

# Reimagining the Body

## Attunement of Intentionality and Bodily Feelings

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*The tragedy of the first position*<sup>1</sup> is a video that went viral and gained more than 6.5 million views on youtube. This video demonstrates one of the common challenges in learning a technique. Acquiring new physical knowledge, which lies beyond one's existing patterns of movements, is not a self-evident task. In the video a little girl, approximately 4 years old, is confused by the request to perform a first position in a ballet class. First position seems to be a very basic task to perform for dancers. Thus, when dancers watch this video they know how to achieve what the girl in the video is trying to realize. Nevertheless, the video became viral among some professionals, not as a target for mocking the girl, but rather as a source for empathy. The movements the little girl performs demonstrate her determination in comprehending the request of the teacher. Alongside with her misunderstanding, the girl's movements express her natural intelligence, her cognitive effort, and her ambition. When she touches her legs and opens her wrists her cognitive effort becomes apparent. It is noticeable that she conceptually understands the requested task of the first position. However, she does not comprehend how to conduct her body accordingly. The girl changes her strategy, and as the teacher corrected her position beforehand by replacing her feet, she reaches her legs with her hands and tries to open them. Focusing on the position as a requested result, the girl relates to her feet as if they were an external object to her own consciousness and spirit. After the attempt to move the feet with her hands, the girl loses balance. Losing balance becomes a sudden moment of grace. It seems that her feeling of almost falling induces an inner recognition, which directs the immediate catch up that she, as a sovereign agent,<sup>2</sup> successfully originates.

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1 | <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tdylQeg5B9l> (last access: 14.06.2016).

2 | Aili Bresnahan defines agency as the control and intention of dance performers. The act of catching balance reviles that the girl is able to take hold on physical control. For that reason, it testifies her existing agency. (Bresnahan 2014: 86)

For the reasons of trying to achieve the task, and the success in catching balance, it becomes evident that this girl is neither senseless nor incapable of physical coordination. She is clever enough to understand the task and her physicality is just fine. What the girl lacks in this moment of confusion is the capacity to grasp and to embody a *new physical idea*. The idea of the first position seems to be mysterious and abstract and she cannot realize how it can be operative. Her attempts are common for acquiring new knowledge. Accordingly, the girl tries to comprehend the operative method for reaching the first position as a result. The girl's challenge in comprehending a new task is a very basic human challenge. Furthermore, moments of physical confusion are familiar to dancers, who ask to improve and push further their physical performance and techniques; they often face the not yet understood. For most people, no matter what their background of training, performing and comprehending movements that are not within their habitus does not come without effort.

This article deals with the challenge of reimagining the body and suggests concentration upon attunement to sensory information and intentionality is a productive promise for dealing this challenge. Incorporating sensory information within movement's intentionality means to conduct bodily movements within physical awareness. Accordingly, bodily movements are comprehended both as appearance and as a sovereign process of shaping and designing them. The question of exceeding habitual patterns of behavior has varied expressions in dance. As it is presented in the example of *The Tragedy of the First Position*, reimagining the body may deal with the wonder of how to embody a new dance move where a student is not familiar with its operative technique. Another aspect, which is more typical of creative processes and improvising, relates to the challenge of imagining and performing new patterns of movements that are not merely a repetition of what has already been done. Moreover, the question of reimagining the body may occur while activating a familiar bodily procedure by course of a habit. Thus, the realization of current physical capacities is cut short. An example for it may be the attempt of leading the extension of the working leg within a *développé* to a familiar spatial direction, without realizing, and therefore without fulfilling, the actual potential of the stretch. All these aspects express the challenge of reimagining the body. Those cases deal with similar confusions and can be resolved within a concentration on mutual exchange between bodily feeling and its relation to the intentionality of movement. Accordingly, the argument here is that imagination in dance has to be comprehended as an innovative organization of actual physical capacities.

Imagination of a new physical task may become less mysterious than it might at first seem, once we comprehend its relationship to habitus and perception. Human practices are social and individual at the same time. As it is within any other body of knowledge, dancing holds the tension of an antinomy. On the one hand knowing how to dance is a technique with a cultural structure; on the

other hand it is a personal skill, accordingly the individual dancer handles their perceptual experience. As individual and social human beings, dancers know how to think within movement, according to their ensemble of already acquired techniques, or *Habitus*. Technique, as Marcel Mauss (1935/1994: pp. 461) defines it, »is an action that is effective and traditional.« It conveys the effective knowledge that has been learnt during social history. However, the affectivity of traditional knowledge is acquired and confirmed within personal experience. Following Mauss, in the social philosophy of Pierre Bourdieu (1977), habitus defines the schemata of perception that each individual in a certain society is used to follow (and society for this purpose, can also be a dance society, as the societies of urban dancing, release technique, Gaga, ballet, and so forth). Implicitly, or explicitly, movements and perceptions are organized by already-known patterns. Thus, for ballet dancers, dancing ballet is habitual activity. Thus, it both follows and confirms their cultural training. As a technique of handling movements the body of a ballet dancer is able to coordinate and comprehend physical tasks within the technique without thinking too much. Thus, accordingly, the operative knowledge of a technique is physically embodied. However, more than that, it is not merely the body that finds its coordinative manners easily within a technique. Rather, the resulting movements regulate the aesthetic tendency of the educated dancers. Thus, dancers recognize easily the aesthetic and the operative value of their own dance moves. Consequently, dancers direct their imagination within the paths of their techniques.

The notion of habitus can elaborate the challenge of imagination: how dancers move is identical to how dancers perceive. Thus, reimagining the body demands to move beyond habits. Consequently, the problem of imagination is circular: moving beyond habits requires new manners of perceiving movement, while different perceptual manners require novel patterns of physical arrangement.<sup>3</sup> The physicality of habitus is articulated in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, as a challenge for perceptual awareness. For Merleau-Ponty the habits of perception are identical with the habits of movement perceivers have.<sup>4</sup> Thus, also in case of looking at pictures, for example, observers are attentive to pictures in relation to their habitual patterns of moving their heads and directing their gazes. Since movement and perception are combined, Merleau-Ponty claims: »[i]nattentive perception contains nothing more and indeed nothing other than attentive kind.« (1945/2007: 32) Accordingly, for Merleau-Ponty attention cannot be a mere cognitive act of awareness towards objects in the world. For that reason, Merleau-Ponty claims that the physical manners of perceiving have to be considered within the perceiver's attentiveness. Hence, Merleau-Ponty promotes

**3** | Friedrich Ast defines such a problem as the hermeneutical circle, cf. Palmer 1969: 77-78.

**4** | »In fact, every habit is both motor and perceptual.« (Merleau-Ponty 1945/2007: 170)

somatic attention as conditional for perceptual judgment. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body stresses that bodily sensations have to take part in consciousness, not as something consciousness reflects *upon*, but rather reflects *with*. Otherwise, both perception and attention become empty concepts (*ibid.*). Therefore, his criticism of both intellectualism and empiricism is that sensual information cannot be a disturbance for knowledge. Merleau-Ponty criticizes the empiricist tradition for looking merely on the world without considering the enactive part of the observer, and the intellectual tradition for examining solely cognition, without comprehending the world it inhabits. Accordingly, both traditions do not fully comprehend the nature of perception.<sup>5</sup> For Merleau-Ponty, »perception and experience of one's own body are mutually implied.« (*ibid.* fn. p. 150) To perceive is not to remember but rather to live through.

Inasmuch as it is basic; we all have bodies and we all feel our bodies, to take hold of somatic awareness is not always easy. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is an opposition to the dualist tradition in western philosophy that divides between body and mind. However, being detached from experience is so embedded within human culture, that ignoring bodily feelings as a source for knowledge is not solely a challenge for dualist philosophers. Those who ask to work within their physicality and to dance might occasionally experience misunderstanding regarding the coordination of body and mind as well. In the case of dancing, the body, the *soma* always underlies focus of attention. However, being attentive to the body is not sufficient for perceiving. It is, rather, necessary to consider the body as a knowledgeable source that organizes movement. If dancers are attentive merely to how their bodies feel when they move, they tend to repeat their patterns of movement. In such cases, habitual patterns are thought to be *natural* and *biological*, without considering the cultural, artificial, knowledge that movement embodies.<sup>6</sup> This problem occurs in another variation, as it is in *The Tragedy of the First Position*, once the body is considered as a result of shaping, as a mere effect, rather than as a knowledgeable origin that organizes, handles and shapes movements. In the first case, cultural results are assumed to be natural because they belong to the body. In the second case, cultural knowledge is considered as mysterious because it does not fit the current physicality. In both cases the body as an origin of knowledge is ignored.

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**5** | »Empiricism cannot see that we need to know what we are looking for, otherwise we would not know we are looking at it, and intellectualism fails to see that we need to be ignorant of what we are looking for, or equally again we should not be searching.« (Merleau-Ponty 1945/2007: 33)

**6** | John Dewey defines culture as artificial in a good sense. Accordingly, culture is an artifact that enables thinking as an invented effective procedure. However, in order to be effective further, the artificiality of cultural knowledge has to be considered within the reflective thought. (Dewey 1910: 68-79)

Dance is not a sequence of results; it is rather a thoughtful, innovative and knowledgeable process of shaping. For that reason, when in *The Tragedy of the First Position* the teacher tells the girl to open her feet »just like my feet«, her guidance is insufficient. It is not enough to be attentive to a mere effect. The girl in the video needs to learn the cultural logic behind the first position as an operative technique that her body can handle. Similarly, if ballet dancers want to follow Forsythe's *Improvisation Technologies* they have to physically follow and to incorporate its conducting game rules, as a new cultural knowledge this technique conveys. Thus, in order to know *how* to move, dancers have to be attentive to *why* movements are operative in relation to a requested task.<sup>7</sup> In *Art as Experience* John Dewey explains perceptual experience as the activity of organizing doing and undergoing. Accordingly, »an experience has pattern and structure, because it is not just doing and undergoing in alternation, but consists of them in relationship.« (1934/1980: 40) For Dewey, perception is a constitutive act that demands the evaluation of what undergoes in relation to the work that is needed for achieving further harmony. I would like to suggest here a practical elaboration of this argument: the *harmonic result* of the first position is the opened feet, the *manners of doing* are the intentional direction of the physical movement, and *what undergoes* is the physical feeling of the legs. The challenge here is, however, how to comprehend the mutual correspondence between the task, the intentionality of action and the current feeling of it.

Thoughtful conduction of movement considers the intentionality of the dance within and in relation to the feeling of the body. Accordingly, dancers are able to take hold of both their intention and their feeling. The sovereignty of conducting the dance is cut short, if there is a gap between body and mind (cf. Varela/Thompson/Rosch 1991: 27-29). Thus, as it is in the case of the *Tragedy of the First Position*, cognitive effort is detached from the physicality of its regulation. Evan Thompson marks out the perceptual gap between body and mind as a case of being led by the body image. Accordingly, the relationship to one's own body is conceived as the relationship to »an intentional object of consciousness.« (2005: 41) However, once the body is considered as an »intentional object«, it is not merely the body that becomes alien to the dancer, but intentionality is withdrawn from the sovereignty of the dancer as well. When the girl in *The Tragedy of the First Position* repeats the movement of the teacher, and corrects the position of her feet with her hands, she does not merely relate her body as external object, she also does not realize the intention to move the feet as her own. The first position becomes an external order (that of the teacher) that the girl attempts to fulfill.

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7 | For John Dewey, thinking is always an activity in relation to a problem. Thus, the reflective thought considers the best method of solving that issue (ibid.).

Bodily movements are organized within the body in regard to spatial direction and the conduction of it within time. For this reason, in the case of relating the body as external, the body and the mind are detached from their sovereignty. »Body image« is a psychological term, which is adopted nowadays by philosophies of embodiment as a cross model for body schema. The body schema is a continuous, coherent organization of sensory-motor capacities held by the body from within. It is the body's *knowing how* to move.<sup>8</sup> However, more than a mere knowing how, for Merleau-Ponty, the body schema is also a »knowing that.« Merleau-Ponty's sees the body schema as dynamic. Accordingly, being dynamic »means that my body appears to me as an attitude directed towards a certain existing or possible task.« (1935/2007: 114) Thus, human motility is situated and movements take place with a background and a reason in relation to experience. Movements, even if without awareness, are intentional; they relate the world regarding to the interest of the human being as an agent within. Accordingly, the spatiality of the body is not directed towards a spatiality of position, but towards a spatiality of situation. The body schema is, therefore, a perceptual physical capacity regarding a situation. Thus, it enables movement to happen unconsciously, without thinking too much about how to move, but rather why to move.<sup>9</sup> For this reason, the girl in *The Tragedy of the First Position* was not confused when she directed her hands towards her feet, she knew her task and her body schema was organized accordingly.

Imagination in dance is external neither to dealing with the physicality of thinking nor to considering the physicality of knowledge. The way dancers move is always related to how they physically handle the ensemble of techniques that their bodies possess and have. The challenge of reimagining the body occurs since unlike intentional movements from everyday life, like grasping a glass or reaching my feet, dance movements do not have a situated reason within. Dance movements are invented rules of game, and they are conducted according to the embodied accumulation of cultural knowledge. Thus, the perceptual act of dancing is directed beyond the here and now. Imaginary rules of game become the reason and the ground of movement. However, the fulfillment of dancing has to consider the here and now, and to integrate actual situation within. Executing a grand jeté, for instance, the dancer has to consider the current feeling of physical heaviness in relation to gravity within the intentionality of directing the physical energy towards springing. It is not enough to learn dance as set of

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**8** | »[I]t is a system of sensory-motor functions that operate below the level of self-referential intentionality. It involves a set of tacit performances – preconscious, subpersonal processes that play a dynamic role in governing posture and movement.« (Gallagher 2005: 26)

**9** | »[...] the fact that bodily space may be given to me in an intention to take hold without given in an intention to know.« (Merleau-Ponty 1935/2007: 114)

positions, but as conduction of movement. Trained ballet dancers implicitly *know that* in order of performing a *développé*, it is not enough to lead the working leg, they also have to ground their standing leg, to counterpart their pelvis and their balance and so forth. Likewise, they know that in order to perform a *grand jeté*, the knees have to *plié* beforehand. However, this knowledge is not a detached set of rules for action. Rather, the feeling of the current sensory-information in relation to the intentionality of the spring is immediate, tacit, knowledge that conducts the momentum of the jump. The situation of the dance is the body as its subject of inquiry; the body as feelings, information, archive of knowledge. Dancers who consider their bodies learn to integrate their bodily feelings and to guide their intentions accordingly. As a result, following exceptional current bodily feeling and conducting them further into experience enables the dance to become genuine. On the one hand the dance is fulfilling and intentional, and on the other hand the movement becomes advanced and innovative.

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## INTERNET REFERENCE

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