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Native Dance as Epistemology: A Review of Shay Welch's *The Phenomenology of a Performative Knowledge System: Dancing with Native American Epistemology*

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The Phenomenology of a Performative Knowledge System: Dancing with Native American Epistemology
Shay Welch
Palgrave Macmillan, 2019
215 pp.

Native dancing practices are not thought to be a philosophical topic, except perhaps as worthy of reflection for specific aesthetic considerations. Shay Welch's book will convince you otherwise. Dancing does, the book argues, have epistemic properties because, in a philosophically relevant sense, dancing constitutes and communicates truths. The book's argument takes one through widely different disciplines, including indigenous studies, dance studies, embodiment studies, and, of course, epistemology, to make good on what would at first appear to be a philosophical absurdity: that dancing is an important area of address for epistemological research. One should read it, then, because at least it attempts the impossible. I also think it largely succeeds. In what follows, I explain how it does so.

Indigenous Dances as Epistemic Activity

Welch advances two basic and related claims. The first, a weaker claim, is that indigenous dances are epistemic activities because they are truth bearing and communicating (158). Her second claim, the "stronger claim," is that indigenous dances are the *best* epistemic activity because most suitably truth bearing and communicating (157). The second claim presupposes the success of the first, and will likely turn out to be the more contested of the two for reasons explored below, but it is not, I think, needed to command the attention of philosophers. Even the success of the first counts as a serious contribution to epistemological research.

Welch's argument in support of these claims begins by identifying two central features of Native American epistemology with conditions that make sense of each, namely that knowing is ethical and that truth follows a process, i.e., is procedural. In claiming that knowing is ethical, Welch intends not only that among Native Peoples knowledge exists to be shared, but more especially that it observes the Limiting of Questions Principle, and the Moral Universe Principle (34-5). In the former case, one is to recognize constraints on epistemic enterprises, namely when they do not facilitate better living, and in the latter one is to recognize that the universe is moral, so that no facts are morally neutral. In claiming that truth is a process, is a truth-ing, Welch means that truth is a respectful and successful performance of an action to achieve a (good) goal, i.e. it is a procedural activity. Four specific criteria put some flesh on this claim: truthing is dynamic (42), operates from a phenomenological—experientially lived—basis (43), operates respectfully (44), and draws on the inner aspects of a person, one's "inscape" (49).

If Welch's argument can show that Native dancing satisfies these criteria, then she will have made good on the weak claim. If her argument can show that Native dancing is decidedly better than alternatives at satisfying these criteria, then she will have made good on the strong claim. Such is the logical organization of the book.

The Puzzle of a Broadened Epistemology

A puzzle now emerges. While the outlined criteria suggest a wider, or at least different, sense of epistemic activity than normally conceived, it may at this point look baffling how Welch could connect Native dancing with this broadened epistemology. What has dancing to do with truthing? In her characteristically creative way, Welch resolves the puzzle by looking to arguments in another interdisciplinary domain: embodied cognition.

Briefly, the arguments from embodied cognition (chapters three and four) proceed as follows. Welch begins by noting that epistemic claims emerge from the broader domain of meaningful claims (54). Yet meaningful statements, thoughts, movements or any other cognition are conditioned and structured by our embodiment (56). To recall the work by Lakoff and Johnson (1999), on which Welch draws, root metaphors structure the contents of our thought. For example, our primary motor functions provide our cognition with its basic resources: warmth, bigness, upness, closeness, and so on. These basic cognitions are then extended metaphorically to cognize other matters: affection is warmth, important is big, happy is up, intimacy is closeness, *et cetera*. These root metaphors then combine to enable comprehension of more abstract topics, such as loving relationships, by means of complex metaphors.

In the “West,” love is often conceived metaphorically as a journey. The lovers are travelers, their common life goals are destinations, the relationship itself is a vehicle, and difficulties are impediments to motion. It is complex mappings such as these that make sense of lovers’ frustrated statements, for example, that their relationship “is spinning its wheels.” Importantly, the path from our corporeal cognition to meaningful expression is made possible by schematic procedures (68). Sensory motor functions are but one of these. Welch notes that narratives are another and more important such procedure, and these may in turn be mapped to movements. A, perhaps *the*, source for root movement metaphors, Welch argues, is dance (118-37).

Native dancing, then, is a sort of procedure that may reasonably be understood to condition and limit our knowledge. Moreover, it satisfies the criteria of Native epistemology, since it is dynamic, phenomenologically based, observes the constraints of respect, emerges from the dancer’s inscape, and proceeds ethically (159-87). As a result, it is also an epistemic activity because it is truth bearing and communicating. These points thus satisfy the conditions for the book’s weak claim. It is also most apt relative to its competitors, since they, including linguistic expression, exhibit less well the embodied and dynamic characteristics of native dancing. At least for these reasons, and the book delivers others, Welch argues that the stronger claim is satisfied.

The forgoing outline of the book’s argument should be enough to convince anyone interested in epistemology, embodiment, dance or indigenous philosophy that Welch’s contributions are serious. There is, I think, likely to be broad agreement of its success on three fronts, and on another, a productive discussion is likely to follow. To explain my reasoning, one might put the matter as follows. Typically, research on indigenous philosophy aims at one of (or in Welch’s case: all of) the following three goals.

1. To show that some people's thought is philosophical, or that some yet unexplored topic is pertinent to an existing field.
2. To show that the addressed indigenous approach is different from the standardly conceived options.
3. To show that the indigenous approach is better in some way.

Notably, 3. may be indirectly demonstrated through 2., for if the standardly conceived options are unable to address the phenomena under discussion, then the indigenous approach proves more robust by virtue of its greater comprehensiveness. Welch's argument roundly succeeds in demonstrating that Native dance is an epistemic activity that is truth bearing and communicating, and so succeeds in the first goal. The book also shows that Native epistemology is in crucial respects different from the standardly conceived options, and so succeeds in the second. It also succeeds in the third at least indirectly, since it shows Native epistemology to be more robust insofar as it is open to a broader range of epistemic phenomena. Where the work is likely to open some productive discussion is with respect to the third point considered directly.

The strong claim of the book argues that Native dance is the best epistemic activity, but in order to show this, the argument must hold that Native epistemology is not only different from standardly conceived options, but that it can embed their claims. To demonstrate embeddedness, it must show that all propositional knowledge is entailed by dance as a praxis. The difficulty is that the arguments from embodied cognition only show that dance, in the best case, schematizes or processes our cognition, and so delimits what is meaningful. It does not show that it entails specific contents further up the cognitive ladder, as it were, and it is hard to see how it could. The combinations of basic root metaphors into complex ones looks to be endless, since even the orders of their complexity (e.g. metaphors using metaphors to the fifteenth order) is indeterminate. It is considerations such as this that have led Johnson (2017), Welch's rival on this score, to support the view that there are distinct epistemic activities: knowing-how, i.e., those that are strictly embodied activities, such as dancing, and knowing-that, i.e., those that use embodied basic root metaphors for our representational cognition, such as the activity one finds in mathematics.

Welch claims that "Native epistemology would suggest that knowing-that is internal to knowing-how," but the argument she provides, as far as I can tell, does not take us to that point. Nor do I have a sense of what kind of argument could shoulder that burden. I am, perhaps, mistaken and it is for this reason that I think this third point might yet lead to a productive discussion. Yet, one consequence of this analysis, if I am right, is that it is unclear that the strong claim of the book is ultimately supported. But again, I do not think the strong claim is necessary to command philosophical attention.

Before concluding, I pause to mention my only hesitation with the work. It is not so much a disagreement with respect to claims as a difference in preference for the method of conducting research in the field of indigenous philosophy. The matter turns on the "pan-Indigenous" framework for Welch's undertaking (35). Rather than follow the philosophical

articulations of a single nation or people, Welch develops a philosophical analysis that draws on ethnographic sources from all the Americas, though centering on North America. The argument presents, then, an amalgam of their views. Welch defends the approach, and is joined by reputable others, by noting that there are many commonalities among the outlooks, even a shared worldview.

The commonalities defense strikes me as accurate and useful if its limits are respected, but I hesitate with the approach nonetheless. For example, Welch argues that “the nature of Indigenous languages themselves prohibit the division between is and ought” (35). Welch intends that “to be” for indigenous languages entails “what ought to be.” I do not know enough about other indigenous languages, but this is not accurate for Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs. Their language is omnipredicative, which among other features means that it lacks a copular word and has no word for “is” (cf. Launey, 2004). As a result, they have no “is” which entails an “ought” (though they do have a word for “ought”). Moreover, the relation between “what is” and “what ought to be” is tenuous in their thought. For example, a father rather memorably instructs his young daughter about the human condition saying: “This is the character of our circumstances. O my daughter, my child, hear well: the slippery earth is not a good place. It can only be said that it is a place of joy-pain, joy-fatigue” (Sahagún, 93).¹ If anything, then, the Nahuas thought our specific circumstances, what “is” under the configuration of the Fifth Sun, are not (simply) good. My purpose with these points is to underscore the grounds for my hesitation with pan-Indigenous approaches: even among the indigenous peoples of North America, I find the differences among their views on specific topics to be substantial. This hesitation about method is something of which Welch remains cognizant, however, and I do not think any of her central claims step beyond its limits.

On my reasoning, in sum, Welch’s argument has succeeded in meeting the three separate aims that standardly animate contemporary research in indigenous philosophy. In her style, Native dance as an epistemological topic is now a thing. It’s not like “Western” approaches to epistemology. And it’s better than they are, at least because it is more comprehensive in scope. The field, moreover, has its own distinctive problems of address, and controversies surrounding them, and so is already bearing epistemic fruit. Its discussion also rests at the center of a massively interdisciplinary set of reflections that might serve to move stuffy philosophic topics into the center of academic, even public reflection. For all these reasons, then, the book is a marvel of philosophical insight worthy the attention of anyone interested in its many fields of address, from epistemology, to embodiment, to dance. Just read the book.

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¹ The translation from Nahuatl is my own.

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