Chapter 9
Embracing the Unknown, Ethics and Dance

Philipa Rothfield

> Where you are when you don't know where you are is one of the most precious spots offered by improvisation. It is a place from which more directions are possible than anywhere else. I call this place the Gap. The more I improvise, the more I'm convinced that it is through the medium of these gaps— this momentary suspension of reference point—that comes the unexpected and much sought after "original" material. It's "original" because its origin is the current moment and because it comes from outside our usual frame of reference. Nancy Stark Smith [15, p. 3]

9.1 Introduction

Nancy Stark Smith is one of the founders of 'Contact Improvisation,' a group dance form that continually exceeds the individual plans and intentions of its participating dancers. Having too many plans can be a dangerous thing in contact because it interferes with being alive to the present moment. At its best, the unfolding of Contact Improvisation is a surprise to its participants and audience alike. That is its joy. The New York choreographer, Susan Rethorst also speaks of a certain kind of unfamiliarity with regard to "that stranger, the unmade dance" [12, p. 28]. For Rethorst, the work of choreography is, "not a well lit activity; decisions happen in the semi-darkness… Staying with nerves of steel in that poorly lit place, not in spite of its lack of light, or any other lack, but for its own singular reality…" [12, p. 29]. Improviser Eva Karczag speaks of the disorientation that occurs: "There are situations where you're totally thrown out because you've changed, you've become a little different and how can that continue to support what you've done before" [6, p. 49]. What these dancers share is a state of not-knowing, not as a temporary blip in the course of knowledge building but as a requirement, a pre-condition for the

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art of making dance. The point that they all make is that putting themselves into a state of physical not-knowing is (kin)aesthetically productive, necessary even.

There are two perspectives on this process: one, the subjectivity of the dancer (which includes the dancer's awareness); and two, the body that creates. They are intertwined, one facilitates the other. Nancy Stark Smith's reference to 'the Gap' is an acknowledgement of the first aspect, which I call the dancer's state of not-knowing. Susan Rethorst uses the metaphor of light to depict the choreographer's groping towards the creative moment. In both cases, the artist places herself in the dark so as to allow something to occur. The second perspective belongs to the body, as the site of (kin)aesthetic creativity. It's the body that produces the sought after original material, the body which renders the dancer "a little different," bringing subjectivity along in its wake. According to these artists, the subject-dancer needs to make room for the body by getting out of the way.

Deborah Hay's *In the Dark* (2010) encapsulates these two elements and puts them on stage for all to see. Three soloists have spent months preparing to get up in front of an audience. They do not know what they are going to do. This a pre-requisite of *In the Dark*, that the performer must remain in the dark at each and every moment of the dance, an attitude which is in stark contrast to the ballet dancer's relation to her familiar repertoire. Hay's dancers are perpetually poised on the abyss of their own cultivated ignorance. By putting themselves into that state, a certain kind of space is made for something new to emerge. *In the Dark* allows an audience to watch dancers take their not-knowing into movement, to use it as a means to create.[1] Audience and performer discover together that which follows. Fiona Bryant taps a cowboy boot on the floor. Each tap has its own singular rhythm as if commanded to differ from the timing of the previous tap. Bryant's face is intense but open.

Hay seeks the body as the principal agent in her choreography. She disperses the sovereignty of consciousness by invoking the notion of a body in constant flux—"23 trillions cells changing all at once."[2] Her choreography challenges the performer to resist his/her habits, while remaining in a state of not-knowing, balancing "at the edge of the unknown" as Eva Karczag would put it [7, p. 48]. In short, the distinctive tenor of Hay's choreography challenges and occupies the dancer's subjectivity, while trusting the body to compose the dance.

The idea that subjectivity is no longer central and that the body holds the key is not new. Nietzsche is renowned for preferring the body to consciousness, and for looking towards corporeal becoming as the means by which life can be affirmed. His notion of (self) overcoming could be thought of in relation to the subject-dancer's being in the dark. But it's Spinoza who takes this odd couple—the 'creative body' and the 'subject in darkness'—into an explicitly ethical domain. His famous dictum that "we don't know what a body can do" identifies the twin elements discussed above: the subject who doesn't know, in relation to a body which acts. However, it is one thing to acknowledge that dimming the lights on subjectivity can be aesthetically fruitful, another to call it *good*. Spinoza's understanding of goodness introduces an ethical perspective on dance. This is made possible through a common focus on the body's creativity, in movement. For Spinoza, goodness is a matter of creative

[1] For my review of *In the Dark*, see [13].

[2] Personal communication, 1998.

self-differentiation, according to which a body develops through its own activities. A body that becomes better, changes for the good. This in turn produces joy in the heart of the subject. Adapting Spinoza somewhat, we might say that joy is the mark of the dance well done, of a body that surpasses itself in action. This is something that dancers intuitively understand, for dance is their art and the body their wherewithal.

In this chapter, I claim that the activity of dancing affirms Spinoza's ethics. The joy inherent in the dance well done is entirely compatible with Spinoza's conception of the good. Not only does dance affirm the value of corporeal activity, dancers are more willing than most to tolerate not-knowing in the name of their art. They are willing to do what it takes to allow the body to excel. They are experienced in allowing the body to come to the fore by way of 'backgrounding' their own sovereign subjectivity.[3] Spinoza wants to affirm the body's achievements, as a momentary accomplishment. This resonates with dance to the extent that a body aims to make something of itself, to become something more in movement. Despite the desire to improve, however, there is no established pathway to the good. This is because 'we don't know what a body is capable of,' even our own. In this respect, the body is the teacher.[4] Dancers allow for that. They look to the body as the medium of their art. While Spinoza's ethics offers no formula for success, I want to suggest that Spinoza might nonetheless acknowledge the dancer's endeavours as a mode of ethical improvisation.

9.2 Spinoza's Ethics

Spinoza puts his faith in what a body does. His ethics is centred upon the relation between the uniqueness of a body (its essence) and its activity (what a body does). The more a body expresses its essence in action the better. This is what Spinoza means by the good. Spinoza's key claim is the idea that the good inheres in the body's increasing power. At first glance, the enhancement of power appears an unlikely mark of the ethical, for what exactly is *good* about becoming more powerful? Much depends upon how we understand power. In Spinoza's case, power inheres in the body's activities, in what a body does and how that relates to its essence. While essences don't change, what does change is the extent to which a body draws upon its essence by way of its own agency. The more agency a body expresses, the greater its power. Ethics is thus about empowerment in the singular rather than domination over others. The challenge of this way of thinking lies in its refusal to fix any particular *content* for the notion of the good.[5] Rather, the good arises as a difference in *this* body, through *its* becoming active.

[3] Drew Leder offers a characterization of the typical sovereign subject who experiences his/her body mostly as an absence [8]. The idea that the dancer reverses this position through 'backgrounding' subjectivity is reflected in Leder's exemption of dancing from his general claim that the body is liminal to our lived experience. In other words, the dancer's body enjoys a corporeal prominence not usually felt.

[4] Deborah Hay's book, *My Body, The Buddhist* looks to the body as the source [5].

[5] This is where Spinozan ethics differs from moral principles that depend upon universal notions of the good.

However, it's not *just* this body. Ethics typically concerns relations between individuals. In Spinoza's case, it's about encounters between bodies. Bodies are big and small, simple and complex. When a body encounters another, two possibilities arise. A body may become more or less powerful as a result of the encounter. Deleuze, in commenting on Spinoza, writes: "The good is when a body directly compounds its relation with ours, and, with all or part of its power, increases ours" [2, p. 22]. The good arises from the singularity of this body, in its encounter with another. It emerges because of the body's particular qualities, which enable it to become more capable, more powerful and because that particular body expresses those qualities in action. Of course, the encounter may go the other way, producing a decrease in power as a lessening of capacity. Any increase in power leads to joy, and conversely, any decrease leads to sadness. Power grows through the body's increasing ability to act [16, p. 116]. This is not because some external value is satisfied. Rather, it has to do with what a particular body becomes as a manifestation of its own singular essence. This is its joy, the joy of expressing a greater sense of agency in the world.

The idea of a dynamic increase or decrease of power thus poses the good (and bad) in relation to change. Spinoza looks at the notion of change through his theory of affect: "By affect I understand affections of the body by which the body's power of acting is increased or diminished, aided or restrained, and at the same time, the ideas of these affections [16, p. 70]." The notion of affect represents those changes embedded within corporeal becoming, that is, when one bodily state becomes another.[6] The ethical moment in Spinoza's thought arises as a distinction between *kinds* of becoming. When a body encounters another, it can be affected in one of two ways: either actively or passively. Actions are a matter of bodily agency, whereas passions are external in origin. Passions act upon us, they produce passive affections. The distinction between active and passive corporeal qualities (affections) turns on the different role that each body plays in the encounter. Active and passive affections are relational and event-based. Whether a body is active or passive is not fixed for all time but depends upon the relation between what a body does and its particular powers. There is a sense in which this power is fixed: for every body has a unique and unchanging essence. What changes is the body's expression of that essence, whether active or passive.

Deleuze speaks of a body's power in terms of capacity; the capacity "to be affected" [3, p. 93]. Although the capacity itself is stable (constant), a body's 'affections' will vary, depending upon what a body does, its behavioural qualities. He writes that, "the power of acting (or force of existing) 'increases' and 'diminishes' according to the proportion of active affections contributing to the exercise of this power at any moment" [3, p. 93]. This is a question of agency. To discern a body's activity or passivity, we must seek the corporeal encounter. The encounter between bodies is an event. Something happens in the exchange between bodies, whereby each participating body expresses or undergoes a dynamic corporeal change. This

[6] Notice also that, for Spinoza, changes in the body also produce shifting modes of thought. Spinoza resisted Descartes' mind/body distinction through arguing for one substance. The two qualities of substance, thought and extension, are two attributes of a single ontology. Thus, the enhancement of the one quality implies a correlative enhancement of the other.

is where the qualitative difference between active and passive affections arises, depending upon whether a body acts or is acted upon (suffers action). To actively participate in an encounter—to exhibit bodily agency—is to increase one's power inasmuch as a 'new' activity has been performed by this body.[7] Conversely, an encounter that is wholly caused by another body is also an event but one which is not due to my body's activity. To that extent, it represents a diminishing power of activity on my part. The encounter is thus always conceived as expressing a qualitative difference: either a body acts for itself or it is acted upon.

These qualities may appear in quick succession. For example, Ramsay Burt refers to an event that occurred within a Steve Paxton piece entitled *Magnesium* (1972) [1]. One performer (Curt Siddall) dropped another (Nancy Stark Smith). According to Burt, instead of trying to take responsibility for a 'mistake,' Siddall allowed the body of the other to deal with the encounter, to find a safe way to roll onto and over the ground. This happened quickly. Burt argues that the performer's getting out of the way enabled the bodies involved to respond in the moment and to take the lead. In other words, Siddall did not try to consciously 'fix' the situation. Rather, he allowed Stark Smith to negotiate her own body's dynamic response. Burt speaks of the body's "relatively autonomous motor actions" as something beyond conscious control [1]. He draws on the distinction between the dancer's subjectivity (as conscious control) and the body's skilful expression, arguing that the latter came into play through this encounter. We might say that, for Burt, the body which rolls out of the fall becomes more capable in virtue of the encounter. If the first moment involves a passive affection—being dropped—the second moment consists of a creative corporeal act—an arm cradles the back as its rolls across the floor. Bodies in dynamic relation, flickering between active and passive affections, following the body's lead. *Australian Rules Football* could be seen as a series of active and passive affections: gaining the ball, being tackled, climbing onto another's back to get the ball, falling down, becoming injured, avoiding a punch and so on. The qualities of active and passive affections belong to each body in turn, depending upon whether or not that body manages to exert an active agency within the ongoing context of the game.

Counter-balancing is another instance of dynamic corporeal activity. In the counter-balance, two or more bodies combine to create movement which neither body alone could achieve. Two dancers hold hands and lean out: the weight of the other body 'counter-balances' each individual body. The challenge of this work is to deal with the subtle shifts of weight that inevitably arise. Let us conjecture the momentary shift as a passive affection, as the work of an external body. The challenge for each participating body then is to actively manage this shift and not destroy the counter-balance. In the course of the counter-balance, bodies have to find new means of activity (micro-adjustments) to manage shifting relationships. A particularly challenging version of the counter-balance occurs when the centre of gravity (formed between two bodies) shifts. For example, two dancers lean out holding onto each other's arms and walk in turn along a single line.[8] To walk is to shift a mutually

[7] Deleuze underscores the importance of the new by arguing that activity is the only "real, positive and affirmative form of our capacity to be affected" [3, p. 225].

[8] This example is taken from the work of Russell Dumas (see Artist Profiles).

created centre of gravity while actively managing the unpredictable changes inherent in this volatile situation. A body that creatively and actively manages the shift could be said to increase its agency. If the action fails (as it often does), then the counter-balance is lost. The body here does not increase its capacity but merely reacts to a change of circumstance. We might think of the body created within the counter-balance as a single entity composed of two constituent bodies. Thought as a unified body, the question of empowerment devolves upon whether or not this body-complex exerts an increasing agency within the course of the movement.

The 'attainment' of active affections produces a shift from dependence upon external causes to a mode of corporeal agency. The body that can do things exhibits an active mode of affection, whereas the body that depends upon the activity of another inhabits the domain of passive affections. This implies a certain conception of the good individual. Deleuze puts it thus: "The individual will be called *good* (or free, or rational, or strong) who strives, insofar as he is capable, to organize his encounters, to join with whatever agrees with his nature, to combine his relation with relations that are compatible with his, and thereby to increase his power. For goodness is a matter of dynamism, power and the composition of powers" [2, p. 23]. This dynamic conception of the good situates ethics in the very gap of change, in the body's becoming otherwise in combination with other bodies. What changes is the way in which a body exhibits its singular essence, the extent to which a body actively expresses its power. The good thus pertains to the particular body. It is situated in the moment and felt through the dynamic of corporeal becoming.

A body which moves entirely due to external causes expresses a passive affection and to that extent 'diminishes' its powers. Although there is an emphasis on what a body does as a matter of its own agency, it is important to acknowledge that bodies can enhance one another in myriad ways. Deleuze describes the joy that a body may feel as it passively combines with another to create something more [3, p. 239]. This is encapsulated within teaching at its best—the good teacher is the one who can facilitate the enhancement of power in the body of the student. Such a body becomes more powerful because it expresses (engages in) a new form of activity. Perhaps we could look at dance training in ethical terms, such that goodness arises in the body that becomes more capable by way of its own activities.

9.3 Training and Technique

Dancers often talk about technique as something a body 'has,' as if training inculcates technique in the body. Spinoza's view is somewhat different. Each body has a singular essence. This is fixed. While the body's capacity to be affected doesn't change, what does change is the expression of that capacity within the encounter. A body increases or decreases its power either through acting or through 'suffering' action. Gains are not permanent but are dynamically manifest within the specificity of each and every encounter. What does this mean for the notion of training which tends to be thought of as a cumulative asset?

Training promises an ethical horizon of corporeal empowerment. Thought of as corporeal capacity-building, training could be conceived as an ethical affair, an organised encounter between bodies which aims to prepare a body to dance well. If the encounter enhances a body's power to act, we would say, along with Spinoza, that this manifests as the good. The ethical question turns upon whether facility, according to a particular technique, enhances this body's ability to dance in the particular instance. Certain styles and approaches towards dance commit to a specific character of work. This is a cultural matter, a question of aesthetic and kinaesthetic taste, culture and tradition, whereby certain qualities and modes of activity are selected and made available according to the concerns of the particular field. Training in this context is oriented towards a given sphere of kinaesthetic and aesthetic values which endures via body-to-body modes of transmission. So the question is whether the skills embedded in a tradition could be said to increase a particular body's 'power of acting.' In a sense, this is a variable state of affairs, a question whose answer is embedded in the event. Only the dancing will tell. This may be difficult to determine in the particular instance, as Deleuze notes: "And no doubt, when one goes into the details, the situation becomes more and more complicated. To begin with, we have many constituent relations, so that one and the same object can agree with us in one respect and disagree with us in another" [2, p. 33]. Perhaps we could think of training in idealised terms, as a process which, at its best, leads to skilful dancing, and which produces the virtuosic dancer.

Virtuosity is dancerly facility expressed in action. While the specificity of tradition and technique pre-determines the kind of power a body may acquire, it could be argued that a body which acquires and demonstrates this power nonetheless increases *its* own power. This capacity is sometimes evoked by virtuosic dancers in the subtlest of ways, in the pause before movement ensues, the anacrusis of action. The Australian choreographer Russell Dumas sometimes speaks of keeping open possibilities in relation to dancing phrase material.[9] The point is not to foreclose the ensuing movement by committing a body too soon, but to suggest a horizon redolent with possibility. The power of suggestion is an activity of the body. It takes a plastic, evocative skill set to suggest the possibility of more at each moment. In this sense, the virtuosic body is not victim to the dictates of choreography but rather dances in excess of requirement. The virtuosic dancer here is the one who can summon and keep alive a moveable feast of kinaesthetic potentiality. The ethical arises because the virtuosic body manages its encounters—with the floor, over time, in space, in relation to constituent body parts and functions—*actively*, so as to manifest a breadth of activity.

Dumas recalls Margot Fonteyn's ability to evoke the force of an arabesque way beyond the limits of her actual body. This power of suggestion is made manifest within the dancing. It is a demonstration of ethical virtuosity which produces joy in the dancer and audience alike. The increase of power is, here, the child of restraint, a mature subtlety that does more by doing less. In traditional Korean dance, improvisation is both valued and kept alive within fluid relations between the dancer and

[9] Erin Manning writes of preacceleration in a related manner, as the space of creative possibility opened up within the dancing [9].

the musician. Virtuosity resides in the interstices of this relation, in the elastic moment of timing. This may be felt in the multiplicity of momentary relations felt between the foot and the floor; as the foot feels for the floor and the floor embraces the foot. I have watched Korean audiences applaud and acknowledge master dancers' exquisite sense of timing, and have been personally counselled as to the merits of waiting for the moment to commit; for time is the existential domain within which the 'power of action' is made manifest. Each tradition and style will have its own candidates and features, horizons of master activity that enable a body to enhance its capacity for being affected at the level of action/dance. This is not fully determinable in advance and yet may ensue from the inculcation of technique in a body. Virtuosity is ethical potential made manifest.

9.4 Conclusion

Spinoza offers a dynamic conception of corporeal becoming in terms of the increasing or decreasing power of action, felt in the passing moment. The world changes and we change within it. A body that becomes more powerful by way of its own activity is a joy to behold. This is the lure of performance. We see a body risking itself in the moment. I heard recently of a ballet dancer who had fallen off her point shoes in the middle of a show, suffering a flash of anxiety and fear, then getting up to finish the dance. The audience applauded her recovery. With Spinoza, we might acknowledge her courage in ethical terms, for she didn't know how to go on, yet found a way. Kim Sargent-Wishart speaks of the improviser's need to open up the space of improvisation, and that this raises a question for the subject-dancer: how to open oneself up to that space of possibility. This is where the dancer's not-knowing comes to the fore. Anneke Hansen speaks of 'vacating yourself' when performing. Likewise, for Sara Rudner, "When it came right down to it, and you were there to do the dance, the best thing that happened was the body took over and the dance happened" [14]. Rudner brings to the fore the two elements I have been emphasising: the dancer's not-knowing and a body that leads. The subject's ethical task is to accept not-knowing as a strategic orientation so as to make way for the body's active enhancement.

Ethical development requires a kind of beginner's mind. Intuitively grasped by many dancers and practised by many good teachers, it implies that we don't know beforehand what will work in the particular instance. Some dance styles, such as postmodern dance, undermine the knowing subjectivity of the dancer. Russell Dumas' postmodern choreography constantly challenges his dancers to put aside their knowing. He writes for example, that: "This practice involves distracting the conscious mind with detailed complex physical activities. In the best scenario, the mind abdicates control over how these tasks are achieved within the body… As trust and confidence in this body wisdom increases, development occurs 'behind your back.' And so the dancer matures as an artist" [4]. But there is no guarantee that a body will become active in the moment. The best a dancer can do is to 'organise' her encounters towards an increase of agency.

Spinoza's ethics is challenging. It dethrones the sovereign subject, eschews universal principles of good and bad, focussing instead on each body as the source and site of goodness. To take up Spinoza's challenge then is not merely to set aside our pre-conceptions of the good, it is to acknowledge that the good is a variable and momentary quality. To affirm this form of the good is to take joy in the corporeal moment. If we don't know what a body can do, we can nonetheless embrace the experiment and follow its lead. This is Nietzsche's hope: "We are experiments, let us also want to be them" [11, p. 457]. Nothing to hold onto, striving nevertheless to maximise the body's active affections, dancing could be conceived as an ethical endeavour *par excellence.* Deleuze speaks of the need to concretely try in the midst of our not-knowing, to open ourselves to the endeavour [3, p. 225]. The term 'concrete' requires more than attitude however. 'Concrete trying' is a form of attitude made manifest in practice. It represents a body aiming to raise itself to a higher power, hoping for that flash of joy that accompanies the dance well done. Here today, gone tomorrow, we might well agree with Nietzsche that, "slipp'ry ice is paradise, as long as dancing will suffice" [10, p. 14].

Artists' Profiles

Russell Dumas is the Artistic Director of *Dance Exchange*, Australia. He has performed with many European Ballet companies, including the *Royal Ballet* (UK). He also danced with *Trisha Brown Company* and *Twyla Tharp and Dancers* in the USA. Dumas' choreography is highly complex and original, requiring a great variety of skills on the part of his dancers.

Deborah Hay is Director of *Deborah Hay Dance Company*. She has over the years, developed a distinctive choreographic style which is perceptually focussed, score-based yet does not predetermine how a dancer will physically look when following the choreography.

Anneke Hansen has been creating dance works in New York City since 2002. Her work is concerned with dancing and dancers and strives to create meaning through evocative, sensuous, and sophisticated movement. Questions of what the body and mind are capable of, in terms of coordination, texture, and timing, are central to the studio explorations that serve as the source for performance works.

Eva Karczag has performed as a member of *Trisha Brown and Dancers*. Her performance work and her teaching are informed by dance improvisation and mindful body practices (including T'ai Chi Ch'uan and Qi Gong), the Alexander Technique (certified teacher), Ideokinesis, and Yoga.

Steve Paxton emerged from the Judson Dance Theatre in New York to become one of the founders of Contact Improvisation, a collective mode of improvisation which has spread throughout the world.

Susan Rethorst is a New York based choreographer. Her work has been presented at the Museum of Modern Art, The Kitchen Center, Dance Theater Workshop,

Danspace Saint Marks, The Downtown Whitney Museum, among others, as well as at various dance theatres, universities, and festivals throughout the U.S.

Sara Rudner is one of the leading figures in American postmodern dance. She was a principal dancer in *Twyla Tharp and Dancers*, and has been choreographing, teaching and showing her own work for a number of years.

Kim Sargent-Wishart has trained in Body Mind Centering with Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen. She is completing a PhD exploring relationships between embodiment, emptiness and creative acts through the lenses and practices of Body-Mind Centering® and Tibetan Buddhism.

Nancy Stark Smith is a founding member of Contact Improvisation and a co-editor of *Contact Quarterly.* She works extensively with Steve Paxton.

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