

Performing Presence

This was a paper delivered at the Consciousness Reframed II Conference hosted by CAiiA - STAR in 1998

It is published in Consciousness Reframed ed Ascott R Intellect 1999

A written commentary on the question and nature of 'being present' How presence is determined and experienced. The nature of human movement. The bilateral symmetry of the human body and the consequences for presence arising from the nature of movement. Presence, movement and the presence of others.

Presence. Movement. Lines. Position. Velocity. Contact. Bilateral symmetry. Biomechanics. Turning. Wanting. Strangers.

I want to say something about presence. The title of my contribution is Performing Presence, mainly because performance is my field, and I know what I know (if anything at all) as a result of working in performance. But it is presence which is the key issue here. I am interested in what it means to 'be present'. I want to know if this is important, or not. I feel that it is, that it is very important, and that everything that is critical for us is somehow dependent on 'being present'. But to articulate this further is not easy.

What does 'being present' consist of? I have isolated three fundamental elements, namely position velocity and consciousness. Position may be said to equate with space, velocity with time and consciousness with the individual connection with both of these things, which connection renders both the position and the velocity relative. thought never uncertain.

What is position ? It is where you are at any particular moment. We can encompass enormous shifts of scale in one instantaneous understanding of our position. For example,

I can know both that I am on the planet Earth (and not Mars), and that the little finger on my right hand is only a short distance from the little finger on the left hand of the person sitting next to me. Implicit in an understanding of position is an awareness of the distance between us.

What does position consist of? Human beings have forward looking eyes, ears on either side of the head, in other words a bilateral symmetry of the body which generates six co-ordinates of position. These are directly in front, directly behind, to the right, to the left, directly above and directly underneath. We understand these co-ordinates in one instant as a single point, which is 'being there'.

We have a very wide eye focus, but it has limits. Our forward looking eyes are adept at detecting the slightest movement, particularly at the edges of our field of vision, and at focussing on a particular point directly in front of us. Where we cannot see any more is a critical boundary that separates seeing from not seeing. This line separating in front from behind, extends out from each shoulder to right and left. It is a key transitional line in our understanding of position. In front is visible, behind is invisible, but audible. The relation between hearing and seeing is critical, and the desire to turn and look back at what is behind us is always strong. As a result it appears in several mythical narratives. You can never see what is directly behind you, since as you turn to look, the position of 'directly behind' moves with you. Some have placed our own death in this never to be reached position.

Each shoulder gives us a right and a left. This line crosses the in front and behind line. It is often the widest part of the body and we use it to know if we can 'fit' through a passage of particular dimensions, such as a door, or the space between two other people. The integration of these two lines of position gives us an understanding of how we are in relation to another. Side by side, as in a marriage ceremony. Behind or in front of another as in a queue for a bus, or for food. Front to front ('face to face') with another as in combat or courtship.

The vertical line, up and down, gives us our height, the distance of our hair from our feet on the floor. This co-ordinate is never really static, though the rate of change slows down considerably from the age of twenty or so until the late sixties. Our sense of this up / down line, looking down and especially looking up, is developed from the moment we start to look. Initially we can only look up, or down at the floor or the surface we are on. Once we can stand this changes and we can eventually use our head to look down and up. Everyone who is taller than you are has to be looked up at. To see the stars we have to look up. To see the earth we must look down.

Velocity is the rate of change of position. We know our position and also simultaneously know that it is not fixed but has constant potential for change. Asleep the body is at rest. When awake we engage in movement which takes our body through different positional points. and at different speeds. I am interested in this movement. Not as bio-mechanics but as bio-mechanics integrating with consciousness. We know that we move, and that we can move. Therefore we must decide to move, we must want to move. I am interested in this decision process, in this wanting. What is it? Let me put this another way. When we start moving what makes us stop, or change direction by turning. What is stopping? What is turning? How do these changes occur, again not just bio-mechanically but in interaction with consciousness. When moving on the line directly in front of us, which all forward movement is, there seems to be limits. We like to turn round and come back again.

I can illustrate with an example from performer work. In this particular exercise one performer is asked to stand behind another and give a physical impulse with their hand to the other base by maing pushing slightly at the base of their partner's spine. The performer moves forward on this impulse and comes to a standing position. When first doing this work the moving performer will almost always turn at the stopping point of the movement and walk back to the other. Out on a limb in this way they feel uncomfortable, stranded, strange. The performer has to learn how to resist the impulse to turn and go back, how to remain facing forward, somewhere else, waiting for a new impulse to move forward again. It would seem as if the default decision as it were is to turn round 180

degrees and go back to where you started. If we think about our movement in these terms for a moment then we can see that for most of the time we move forward for a short time and then turn and come back. Turning is the key to stability. Turning keeps us more or less where we are. If we didn't turn then we wouldn't have communities, we would set off from the house and never come back. Travellers and nomads also return to places. Just to consider performance, we can see that actors, dancers and others keep themselves on the limited space known as the stage by turning frequently, and by restricting their forward movement in this way so that they are contained within the boundaries of the set stage space.

The forward line appears to be a major structural element in presence. If presence is characterised by this, does this link presence to the consciousness of containment, and the resistance or acceptance of that? What if you decide to stay where you are and only move in one direction, turn and move back the way you came and go on repeating this? What if you decide to move forward until you meet an obstacle? What happens then? Is another person an obstacle? Do you turn then? What happens when one person meets another? What are the dynamics of this meeting, this contact? Other people are disturbing, exciting. For where as we can exercise some element of control (if we want to) on our position in relation to static objects, we cannot do this with people because they are capable of changing position, as we are. In these conditions I have found that presence becomes felt in a much more personal way. Physical actions involving change of position such as moving, turning, can resonate with feeling states such as being accepted, or being rejected. When two or more people are in close proximity to one another then there is a strong desire to synchronise changes of position, a desire that can be followed or resisted. Moving together feels good. We want it to happen. When another allows this to happen, or when they resist this and move independently we sense this emotionally.

Do we look for contact with strangers? When we move, change position, do we do this in order to make this contact? How do we know the people we know? Is it because they keep re-appearing as we move and turn back the same way? Turning 180 degrees is to reverse the direction of the line and so maintains something. Turning 90 degrees along

the right or the left axis of the body is to make a major change. The possibilities of 90 and 180 degree turns can in the end take you anywhere you want. But this is to beg the question. It cannot be that there is just changing position. True, we are alive and cannot be still. But there is more. What is that more?

© Barry Edwards 2005