

Agency in instructed action, or the order in motion: A dance lesson for the Students of Religions

Introduction

The last year at this conference I was advocating the Actor-Network-Theory (ANT) approach to the study of religion. In the meantime I got a unique chance to study the dancers during a semi-annual project of a dance improvisation. I welcomed it as a rare occasion to study social order in making. Under the influence of John Law's *Organizing Modernity* I decided to study it as organising practices which make - in this case dancers, not scientists and their managers - manage their achievements.

So my presentation concerns the ordering of dance improvisation. Yet, I believe that this presentation on dance can illuminate also the way we research religion. As I said, I am primarily interested in the problem of order. By referring to John Law I am saying that I do not think that we can achieve much by taking "order" as a kind of stable object. The order means, first of all, the many different practices and aims of ordering. This is a lesson the ANT scholars have learned from Harold Garfinkel's ethnomethodology. That the order is temporary achievement of hard efforts of all involved actors.

Relation to the Study of Religions

Students of religion believe that religion has something to do with social order either. They take it for granted, I think, when they speak of cultural and social significance of religion. Yet, too often they presuppose that religion is something quite stable, that it is some structure, some organization, some knowledge, some habits which organize society. This way of thinking I would say, is both inappropriate and harmful. It is one of the sources of our tendencies to marginalize all those whose voice is weaker, difficult to hear. It is this tendency to see things as *naturally* stable, and to see religions, cultures, societies as monoliths, what makes us overhear dissenting voices, weak voices, and what makes us neglect ambiguities, uncertainties, and controversies. One of my aims then, is to highlight dissent, ambiguity, uncertainty and controversy as the common part of our everyday life and a crucial aspect of ordering reality. As such, it is, I would claim, also a common and

crucial part of whatever we call religion as well. And definitely, much of religion consists of an instructed action. On this ground I hope that my following lesson of dance might be of use also to the students of religions.

The bottom line of this is that (a) much of what I say of the instructed action will apply also to those kinds of instructed actions we might find in religion, and (b) that "religious" activities can serve, just like the dance, as a laboratory to study the order in everyday making. By "everyday making" I am referring also to the fact that all the stories I am going to narrate are concerned with very ordinary things, which everybody is familiar with.

The Data and the Field

Before I start narrating let me say few comments on the data I am using. These are mostly my field notes which I recorded due to having a chance to accompany the dancers throughout their trainings and weekend intensive programs, through the work meetings of the (two) choreographers and their meetings with whoever else involved in the project. I followed the dancers after trainings in their coffee-house discussions, I spent some weekend leisure time with them, was on their mailing list and had access to whatever documents I asked for. As a matter of course I have become the part of the project, involved also in other work than just making my notes.

So now let me come to the three stories of instructed action I would like to tell you.

Story 1: The story of intervening mirror and creating the shared skill

The first story consists of a very simple instruction. We are at the third training evening. The warming up slowly turns into the first training activity of a simple walking with a demand on all dancers to react to the movements of others. The instruction (from the end of warming up) is described in my field notes thus:

Mutual massage of legs, afterwards laying on the back again [...]

"I'll try what I am able to achieve."

"How far I am able to attune [with others]."

After the relieve of the head, rolling down and stretch in the "roof": "I look who all is here."

"Let's walk." "So that you don't just hang around, so that you know where you are going, which trajectory you choose."

"You can go faster, slower, play with tempo."

"Realise what in this particular space, with these people you can do."

"And try **not to use the mirror**¹."

Monika is smiling - she seems to have been using it - [she says:] "Potrefená husa" [shot goose; an expression expressing that the one to whom a general comment was targeted proved himself guilty by reacting to that]. (37:4)

The activity is slowly led to an end and some other tasks are added to the walk so that it becomes slightly more complex. And Markéta [one of two choreographers] continues in instructing while the activity is going on.

"Take it just as an information. You don't need to SPEKULATE about it."

Lenka: "And I cannot then also check the mirror?"

Markéta: "You don't need to, try not using it, don't look in it." (37:8)

Then she observes them carefully. After a time the activity comes to an end. She explains that the aim was just to work on developing sensitivity for relations in the space. So she stresses that she wanted ordinary walk, **not any special hoping**, and points out again that next time they **should still less check themselves in the mirror**. They wan't have any on the stage, so they need to be sensitive to the movement of others without it. "**Monika complains that it is not possible and shows how she was discreetly checking the mirror. So the girls start to discuss what to do with the mirror: cover it by paper or cloth. Maruška maintains that the problem is not in the mirror**, but in fact that **Markéta was standing by the mirrors while instructing.**" (37:14).

1 All the bold letters and italics are my emphasises. In a field notebook I used only words written by capital letters to mark emphasises by the participants. I also consistently used quotation marks to mark what I was writing on behalf of myself, or paraphrasing the words of others off the exact quotations.

What can we learn?

What can we learn from this story? First of all, that things quite normally do not go as they were planned. Forbidding of checking the mirror was an *ad hoc*, situational instruction. It was not planned. We come to appreciate this fact in the second story. Now, it is quite common that the dance halls have mirrors installed to serve the dancers to watch themselves. Quite strange if we see how they interfere in doing properly the activities aimed to develop the skills necessary to dancer, at least for those who want to improvise on the stage. And we see in Monika's complain that the mirror interferes quite strongly.

This have something to do with the order of dance halls. They are mostly designed accordingly to the ballet tradition and they have mirrors. But there is more to this. There is also an order of performance and the order of training. There are no mirrors on theatre stages. That is a paradox: the training aims to prepare one for an actual performance, yet it is an activity of a special kind, much different from the performance. The dancers are aware of it so they manipulate the conditions of a training space if it is possible. They proposed some manipulations in this case as well. But the proposal was not fulfilled. There is not a single note on covering the mirrors in my later records. How is it possible? The mirror lost its agency. It was quite difficult in the beginning, but after a continual pressing by a choreographer it proved possible to learn not to use the mirror. This seems to be the case. The activity was being developed further in later trainings, but I cannot say that Markéta or Šárka (the second choreographer) would stop instructing with the mirror just behind their back. So the agency shifts from the mirror to a dancer's shared skill.

Story 2: The story of inevitable distortions of shared experience and difficulties in gaining shared knowledge

The second story is a story of more complex, yet still very simple, instruction. First of all, the dancers are forced to use less than a quarter of the training hall – the small space which should force them to interact. The choreographer instructs seven dancers dispersed

on their spaces in a training hall and pursuing activity called the “tree”:

"Make your legs deeply rooted, stand as comfortably as you can, breath deeply, feel the air coming through your nose. And imagine the tree - on the rock. Not very fertile soil, but enough; it stays solid and reliable. Notice its shape, the directions of its roots, its stem, stem's structure, how the sap flows through, how it moves. Try to be **as credible as you can to its movement in your movement**. [...] Try to make your movement **the closest possible to your vision**. Resemble its largest as well as its most tiny movement, which you can notice. [...] And **make sure that your movement resembles as accurately as possible the movement in your imagination**. [...] During that Šárka [the choreographer] moves around the girls (...) and speaks, and inspects what is going on. **"Notice if the tree moves still the same way."** This she said after I have myself noticed that Lenka and Martina, once again create much more expressive - outstretched, outwaved - movements than the others.

And as you are getting your movement to resemble the tree, start slowly leaving your vision so that you can divide from your tree. The tree will remain available to you, you can come back to it whenever you like. And at the moment you can do it, move out." (23:7)

And the dancers move out and the following instructions instruct them to go **their own way** to locate the thing they need. It can be whatever, may be the food, may be something else. Go, collect it, and get back to the tree. So all the dancers move around searching something and after a time come back. To the surprise of the choreographer, not even one of the dancers needed to cope with someone else crossing his path and forcing him thus to interact.

A part of the following reflection of the activity in the cycle looks like this:

Šárka: Good. Let's take it one by one. First of all: **It does not have to be an aesthetic movement**, not at all.

Lenka: *Yes, as one feels it*, isn't it?

Šárka: Yes.

The second thing. Have your legs rooted even deeper.

And Lenka stares into nowhere, as if she was thinking of something. (23:26)

Yes, Šárka felt troubled especially by Lenka. All the special, *ad hoc* added instructions we find here are addressed to her specially:

"To get deeply rooted", due to her moving around; not to care for **aesthetics**, due to her

employing of, as Šárka expressed it, "empty forms", without "really feeling the tree moving like that". For that reason "try to **be as credible as you can** to its movement in your movement", or "**make sure that your movement resembles as accurately as possible the movement in your imagination**", or "**notice if the tree moves still the same way**".

What is important about it? Šárka issues general instructions seemingly addressed to all the dancers, but meaning them especially for particular ones. The setting is like that, she cannot navigate each dancer separately, she does not have tool to do that. And she also does not want to create more tension between her and Lenka. There is already some. My notes for example say:

“Markéta [the second choreographer] switches of the music, and Šárka takes on her part [of the training]. And Lenka says immediately: "I am already afraid of what you'll say." (23:8)

So Šárka issues her instructions carefully, and generally. This is inevitable in a given situation. Yet, it creates confusion. Similar confusion as the one which led to the surprise of Šárka by dancers not getting to any interaction in the second part of the activity. Helen and Maruška made it clear in a discussion after training. The first simply understood the instruction "**your own way**" as "my way in which nobody interferes". The second did not want to contact anybody, because she understood the contact in technical terms of the contact improvisation as "sharing weight", but she did not liked to do this kind of the contact today. But Helen made it clear, that she could not understand my "**own way**" to include a contact, because she also understood contact as *sharing weight*, which was not suitable for the situation. Yet Šárka had different meaning of contact in mind – whatever kind of contact, which the dancers were already experimenting with, in previous trainings. But during the last training, due to noticing that some of the dancers (some of them being a ballet dancers and modern styles dancers) have serious problems with the principles of contemporary partnering, she emphasised these principles of *sharing weight* and guided some activities to elaborate their experience with this kind of contact. So this, as Maruška and Helen made clear, was the pattern – it became an *authoritative meaning* of “contact” for them.

When we come back to Lenka, we find, in the coffee-house discussion, that the pattern of her understanding of the tree activity, originated seven and half months back, during a weekend program in which the choreographers experimented with some interested dancers and the style of work they planned to apply. That time nobody knew exactly even when will the improvisation project start and who will participate. The tree activity then was guided not by choreographers, but by Alena, a person, who participated in the project as a (visual) artist working on the scene.

What can we learn?

What can we learn from that? While the first story taught us that an instruction may be internalised as a skill, it is also problematically and ambivalently bound to the situation of its performance. There is a plan definitely behind the instruction, the choreographers spend two hours before every training to discuss and prepare it. Still much improvisation is demanded to enact this plan when things go otherwise than expected – what is – to a certain degree – all the time. So the plan and the situational interferences need reconciliation, and it must be achieved in a second of a decision in a situation which will never repeat. So the stability and intersubjective unity in the meaning of an instruction as a collectively shared experience is almost impossible to achieve. Or more precisely, it cannot be achieved as a stable achievement. If it is, its breakage is just a question of time. The agency is too much dispersed and unpredictable. To be sure, the shared experience can be built, the awareness of the same aim is definitely achieved. All the dancers learn by the time “what it is all about”. Otherwise the dance improvisation like this could not be carried on as a performance. And it was carried on, successfully! But the surprise and distortion comes as a matter of course. Yet, the people – not only the dancers, but all people (maybe all living beings ?) – are able to deal with it. They know how to, say ... *improvise*. Yes, its their daily business, *to improvise*.

However, there is something important missing in this account. And the crucial question is why is it missing. The answer is: due to my asymmetrical approach. I have somewhat tended to side with Šárka over Lenka. So let me explain this in the following note on

a/symmetry. I want to keep this note separately – instead of correcting the second story – in order to emphasise huge theoretical significance of the concept of symmetry, which in the following remark, will take on primarily ethical dimension. So it is also a story of theoretical significance of ethical considerations. But again, it will prove to be more complex.

A note on a/symmetry

So what is this asymmetry about? It is about Lenka. Look at her role in the account provided above. She looks somewhat like a trouble maker. So what would she say, if I sent this account of an instructed action to her to get a feedback? And I plan to send it to all participants, since I find their feedback important – theoretically as well as ethically. This was an *ethical* moment. But there is a *pragmatic* moment as well. What if she says that if writing like that, I cannot use her data any more? This she can do – as I explained to the participants at the very beginning – at any time during the project, including the time of analysis, of course.

So I had to think, if I was righteous enough to her in my account, and if I can honestly defence symmetrical character of it. And here is what I have found. I omitted a crucial controversy between Lenka and Šárka which seems to be quite important. I recognized it during analysis, but at first I did not find it revealing something important in this particular context. Yet after having taken into account the problem of symmetry I have come to understand what it reveals.

The controversy was about a theory: the aesthetics of a dance movement. The conflicting theories Lenka and Šárka were maintaining might be termed as Lenka's *visual-art theory* and Šárka's *psychological theory*. While Šárka maintained that the aesthetic quality of movement lies mainly in the emotions, feelings, thoughts it expresses, Lenka would partly agree with it but maintained that the spacial visual quality of the movement is of the same importance. She argued that dance is also a kind of visual art and must have a quality of an artistic image. But to Šárka this quality resembled rather something she would term as an “empty form”, or what she termed so at least in this case. The discussion on this issue between Lenka and Šárka, with occasional statements of another

participants – including myself – went quite long in the coffee-house. Yet, it was not resolved. Šárka and Lenka got on respecting their mutual right on maintaining their opinion, but did not get any closer to resolve this issue.

And this issue proved to be quite important for the whole project. The project was framed by Šárka's aesthetic theory, she shared it with the second choreographer as well as the crucial part of the dancers, and even musicians. There was one dissenting voice, Lenka and there was some more dissent not expressed so clearly. There was also a dissenting set of practices based on the same theory. These practices were carried on not only by some of the dancers, but prominently by the visual artist responsible for the scene, Alena. She did not enter such discussions, as the one between Lenka and Šárka, too often. She lives some fifty kilometres from Brno in the countryside, and was pregnant during the whole project, delivering a baby few weeks after the performance. So she kept in just an occasional contact with others and worked on the scene as she felt it to be just right. And the outcome of her works was received with somewhat mixed feelings by the choreographers and some of the dancers. Furthermore, Alena was the one who guided the tree activity seven and half months back during the occasion which served to Lenka as a pattern for understanding the “tree” instruction.

By this I want to point out that theory is also an important part of instructing and following instructions. Both instructing and following instruction is based on a theory of action which comes out as an instructed action. Conflicting theory then complicates the relation between instruction and instructed action as its desired result. It is a problem of understanding, and also a problem of will to follow the instruction the way one expects that the instructor expects that it should be followed. It is difficult to conform if one thinks that it all should be other way round.

But this problems opens then the more general question of order of a dance performance. It is the order of selecting the dancers into the project and of the power of a choreographer. And this problem in this case proved to be more complicated then the difference between the professional and amateur setting of the project. This project was an amateur project. But this was project ran intentionally in a different settings then the

older projects of the same company.

First of all, this project was the first in the company's history to be based on an improvisation instead of a prepared choreography, choreography prepared rather according to a visual-art theory of the dance. So there was this divergence, and it was made possible by the growing significance in the company of the couple of choreographers. This significance comes – apart from another sources – from the fact that these two choreographers at the moment are the two of three dancers able to prepare trainings for the rest of the group, and two of few more with a relatively clear ideas concerning the activities and development of the company. In other words, the two with an idea of what is there interesting in the dance for them, and hence what might be good to explore and elaborate. And these two and the third one, Helen, are prominent now in the group partly due to that babies and the care for the family does not allow some other strong personalities of the company to drive its activities in a particular direction. So this project was moving in a new direction also because of the number of its members are young mothers busy with their families. Šárka is also busy this way. But her children are of a kindergarten age and also the dance is a must in her life. She cannot dedicate it regularly more then few hours a week, but she must dedicate it at least the time she can. She cannot live without dance.

So the influence on the company's activity has something to do with dance skills, available time, personal priorities and preponderance with dance, an urge to explore its possibilities. But this new direction was not only about exploring the new dimensions of the dance itself and the dance work. It was also about mobilizing people for the performance not only in the company itself, but in a wider pool of the dancers interested in developing dance in the same direction, exploring the similar or the same dimensions, and working the same way – the way of creative improvisation. And two such dancers were mobilized for the project, and unlike Lenka, who finally decided not to dance on the stage and took on only her organizational duties – through which she helped the realization of the project fundamentally –, took part in the performance and continue in cooperation up to now.

And the third, it was not only of mobilizing others, but of mobilizing whoever felt ready to work the way choreographers planned to. The older projects of the company had a more restrictive policy and only a handful of its members used to appear on the stage. At least, so Markéta explained it to me when I was discussing this paper with her [in personal discussion in Brno, 28.8.2012]. So some of the dancers in this project might not get chance to perform otherwise.

These are then agencies driving Šárka to occasional complains that she must be satisfied with the dancers she has at hand and has to deal with it. It might be easier to her to work with a group of professionals and only those subscribing to her aesthetic theory of dance, to have more power to urge the dancers to do exactly what she likes. The result might be more secure, however I seriously doubt it, because I have witnessed, I think, the rise of the quality in performing with the widening possibilities of all dancers to express their ideas and to influence more the training activities. But, as Šárka pointed out to me during our discussion concerning her approval of my entry into the field, the result was important to her, but the process was even more – how it grows and evolves. This was our common interest, and on this ground she was ready to accept my interference into the project. So with having more power over the selection of the dancers the work might be easier – what does not mean necessarily more successful –, but the process might be less interesting. The process itself was revealing and enriching. Not only in exploring dance improvisation, but in exploring ourselves. It was a kind of intense semi-annual dance therapy, as Helena expressed it. So the process was quite important and the lack of power over dancers was a part of its revealing capabilities. And with reference to the dancers Šárka had formulated it clearly shortly before the performance on her Facebook page: “Very often I am wrong and due to that I make also my surrounding perplexed. But one thing I am sure about. I have a team of amazing people, growing just before my eyes. ME-MY will be a good performance. ME-MY will be worthy of experiencing.”

Story 3: The story of productive uncertainty

So there was necessarily some confusion, and was much of uncertainty and a lack of

control. Yet, it did not cripple the performance. It seems that it was an important part of the revealing quality of the whole project, an important source of experience. That people can act and perform without being certain, we can learn again from the last story:

Some two weeks before the performance the dancers came to this discovery: Last time, the dance looked quite strange, yes. But at least, we felt that something is going on among us, and we enjoyed it. Today we even bored ourselves. That was the bottom of a depression. After that the strategy of training was changed and it really brought some positive results. The improvisation is not perfect, says the general consensus, but is getting much better again.

And we are few days before the performance in a theatre. Šárka sits in the auditorium, the dancers are improvising on the stage. Šárka stops the improvisation after 20 minutes, while normally it takes more than 40 to finish whole piece. All, including the musicians and myself make a circle on the stage and discuss the situation, me taking also notes.

First of all, Šárka wants to hear what the dancers have to say, what is their feeling about what was happening on the stage. They are mostly quite surprised that Šárka stopped the performance so early. Of course, not everything went smoothly they mean. But most of them expresses that they feel something interesting was going on, they experienced it intensely. Šárka then formulates what she did not like about it, framing it in a picture of emptiness: "I could not get any impression who you are". Helena is quite surprised: "Now I already understand nothing. When we think it's quite fine and something is really happening, you say that it looks empty and useless, when we feel it's quite useless and empty, you say that it was perfect". Few days before an opening night, the first and finally successful performance Helena posts the text on a Facebook page of the company with the following comment:

"Do not we want to change the text of the program? I think that this nicely expresses our semi annual achievement :))"

The post says:

"Theory is when you know everything but nothing works.

Practice is when everything works but no one knows why.

In our lab, theory and practice are combined: Nothing works and no one knows why."

But all the participants are happy with continuing the work, looking forward to more performances of the piece. We have actually much to learn from a fact that Helen was not an author of this post, she just shared it. It is a common experience. Things do not necessarily work as we expect, often we do not know or we are uncertain. Yet it does not cripple our activities. If it did, we might not do anything. It rather urges us to explore, and to have some challenge, and even fun. Would not it be boring otherwise?