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# A Phenomenological Appreciation of Dancers' Embodied Self-Consciousness

Camille Buttingsrud

When a dancer enters the stage to perform, her intention will most often be to communicate with her audience. Using her movements, emotional and physical expressivity, postures and rhythms she will tell a story, express an atmosphere, explore an emotional or motivational theme or an idea, or in other ways present – as well as constitute – the piece of art in question.

Doing what one has learned by heart during classes and in the studio, in other words automatically performing one's *second nature* is often not satisfactory to the professional. During her bodily work the dancer will most often aim at using her prepared and incorporated moves, steps and expressions to explicitly articulate what she wants to share with the world.

Through the work on stage further understandings of the dance piece's content, or understandings of the other, of their interactions, of life situations mirrored in the performance's sequences, might reveal itself to the dancer – as it might to her co-dancers, the musicians – and in the better cases to the audience as well.

Artists from different fields seem to share this experience: bodily and emotional work has the capacity to lead to insights and knowledge. As a philosophy student I was thus looking forward to learn about the structures behind this transcendence of the bodily and emotional self, and to define this particular path to cognition. By the end of our master programme it had still not been mentioned, and I asked a professor, a phenomenologist working on music. *Well, when it comes to terminology no one has really pinned that out, he said apologetically. What you will find is that it is not recognized as a path to higher cognition.*

Provoked and inspired I started the process of verbalizing and defining my own experiences of bodily consciousness in performing situations. I read up on the classical phenomenological descriptions of embodiment, and on emotional and embodied cognition. And I realized that even within the most body-embracing philosophical tradition, phenomenology, and the most up-to-date work on embodied cognition, we still operate with a hierarchy where emotional and embodied experiences of the self are seen as basic foundations for higher order conceptual reflection (Gallagher & Zahavi 2008; et al.). I read up on the current philosophical debate on expertise (Shear, 2013; Dreyfus 2005, 2013; Montero 2013), and I learned that the discussion on self-consciousness in skilful activity is framed as a question about whether the expert performer of bodily action is reflecting upon herself and her activity, or whether she is bodily absorbed and thus pre-reflectively self-conscious – and I thought: To reflect or not to reflect – is that the question?

Further studies of the work of dance philosophers like Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, Jaana Parviainen, Dorothee Legrand, Susanne Ravn and Barbara Montero, as well as a closer reading of Merleau-Ponty's essays on the painting artist (Merleau-Ponty, 1993)



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made me realize that I was not completely off-track; they all discuss the state of self-consciousness that my former colleagues and I have experienced.

I empirically recognize and theoretically appreciate these philosophers' elaborations on dancers' states of self-consciousness, described by for instance Sheets-Johnstone as *thinking in movement* (1980; 2009; 2011; 2012), by Parviainen as *thinking through movements in order to poetise meaning* (1998), and by Legrand and Ravn as *a form of reflective consciousness at the bodily level* (Legrand & Ravn 2009, Legrand 2013). But these phenomenological descriptions seem to exceed the theoretical understanding of reflective and pre-reflective self-consciousness found in classical phenomenology. The descriptions of the dancer's state of self-consciousness have the common peculiarity of covering embodied absorption and reflective awareness experienced simultaneously. Theoretically we know that the reflecting subject observing her movements and herself attentively cannot continuously stay in the immediacy of her pre-reflective experience. Pre-reflective self-consciousness is an integral part of phenomenal consciousness, and it constitutes the reflective experience, but it cannot in itself be an object to the subject. To be pre-reflectively self-conscious is a single experience with an immediate and non-observational nature, whereas reflective self-consciousness is a situation involving two experiences of the self; 1) the experience of reflecting, and 2) the experience of being the object reflected upon. The experience and consciousness of the self-alter through reflection, and differs irreducibly from the experiences of the pre-reflective self (Gallagher & Zahavi, 2008: 50-57; Zahavi, 1999:198). In other words, the phenomenological framework is challenged when it comes to an understanding and a definition of dancers' experiences of being, as some dancers describe it: in a trance and yet hyper-aware.

Writing about this dilemma I made theoretical as well as qualitative research. I interviewed four dancers; a classical ballet dancer, a contemporary dancer, a classical Indian dancer, and a former ballet dancer now choreographer. As the general performing situation aggregates a wide range of experiences of the self, the interviewees report of various incidents of being reflectively self-conscious, as well as incidents of being pre-reflectively bodily immersed in their actions. But to three out of four research objects the above-mentioned puzzling bodily transcendence is the pursued and preferred state of self-consciousness while working on stage. Aligning the empirical material with the phenomenological theory on reflection and pre-reflection, I realized that the interviewed dancers describe this specific bodily self-consciousness on stage with terminology traditionally used on the order of reflection: they are attentive – bodily attentive, that is. They are *intensely self-aware, explicitly aware of the other and the world*, and they are *disclosing experiences through transformation* – by means of the body. They are emotionally and-or bodily *articulating what they experience pre-reflectively*,

and they are – through their bodily selves – *thematically transforming or reproducing something received or grasped from their second-nature, from other pre-reflective experiences, or even from conceptual ideas.*

These are word-to-word descriptions of reflection (Husserl, 1960:38; Husserl, 2012:68; Gallagher & Zahavi, 2008:46; Zahavi, 1999:62). One might assume this as indications of conceptual reflectivity; yet, there is a simultaneous lack of thinking and conceptual control in this state. The dancers report of having *artistic blackouts*, feeling *something taking over*, feeling *someone else leading their arms and legs*, experiencing *being in a trance*. They notice how *movements and expressions are appearing through their body*, and they experience *artistic material asserting itself through them*.

Let's have a closer look at the descriptions a couple of the interviewed dancers gave. Performing, contemporary dancer Pedersen claims to have experiences consisting of attentive awareness and various degrees of absorption simultaneously. She is generally what she calls *mega conscious on stage* – as *one has responsibilities and has to be extremely aware*, as she puts it. Occasionally she experiences *getting into a trance*. The absorption that she describes as a trance does not intrude with her awareness, on the contrary: *One is still fully awake*, she says, *actually more awake than when walking down the street*. Pedersen describes her body as being extremely alert in this state, *as if even the hairs on my arms are aware of what is going on*.

In this state she does not register personal emotions or bodily feelings, such as whether the room is cold or warm, or if she feels low, or in good spirits, on a private level. Pedersen clearly feels her bodily presence in the space and is observant and attentive when it comes to the other dancers and their activities – *putting out my feelers*. Even though her awareness is upon the world around her, she is just as aware of her own dance work. Through her descriptions it seems evident, that she is experiencing a bodily focus on the living body (*Leib*), rather than on the physical (*Körper*). Barely recognizing her anatomical body, the work takes place in what she calls a *transformation of her emotional expression through the movements*.

Pedersen is not taking her physical body as an object and her state of awareness cannot be defined as a reflection upon her own body as such. She is sensuously and kinaesthetically alert and focused on her task, which is attended to with great explicitness as she discloses the theme of the choreography through this transformative process. Through her kinaesthetical interpretation the choreography unfolds and reveals its inherent sense and meaning. Pedersen is thus both absorbed, attentive, and transforming her material, simultaneously.

Modern ballet dancer and choreographer Holm is a former solo ballet dancer. During the five decades he has created dance performances, Holm claims to have depended upon his body, his sensuousness and imagination, rather than upon conceptual decision-making and planning. He calls it an *anti-method*, and he feels convinced that his huge load of previous events and factual knowledge – cooperating with his personal intuitive ability to sort out – simply dictate him from the first line (Holm, 2013:31). These experiences seem to be of a pre-reflective character; Holm relies on his embodied skills that after a lifetime of professional bodywork have

become second nature to him. But Holm additionally refers to the process of choreographing as a *reproduction of something received* – from where he is not sure: *I've never been introduced to the god of choreography, or whoever it is talking through me*, he says laughing.

When he adjusts the scenes with his dancers, this happens in what he calls an *attentive trance* (Holm, 2013:33). He explains that the trance part of it is a *one hundred per cent openness*, a submission to his bodily conditions. It is a deliberately chosen state in which he pursues his inner vision of the choreography. He cannot explain it further, he says, and claims that it is *merely a pocket that he slips into* in order to perform his craft. The attentive part of it lies in how his physical cooperation with the dancers enables him to see possibilities in their movements, and in the space where they are moving together.

Holm is bodily attentive and creative as his kinaesthetic, emotional, and perceptual logos is producing the dance steps required to finish the choreography of the performance he has in mind – as well as *in body*.

Thus, there seems to be an experientially lived as well as theoretically seen experience in which the subject's bodily self "thinks", or reflects, or accesses herself as object, through, or in, or by means of her embodied activity – in which she is completely immersed. Even though it shares certain structures with the other states, this proposed third state of self-consciousness appears irreducible to reflective and pre-reflective self-consciousness respectively. In this state the subject's attention is springing from and is of her bodily self, more specifically the subject's movements and-or her emotions, that is her *living body* – what we know as *Leib* (Husserl, 1952).

**In summing these observations up, we can see that the state of self-consciousness in question is reflective, non-conceptual, and embodied. As a reflective state it takes objects. Yet it stays in the immediacy of the lived body. This phenomenon has been described dance-scientifically as well as philosophically. Yet, it contradicts the phenomenological theoretical framework. It is in need of comprehensive academic elucidation.**

I call this distinct state of self-consciousness *embodied reflection*. Embodied reflection shares the characteristic immediacy with pre-reflective self-consciousness, the, in Husserl's words *straightforward mode* with which one undergoes one's experience (Husserl, 1960:34). There is no switch from implicit embodiment (pre-reflection) to a focus of the mind (reflection), the change in the way the object appears to the subject happens and stays within the embodied realm. Another characteristic embodied reflection shares with pre-reflection is the lack of conceptual reflection. When artists report of having had *blackouts* or having been *in a trance* these are to be recognized as experiences where conceptual thinking was momentarily kept on hold. To reflect in bodily terms is the experience of having an extremely intense focus through the embodied-emotional self, in a situation where one is absorbed in an activity of a bodily or emotional nature. Even though the artist might not rationally remember her experience on stage after having been in a trance, and she might be unable to give a verbalized account of the experience, her bodily self remembers and is indeed aware of the transformation she has undergone: after such a performance one often feels fulfilled, elated, euphoric, or *high*. It seems evident that artistic blackouts are neither experience of losing one's consciousness, nor of losing one's self. On the contrary, it is an experience of a radical focus within the self – within the embodied self. The notion of self-forgetfulness in absorbed activity reveals a dualistic approach to the self; it speaks of the self exclusively as minded, ignoring the self-experience of the bodily self.

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I have hereby presented the proposition of a reflective order of embodiment. To reflect through the bodily aspect of the self is neither mystical, nor is it exclusively experienced by artists or experts. I believe we all have the capacity to reflect emotionally and bodily – playing as children, during erotic convergence, and during sports, yoga or meditation, just to mention some situations. It is the universal human experience of being profoundly focused through non-conceptual parts of the self. Elaborating further upon dancers' manifold experiences of embodied self-consciousness might lead us to a broader understanding of these human cognitive recourses.

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