

BOOK REVIEWS

A Turning Point in Movement Therapy

Body Movement: Coping with the Environment

Irmgard Bartenieff with Dori Lewis

(New York: Gordon & Breach, 1980, 304 pp, \$42.50)

Decisive progress in any area of therapy seems to occur when the special techniques for curing a physical or mental deficiency are seen in a much broader context of human functioning. Therapy originates as a bag of practices, derived from episodic observations and based on hunches. Such practices start out as separate remedies, unrelated by governing principles, unsystematic and unexplained.

Mental illness becomes understandable when it is seen as a special disorder of general, "normal" functioning. Correspondingly, psychotherapy becomes effective when its methods are derived from the psychological principles that govern behavior in general. Anxiety, for example, can hardly be dealt with as long as it is perceived as nothing but a symptom of illness rather than a common human response to certain types of experience.

Similarly, art therapy acquires its necessary psychological basis when it is understood as a branch of art activity in general. It presupposes much knowledge of what needs are fulfilled by the making and receiving of art, what functions of mind and body are employed, and what ways of looking at the world of experience are entailed in art. To a particularly striking extent, this broadening of outlook is required for dance therapy because in this case the necessary context

reaches not only beyond the dance as an artistic activity but even beyond the realm of the arts. Dance is inseparably related to movement quite in general. Movement as a basic activity of life already contains all the elements of functioning and expression that distinguish its precious flower, the dance. In consequence, dance therapy is coming to be conceived as a feature of movement therapy. Neither in theory nor in practice is there much to be gained by trying to find the boundary at which mere movement becomes dance.

This development in movement therapy is dramatized and supplied with a systematic foundation by the publication of a standard work: *Body Movement: Coping with the Environment*, written by Irmgard Bartenieff with Dori Lewis. Bartenieff, now in her eightieth year, was trained as a dancer and has never lost contact with dance as a modern art. Thoroughly trained at the same time in the anatomy and physiology of the human body, she approached her life's work in therapy with principles that had decisively influenced the practice of the dance but not yet been recognized in clinical work. The decisive impulse on which she built her own approach came from her early contact with her teacher, Rudolf Laban.

The extraordinary range and depth of Laban's achievements derived from a few basic insights.

Although a choreographer by profession, he came to see bodily movement quite in general as an indivisible entity. When the advent of Nazism in Germany interrupted his career as a prime mover of the modern dance in that country, he became engaged in England during the war in what we call time and motion studies in industry. This task helped to develop his conception of movement as a goal-directed activity, which requires the integrated functioning of body and mind. The economic conception of the worker as the means to the end of industrial production was supplemented by the idea of work as the means to building well developed human beings. The application to therapy suggested itself naturally.

Physical therapy had limited itself traditionally to the strengthening of particular muscle groups. When Bartenieff received her training under George Deaver at New York University, the older approach was being replaced with principles that she found to be in keeping with what she had learned from Laban. For an effective physical therapy it was necessary, first, to treat any local weakness in the context of the body's total functioning. The goal was that of enabling the patient to fulfill tasks which challenged the whole body, not just a particular limb or segment. Second, there was no such thing as retraining the body as a mere physical instrument. Rehabilitation required the cooperation of the patient's mind, which had to be directed toward the goal to be attained by the total organism.

I might mention here that this approach corresponded also to the principles of gestalt psychology. In an address I gave at the Laban Centennial Celebration in New York in 1979, I had occasion to refer to an experiment I witnessed as a student in the 1920s at the University of Berlin. One of my teachers, the psychologist Kurt Lewin, was working with encephalitic children. These children had difficulties with initiating and controlling motor behavior. To make an arm reach and move in a prescribed direction was a problem for them. Lewin constructed a revolving drum that rotated slowly behind an opening in a screen. A number of hooks were attached to the drum, and the children were asked to slip a small metal ring on each hook when it appeared in the opening. This they did remarkably well—apparently because the experimental setup shifted their attention from the arm to the target. The voluntary

innervation of the arm, especially the act of decision, was all but absorbed by the dynamics of the task. Part function was incorporated in the unified, goal-directed activity as a whole.

Once the mind had been enlisted in relieving the weaknesses of the body, it was logical to profit also from the converse of the relationship by making the body help in the rehabilitation of the mind. This was the beginning of movement therapy as an aid to clinical psychology and psychiatry. Movement therapy started inevitably as an intuitive and somewhat haphazard means of using recreational games, music, and dance to enliven the mood of hospital settings. But to give a more systematic basis to the new discipline, it was necessary, first of all, to provide an analysis of movement and to identify its underlying dimensions. Here Bartenieff was able to make use of the theories of Laban, who had based his system on the triad of body, space, and what came to be known as "effort."

The body with its anatomical structure and its physiological functioning is the instrument of movement. All movement must be derived harmoniously from the particular conditions provided by the body. For the purpose of movement analysis, Bartenieff describes the lower unit of the body, from the hips down, as the initiator of the center of weight, which essentially serves locomotor activity and postural changes, and the upper unit as being at the service of exploring, manipulating, gesturing activities. The upper unit "initiates and extends reach-space, communicates through spatial gesture, body touch, grasp, enveloping, dispersing, intertwining."

All these activities occur in space, specifically in the limited area that surrounds the body and is called the kinesphere. Defined by the principal directions of movement, the kinesphere has the shape of a cube as long as the directions are elementary, but must be described as an icosahedron, that is, as a polyhedron of twenty faces, when the repertory of movement becomes more complex. In its most generalized form, of course, movement is comprehended by a sphere surrounding the body in all directions.

The most important aspect of movement analysis refers to the dynamic qualities of the movements executed by the body. Movement is not identical with mere locomotion, that is, with a mere change of place, but is activated by centers

of energy which determine its particular meaning and effect. It can be the active manifestation of a source of energy inherent in the body or it can yield passively to an outer force. It can have any degree of strength, consistency, focusing. The psychotherapeutic and diagnostic virtues of movement derive principally from the perception of the directed tensions that are produced by innervation and the exertion of muscles and tendons.

Bartenieff's version of the Laban analysis has become known as the Effort/Shape system. "Effort" does not strike me as the best term available to describe the dynamic qualities of movement. In common usage, effort is the sudden mobilization of a strong amount of energy and therefore nearly the opposite of the kind of behavior favored by Bartenieff for a sensible therapy. It would also seem that the term effort is made to stand for a number of components that deserve to be distinguished conceptually.

The dynamics of movement is, first, a visual quality perceived by an observer, such as a therapist watching a client or an audience watching a dance. It distinguishes, for example, a limp, poorly directed reach of the arm from a vigorously determined one. The dynamics of movement is, second, the physiological activity, which manifests itself indirectly in visual appearance and somewhat more directly in the kinesthetic experience of the therapist who monitors a client's performance by touching his body. Kinesthetic perception is also available to the mover himself, who senses and controls what his body is doing. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, dynamics carries expression, that is, it stands for the mental attitudes corresponding to the varieties of physical dynamics. For example, expression is what makes a determined gesture convey the sense of courage and distinguishes it from helpless fumbling. Expression comprises all the psychological connotations perceived by movers and observers and therefore constitutes the base for analogies between mental and bodily behavior, that is, the base of movement therapy and aesthetics.*

These various components of dynamics and expression are implied by the term "effort." Bar-

tenieff characterizes effort under four headings: space, weight, time, and flow. Spatial orientation influences effort, for example, by the difference of expression between an upward move versus a downward move or between a direct aiming at a goal as against "an encompassing reference" to it. "To crack an egg, the attitude toward space must be Direct, as opposed to the Indirect attitude of folding beaten egg white into a dessert."

The weight factor of effort describes the difference between the heavy investment in a smash of the fist as against the light touch needed for delicate handling. The time factor refers to the expressive aspects of duration, for example, the suddenness of grabbing or withdrawing as against leisurely lingering. Finally, the free flow of streaming, swinging, or whirling is distinguished from restraint, control, or blockage of movement.

Naturally, in any actual performance these four aspects of expressive movement combine in various ratios. While the purpose of systematic analysis requires that the components be kept apart and described separately, Bartenieff insists throughout her presentation that only a totally integrated performance of the whole organism makes for successful and wholesome movement. Such integrated movement requires, first of all, that the body be organized around a center within itself—a center established by a constant, flexible search for balance, not by rigid restraint. Upright posture, for example, should not be obtained by stiffening and bracing. Instead, "the whole body slightly sways while 'standing still' in a figure-of-eight distribution of weight (center, forward, right side, backward, center, forward, left side, backward, center) in continuous subtle fluctuation between stability and mobility to maintain balance."

When the norm position of the living body is a state of constant, subtle readjustment, it adapts itself more easily to a restructuring, required when some functions are impaired by paralysis or injury. I remember studies carried out many years ago, I believe by the psychologist David Katz, in which the almost immediate rearrangement of the body's total functioning was described in animals deprived of one or several of

*Arnheim, R. *Toward a Psychology of Art*. Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1966. Pp. 51 ff.

Arnheim, R. *Art and Visual Perception (New Version)*. Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974. Chapters 9 and 10.

their limbs.† Similarly, Bartenieff has the example of a four-year-old polio patient whom she gave exercises that made him "struggle for balance" to re-establish verticality. This, she says, was in contrast to the traditional focusing on local muscular activity "without spatial reference."

In the well integrated body, movement is activated by a number of centers, which are hierarchically organized in such a way that the impulses from secondary centers subordinate themselves to the main direction given by the dominant center. The location of the dominant center can vary. Thus, in the Japanese kabuki dancers the center of the weight is in the pelvic area, which conveys a sense of earthbound grounding whereas the Western ballet dancer centers his weight in his chest and thereby obtains the quality of "heaven-reaching, off-the-ground."

Only in the simplest cases, eg, when a boxer gives his thrust a maximum intensity by marshaling the energies of his total body in support of it, are the subcenters of activation mere executives of the dominant movement. More often, gestures and counteractions complicate and enrich the performance. Nevertheless, this must not lead to fragmentation. Every good dancer demonstrates the harmonious unification of the various motives contributed by the limbs as though they were the members of a chamber music group. This unity of the effort is a necessary condition for physically and mentally successful behavior.

Bartenieff refers here, for example, to a study of the motor behavior of business executives carried out by Warren Lamb, a colleague of the late Rudolf Laban. Lamb showed that an isolated gesture, not supported by the rest of the speaker's body, may reveal a lack of true engagement and is likely not to create the desired effect in onlookers and listeners. (Instructive photographs illustrating Lamb's principles are published with an analysis of his "action profiles" in a recent book by Ramsden.* The expressive aspects of motor dynamics are amply documented by Bartenieff. She reports, for example, how she came to suspect suicidal de-

structiveness in a young woman who in a dance therapy session ended every phrase of her movements with an abrupt cutting-off of the flow. In another instance she analyzed the motor patterns of two presidential candidates in a television debate, indicating the difference of attitude in the incumbent and the challenger.

Bartenieff's book abounds in revealing analyses of bits of everyday behavior observed in railway stations or during professional activities. They remind me of similarly incisive, although purely intuitive, analyses in the writings of Honoré Balzac, who was especially interested in the expression of people's gait. I remember an episode in which a husband suspecting his wife of infidelity watches from a window the "particulier," ie, the unattached male, leaving the house, in order to guess from the expression of the suitor's walking whether or not he has had success with the lady. Balzac could not rely, as Bartenieff does in her book, on an ample assortment of delightful snapshots, taken mostly by Bonnie Freer and Morris H. Jaffe and showing people of all ages, walks of life, and different cultures in eloquent demonstrations of spontaneous body language.

Bartenieff's analyses of visual and verbally described examples prove how decisively her sensitivity to the character and meaning of movement has been refined by the categories of "Labananalysis." Her descriptions are worded in the terminology created for the purpose, which requires the user of the book to learn its special language but is indispensable once the informal descriptions of everyday observations are replaced with the systematic approach of the professional. Thus, although enlivened on every page by the humanity of its author, Bartenieff's book is intended mainly for readers who study movement in earnest. To them she offers a treatise whose completeness and expertise will not be surpassed in many years to come.

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†Katz, David. *Gestalt Psychology* New York. Ronald Press, 1950. Chapter 3: The Plasticity of Motor Processes.

*Ramsden, Pamela. *Top Team Planning: A Study of the Power of Individual Motivation in Management*. London: Cassell, 1973.