

Chapter 4. Intercorporeality: connectedness and creative collaboration in the embodied practice of dance

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Abstract

Dance plays a role in healing rituals across a number of cultures and is also recognised to promote social bonding. This, of course, includes contemporary Western medicine, in which dance is used in psychotherapeutic contexts in the form of dance/movement therapy (DMT). As a contribution to the burgeoning field of health humanities, this paper seeks to explore the power of dance to mitigate human suffering and reacquaint us with what it means to be human through bringing the embodied practice of dance into dialogue with the work of the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty. The promise of the health humanities is of a broader and richer understanding of what is healthful and therapeutic through exploration of and insight into the human condition. As such, it celebrates the uses of arts and humanities within traditional healthcare settings, practices and training, but also calls for a reimagining of the boundaries of health and healing, so that our intellectual and therapeutic focus might escape the physical and, perhaps more importantly, the epistemological constraints of the clinical. In this spirit, this paper presents an alternative understanding of dance as therapeutic, which is based in philosophy rather than in the psy-disciplines or the neuroscientific insights that currently dominate the literature of DMT as a clinical practice.

Keywords: intersubjectivity, intercorporeality, dance.

Theoretical background

For Merleau-Ponty (2002) the primary sense of self is not understood in the Cartesian dualist sense which separates and privileges mind over body, subject over object, but rather through the non-dualist notion of body-subjectivity. Prior to Descartes' cogito – 'I think therefore I am' – there is the

'tacit cogito' - 'I can' - the feel we have of our body and how it connects us to the world. Merleau-Ponty also denotes this pre-reflective feel that we have for our body's positioning and possibilities for action with the term corporeal schema. My corporeal schema is thus my primary sense of self or 'I', in the sense of the 'I can'.

While the Cartesian tradition has struggled with the problem of intersubjectivity, also known as the problem of 'other minds', Merleau-Ponty's rethinking of self as situated and embodied opens up the possibility for rethinking self-other relations. Merleau-Ponty shifts the focus from the private, invisible experience of thought to the lived body through his redefinition of human being in terms of embodiment and behaviour, these being visible and publicly available. The Cartesian problem of solipsism is in fact dissolved in Merleau-Ponty's framework as my existence as a self comes into being and comes to my awareness in the same shared world where other selves are coming into being and to my awareness.

Intersubjectivity, for Merleau-Ponty (1964), is therefore based in a mutual awareness, which is understood as a reciprocity of perception. This reciprocity is captured in the term reversibility, which is primarily conceptualised through the basic model of one of my hands touching the other where the hand that touches can also be touched by the hand that was originally touched but is now touching. Indeed being able to touch anything requires that the toucher is also touchable, as to touch a thing is to feel the thing touching me.

This perspective dissolves any clear distinction between touching and touched, sentient and sensible, and thus between the body as subject and the body as object. I do not experience my body as either wholly Cartesian

subject – in which case it would be invisible – nor as wholly object – in which case it would not be able to serve my intentions. Rather I understand and inhabit my body as simultaneously part of my intentional subjectivity and as an object in the world – an awareness that Merleau-Ponty calls corporeal reflexivity.

This corporeal reflexivity allows that there is overlap, not only between my body as subject and my body as object, but also between my experience of my (visible and touchable) body and my experience of other bodies. It is this reflexive overlap between the outer look of the body and the inner experience of the body that explains the possibility of imitating the behaviour of the Other despite the fact that the outer look of the behaviour is not the same as the inner feel of the behaviour.

Thus there is a reversibility to intersubjective relations which relies on my own sensibility as well as my sentience: the other and I are mutually available to each other through our perception of each other. The corporeal schema, my primary, embodied sense of self, is not a private, inner realm, but rather is visibly and tangibly manifest in my embodied behaviour, and as embodied, sentient and sensible beings open to a shared world, we experience each other in what Merleau-Ponty terms carnal intersubjectivity or intercorporeality. This intercorporeal connection with the Other is referred to as transfer of corporeal schema, and it is through this process that we recognise other human beings as like ourselves, making it the grounds of intersubjectivity.

Method / Description of the experience

This paper will proceed by elaborating aspects of Merleau-Ponty's thought related to subjectivity and specifically intersubjectivity, before exploring how these phenomena play out in the embodied practice of dance. In order to attend to the experience and the potential of dance, this study draws on in-depth qualitative interview accounts of sixteen professional contemporary dancers from UK repertory companies. In-keeping with the aims of Health Humanities to broaden our understanding of the healthful dimensions of the Arts and to democratise our approach to the Arts in health- (and self- care) beyond the clinical setting, this is not, therefore a study of DMT therapists and patients, rather it is a study of individuals for whom dance forms a central part of their lives. Professional dancers, in particular, were chosen for this study because their daily engagement with dance as reflexive practitioners gives them a heightened awareness of their own embodiment and that of other dancers.

Results

The process of joint movement, of dancing with someone else, is particularly interesting for rethinking intersubjectivity in Merleau-Pontian terms as it involves a form of connection or communication which is achieved without words and through the medium of bodily contact. As Louisa suggests, openness to such bodily communication is part of an overall tacit or pre-reflective awareness that the dancer has of their embodiment and situation within the immediate context of the dance:

If you're in the moment and you're on stage and you're aware – you're in the moment and you're in your body, you're in that part of the piece, but you also have to be super-aware in the way that you're

ready to accept anything, and that's like that communication that happens which is not, you don't talk you just know, you, you even feel it in, you feel inside and you just react – that's the strange thing and that's really exciting when you just have that, when it's in sync like that. [Louisa]

Here, the dancers are not consciously formulating thoughts or reflecting on the situation but are reacting to each other – to each other's bodies – at a pre-reflective level. Thus dance grounds us in our own body-subjectivity or bodily intentionality and also orients us to or opens us towards the body-subjectivity or bodily intentionality of the other dancer. The analogy with conversation used by many of the dancers is significant because this notion of a (tacit or unspoken) dialogical interaction emphasises a two-way process between two mutually engaged beings. Dancing together thus involves a reciprocal openness or awareness allowing this type of tacit bodily communication to occur:

There's this like different kind of awareness that you have to have, just because you have to be able to move together.... you have to talk with your bodies so you have to kind of listen to each other – you can't always do it your way, you have to find the way. [Anna]

The awareness of and connection with other dancers achieved in this way is not, therefore, limited to understanding the materiality of their bodies in terms of weight and position in space, but also includes an understanding of them as intentional beings who want to do things in certain ways that may be different to what you want. The dancers are able to recognise each other through their bodily interaction not only as other physical objects in the world but also as other body-subjects:

you can kind of listen to each other through your bodies. You can become quite close to people – you have to be prepared to work very closely with people physically, but because you're so close physically

you, it opens up something mentally as well, there's some connection there. [Tara]

This can be understood in terms of the Merleau-Pontian notion of transfer of corporeal schema where we can come to know people's thoughts, feelings and intentions through tuning in to the intercorporeal overlap between their bodies and ours. Dance training and practice, with their emphasis on mirroring and adapting to others' movements, open us up to this reversibility inherent in intercorporeal relations, and Tara's comments suggest that the intercorporeal identification involved in learning dance also makes the dancer more open to those dimensions of the Other's existence that she describes as mental.

Through moving with each other and attending to the corporeal schema of the other dancer, dancers can come to understand and experience a kind of physical and emotional or mental synchrony or kinaesthetic empathy with the dancer with whom they are moving. Dancing with another person thus returns us to a recognition of our shared humanity and our capacity for mutual openness and connection.

Indeed my interviewees emphasised that dance is characterised by mutual openness in the sense of both awareness and honesty:

if you're really invested into the moment and invested in this connection then you have to let those masks and those barriers fall down so that you can feel one another, be with one another and experience this thing with one another. [Steven]

For Merleau-Ponty it is this direct openness to others and to a shared world which characterises intercorporeality. Steven describes this as an interconnection or communion of the two dancers' souls as well as their bodies:

I think that you get to know people incredibly well through dancing – incredibly, incredibly well in a way which is really quite beautiful actually, really quite beautiful because it, because, because it, because of the context of it, it allows space for you to... almost for like your, when it, for your souls to interconnect in many senses ... it's just simply about being with someone in the space and connecting with someone and that is such a beautiful sensation. ... it gets to a place where you're communicating, you're operating on a level of sensation and connection and it's almost like you're, you're having a conversation of sensation but there's no attachments or connotations of anything else really – it's really quite beautiful, really something quite special.[Steven]

The context of dance as creative collaboration opens up the possibility for us to transcend our individual ego-centric concerns and feel that we are genuinely in touch with the other in a direct and open process of co-creation and co-expression. It was this ability to come out of ourselves and experience mutual connection with the other which my interviewees talked about as making the experience of dancing with someone else particularly 'special' or 'beautiful'.

In a continuation of the passage quoted above, Steven further explains:

You do get to know a lot about people when you dance with them because you're working with them all the time and you sweat – you sweat with one another for goodness sake – you know when you sweat with someone you get to know everything about them ... it kind of is so, such a close-knit thing and you have to be so co-dependent, you know, it's so, you know, it's impossible for you not to get to know someone really well. [Steven]

Steven's words here evoke a sense of vulnerability. What is special about the relationship formed when we dance with another person is therefore that it develops in us a capacity for openness towards the other which may feel too dangerous in alternative situations where it doesn't arise pre-reflectively from mutual trust being slowly built up in the process of joint movement. It

provides a context in which mutual openness (and its attendant vulnerability) develops between embodied beings, and thus returns us to an understanding of our basic potential to connect with the other and the world and thus with our own humanity.

Discussion

In a world where negative feelings of detachment, fracture and alienation have consistently been identified by psycho-social theorists as ‘symptoms’ of modern living, it becomes increasingly important that any understanding of health engages with issues of groundedness and connectedness. In the spirit of the health humanities, this paper has offered the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty as a basis from which we might begin to make sense of our being-in-the-world as body-subjectivity and also of our connection to others as embodied and as borne of our mutual situatedness in a shared world, thus opening up a different kind of conversation about the therapeutic value of dance from those generally found in the psy- and sci-informed disciplines with their Cartesian underpinnings.

Importantly, it is dance as an end in itself that is brought centre-stage in this discussion, and the focus on the experiences of those who engage in dance as creative practice rather than those who subsume dance into their broader (psycho-) therapeutic practice is significant for re-adjusting the way we think about dance (and all creative arts) as healing and life-enhancing. This move out of the clinical setting is also significant in the context of the aims of the Health Humanities to democratise the practice of healing arts beyond professions such as DMT and to extend their reach beyond patient populations.

As has been shown in the discussion above, dance stimulates a particular kind of awareness that not only helps us to experience ourselves in a more holistic way as embodied beings by grounding us ‘in the moment’ and ‘in your body’, but also opens us to a direct connection with the embodied other. Here, dance allows us to experience a form of communication or dialogue with the other characterised a mutual openness and a transcendent state where self and other are both drawn out of themselves into the ongoing communicative and creative experience of co-expression. Through this Merleau-Pontian framework we can therefore come to appreciate the true potential of dance as a positive and deeply humanising experience, thus demonstrating how expressive arts practice understood through the lens of philosophical theory can open up new dimensions of understanding and experience in relation to well-being and self- (and other-) care.

References

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