

CREATIVE MOVEMENT, CREATIVE THOUGHT. THE DANCING PHILOSOPHER.¹

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Abstract

When Zarathustra comes back to human world, he finds an old man that recognizes him. One of the first things the old man perceives is that Zarathustra is transformed, and at the same time looks like he “strides like a dancer” (TSZ 2). The kind of transformation Zarathustra experienced can be seen in his movements; it is related to the way he walks, the balance on his legs, the way the arms go with the rest of the body. In this context I want to make two points in the *Zarathustra*: first, philosophy is a kind of practice that leads to a transformation of the philosopher; and second, that philosophy's power of transformation is related to a creative relation among weight, body and ground. The *Zarathustra* presents these points through images that, as I gather, need to be performed in order to be understood, instead of being understood only through argumentative explanation. The image of the dancer philosopher suggests that we need to move ourselves if we want to practice philosophy. It invites us to think in movement, to perform and understand thinking through movement.

Keywords: dance, improvisation, artist-philosopher, Zarathustra.

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I

Overlapping Philosophy and Movement

When Zarathustra comes back to human world, he finds an old man that recognizes him. One of the first things the old man perceives is that Zarathustra is transformed, and at the same time looks like he “strides like a dancer” (TSZ 2). The kind of transformation Zarathustra experienced can be seen in his movements, it is a transformation related to the way he walks, the balance on his legs, the way the arms go with the rest of the body. Then, the old man asks Zarathustra why is he coming down if that means he must drag his own body through the ground, “to climb ashore”. To the old man, having a body touching the ground means subjecting the spirit to a heavy existence. It means not being free, but being forced to live in the platonic prison that is the body. We know about this because the question made by the old man is ‘why descend?’ or ‘why to come down?’, which points not only to a geographical or spatial location, but also to a hierarchy between the elevated spirit and the grounded body. In spite of this, Zarathustra replies: “I would only believe in a god who knew how to dance” (TSZ 29). This response makes us question what the material conditions for dancing are.

It seems that dancing requires a body, it requires weight and gravity. The kind of freedom that dancing provides, the experience of being freed from gravity, is indeed something that can only be done through a body. Considering this we can make sense of what Zarathustra says immediately after what I just quoted: “Now I am light, now I fly, now I see myself beneath me, now a god dances through me” (TSZ 29). Zarathustra is down on the ground, since only from there he can walk, run, fly, and dance.

I want to show two central points in the *Zarathustra*, which I consider remarkable: first, philosophy is a kind of practice that leads to a transformation of the philosopher; and second, that philosophy's power of transformation is related (among other things, about which I will not talk) to a creative relation between weight, the body and the ground. The *Zarathustra* presents these points through images that, as I gather, need to be performed in order to be understood, instead of being understood only through argumentative explanation. The image of the dancer philosopher suggests that we need to move ourselves if we want to practice philosophy. It invites us to think in movement, to perform and understand thinking through movement. The first image is the philosopher standing and walking, and the second image is based on the three metamorphoses. Experiencing both images we can become dancing philosophers, or, at least, we can take some first steps towards this transformation.

II

Standing and Walking

But this is my teaching; whoever wants to fly someday must first learn to stand and walk and run and climb and dance – one cannot fly one's way to flight!

(TSZ 156)

In the *Dance Song*, Zarathustra encounters a group of girls dancing in the woods. Then they stop dancing and he approaches them kindly.

God's advocate before the devil I am; but the devil is the spirit of gravity. How could I be hostile toward godlike dancing, you light ones? Or toward girls' feet with pretty ankles? (TSZ 83)

For now, Zarathustra is not the one who is dancing. This could be the paradigmatic image of the contemplating male philosopher who is at rest, opposed to the female dancers moving around, feeling and being contemplated and judged. But there is something remarkable that makes the female dancers stand in the position of practicing philosophy, instead of merely being objects of contemplation and judgment. If this is true, if it can be thought that philosophy deals with the divine, the godlike, then Zarathustra's allusion to the girls' movements as something that resembles god, or divinity, can lead us to say that dancing is in a sense practicing philosophy. Zarathustra says: "Only in dance do I know how to speak the parables of the highest things" (TSZ 86). This expression "the highest things" reminds us of the Platonic and Aristotelian traditions referring to the ideas, to the principles or axioms, to the causes, which are privileged objects of philosophical inquiry. Here, instead of a merely intellectual access to the "highest things", we reach them by dancing; the practice of philosophy entails movement.

The way the girls move makes them light and divine, not divine in a spiritual sense, but rather in a corporeal sense: in as much as bodies can be light and graceful through movement. Their movements contradict the spirit of gravity, for gravity decreases the spirit but empowers the body. The weight involved in the dancers' movements binds them to the earth and the ground. Dancing needs and depends on the ground, for weight is not denied, nor it is an obstacle. The opposition to the spirit of gravity is not a liberation of the bodily character of dancing; in fact, it is a reinforcement of it (Bardet 2010, 33).

If we approach the experience of the girls dancing, we find a kind of attention toward movement that could allow us an experience of openness through feeling our own body in movement. Gravity closes our possibilities of movement as much as it opens them and makes it possible for us to extend the experience of ourselves into a diversity of movements. To become free and affirmative owners of the movements we perform is not to cause them in a cause-effect relation, but rather it is to be able to listen to the already present relation between our bodies and the force of gravity.

I would like to ask you to follow me with this small exercise. Find yourself in a comfortable position in the chair, with both feet on the ground and the spine straight. Breathe deeply and close your eyes. Feel free of move yourself any way you need to or want to. First, we are going to imagine that we are about to stand up. Imagine the particular quality of movement and effort this movement requires, imagine it as something virtually present in your body. You can feel the upward direction all over your spine, the small angle that closes the relation between your spine and your lap, the core of your body is active and full of force.

Now I invite you to actually stand up. Do it very slowly and fully aware of all the directions, forces and efforts your body requires and performs. Feel your arms falling down, relaxed, and pay attention both to the internal state of your body and its surroundings. Feel your weight released, the gravity pulling down your body, your skin touching the surfaces and air around you, all that is touching you. Now bring your attention to your bone structure, to the way each joint is in contact with other joints; feel them as if they were full of air. They are active, not blocked. And start bringing your attention all over your body: neck, shoulders, alongside the spine, hips, right and left femurs, knees, and lastly the feet. Then, with both feet on the ground, you can start balancing gently your weight left to right, feeling the way every joint is ready for movement. Now you can turn the balancing slightly forward and backward, turning this swinging into small circles around your own axis. Let the movement decrease progressively until rest.

With this felling of balancing present to you, particularly the shifting of weight involved in it, I invite you to walk, and again start very, very slowly. You are going to feel the small changes of the supporting points on each foot, the air on the sole of the foot, the slight fall of your body toward the ground in the complete change of weight, when the right foot touches the ground and the balance turns forward, leaving your left foot released and ready to start again the process (Paxton 2003, 176). Take a look on the room where you are, pay attention to the details that characterize this place. Walk very slowly, feeling how the weight balances from one part of the bottom of each foot to other parts of it, from one foot to the other, from one leg to the other. While you walk there, you turn the space into something shared, the plasticity of space depends on your movements, your mood, your thoughts, your presence².

Then you can change the pace of your walking, feel free to explore variations in this walking without leaving the state of awareness you recently reached. You can explore variations relating

2 “The sole of the foot is often the place of contact with the Earth. To unfold the foot, the skin on the foot sole is the place of all variations in the quality of supports and directions. To feel the open directions with each step. To walk “normally”, setting the heel before all, in an immediate connection to the ground; the classic walk, brisk and silent, tends to undertake the step through the tip of the foot. Changes, which penetrate through the walk, through the feet, which set upon the ground and raise the question about the common in the art. One walks... When walking, the walk on the street, the walk in the study, the walk on scene are hybridized. An intrusion of anonymous and of singularity in the journey, which is recognised in the steps of a staircase: simultaneously common and singular. To enter the stage and walk, to hang the thread between everyday walking and the danced movement” (Bardet 2010, 63).

speed, force or tone in your muscles, rhythm, direction, etc. Do all the variations you need or want until your movement find the rest.

There is a possibility of transformation through this kind of experience of movement; we can shift and open our attention, we can be aware of our entire body and its surroundings. Compare now this final state with the state of your body at the very beginning of this small exercise; do you feel any kind of transformation in your body?

This very simple experience helps us to approach to what Erinn Manning calls “the virtual momentum of a movement's taking form before we actually move” (2009, 3). And it also helps us to experience the relation among the virtual momentum and the actual movement; a constant and active exchange of movement and rest. You was sensing your body in an agitated stillness. That kind of attention toward your own state is not immediately present in everyday life. Dance practice, among others, allows this feeling not to a selective group of professional dancers, it allows it, rather to everybody willing to move.

Zarathustra is pointing out the transformative power of philosophy through dance and movement: that is why, in the first place, he invites us to stand and to walk. This implies considering philosophy as a kind of practice. We cannot think about body, space, time, or even the highest things, without moving ourselves: a thought in motion requires actual motion.

III Three Metamorphoses

“What is heavy? thus asks the carrying spirit. It kneels down like a camel and wants to be well loaded” (TSZ 16).

The metamorphoses present in the *Zarathustra* can be interpreted in terms of three different wills, each one denying the previous in the progress of ascension among them. But in terms of the progression towards becoming a philosopher, I think we can understand the three metamorphoses as the kind of philosophical transformation that dance allows us through movement. This is therefore a question about how we are related to the fact that we are alive, inasmuch as we are bodies in movement. What I aim to show is that there is an understanding of the three metamorphoses, which is not discontinuous and dialectical, but rather, on the contrary, that all the stages of the metamorphoses are threaded together: becoming a dancing philosopher integrates resistance, control and creation.

We are heavy beings, but this does not reduce us to stillness, quite the contrary. It compels us to move, to be constantly in movement, to be affected by, or to be a source of impulses and forces. A philosophy in movement is a philosophy disposed for transformation, and the kind of transformation I am interested in now entails a bodily practice, inspired by the dancing Zarathustra, the dancing girls, the heavy camel, the affirmative lion and the playful child. We

actually move ourselves, and we can expand the impulses, make greater the rising forces and directions that are already involved in our bone structure and our muscles when holding and releasing weight. We can access a form of freedom for creation through movement: heightening, in the first place, our sense of movement (Sheets-Johnstone 2001, 121). This is not about becoming a professional dancer, although this is not excluded; this is about thinking in movement or practicing philosophy through dance.

Let us experience the resistance the ground offers to our body and how it gives us a sense of being present, right here, right now. There where you are now, or in a place you like it in the room, I invite you to perform a final exercise. Find yourself a comfortable way to lie down on the floor. Let your weight follow a natural path to the floor as if you were a piece of fabric falling down; you can do it slowly and carefully like you were melting. Do it several times, just go up and down exploring different ways to do it. While falling, I suggest you to be fully aware of the resistance and opposition to gravity. I would like to ask you, as the camel does: “What is heavy?” (TSZ 16). Where do you feel the weight? What part of you feels heavy? What are you carrying while you falling? For example, choose one part of your body and feel its weight pulling you down until you finally reach the floor.

Then do one more fall³, and go to four supporting points; like a lion, you are going to heighten your sense of movement to realize the next stage of the metamorphoses, not only resisting gravity, but actively opposing it. When you go to the floor this time, don't let yourself finish the fall completely, but rather avoid it very near the floor, with your arms and legs flexed. In that position, crawling on all four, start moving yourself around the room. The lion is full of muscle tone; opposition and resistance result in a controlled and thick movement.

If you come back to the first exercise, standing up, you will probably feel again the shifting of the weight in the sole of the feet, the small balancing. Your attention is going to be now in your bone structure, playing with the joints (fingers, wrists, elbows, shoulders, neck, spine, hip, knees, ankles, feet). Try to be very economical with your force, use the minimum of muscle tone, thinking particularly in the direction of movements from your bone structure. If you feel comfortable, chose some part of your body, unlock it or free it of the resistance to falling down, and while feeling the direction your bones put into your movement explore the possibilities of movement that open before fully controlling the movement. The idea is to let yourself continue the small impulses that are already involved in standing up right now; to let the movement go on multiple paths in a playful manner. You can play with speed, tone, rhythm, expansion, intensity.

3 There is a second option to this exercise: doing one more fall and this time end the movement on the floor. And there, you can do something very simple. With your arms open and extended on the floor alongside your body forming a 90-degree angle, you start expanding your arms and legs as far as you can, as if they were growing and progressively becoming longer and longer. Let your arms and legs leave the floor a little, but just a little, and then stay there. You are so close to the floor, and nevertheless gravity pulls down on your arms and legs, you need to oppose a great force in order to keep them lifted. This is not merely to carry your own weight, but to actively oppose to gravity.

You are already improvising, you are playing and dancing; the philosophy of movement is being practiced and performed through movement itself. Feel free to move yourself and expand the impulses you already have, make greater the rising forces and directions that are already involved in your bone structure, in your muscles holding and releasing force and impulses. Then, take your time to find an end to your movement, to go back to the agitated stillness from the beginning.

Before this little experiment, did you realize that you were avoiding falling? Did you realize every small movement involved in sitting down? Did you realize how much movement there is all over your body when you stand up? We are not in complete stillness, we never are, we are always carrying our weight, resisting falling. To carry our weight implies to be in movement. The first stage of the metamorphoses is to resist gravity. The camel, as we are right now, is carrying its own weight. But we are not merely passively opposing gravity; we are actively avoiding the fall, even if we do so through very small and imperceptible movements, compensations and balances.

My brothers, why is the lion required by the spirit? Why does the beast of burden, renouncing and reverent, not suffice?

To create new values – not even the lion is capable of that: but to create freedom for itself for new creation – that is within the power of the lion. (TSZ 17)

But to be in movement allows us to realize the small forces and balances throughout our body; we are always shifting our weight, we are always involved in the potential directions our small movements could take. This is why it is not enough just to carry our weight and avoid falling. It is impossible for us to only stand, just to resist; the camel stage is fundamental because our body cannot only avoid the fall. In order to do that, we are necessarily actively performing a rearrangement of the structure of our entire body, through small movements. It seems that we cannot just be camels.

But tell me, my brothers, of what is the child capable that even the lion is not? Why must the preying lion still become a child?

The child is innocence and forgetting, a new beginning, a game, a wheel rolling out of itself, a first movement, a sacred yes-saying. (TSZ 17)

There is a creative power inside of this transformation, and the lion unlocks a creative part of the movement. The child is that power of creation, a kind of agitated stillness and state of activity and responsiveness. The child is improvisation, is the dancer playing around.

We found with the camel that weight is related to the internal and external impulses and forces by means of which we can be upright. If we just let the impulses go on, then we realize that being at a complete rest is impossible, that there is always a little dance in our body. When that feeling increases and we let ourselves heighten our kinesthetic awareness, when we realize that

affirmative opposition to gravity, we become lions. We realize that we do not need to change the nature of our movement to become lions, just becoming active and affirmative. Then, shifting our attention to our bones and freeing ourselves of the fear of falling, engaging the affirmative state of lion, and heightening still further our kinesthetic awareness into all possible directions we could move, we reach a sense of creation through movement. When we enjoy this creative power and we abandon ourselves to the game of improvisation, we become children. We become dancing philosophers.

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