In its purest form, dance’s only medium is the body - a body that is often considered to be illiterate and frighteningly ambiguous, certainly as the subject of art. Perhaps the greatest power of language, on the other hand, is that it allows us to refer to and talk about things that are absent. Dance, therefore, is necessarily rooted in the present and demands an ongoing engagement with that dynamic present. Dance, as Merce Cunningham said, ‘gives you nothing back, no manuscripts to store away, no paintings to hang on your walls and maybe show in museums, no poems to be printed or sold, nothing but that single fleeting moment when you feel alive’. In a world that prizes objects, dance stands apart in defiance of this preoccupation.

Science, in attempting to describe and explain an objective reality must necessarily remove the subject from the equation and provide evidence – a record - of the phenomenon in question. It is perhaps not surprising then, that in a world strongly shaped by rationality and the logical structures of science and technology, dance, as a practice and an art form, hasn’t been taken very seriously. However successful science has been in shaping and explaining the objective physical world, its attempts to explain consciousness have been less effective. Its main sticking point is explaining the *qualia* of experience, that is, the particular *felt quality* we have in experiencing a given phenomenon.

Philosophers since antiquity have sought to explain human conscious experience, in particular the capacity for abstract thought and language that sets us apart from the rest of the animal kingdom. It is also not surprising then, that they have tended to prize our rational capacities over any other, particularly if we bear in mind that until the development of modern medicine, the body was far more commonly subject to illness and disease – the site of decay, discomfort and deformity. Perhaps the best-known and most influential thinker on the matter of thought and consciousness is René Descartes, famous for the phrase ‘I think, therefore I am’. Implicit in this neat sentence is the belief that the self lies fundamentally in rational thought, which he believed to be a substance altogether different from that which makes up our bodies. This duality, separating mind from matter, (which was, it must be noted, largely in the service of religion and the belief in a transcendent soul) has had a profound impact upon how we conceive the relationship between thought, emotions, the body and the self, forging a gap between our cognitive and rational capacities on one hand, and our bodily, perceptual and emotional capacities on the other.

The duality is still very much alive in modern conceptions of mind, which nowadays, having largely done away with the belief in a transcendental soul, commonly seek to explain its functioning in purely materialistic computational terms. So, for example, any system programmed in the right way could essentially think like we do, assuming of course that we will one day understand how our brains are ‘programmed’. Underlying this, however, remains an assumption that what we think and the way we make sense of the world around us has nothing to do with our bodies and the feelings and emotions that run through them. Our language abilities and the truths that can be arrived at through its logical structures are seen to be directly and fundamentally related to the objective reality that it is science’s mission to uncover. There is no place, therefore, for the supposedly illiterate and irrational body in this picture.

It is hard to deny, however, that as a feeling and thinking subject, our actual *experience* of the world is a complex and murky combination of a range of thoughts and feelings never entirely separable from one another even though our attention may be focused, to varying degrees, by one or the other at different times.

The work of neuroscientist Antonio Damasio is particularly interesting in this respect and his line of thinking is representative of a growing trend in studies of consciousness that acknowledge the centrality of the body and emotions in shaping our thoughts. Damasio believes that we tend to think, and our disposition towards different types of thought, is inextricably linked to the complex sensory engagement we have with our environment, mediated, of course, through the body. Consciousness is a very recent development in the evolution of life, which, importantly, may also be considered an evolution of movement – movement being a defining feature of life. For most of this evolutionary time, living things have successfully navigated their environments without the mental capacities we possess. This is because all living organisms, even single-celled bacteria, are born with devices that solve, *automatically,* the basic problems of life – for example, finding sources of energy (food), fending off external sources of injury or disease, and maintaining a chemical balance inside the body enabling it to function properly.

We humans, however, are somewhat more complex than our bacterial ancestors, and have over time evolved the capacity to monitor these automatic processes – we are able to perceive and reflect upon what happens in the body. It is this very capacity that Damasio identifies as giving rise to emotions and consequently the feeling of the emotion we perceive. Emotional responses are processes arising from the perception of ongoing changes within an organism in its engagement with the environment. Thus, emotions evoke changes within the organism and motivate it to act in ways that tend to be conducive to its welfare. For example, if you suddenly perceive that an object is hurtling towards you, your body reacts with numerous internal neural and chemical changes, which enable you to take quick avoiding action through the well-known fight-or-flight mechanism. The point to note here is that our conscious experience of this happening comes *after* the event itself. We react and *then* we feel what has just happened. Our thoughts consequently turn to subjects that are consonant with how we’re feeling. Damasio shows also how even in problem solving situations, where we might consider to be drawing purely on our rational capacities, the body reacts in advance of our conscious thought processes. Our feelings and thoughts – the body and mind – are therefore inseparably engaged in a continuous feedback loop of action, reaction and reflection. To refer to them as separate entities is to make a distinction that does not exist.

One of the most interesting aspects of this perspective on the relation between mind and body is its bearing on our understanding of habit and practice. For example, our abstracting and reflective capacities enable us to plan structures of physical practice that engage the habituating processes of the body and mind. In doing so we develop skill as our ability to *enact* a given movement and what we *perceive* as we do so becomes increasingly refined. Dance, unlike most other physical practices, however, is one that embodies, most fundamentally, the rich range of qualitative dynamics in movement and aspires beyond its functional value to a communicative and expressive realm. The terms given to ballet steps, for example tendu, frappé, or fondu (to stretch, to strike and to melt respectively) are qualitative ones – they denote a specific dynamic process of movement, not just the positions that one assumes. Maxine Sheets-Johnstone in her book ‘The Corporeal Turn’ explains how an evolutionary perspective on movement highlights the degree to which meaning is present in these qualitative dynamics of movement – what she terms a ‘kinetic semantics’. As noted above, the particular dynamic of an object’s motion carries with it a specific meaning in relation to the well-being of an organism. Imagine the difference in the motion of, and how you’d react to, a stray cricket ball and the tender caress of your lover, for example. It is these qualitative dynamics that underlie the continuous, but largely non-conscious, aesthetic engagement we have with the world - one that embodies the intelligence of a history of the evolution of life in movement. These qualitative dynamics have emotive resonance because we share a common body. As the philosopher Mark Johnson says:

‘We know the meanings of various bodily movements and gestures in dance precisely because we know the feeling and meaning of our own bodily gestures. We know how it feels when our bodies sway gracefully and rhythmically versus when we slip and fall, or jump back in fright. We know intuitively what it means to “be up” and happy, just as we know what it means to “feel low” when we are depressed. Our bodily posture and openness to the world is upright and expansive when we are joyful, and it is drooping and contracting when we are sad.’ (Johnson, 2007 p.45)

It is precisely because this engagement exists in a continuously unfolding dynamic present that it stands at odds with the scientific and literalistic tendency of knowing and confirming things only by means of a recorded proof, or by naming them. Language only reports experience however – it is post-kinetic – and this is why we struggle to put into words, or describe adequately what we are feeling from one fleeting moment to the next. This is why I believe that in a world of perhaps excessive literalism, to dance – to live in the feeling of experience as it unfolds – is to be open and connected to the rich range of qualities that are the very foundation of life and human meaning. Science and rationality have rightly freed us from many misguided superstitions and dramatically improved the material conditions of life, but to take them as the *basis* of how we understand ourselves and experience the world leaves us with a narrow and depressingly cold picture of humanity. As Carl Jung said:

‘Science is the tool of the Western mind and with it more doors can be opened than with bare hands. It is part and parcel of our knowledge and obscures our insight only when it holds that the understanding given by it is the only kind there is.’ (Jung, 1958, p.303)

If God is dead as Nietzsche claimed, maybe dance and the realm of experience it takes us to can help us fill the space once occupied by the transcendental soul of religion. We might do better to understand the limits of rationality and explore the full range of what it means to *experience* life – connected as deeply and richly as possible to the qualities inherent in how we interact with one another and the world around us – and to hone our sensitivities to these qualities through practice. Mark Johnson again says:

“Our aspirations for transcendence must be realised not in attempts to escape our bodily habituation, but rather by employing it in our ongoing efforts to transform ourselves and our world for the better”. (Johnson, 2007 p.283)

Religion’s belief in a life beyond this world emphasises devotion to a practice as a *means* to an end. I humbly suggest that if we are to live the good life here on earth, we should see practice as an *end* in itself, because it is the place where our past labours are brought into the present, inspiring us to continue them into the future.

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