into “spectators,” and student dancers into “emotional” wrecks. Once “feeling” is accepted as something that “just happens,” as an existential fact of our psychophysical being-in-the-world, then the negative effects of its unreliability will no longer be deceptive. The student dancer can observe her teacher’s demonstrations without the false expectation engendered by the *πρᾶξις* (*praxis*) of copying—of wanting to “get it right for the sake of getting it right.” Instead, as Alexander suggested in his writings, she can work on improving her conscious knowledge of how she

directs her own movement in order to critically explore the underlying principles and structures that she witnesses in her teacher's demonstrations. If she directs for *herself*—through her own consciously aware experimentation—then her *own* equivalent of what her teacher directed will be produced. She will have made something *new* out of herself. In pursuing this constructive conscious path, she will be able to set to one side her “feelings,” whether “emotional” or not; she will not be a failure and she will “*feel*” great. If she could do this then she could understand with Agamben that

So long as the artist lives in intimate unity with his material, the spectator sees in the work of art only his own faith and the highest truth of his being brought to art in the most necessary manner, and a problem of art as such cannot arise since art is precisely the shared space in which all men, artists and non-artists, come together in living unity. (Agamben 1999, 36)

Notes

1. In Plato's *Phaedo* Socrates says:

The lovers of learning know that when philosophy gets hold of their soul, it is imprisoned in and clinging to the body, and that it is forced to examine other things through it as through a cage and not by itself, and that it wallows in every kind of ignorance. . . . that investigation through the eyes is full of deceit as is that through the ears and the other senses. Philosophy then persuades the soul to withdraw from the senses in so far as it is not compelled to use them and bids the soul to gather itself together by itself, to trust only itself and whatever reality, existing by itself, the soul by itself understands, and not to consider as true whatever it examines by other means, for this is different in different circumstances and is sensible and visible, whereas what the soul itself sees is intelligible and invisible. (Plato 1997, 82d–83b, p. 72–73)

2. For example, in *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (2002), Brian Massumi (using the term “affect” as a synonym for “feeling” and “intensity” as a synonym for “affect”) states that Affect [“feeling”] is most often used loosely as a synonym for emotion. But . . . emotion and affect—if affect is intensity—follow different logics and pertain to different orders.

An emotion is a subjective content, the sociolinguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which is from that point onward defined as personal. Emotion is qualified intensity, the conventional, consensual point of insertion of intensity into semantically and semiotically formed progressions, into narrativizable action-reaction circuits, into function and meaning. It is intensity owned and recognized. It is crucial to theorize the difference between affect and emotion. If some have the impression that affect has waned, it is because affect is unqualified. As such, it is not ownable or recognizable and is thus resistant to critique. (27–28)

In *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow and the Feeling Brain* (2004), Antonio Damasio argues that

In the context of this book then, emotions are actions or movements, many of them public, visible to others as they occur in the face, in the voice, in specific behaviors. To be sure, some components of the emotion process are not visible to the naked eye but can be made “visible” with current scientific probes such as hormonal assays and electrophysiological wave patterns. Feelings, on the other hand, are always hidden, like all mental images necessarily are, unseen to anyone other than their rightful owner, the most private property of the organism in whose brain they occur.

Emotions play out in the theater of the body. Feelings play out in the theater of the mind. As we shall see, emotions and the host of related reactions that underlie them are part of the basic mechanism of life regulation; feelings also contribute to life regulation, but at a higher level. Emotions and related reactions seem to precede feelings in the history of life. Emotions and related phenomena are the foundations for feelings, the mental events that form the bedrock of our minds and whose nature we wish to elucidate.

Emotions and feelings are so intimately related along a continuous process that we tend to think of them, understandably, as one single thing. In the normal situation, however, we can glean different segments along the continuous process and, under the microscope of cognitive neuroscience, it is legitimate to dissociate one segment from the other. With naked eyes and a slew of scientific probes, an observer may objectively examine the behaviors that make up an emotion. In effect, the prelude to the process of feeling can be studied. Turning emotion and feeling into separate research objects helps us discover how it is that we feel. (28)

In both cases the distinction more or less corresponds to David Hume's schema of "Impressions" and "Ideas" in *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739 and 1740), where "Impressions" refers to the physiological process of sensory interface and the "Ideas" refers to the "internal" subjective processing. The only essential difference would seem to be in the relative terms used and the way they are opposed (see Hume 1985, 49–55).

3. Alexander's technique in the context of his writings is very different from the common public impression that has grown in the years following his death that it is some sort of "somatic" therapy. This misconception is perpetuated both by some teachers and organisations and also by the pupil's perception that the Alexander technique is something that the Alexander teacher *does* to the pupil through working on them with their hands and that this is something that will principally help with things like back pain or, more generally, posture. In his writings Alexander, although in no way a professional philosopher, is clearly operating within his contemporary intellectual environment and attempts to situate his technique within prevailing ideas of the self. He is clear that his technique is no mere therapy but, as his "star" pupil Professor John Dewey characterised it, a "revolution in thought and action" (qtd. in Alexander 2000, 25). His own succinct description of this "revolution" is given in the following passage from his fourth book, *The Universal Constant in Living*, first published in 1941:

It means that on the receipt of a given stimulus to perform some act which we have decided is necessary for the change of our habitual reaction, CONSENT TO PERFORM THE ACT MUST BE WITHHELD, NOT GIVEN, in order that our habitual reaction may be held in check, and the usual messages to the motor nerve and muscle mechanisms which determine our manner of employing the primary control of our use in our habitual reaction, not projected. This clears the way for us to project new messages which in time will be associated with new and unfamiliar use of the mechanisms in activity, thus bringing about a change in the employment of the primary control, and thereby indirectly a change in the manner of our habitual reaction.

Here we have two procedures fundamental to our new technique, which, if repeated, will *cause the habitual means whereby we have energised our old reaction to fall into disuse, and enable us to employ new means whereby we may energize the new and desired reaction.*

This new reaction comes in time to take the place of the former habitual reaction, to be equally part of ourselves and therefore to "feel right." (Alexander 2000, 25–26, emphasis in the original)

It is this original conception of Alexander's technique that is taught to dance students at De Montfort University and that I suggest is the basis for a turning of *praxis* into *poiesis* at the close of this paper.

4. This concept of "Voice" is derived from Giorgio Agamben's various discourses on human being, especially *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity* (1991) and *Infancy and History: An Essay on the Destruction of Experience* (2007), as well as Adriana Cavarero's *For More than One Voice: Towards a Philosophy of Vocal Expression* (2005). Both of these authors are indebted to the radical articulation of human being in Martin Heidegger's philosophy.

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