



Embodied Reflection

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EMBODIED REFLECTION

When a dancer enters the stage to perform, her intention will most often be to communicate with her audience. Using her movements, affective and physical expressivity, postures and rhythms she will tell a story, express an atmosphere, explore an emotional or motional 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 (Dreyfus 2013; 2005) what after practising has become a 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 affective 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 affective 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 then 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 embodied -, embedded -, enactive -, and extended cognition; the '4EC'. And I realized that *even within* the most body-embracing philosophical tradition, phenomenology, and – as far as I could see - the most up-to-date work on the 4EC, we still operate with a hierarchy where affective and embodied experiences of the self are seen as basic foundations for higher order conceptual reflection (Gallagher & Zahavi 2008).

I read up on the current philosophical debate on expertise (Shear 2013; Dreyfus 2013; 2005; 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 makes use of her *reflective capacities* during her activity, or whether she is *bodily absorbed*, in other words *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, Dorothée Legrand, Susanne Ravn and Barbara Montero, as well as a closer reading of Merleau-Ponty's essays on the painting artist (Merleau-Ponty 1961) 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* (2012; 2011; 2009; 1980), 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 2013; Legrand & Ravn 2009). 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 alters 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 abovementioned 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 affectively 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 these as indications of conceptual reflectivity; yet, there is a simultaneous lack of thinking and of 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. It is rather a here-and-now awareness, which she does not evaluate. It is experienced merely as it is, she states. 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* (in phenomenology distinguished as *Leib*), rather than on *the physical* (phenomenologically known as *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. Phenomenology tells us how transformation through reflection makes a previously dumb experience articulate its own sense (Husserl 1950, 77) (Zahavi 1999, 64), and this description seems to have a quality of familiarity with the bodily process Pedersen is undergoing on stage.

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 2014, 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.

Having authored several books, Holm has verbalized his experiences of dancing and choreographing. Here’s a quote from one of his last works:

I have made dances in a somewhat similar way throughout a long life of choreographing. I am not roaming about in a dance studio alone preparing steps and movements. I observe and sense atmospheres, music, and am of course already familiar with the content of the performance at stake. I know in detail what it will express, how long or short one and the other scene will be. In my imagination I can clearly see the dancers doing it all. But when I meet the dancers I am blank when it comes to steps and movements. There we stand, I use an inspiring piece of music - or maybe not - and standing in front of a dancer or two or five I improvise.

I don’t mind confessing that I’ve often felt it as if someone or something dictated me, led my legs and arms, and once it was close to a religious experience or at least an experience endowed with spirit. (...) I composed the act within one and a half hours. And I didn’t change the move of a finger afterwards.

(Holm, 2014, 32) (Author’s translation)

When he adjusts the scenes with his dancers, this happens in what he calls an *attentive trance* (Holm 2014, 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 thus 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.

Gathering our material, we can now conclude that the dancers' statements represent the same theoretical dilemma that we saw in the dance philosophers' work: How can the dancing subjects' experiences be *attentive and immersed* simultaneously?

Would it be possible to recognize this seemingly contradictory experience as either conceptually reflective, or as pre-reflective, or as an experience consisting of a combination of the two, where the subject alternates between reflective and pre-reflective self-consciousness?

The dancers' stress on profound *attention* eliminates pre-reflectivity as the adequate term for this specific state. Yet, the attention is not *on*, but emerges *through* the body, thus it does not make sense to define the attention in question as conceptually reflective.

Even though it shares characteristics with pre-reflective as well as with reflective self-consciousness, this seemingly two-fold mode of awareness is neither reflective nor pre-reflective in the traditional understanding of the terms. As a consequence, the mode cannot be the result of an alternation between pre-reflective and reflective self-consciousness; it's attentive and thereby reflective aspect is not identical with the reflection in conceptual reflective self-consciousness. The puzzling factor is not the immersion, but the attention, it being the *bodily* self's focus upon its activity and this activity's context.

Besides, in the close connection between immersion and attention in this state, one is causing the other in a constant reinforcing intermingling: the dancers are attentive by virtue of their embodied absorption, and their immersion is profound by virtue of their focus and attention. This persistent unification throughout the activity constitutes the very existence of this state, as well as its characteristics.

The case of two individual states of self-consciousness momentarily replacing each other seems to be a different experience from the experience of the state we are discussing.

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 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**. Talking of matters concerning the bodily self I prefer 'reflecting' to 'thinking'. Due to its unambiguousness 'thinking' might be misleading. The verb 'to reflect' has a broader field of utility, as we might talk of 'how the sunlight is reflecting off the window' as well as of conceptual reflection. The etymological background of 'reflecting' is the Latin word *reflexus*, which means *bent back*, and thus inclines an input-output, action-reaction movement.

Let's have a look at the characteristics embodied reflection shares with pre-reflective and traditionally reflective self-consciousness respectively.

Embodied reflection shares the aspect of immediacy with pre-reflective self-consciousness, the, in Husserl's words *straightforward mode* with which one undergoes one's experience (Husserl 1960, 34).

To reflect bodily does not imply the dichotomy normally found between the reflecting subject and the object reflected upon. 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. The object of embodied reflection is often to be found in the subject or in the subject's horizon. It can be a movement, a beat or rhythm being processed through the subject's body, an affective expression, the sense of an atmosphere finding its way through the steps, and so on. The dancer might bodily transform and communicate almost any aspect of the dance piece; the mere physical movements, the emotional content of the piece, or even conceptual ideas behind the performance. As the subject is presenting the objects through her bodily and/or affective self, and as the body is the reflecting aspect of the self, immediacy is intact during this

bodily reflective experience - there is no change of temporality, and no distance between the object and subject in embodied reflection.

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 experiences 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.

Additionally to the *absorption* and *lack of conceptual reflection*, *embodied reflection* shares 'movement pattern' with the pre-reflective. There seems to be a difference in the way reflective and pre-reflective self-consciousness 'moves'. Where the conceptually reflective action makes one's awareness 'move' like a laser ray and meet one's object by *narrowing down to the point*, the pre-reflective 'move' is an open embrace. Experiencing **embodied reflection** one's focus is not like a scrutinizing look or a pointing finger; the focusing lies in actively *opening oneself* in order to embrace the wholeness of the context. This may concern the quality of the objects of **embodied reflection**, but more specifically it concerns the approach and attitude found in the subject. What has been called 'passivity' and 'lack of control' - due to conceptual passivity and the lack of conceptual control- is in this case rather an ability to actively submit oneself to one's activity and this activity's context. This is characteristic of the way this self-consciousness 'moves' - not to be confused with the activity in which one experiences embodied reflection.

When it comes to the characteristics **embodied reflection** shares with reflection, we have already learned of the *attention*, *explicit self-awareness* as well as *explicit awareness of the other and the world*, of the *thematizing*, *the transformation* and *reproduction of objects received or grasped*, of

the *disclosure of objects through transformation* in and through the embodied, and the *articulation* of emotional and bodily experiences, that the subject undergoes in *embodied reflection*. These experiences all share traits with reflective self-consciousness.

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 affectively and bodily – playing as children, during erotic convergence, and during sports, yoga or meditation, just to mention some situations. It is merely the universal human experience of being profoundly focused through non-conceptual aspects of the self.

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