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# Dancing Philosophy: What Happens to Philosophy when Considered from the Point of View of a Dancer

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## Dancing Philosophy

What Happens to Philosophy when Considered from the Point of View of a Dancer

 Aili Bresnahan

Western philosophical aesthetics tends to answer the question “What is art?” by starting with the perspective of the art appreciator. What does the spectator perceive in the artistic entity at issue? For example, are these properties formal and tangible, an arrangement of lines and colors as provided by Clive Bell’s theory of significant form? Are they contextual—are they, for example, the expression of the experience of a particular culture? Or are these properties relational in the sense of being a comment on or response to another art-historical movement, such as Cubism?

Starting from this perspective, the methodology tends to begin with the appreciator’s response to the artistic object or product and deriving the artistic entity itself from that. The methodology then either stops there or takes a look around to see the historical context in which the art entity arose. It may even go one step further back to artistic intentions, but with care to avoid running afoul of the intentional<sup>1</sup> or genetic<sup>2</sup> fallacies. \*Whatever intentions of the artist count must be *in* the art entity or the appreciative experience of the art entity, and not solely in the inaccessible mind of the artist alone. It is the perspective of the appreciator that makes “objective” definitions of art and accounts of the ontology of artworks, art events, and art practices, defensible. They are answerable to what can be demonstrated to be true by attention to some feature or property that is accessible to the reader either in theory or in conjunction with an experience of the art entity. Examples of this methodological approach can be found in abundance in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, *The British*

*Journal of Aesthetics*, and anthologies of articles on aesthetics and the philosophy of art.

This model fits well with art criticism and with the conveniences of academic scholarship in philosophy, since the philosopher of art need not muck about with artistic processes and practices, which are often hard to connect in a clear and causal way to the art entity. What are we to do, for example, with the claim from legendary dance choreographer, George Balanchine, as reported in Solomon Volkov's interviews with Balanchine, that the ghost of Tchaikovsky told him how to choreograph *Swan Lake*? And what to do with modern dance pioneer Martha Graham's claim in her autobiography that her dances derive, in part, from "blood memory"?

The issue on which I would like to focus now, however, is not on the claims, whether legitimate or specious, of what art is from the perspective of dance choreographers, but of what we might learn about dance from the perspective of dancers. What happens to philosophy when the perspective from which the philosophizing begins is not that of the appreciator but that of the moving dancer while dancing? What happens when the philosopher is not at a desk engaging in a contemplative project at a remove from the art entity but is either *right inside* of the art entity or, even more radically, *is the art entity altogether* in one moving mode of his or her performing and artistic self?<sup>3</sup>

A brief example from a research project in which I am currently engaged may help to shed some light on these questions. Does dance, I was asked, have anything to contribute to the philosophy of temporal experience? I have far more experience as a dancer, having spent 10 years training for a career in professional ballet, than as a dance appreciator. When asked this question, then, I immediately thought: "How does a dancer experience time?" It was a short step from there to the question: "How does the dancer experience time *while dancing*?" Now we have a moving and experiencing contemplator: a dancing philosopher.



"Black Swan" Pasquale Vitiello

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Edited by Alex Bucher

Here is what happens to the philosophy of temporal experience when the philosopher is dancing (among other things):

1. It starts with an environmentally situated experience;
2. This experience is embodied and extended in a visceral and kinesthetic way (neuromuscular, proprioceptive and other systems needed for bodily motion are activated, vibrations are felt, sounds are heard, etc.);
3. The experiencing philosopher, as part of what is needed to dance, is already (and before philosophizing) engaged in a project of high awareness of the temporal and spatial parameters of the piece that he or she is dancing.<sup>4</sup>

From this starting place, then, any theories of temporal consciousness or experience that treat awareness of time in ways that exclude bodily, moving, spatial and environmentally interactive components, seem not only naked but misleading. In isolating only mental and brain-bound processes in the description of temporal consciousness, for example, one starts to believe (as many philosophers of temporal consciousness do) that time has order and sequence but has no spatial dimension.<sup>5</sup>

My claim here, in short, is that the perspective of the philosopher and the conditions construed as the vantage point from which consciousness and experience takes place has everything to do with the theory that results. That perspective is not a neutral one—it already strips away features of actual human experience of time (that of the dancer, say)—to reach conclusions that find time itself to be something that has none of the features that were

excluded from the beginning!




Of course it is natural for philosophers to begin philosophizing from the perspective of looking out upon the world from the armchairs of their offices or libraries. The point here is that one should take care not to mistake that perspective for the only relevant stance one can or should take to the phenomena, practice, or entity at issue. We are not, after all, only or always philosophers in armchairs and we are certainly not brains in vats. If a philosopher who is also a dancer, for example, is asked how temporal experience arises in dance, she just might decide that the more relevant stance from which to consider this question is not from the perspective of the seated observer but from *relevé en pointe* followed by a sequence of *chaîne* turns. From this perspective time is experienced as part of a thoroughly spatio-temporal experience. A theory of this experience in terms of consciousness that included only computational brain processes without considering feedback from the body and the environment outside of the body seems nothing short of bizarrely truncated and inapt.<sup>6</sup>

At this point, the reader may be wondering what this example has to do with philosophy overall rather than with the very tiny (but growing!) area of philosophy that is the philosophy of dance. Here is the answer: Considering temporal experience in dance from the perspective of dancing is not only relevant to understanding dance but it is relevant to understanding the extent to which perspective of contemplation can affect the analysis of the phenomena or entity being analysed. We (human beings, thinkers, cognizers, philosophizers, persons, selves) are *not* always or typically in contemplative postures. We walk, run, drive cars, ride bicycles, gesture, laugh, move, eat, plant gardens, bake bread, make love, eat, talk, sleep, play sports, engage in conversations and debates, and more. All of these activities are part of our experiences and of our consciousness—they are not add-ons to some substrate “I” that has no body, no interactions with the world, and exists in pure abstraction from the world in which we find ourselves. Viewed in this way the dancing philosopher is not a strange or unusual entity. He or she is just a philosopher who is living, moving, breathing, and interacting with the world (are there any philosophers who do not do this or who did not do this while they were alive?). The dancing philosopher just has the moving, interacting, kinaesthetic aspects human of personhood as an essential part of his or her intentional agency in heightened form.

The study of dance, then, and in particular the perspective of dancers, has much to offer philosophy. Philosophy need not take the perspective of an observer or appreciator/thinker/understander who is ideal, anon-existent in actuality, disembodied, and disengaged from environmental interaction. Let us no longer impoverish philosophy in this way. Let philosophy live, breathe, move, interact, and, yes, dance.

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1. ↑ See William K. Wimsatt Jr. and Monroe C. Beardsley, „The Intentional Fallacy“ in Joseph Margolis (ed.), *Philosophy Looks At The Arts*, Third Edition: Contemporary Readings in Aesthetics. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), 367–380.
  2. ↑ See Morris Cohen and Ernest Nagel, *An Introduction to Logic and Scientific Method* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1934), 388.
  3. ↑ For more on movement and the body and how this affects experience and consciousness in dance see Maxine Sheets-Johnston, *The Primacy of Movement*, Expanded Second Edition (Amsterdam: Johns Benjamin Publishing Company, 2011), and Sondra Horton Fraleigh, *Dance and the Lived Body: A Descriptive Aesthetics* (Pittsburgh:

University of Pittsburgh Press, 1987). 

4. ↑For more on how human experience is necessarily situated see John Dewey's books: Experience and Nature (London, George Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 1929) and Art as Experience (New York: Perigee, 2005). For more on the embodied and extended nature of dancing see Aili Bresnahan, „Improvisational Artistry in Live Dance Performance as Embodied and Extended Agency“ in Dance Research Journal 46, No. 1 (April 2014): 85–94. 
5. ↑See William James, The Principles of Psychology, Vol. II. Authorized Edition (New York: Dover Publications, 1950/1890), 145 and footnote. 
6. ↑See Anthony Chemero, Anti-Representationalism and the Dynamical Stance in Philosophy of Science 67, No. 4 (December, 2000): 625–647 for another argument against the disembodied or representational view of mind. 



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








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