

Dance Movements: Traditionalism to Postmodernism and Beyond—  
Applying the Gravesian Framework to Contemporary Dance

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**Abstract:** I align Clare Graves' Emergent, Cyclical Levels of Human Existence's conceptual theory of developmental psychology with the evolution of dance from traditional to classical to modern, post modern, and beyond (tribalistic and egoistic state; absolutistic state; multiplistic existence and subjectivity; relativistic state; and systemic state respectively). I suggest that applying this framework to dance offers undergraduate dancers an "organizational structure" for applying conceptual theory to their craft. I further suggest that college dance programs are sometimes not successful because of misalignments of psychological perspectives on the part of faculty and students. I cite the failure of my own experience teaching in a particular recreational dance studio because myself and the studio management and the students were operating on different psychological levels.

A sustained career in dance—whether it be a performer, teacher, or choreographer—teaches one lesson above all others: it is not about being the best, but about being the best fit. I do not simply refer to the cliché where the dancer who gets the job is the one who happens to fit the costumes of the person who they are replacing, although that does apply. Instead, I refer to the idea that there is not one 'best' dancer, teacher, or choreographer. There are only better and worse fits for any situation. I learned this the hard way while teaching at the Marianne Anderson School of Dance in Long Island.

I took this teaching job to supplement my income while I was dancing with the Metropolitan Opera Ballet. Prior to this point, I had great success as a teacher. Although I was young (or perhaps because of it), I could reach my students and they responded well to my lessons. However, I learned that I did not have the magic touch in all situations. My drive and encouragement did not lead to progress at this recreational studio in Long Island. The seriousness of purpose with which I approached my teaching failed to resonate with Marianne and her students. Their motivations were to have fun and find belonging within the group. I came from a recreational studio myself but then learned the dedication and knowledge necessary to transition into a professional career in my college training. As a teacher, my strength had been reaching recreational students, much like I had been, and giving them the knowledge and information to take the same leap I had. However, in this case, I pushed too hard and no one was interested in making that leap.

Marianne eventually fired me after I verbalized my frustration about the students' lack of hard work. She was right to do so, not just because I told them they were being lazy, but also because I was never the best fit for that situation in the first place. It was then that I started to realize that there were different approaches to take in different situations. My one-size-fits-all approach to dance education proved flawed. Luckily, I learned from this and went on to find situations that were better fits.

However, just finding the best fit was not the end of the lesson. As a teacher, I wanted to understand my students so that I could do the best for all of them—not just the ones who aligned with my own values. In reading books on psychology and philosophy, I came upon professor Clare Graves *Emergent, Cyclical Levels of Human Existence*. In his system I could see, for the first time, the motivations and psychology behind the various situations I had encountered. Furthermore, the conceptual theory of developmental psychology that Graves proposes holds promise not just for individuals, but also for whole systems. He applied his work as an organizational psychologist in addition to the individual. What strikes my particular interest at this time is the parallel running between the developmental stages Graves uncovered in his research and the artistic movements of our past and present. In my undergraduate dance studies, the motivations behind classical, modern, and postmodern dance were left unclear. My classmates and I could point them out when seeing them and classify them appropriately, but the thinking

behind them was never fully elucidated. We all could tell you which we preferred to watch and perform, but I suspect few of us really grasped what motivations were behind them other than the simplistic platitudes we regurgitated like “modern dance was a rebellion against the rigid structure of classical ballet.”

For the purposes of this paper, I plan to investigate the parallels between Graves’ framework and the development of dance from traditional to classical to modern to postmodern and beyond. From this process, I hope to gain a better understanding of this development and each of the movements so that I can become a more informed, more insightful artist and teacher. I believe this information has the potential to build a bridge in understanding between dance and the art movements of the past, present, and future for both young and ‘not so young’ dance artists. While the scope of this paper will be the historical scale, I will also include personal and organizational examples for each movement. But first, I have to admit to an underpinning philosophy that is at the foundation of this exploration. That is, as Keith Martin-Smith states in his essay *On the Future of Art and Art Criticism*, “A truism: Art reflects the culture and the worldview of the person who makes it.” Embracing the connection of ideology and form as a forgone conclusion, the next step is to introduce Graves’ framework.

**Graves' Emergent Cyclical Model**

Graves proposes that there is not one set of motivations and needs that we humans live by. Rather, that our motivations and needs evolve as we mature because "humans tend normally to change their biopsychosocial being as the conditions of their existence change" (Graves 507). Perspectives and worldviews shift as we evolve; the absolutist viewpoint of the medieval Catholic Church has shifted over time into a pluralistic viewpoint that allows for a variety of interpretations. As our understanding of the world and our thinking develops, so too does our understanding of art.

Graves research suggests humans psychologically develop through states of existence and "that each system has a general theme for existence which typifies it" (507). These systems develop hierarchically from Automatic to Tribalistic to Egocentric to Absolutistic to Multiplistic to Relativistic to Systemic to Intuitive and beyond. These states of existence and their progression were found in his research to not only apply on the scale of the individual's psychosocial development, but also at the larger scale of humans as a species. The states parallel human societal development from pre-historic tribal ages to feudal ages to the industrial modern age to the postmodern age and beyond (Wilber 40). Through looking at the motivations and needs behind each of these movements and their progression and applying them to the art and dance perspectives, I will attempt to draw a more complete and holistic picture of dance in the past, present, and future.

### **Traditional Perspective in Dance**

The use of the word 'traditional' in dance often describes anything that is older or preceding the current point of view. For instance, to Martha Graham and her disciples, ballet is a traditional dance form, but to members of the postmodern Judson Church movement, Graham's technique is a traditional modern dance form. While each form and movement has its traditions, I will be using traditionalism as it refers to the perspectives that pre-date classical, modern, and postmodern times. For dance, this includes tribal, folk/social, and ethnic dance. Traditional dance, as I will describe it, develops naturally over two of the Gravesian states: Tribalistic and Egoistic.

In the Gravesian Tribalistic system, people "develop ritualistic ways full of totems and taboos which is their way to control by incantation and of assuring themselves that they are going to continue to have that which is necessary to take care of their basic needs" (Graves 219). Tribal dance first and foremost serves the needs of the group and is tied inextricably to their rites, rituals, and beliefs. This is the prime motivation and need for dance at this perspective.

When, in traditional cultures, dance begins to serve a need beyond that of ritualistic and religious motivations and is done for recreation and to establish social cohesion, we see the emergence of Social or Folk dance. Here it is removed from the ritualistic ties that it derived from, but still carries on as a social tradition. Individuals start to express themselves, displaying their

prowess, in contrast to others and meeting the needs and motivations of the Gravesian Egoistic system.

Here, the individual discovers the “awareness of self as a possibly powerful being separate and distinct from others” (Graves 226). Courting dances, from those found in traditional cultures to the peacocking behavior of contemporary college students dancing at the local bar, exhibit traditional Egoistic motivations. Ethnic dance derives from the tribal and social dance forms but then develops as a way to delineate the individuality and prowess of one group from all others. Where tribal and social dance are meant for others within the group, ethnic dance developed as the group enters an Egoistic stage and expresses itself for outsiders, even as performed on concert stages in the role of cultural ambassador.

While Traditional dance historically can be found in tribal, folk, and ethnic dance forms, it is also found in recreational dance situations and studios. I started classes at thirteen and enjoyed the camaraderie of my classmates more than anything else. I felt I belonged within the group. Over time, I began to gain confidence in my ability and wanted to explore how I could express my individual prowess in relation to the rest of the group. Recreational dance studios often operate in this state. Marianne Anderson and her school were this way. They were a tribe and she was the motherly leader figure that worked, first and foremost, to ensure that all were safe within the clan.

These explanations and examples are admittedly general. There are cases that blur the lines and dance anthropologists could elaborate here. However, for the purposes of this paper, it is only important to have a grasp of traditional dance (from this perspective) as that which predates classical dance forms and to see the evolutionary development from ritualistic motivations for the in-group to expressive motivations for the other.

### **Classical Perspective in Dance**

When the traditional forms of dance are codified into a canon, the classical forms emerge—like Bharatanatyam (one of eight forms of Indian classical dance) or classical ballet. In the western world, ethnic court dancing transitioned into classical ballet with the canonization that came from Pierre Beauchamp and Jean-Georges Noverre. For the purposes of this paper, which follows the development of western concert dance, I will focus on ballet as the exemplar of the classical credo.

Classicism fits in with the Gravesian framework in the Absolutistic state of thinking. “Thinking at this level is absolutistic: one right way and only one right way to think about anything” (Graves 254). From a classical/absolutistic perspective, there is one superior form of dance. All other forms are barbaric or the work of savages who are not sophisticated enough to appreciate the objective beauty. The fact of this beauty exists independent of human view and culture.

One cannot, from a classical/absolutistic viewpoint, simply claim that one prefers a traditional tribal dance form over that of classical dance without submitting oneself to the accusation that one has no taste. For the classically minded, beauty lies in a set of universals which must not be questioned. For classical ballet, those universals include the concepts of line, symmetry, and harmony.

The various classical ballet traditions of Cecchetti, Vaganova, Bournonville, and French developed around the same concept of the beautiful in dance. The differences in their approaches are minimal as they all strove toward the same ideal of perfection. For me personally, I entered college from an initial Egoistic state of confidence and the desire to express myself. My first year was an eye-opening struggle as I was forced to submit to the discipline and structure of the ballet program. During my second and third years I dedicated myself as a loyal disciple to the Cecchetti and Vaganova ballet classes and the Graham modern classes. At that time, I accepted that these were the pinnacle forms of artistic dance. Conservatory programs, especially those of classical ballet, are often strongly absolutist in thinking.

Classical dance demands a dogmatic dedication and defies innovation or change. Classical thinking has a fundamentalist foundation. Other ways and forms are not simply lesser ways, they are wrong. However, one can be a classicist in approaching a non-classical form. For instance, today there are

followers who believe with righteous fervor about the superiority of Martha Graham's modern dance, George Balanchine's neo-classical (modernist) ballet, or Steve Paxton's Contact Improvisation. One can be a classicist about a modern form or a classicist about a postmodern form.

If an "era builds on the strengths and weaknesses of that preceding it," then the absolutism of classical dance paved the way for the modern era that challenged the dogma of one right way that exists outside of the individual, to find many subjective alternatives (Martin-Smith).

### **Modern Perspective in Dance**

The transition for Graves from the Absolutistic to the Multiplistic existence surfaces in a change from "a submissive state to one of selfish independence" (Graves 282). The shift from Medieval Times into The Enlightenment is the large-scale rendition of this transition. It is Multiplistic because now there are a plurality of right answers—not just one. In the case of the dancer, she begins to question the dogma they have been reared on in order to find ways, perhaps the style, that work for her personally.

My final year of college I started to doubt my discipline. I mean, I embraced how it helped me become a much stronger technician than I was when I began, but I no longer idolized classical ballet or Graham technique. I wanted, at that time and for years after, to find the technique or techniques that best helped me improve. For me, that came when I was introduced to

Horton technique from a guest artist workshop with Milton Myers. Conservatory programs often straddle the line between Absolutist and Multiplistic thinking. Ironically, New York City Ballet has become classically absolutist in its attempts to preserve the Balanchine repertory while Balanchine himself took a very modernist approach to a classical form.

In modernism, whether we are speaking of dance, art, or philosophy, beauty and value are shaped by human view. Yes, beauty is still absolute, but it is open to opinion. What is most beautiful to one culture may not be the most beautiful to another. This begins to sound more like what we are used to in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We generally think pluralistically and we owe that to modernism. Modernism freed us from the oppressive hierarchy of absolutism (often in the guise of the church). However, there is a catch. Modernism believes there is more than one right way, but that one way, in particular, is better than others. There are many paths to the top of the mountain, but one is quicker or safer or more beautiful than the rest.

With modernism and the world of 20<sup>th</sup> century American concert dance, we see the growth of a multitude of approaches and techniques: Graham, St. Denis, Humphrey-Weidman, Limón, Taylor, Horton, etc. They each offered their personally subjective version of the beautiful and accepted the variety of other approaches, albeit often with scorn and derision. To them, beauty was real and existed inside the artist, yet they were competing to see which one had the best grasp of beauty.

It is interesting to see how the modern perspective treated traditional dance forms. From the modernist perspective of personal authority, traditional dance forms were seen as primitive, but not without beauty. Modernists found beauty in traditional forms that the classicists scoffed at; however, the modernists still felt that their own artistic conceptions were superior to the traditional forms. This resulted in a trend of using 'primitive' material but recasting it in the modernists mold. From Pablo Picasso to Ruth St. Denis, primitivism in modernism was the artistic counterpart to colonialization. The modernist interest in traditional forms was well intended, but their inability to escape from their modernist perspective led to exploitation.

Modernism introduced Multiplistic thinking and subjectivity that led to a plurality of competing modern dance techniques. These techniques and their progenitors took themselves almost as seriously as the Absolutist authorities they supplanted. They replaced the one objective hierarchy with a plurality of hierarchies. Postmodernism would take modernism a step further and, in doing so, pull the rug out from the concept of hierarchy altogether.

### **Postmodern Perspective in Dance**

Following the Absolutistic and Multiplistic states, Graves called the next stage of development the Relativistic state. With the Relativistic state, we enter the world of contemporary postmodernism. Beauty is no longer absolute—it is “created by culture and determined by human view” (Martin-Smith). No

universals exist. It is personal to the extreme: whatever the artist says is beautiful is beautiful.

Personally, when I tired of the achievement oriented modernist uptown dance scene in New York City, I started to explore different approaches in order to find a more personally relevant voice. And, as my body no longer had the elasticity and bravura strength of my youth, I explored ways of moving that were not simply about skill. And in this exploration, I started to choreograph. Unfortunately, my palette of movement options was greatly limited by my technical training. I was becoming postmodern in my thinking without an awareness of the postmodern movement in art and dance. As I began to discover the link between the two, I became more curious about the concepts and processes underlying postmodern dance. However, I had to clarify, for myself, what I think is a common dancer's misunderstanding about postmodernism.

Many young professional dancers and college undergraduate dance students consider the postmodern movement in dance to be something that occurred in the 1960's—usually isolated around the Judson Dance Theater years from 1962-1964. They define postmodernism tightly around the experiments of that period which worked to prove that anyone could be a dancer (no technique or training required), anything can be a stage, and anything can be a dance movement (walking, tying a shoe, eating cereal). A strong argument can be made that the Judson Dance Theater was more modernist

Dadaism than postmodern; however, these experiments in addition to those of modernist Merce Cunningham were early predecessors to postmodern thinking. Dancers in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are living the postmodern era, although many think of it as a thing of the past and may not realize how influenced they are by the concepts. While writers and artists have a strong sense of their position as creative artists (whether modernists or classicists or postmodernists) working within the postmodern era, young dancers do not have that same sense of context. Many do not fully understand the concepts of postmodern thought that influence them today.

So what are the concepts? Since beauty is not cross culturally inherent and no universal of what is aesthetically beautiful can be defined, beauty is whatever the artist says it is. In dance, tying a shoe or masturbating on stage becomes as legitimate a statement as the classicist's display of beautiful line or the modernist's expression of inner feeling in a deep contraction. In art, a crucifix immersed in urine joins the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel and Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* as great works of art. While these examples sound shocking, they are important to understanding postmodernism.

Postmodernism helped break down the systems of oppression that existed in the traditional, classical, and modern worlds. As those hierarchies were deconstructed, racism, sexism, ageism, and a number of other exploitative practices were revealed. In dance, this translated to the dismantling of the

classical ballet aesthetic as the highest art form and the deflating of the idolizing of the intensely serious modernist choreographer. Self-parody became a new mark of the choreographer. The modernist's primitivism was abandoned and equal respect was given to traditional forms of dance. In the postmodern era, we see respect for tribal and ethnic dance forms as equal to all others. The concepts of high and low art and those of fine and commercial art become conflated—think Warhol's soup cans.

With beauty being culturally constructed and skill of execution abandoned as a form of hierarchical oppression, irony and impact became the ways in which to judge the effectiveness of a work of art. Something was not a great work of art because it was skillfully done or appealed to some sense of beauty; rather, it is a great work of art if it changed the way you looked at art itself to a significant degree. In our contemporary dance world, a commingling of postmodern processes and ideals with modern and classical techniques has created a wide variety of contemporary forms.

### **Contemporary Dance**

As I mentioned earlier, some dancers in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century do not recognize they are part of the postmodern era. They define contemporary dance as a fusion of techniques. To them, contemporary ballet is often a fusion of ballet and modern. Contemporary jazz is a fusion of jazz and modern. This concept of fusion is indeed a postmodern trait, especially with the conflation of commercial and fine art. However, this conflation has

muddied the waters between the avant-garde and populism. Populism has led to a version of contemporary dance that is a simple fusion of “whatever the audience/choreographer likes best”. Today, audience members watching this fusion version of ‘contemporary dance’ on television shows like “So You Think You Can Dance” are shocked when they attend a contemporary dance concert because the two look nothing alike.

Contemporary dance, as I see it, is a further development of postmodernism that integrates, rather than fuses, postmodern processes with modernist techniques as well as classical and traditional elements. The difference between contemporary dance and ‘contemporary dance ala reality television’ is that the former develops off of the strengths and weaknesses of the preceding and the latter just capitulates to populist desires. One is an extension of postmodernism and is growing with the thought, philosophy, and artistic developments of our age, the other is responding directly to commercial and entertainment aspects of our age.

### **Beyond Postmodernism**

Graves suggests the next level beyond Relativistic postmodernism is the Systemic state. The Systemic state builds off of the strengths and weaknesses of the Relativistic state. The pluralistic relativism that postmodernism brought to our society insisted on seeing all states as equal in order to upend oppressive hierarchies. In seeing traditional dance as equal to classical as equal to modern as equal to postmodern, relativistic thinking

ignored the natural increase in complexity and growth. Systemic thinking embraces this pattern of development as a natural, not oppressive, hierarchy.

Systemic thinking believes that universals do once again exist, but that most of what we understand is contextual and we could never know for sure that the universals we personally believe in are indeed universal. Therefore, Systemic thinking is comfortable with paradox. Beauty does not lie in the object alone, or in the artist alone, or in the viewer alone. Beauty lies in the space of experience between the artist, the object, and the culture and, therefore, is co-determined. Social theorists suggest that we are transitioning from the postmodern era into the transmodern era.

Some contemporary artists are already grappling with these 'transmodern' concepts without giving name to the movement. Based on Graves' systemic state, what might a transmodern dance movement look like? I personally believe it is already emerging. We see it in the integrating of postmodern, modern, classical, and traditional concepts. However, it is vital, if the next era does indeed build on the strengths and weakness of the one preceding it, that we recognize the difference in complexity and development.

Without recognizing this complexity, we end up with artistically vapid fusions. For example, the contemporary artist who willy-nilly intersperses his modern dance technique with tribal dance steps creates an entertaining fusion of

tribal-modern. On the contrary, the contemporary artists who, through inquiry and collaboration, integrate concepts from tribal dance (such as ritual, community, symbiotic relationships) with modern technical developments, and postmodern theatrical devices and processes goes beyond a sophomoric blend of styles and begins to develop a truly transmodern artistic statement.

This artist has incorporated aspects of all the preceding movements into his work. Like the postmodernists, he has embraced all states, but he does so with awareness of the increasing level of complexity. In integrating classicism and modernism into his work, skill of execution once again becomes important, but it is not placed above the process-driven postmodern developments.

One of the dangers in a transmodern perspective to dance is, as the postmodernist would fear, that it would be used to label and categorize, creating once again an oppressive intellectual hierarchy. In addition, the transmodern perspective and its embrace of skill of execution could be misused to regress to modernist viewpoints; confusing re-modernism with expansive transmodernism.

A healthy transmodern movement would not discard any of the developments of postmodernism, modernism, classicism, or traditionalism. Instead, it would embrace them all and continue to expand toward greater

complexity. Graves sees his conceptual framework as an open ended one. It does not have a final state at which to arrive. There are an infinite number of potential states. When a person finds himself or herself at a certain state, it is because it is evolutionarily appropriate for his or her current conditions. This dismisses the individual from being able to claim superiority over another based on their developmental state.

### **Applying the Framework in Dance**

The Graves framework applied to dance can offer an organizational structure for college dance students that will introduce conceptual thinking toward their craft. While not all undergraduate students would care to understand the development of dance beyond the platitudes they often hear, some may gain a greater understanding of the ideas behind the movements.

Of all the arts, dancers are often saved from the rigors of intellectual thought because we are physical artists and not to be labored with such thinking. However, I believe that this is an old Cartesian modernist mind-body prejudice. Presenting the information will at least give those dancers that are interested the ability to grow into knowledgeable, passionate, thinking artists. And for those who would rather not consider it, we would just accept that they are in the state that suits their current psychological conditions.

At Marianne Anderson's School of Dance I ran into an atmosphere based on traditional tribalistic values. I attempted to force a multiplistic credo that took

achievement and progress as absolute imperatives. I urged them to strive to find the techniques that would help them individually compete; they collectively were most concerned with maintaining safety and harmony within the group. I threatened that safety and Marianne, as their tribal leader, took action to keep the tribe safe. The school and I were not the right fit and we would not be unless either they matured through the Egoistic state into at least the Absolutist state (where they would appreciate the discipline) and beyond or I matured into at least the Relativistic state (where I would appreciate their recreational values).

From my perspective, many college dance programs deal with this misalignment of perspectives. Most incoming freshman enter college dance from recreational and competition studios with Egoistic values. A smaller percentage comes from ballet conservatories with Absolutist or Multiplistic values. An even smaller percentage comes to college dance with modern dance experience and those that do tend to have modernist but not postmodernist exposure. I propose that a successful program should understand the complexity in the diverse states of development and work to integrate this information. First, faculty should recognize what their personal preferences are, where their psychological center of gravity lies. Then, understand where the center of gravity for the class and each individual student falls.

Ultimately, when applying the Graves framework to the evolution of dance eras or to dance education, it is more than just understanding the best fit for the situation as I stated at the beginning. A sustained career in dance in the transmodern era—whether it be a performer, teacher, or choreographer—will teach one lesson above all others: it is not about being the best, nor simply about being the best fit, but about understanding that the best fit is constantly changing and evolving.

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