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Dancing with Socrates: telling truths about the self

Mark Evans (Coventry University)

Abstract

This article seeks to consider how and in what ways somatic practice in relation to contemporary dance and movement performance might participate in the telling of truths about the body and more precisely truths about what it means to be an embodied subject.

Keywords

Dance, somatics, parrhesia, truth-telling, the natural body.

Text

Somatics is relevant to a wide range of movement practices, including dance, in as much as it is a set of practices that exists in the relationship between notions of the body and notions of the self as a knowing subject. I am assuming from the start that a central impulse at the heart of somatic practice is to dissolve the inner and outer sense of self as part of a technology of the care of the self, and I am then positioning this impulse as a desire to in some important senses tell truths about the body. I will seek to draw out the potential significances of such a position for those teaching movement and contemporary dance – particularly in relation to the nature of the truths we are seeking to tell, how we tell them and to whom. I am also beginning from a position that, after Foucault and Butler, accepts that the body, somatics and movement practices must be understood as having their own social and cultural histories, and that the body, its practices and those truths it seeks to reveal are thus historically and socially constituted.

The distinctions between what have become popularly identified as the inner and the outer selves began as a problem of artistic expression for the romantic artists of the nineteenth century. The struggle to bring to outer expression the deepest and most profound impulses and imaginings of the inner self was at the heart of the nineteenth century artist's condition. By the twentieth century the problem had shifted from the romantic struggle of the artist to find expression towards a problem of technique. For the twentieth century artist, dancer or performer, it was not just a question of what to say but of how to say it. This can be perceived in the movement away from the production of a specific, idealized dancing body, only attained or attainable by the lucky few, towards what were perceived as natural (de-urbanised, unconstricted, non-hierarchical, healthy and unharmed) processes of body use and embodied learning that could be taught, learnt and written about.

The increased focus on the issue of technique within twentieth century performance is a socio-economic and cultural process that I have previously, in my book on movement training for actors, linked to the rise in emphasis on efficiency, and efficient movement and body use, across Western societies. Despite the twentieth century emphasis on technique and process, many of the new approaches to the training of the performer's body that were developed during this period, and which were based on an understanding of how the body functions most efficiently, were still deeply predicated on universalized assumptions about the body. In relation to actor training I drew on Jen Tarr's work (2002) on the discourses underpinning somatic practices to identify these dominant paradigms in the early twentieth century as the child, the animal, the noble savage and the Ancient Greek.

These various paradigms can be understood as representing late nineteenth and early twentieth century notions of truth about the body, for instance that there is a way of being within the body that has been lost to the city-dwelling modern adult that is in some important respects identified as healthier, more efficient, less repressive and that offers a more holistic experience of being human. The effects of such discursive shifts can be seen on the work of practitioners such as Laban and Duncan – where they danced, how they danced, and who they worked with. Foucault reminds us that such truths are historically and socially constructed. In this respect, these four paradigms locate the idea of the natural body, and the training and learning processes that grew out of these paradigms, within historical discourses of power expressed through the complex tensions between human/animal, child/adult, rural/urban, savage/civilized and classical/modern. The educational processes of somatic practice grew out of the same historical discourses and in a similar manner tended to privilege those ways of being in the self that are perceived as in such respects unsullied.

Somatics in this respect has certainly set out to enable us to tell truths about the lived experience of the modern city dwelling European or American by challenging the ways that urban living writes its effects on the body. But it also exists within a history of the body that positions bodily practices in relation to patriarchal power. Tellingly within the historical paradigms for the natural body - the lost athleticism of the Ancient Greek or the 'savage', the lost physical innocence and playfulness of the child or the animal – the female body occupies a contested and often marginalized space. Somatics in this respect has operated radically to create a space for the female body to tell truths about its own athleticism, sincerity, purity, integrity, and expressivity, as well as its many other qualities. Dance and somatic practice has increasingly, from the

early twentieth-century work of Duncan, Graham and others, sought in this way to create a space for the female body to be physically engaged and to be expressive. For both male and female bodies dance and care of the embodied self allows for the experience of the lived body to become more present in the construction of the sense of self. For this to become radical the knowledges created in this way need to be set in the context of the dominant paradigms for the gendered body – the dancing subject needs to dance out (of) the context which creates his or her historicized body, creating a new sense of embodied self through a constant care to interrogate how their existing self is and has been created.

Equally, the notion of the savage body also clearly represents particular operations of power, most evidently through the cultural implications of the word 'savage'. This word historically implies a Eurocentric perspective towards a body that is both ethnically black and also unrestrained in its physicality and possibly violent. In so far as this notion participates in the construction of paradigms for the natural body, it situates this body within a Darwinian framework where the savage body may be perceived as in some way closer to an earlier form of human embodied subjectivity. F. M. Alexander privileged the 'primitive' as 'an example of the human body untainted by the effects of modern urban and industrial society' (Evans 2009: 77). Alexander's admiration for the savage is however tempered by his suspicion that free expression is potentially intoxicating and dangerous:

music and dancing are, as every one knows, excitements which make a stronger appeal to the primitive than to the more highly evolved races. No drunken man in our civilization ever reaches the stages of anaesthesia and complete loss of

self-control attained by the savage under the influence of these two stimuli. (Alexander 1986: 100)

For Alexander then, the route to natural physical expression is through training and education and not through free expression. The above quotation, taken originally from Alexander's 1918 revised edition of *Man's Supreme Inheritance: Conscious Guidance and Control in Relation to Human Evolution*, helps to identify how the concept of the naturally expressive body has to be understood, right from the early years of the twentieth century, as part of a complex socio-cultural, historical and ethnically contingent relationship between dance, training, civilization and self-control.

The paradox for somatic practice then is that it represents a form of training that has continually had to seek to remove the body from its own history. Somatic practices participate in the same tensions inherent in any training practice - all training regimes embody power in ways particular to their own histories - and if we seek only to remove the body from its history into some anatomically authenticated truth we must be alert to the cultural history of that anatomical truth. A retreat towards anatomy as the locus of truth within the body throws up complex issues around disability and cultural difference that are most evident in the ways that different cultures view posture, movement and agility. Somatic practice might be taken to be truthful to knowledges of the body if only in the extent to which it follows the body's anatomical design and the extent to which its movement is harmonious, effortless and efficient. However, what needs addressing is whether that is enough as a claim to truthfulness or whether what is important is the difference between our bodily practices and the contexts within which they function and which shape and restrict them.

So, if we place the body and our lived experience of the body as the only locus of truth we run the risk of missing the manner in which our experience of our body is shaped by our own cultural history of our embodiment. In experiencing our lived body we must at the same time experience its/our shaping and the ways in which its/our coming in to being result from the operation of power. Michael Peters in his article on Foucault and truth-telling (2003) argues that knowledge is about the body and of the body, and therefore it is not constituted solely by what we can say or write about the body but rather by the collection of bodily practices that we employ at this point in history. What then needs examination is the set of practices that reproduce that knowledge and their relationship to the telling of truth about the power that operates on and through them. What we know through the body should therefore be understood as knowledge that is historically and culturally constituted, that draws on the ways in which power has operated on our bodies. The 'felt-sense' of the body cannot exist as knowledge outside the practices (both physical and intellectual) through which we construct our experiences, knowledges and ideas. Its claims to truth in this sense sit in relation to the phenomenological project to relocate knowledge within and in relationship to the body. As cultural importance and significance is given to the body, so somatics is able to make stronger claims for truth and knowledge. Through dance then, truths about the body may now be told with greater vigour and confidence; truths that might for instance point out the ways in which habituated uses of the body realize specific operations of power upon the body.

We realize and identify habituated use of the body through the differences experienced in contrast to efficient body use, and in relation to our body awareness. The problem in a postmodern, post-positivist world is establishing or even seeking a viewpoint from

which to make such observations. If there can be no one essential locus from which to identify the experiences of the body, how can we ever be certain of what we feel in a sense that allows us to make claims for truth? The body which we seek to bring to knowledge is thus always vacillating between being known and unknown, dancing continually at the edges of our reach. Knowledge in this context is a continual process of becoming aware, the body in a permanent state of becoming. The process of telling the truth becomes as important as the truth statement itself. Nonetheless, if we must take a position, one that acknowledges the body and confronts the ways in which it is shaped through its experiences is surely the best place to start.

For the student performer, the training process both acknowledges the specific sense of an inner space that is inhabited by a personal self and also then goes on to enable that inner self to become increasingly evident within the realm of the outer space. This is the process through which the student performer becomes a professional who can open up themselves and their embodied experience in a way that is in general acceptable because it is under their control and aesthetically orientated. The student typically learns to be vulnerable and comfortable at the same time. To be alert to one's vulnerability and aware of one's own functioning and yet still to function with confidence requires a particular openness to experience, an ability to tell a complex truth about what it means to perform through the body. This sense of movement and playfulness around the self as embodied subject and its claims to (self)knowledge and truth is echoed in Foucault's notion of the 'game of truth'. For Foucault the 'game of truth', which can refer to scientific models or to models inherent in institutions or practices of control, is understood as 'an ensemble of rules for the production of truth' (Foucault in Peters 2003: 211). Also apparent within the

conception of somatic practice outlined above is the sense in which the student takes on responsibility for self-knowledge, which I would suggest is aligned to what Foucault in his later writings calls 'care of the self', an approach according to Peters, 'whereby the individual can come to know himself (*sic*) as well as take care of himself—twin themes in the inherited Western ethical tradition associated with specific techniques of truth-telling practices that human beings apply to understand themselves' (Peters 2003: 209). In Peters view, Foucault develops this as 'an 'aesthetics of existence', where the subject learns the obligations involved in 'care for the self'' (Peters 2003: 212), and where right living is conceived of as having an aesthetic as well as an ethical dimension.

If we feel an obligation as part of our care for ourselves and for others to try to tell the truth of and through the body, how can we set about doing so given the complexities that surround our notions of embodied truth. Drawing on Michael Peters' article on Foucault and educational practice (2003), I wish to consider Foucault's discussion of the Greek concept of *parrhesia* (truth-telling) and reflect on the extent to which it may offer us guidance when considering how and in what contexts we can conceive of dance as telling truths about the body. The Greeks understood *parrhesia* as a form of frankness and free speech, of knowing the truth and conveying it fearlessly to others. What is significant in the Greek concept of *parrhesia* is the requirement for the speaker to have the courage to tell the truth, and to acknowledge the danger of doing so. The *parrhesiastes* (the teller of truth) was a role for those who were of lower social status than those to whom they told the truth, and in part this is where the danger for them lay. But this power dynamic is also what freed the statements they made to be truth and not just orthodoxy or instruction. Truth becomes valuable in this construction because it speaks from the oppressed to the

oppressors, from the dispossessed to those who already have; such a concept of the nature of truth stands in contrast to the conventional egocentric notion of truthfulness measured only in relation to internal, self-referencing criteria.

So what parrhesiastic truths can somatic dance tell? I suggest that the presentation of the body as an efficient, integrated and expressive whole is not, in and of itself, an expression of truth in Foucault's sense. Just as the inefficient, clumsy and inexpressive body is not, in and of itself, a lie – it is a true representation of the state of the embodied subject at that point in time. Both integrated and inexpressive or clumsy bodies are representations of the exercise of power and knowledge on the body or of the resistance of such exercise, just as Iris Young argues in her 1990 essay on feminine body use and spatiality, 'Throwing Like a Girl'. When dance (or indeed movement practice) tells the truth in this context it is communicating how the embodied subject has positioned themselves in relation to the power/knowledge that is seeking to act or is already acting on their bodies and on the construction of their bodies. In doing so, it reveals the action of power/knowledge and enables the person watching or participating to recognize and share in that revelation. This truth-telling may not, indeed need not, take place in an overtly politicized context, although the results will inevitably be that the receiver of truth will be confronted at some level with the requirement to decide how to act in relation to that truth. Parrhesiastic dance or movement could then be understood as a practice that seeks to identify domains of power within the body and negotiate where and in what ways resistance, reconfiguration or play might be possible. Dance thus becomes what Foucault calls an 'art of life', relating to the care of the self.

In his 1983 talks on *parrhesia*, Foucault goes on to ask: 'how can we distinguish the good, truth-telling teachers from the bad or inessential ones?' (Foucault 1999: 35). Similarly we might ask what makes a good teacher within the context of somatic practice that tells the truth about the body. I think that what Foucault suggests here is interesting in relation to the teaching of somatic practice, and, despite the gendered language, merits quoting at length:

the master still uses frankness of speech with the disciple in order to help him become aware of the faults he cannot see [...]; but now the use of *parrhesia* is put increasingly upon the disciple as his own duty towards himself. At this point the truth about the disciple is not disclosed solely through the parrhesiastic discourse of the master, or only in the dialogue between the master and the disciple or interlocutor. The truth about the disciple emerges from a personal relation which he establishes with himself. (Foucault 1999)

Foucault also proposes a responsibility towards the self that is not punitive or judgmental. Instead he describes the attitude that the disciple, or in this case the student/dancer, might take towards themselves as that of a technician, craftsperson or artist 'who – from time to time – stops working, examines what he (*sic*) is doing, reminds himself of the rule of his art, and compares these rules with what he has achieved thus far' (Foucault 1999). This approach is a critical but caring form of reflection that participates in the work of caring for the self; for one of the purposes of examining the truth about oneself must be to improve oneself, as well as to tell that truth to someone else. In so far as danger is involved in this process, it is the danger of hurt, harm and vulnerability. It can take courage to speak the truth about your own body or someone else's body.

Perhaps the most courageous position that one can take is in relation to the body (either one's own or that of another) that does not meet socially constructed norms, that has chosen to reject those norms, or that is 'damaged' in relation to those norms whether intentionally or not. The transformed body of Orlan or Stelarc, the transgendered body, the disabled body and the self-harmed body are all bodies that are not conventionally perceived as healthy or natural, but that through their differences sometimes actively seek to tell truths about the embodied self, the body and its social construction. Well-being, health and happiness are important outcomes of somatic practice, and clearly desirable. They must be allowed to reside not only in the integrated body but also, in some important senses, in the body that offers a different context and meaning for that integration. What enables the body perceived as different to tell the truth in this context is that the difference is consciously manipulated by the subject, who retains some level of control over the ways in which power operates on their body. In this sense obsessive body behaviours may reveal ways in which power can operate destructively on the embodied subject, but they leave less room for the subject concerned to tell truths about the body. The dancer with an eating disorder has limited opportunities to tell the truth about their embodiment, the context they find themselves in can function to create a stronger need to lie. The disabled dancer who is able to express the ways in which their body constructs its own integration may well be more able to tell truths in this sense.

The world is not short of people who would seek to make statements about our bodies or indeed about their own bodies. The problem then becomes how to recognize 'who is capable of speaking the truth within the limits of an institutional system where everyone is equally entitled to give his or her own opinion' (Foucault 1999).

Peters outlines the following qualities of Socratic *parrhesia* which I would like to consider in the context of the aims of this article: first, close proximity, 'a personal, face to face context'; and second 'where the listener is led by the Socratic logos into 'giving an account' (*didonai logon*) of himself and the kind of life he has lived' (Peters 2003: 214). In somatic practice we might take the first for granted as a typical precondition of the work – the teacher traditionally works alongside the student, but the second implies a form of reflection and account-giving that may not always be present. Peters (2003: 214) goes on to suggest that the Socratic role is then to determine 'the degree of accord between a person's life and its principle of intelligibility or logos' (Foucault 1999). In revealing the distance between the life lived and the principles through which one might wish to live that life the student/dancer is encouraged to care for the manner in which their life is lived and to educate themselves towards that goal. The teacher becomes a good teacher, because, as Peters says about Socrates, 'there is an ontological harmony between his words (*logoi*) and his deeds (*erga*)' (Peters 2003: 214). In the same way, the somatic dancer becomes an artist to be attended to, because what they seek to communicate and the body through which they communicate are in ontological harmony. What the somatic dancer does, they seek to do in accord with what they think about the embodied nature of their existence, and vice versa. In this respect, Peters suggests, the truth game is no longer simply about telling the truth to others, but also about becoming courageous enough to tell the truth about oneself. Peters rigorously argues that the commensurate exercise of *askesis*, 'the practical training or exercise directed at the art of living' (Peters 2003: 216), requires not the renunciation of the self and the removal of the self from the world familiar through Christian ascetic practices, but the development of 'a specific relationship to oneself—a relationship of self possession and self-

sovereignty' that enables the subject to 'confront the world in an ethical and rational manner' (Peters 2003: 216). In his discussion of *parrhesia* Foucault thus moves the emphasis away from the teacher as the truth-teller towards the student taking on this responsibility 'as a duty toward himself' (Peters 2003: 216).

Finally Foucault reminds us to ask ourselves 'what is the importance for the individual and for the society of telling the truth, of knowing the truth, of having people who tell the truth, as well as knowing how to recognize them' (Foucault in Peters 2003: 217). Why should the practice of truth-telling be considered more valuable or important for dance and movement students than equipping them with sets of commercially valuable skills for success in the wider creative industries and knowledge economies? Cannot the efficient and healthy sensing of lived experience through the body be enough in and of itself? Rouhiainen (2008: 245) reminds us to be wary of allowing the lived experience of our bodies to be taken as representing a reality that could be prioritized over other forms of experience. Nonetheless, she suggests, awareness of the way we are in the world can operate as part of a process that brings to awareness the extent to which perception 'is a culturally ingrained interpretation of being' (Rouhiainen 2008: 244). How we conceive of this distinction between our lived experience and its cultural construction, and how we practice around and within it and attempt to overcome it, are at the heart of understanding how somatics relates to the performance of dance and movement and the telling of truth about our selves through such activity.

Somatic practices can create the conditions in which bodily habits that do not normally reach our conscious awareness can be identified and challenged. The ways in which habitual body use embodies ideological positions in relation to the subject can thus be

revealed and somatic practices can work to reveal the docility implicit or potentially present in much conventional performance training. A potential danger is that the somatic practices themselves become a form of habit; that they become no longer a process, a way of becoming, but a pattern of experience that embodies its own ideologies. If somatics becomes just another form of training rather than also a way of interrogating the training process then it reduces its capacity for resistance.

In summary then, the somatic training of student dancers aims to remove from them the burden of imitating what they understand as perfect movement, and to enable them to develop and then trust in an inherent wisdom of the body. This creates a concept of dance as a form of critically reflective practice that enables the student, at least as a starting point in their practice, to become more like themselves through movement. It thus implicitly creates a concept of dance as in part, and like many other forms of arts practice, a form of self-education and self-development. Being true to the self can in this context be conceptualized as being true to the physical self, to the body, and importantly to the ways in which we believe that the physical life should be lived. Such a sense of truth must, I suggest, also be based on reference to the wider social context and the ways in which we acknowledge the operation of power on our bodies. The dancer should be well placed to understand how the repressed physical self is typically naturalized and normalized through everyday processes and to appreciate how, without interruption, this process leads to the repressed body becoming an unconditional referent. What we might mean by telling the truth through dance then is that student can realize and reveal what is created and normalized and how, and the doing of this through their dance practice is part of building and sustaining a harmony between words and deeds. Whilst the knowledge that they make

can never be neutral and will always be contingent, the telling of truth in this way is an important political act even and as it is performed through the body. Knowing why we should tell the truth through dance and knowing what that might mean place somatics and dance in a new, dangerous and powerful place.

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